

All the mining concessions awarded in the mandate of the former Macedonian government are located in southeastern Macedonia, a region with a very fertile land inhabited by the local population. The construction of one of the mines at Kazandol, located just a kilometer from Valandovo, is closing in, and the local community continues to show its disagreement with the project.

“For fifteen years, my family and I are investing in organic farming and working with them to leave this country clean,” said Dimce Baleski, organic food producer and council member of Valandovo municipality, at a public hearing in Sobranje, the Macedonian Parliament, on the proposed Amendments to the Mineral Raw Materials Act, on February 1, 2018. “And now, without any consultation with the affected community, you have set a bomb to strike in our yards - surface veins of copper, silver, gold - which will endanger our sources of income, our health and our means of life. You have come, unwanted, and want to throw us out of our homes. You even planned our relocation,” he said referring to a commissioned study by the investor on environmental impact assessment in the vicinity of the Kazandol mine, addressing everyone: the investor, Sardich MC, the Government, the Slaughter and, through video, across the whole of Macedonia.

The same discussion was attended by several representatives of local initiatives from the southeast of Macedonia, who have been fighting extraction mine projects for a year and a half. During this period local initiatives from Valandovo, Gevgelija, Strumica and Dojran organized gatherings and round tables to inform about the upcoming threat and, finally, referendum that enabled them to express their views. Six local referendums were held where over 40,000 voters from the region (98% of all those who voted) opposed the mines in their municipalities.

This is not surprising given that Macedonia is a country in which about a quarter of the population refrains from agriculture - an industry that accounts for 17% of gross domestic product, while the mining sector accounts for 1.5% of GDP, while heavy metalwork employs only 2,500 workers. Additionally, it has been estimated that agriculture brings EUR 237 million of gross value added, and 30% of all agricultural products consumed in Macedonia come from the Southeastern region.

Local initiatives are united in the same vision: with three hundred sunny days a year, the Macedonian southeast is extremely fruitful for sustainable development, agriculture, the exploitation of renewable energy sources, and eco-tourism, and none of it goes hand in hand with toxic and dangerous mining which tries to impose this region through 86 concessions, approved at the time of the last government led by the right VMRO-DPMNE.

“Social Democrats” in an unusual alliance

Current Macedonian Prime Minister, Social Democrat Zoran Zaev, spoke about stopping the mine construction at Kazandol during the campaign for local elections in the fall of 2017, but did not hold any of the promises he made to people from the southeast of the country. His reminiscence resembles a horrible reminder of the neighborhood case, a breach of the austerity premise of Prime Minister Aleksis Cipras by locals gathered around the Skouries gold mine to stop destroying their environment and surrounding forests. What we can conclude so far is that the current government of Zoran Zaev is not much different from the predecessor, at least when it comes to attracting foreign and domestic capital. Nothing has been done to stop the mining industry, despite numerous and legally-founded reasons that could justify a moratorium on the awarded projects.

After repeated recollection of election promises and visible indignation of locals in Southeastern municipalities, a working group was set up to address this problem. This group, which brings together ministers from relevant ministries and their deputies involved in the process of granting concessions and licenses for investors, members of the Assembly, members of the prime minister's office, representatives of competent inspectorates and representatives of local initiatives, met only once in December 2017 without any results. The lawyer's profession emphasizes that there is a legal basis for the Government's imposition of a moratorium on the Kazandol mine, after the Balkan Investigative Network, BIRN, found several indications of illegal acts and irregularities arising during the accelerated concession process for exploration and mining in Kazanda. This can be attributed to the public for the already known breach of contracts committed by the Sardich MC investor, not by constructing a copper cathode production plant with a processing capacity of at least 50% of the ore mined, which should take place within two years (the contract was signed on February 27, 2017). This is also corroborated by drone footage from activists from SOS Valandovo from December 2017, as well as the investor's photo report on the progress of works on this facility.

What is expected of the barely-assembled government led by the SDSM is to at least try to reconcile the stories of the competent inspectors. Two public institutions, the Environmental Inspectorate and the Technical Inspectorate, submitted contradictory reports on the construction of a production facility at Kazandol mine, and other institutions that need to monitor them, did not respond.

While the government apparently agrees to dig up the country, an unexpected "ally" of the Macedonian southeast has emerged in the fight against the mines - President of the country, Djordje Ivanov. In his speech at the end of 2017, he declared that he supports resistance to the mines: "Southeast Macedonia is on its feet, my fellow citizens from my

hometown demand the stopping of the construction of the Kazandol, Ilovica, Borov Dol mines ... They demand a basic human right to a healthy environment.”

Fight for the amendments

Let's get back to the discussion at the Parliament from the beginning of the text. The first, small institutional step in the right direction would be the adoption of the recently proposed amendments to the Mineral Resources Act. Driven amendments (from 2012) to this law VMRO-DPMNE has made it easier for investors such as Sardich MC (for Kazandol) or Euromaxx Resources (for Ilovica-Štuka mine) to convert licenses for geological exploration into licenses for copper, silver and gold exploitation which would be washed with intense use of sulfuric acid and cyanide. Two Green Party members (Democratic reconstruction of Macedonia, DOM), supported by nine other MPs, proposed seven amendments that would “overwhelm” what was voted in 2012 for the benefit of investors. If they pass and take effect, the use of dangerous compounds, sulfuric acid and cyanide in the treatment of ore should be prohibited in Macedonia.

Although local initiatives generally support the adoption of amendments, they require another additional amendment that would require the government to decide, before deciding on such projects, to implement and respect a referendum in which the local population will be able to decide whether they want this project in their municipalities at all. Activists are also dissatisfied with the fact that these discussions do not have enough support for institutions to protect citizens, which should be the primary goal. They seem to be fighting alone, one on one, with representatives of the mining industry.

On the same day, during the debate on amendments, the investor applied for the issuance of the last license, “A1 permit for an integrated environmental permit”, from the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, with which it will be able to start the exploitation and processing of ore. Afterwards, local initiatives have called on all citizens to help them by sending written remarks to the relevant ministry in the hope of using the bureaucratic procedure and delaying the process of issuing an integrated environmental permit to Sadrich MC, which would be the last sting for Kazandol.

The amendments should be discussed this week in the Parliament, but the chances that they pass are quite weak since the Ministry of Economy is forcing them to reject them, saying that, if they are adopted, “foreign investors will be discouraged to spill their capital into Macedonia.”

The mine in Kazandol, the predecessor of other mining concessions, is almost ready for the first works, and the consequences have already arisen. Explosions disturb and hinder the daily life of the local community. Despite fighting and perseverance, some have already put

pressure on them. Some locals, faced with the fact that mines are part of their reality and under realistic existential threats, are hired on that project. In any case, any improvement may only happen as a result of mass mobilization from below, which is the only way the government can make it ultimately fit the side of the local community against the interests of the investor.