

Mining in Bor and the environment in Serbia – the residents near Bor are left without water and their houses are cracking

The strategic partnership agreement, which was concluded that year between the Chinese company Zijin Mining Group, the Government of Serbia and the Mining and Smelting Basin Bor (RTB), brought the state a capital investment of about a billion and a half dollars, which will be invested by 2024. Bor production expansion. However, for some locals, this agreement has brought new problems – house bursts, well drainage and damage to private property, which is why they are still deeply worried about their own future. The life of the inhabitants of Bor villages, which has always been inextricably linked to the fate of the nearby mine, has drastically changed since the Chinese mining giant, the company, took over majority ownership of the Bor basin in 2018.

Just a few kilometers from the construction site of the new mine, in a house with cracked walls, without running water because the well from which they are supplied has dried up, this married couple with a lot of effort makes goat cheese and milk – their only source of income. While the Zivkovics have no doubt that the damage was caused by underground mining as part of the construction of a new mine, the contractor, the company Zijin Mining (until recently known as Rakita Explorations), denies any responsibility in a written response to the BBC in Serbian. However, legal analysts warn that with the strategic partnership agreement, the environmental responsibility of Zijin Mining Group, within which its daughter company, Zijin Mining, operates, is “suspended indefinitely”.

The air pollution, with which citizens of Bor have been living, has significantly increased in recent months. That is why the mayor of Bor filed a criminal complaint in September against the company Zijin Copper DOO Bor, another daughter company of the Chinese mining giant. After that, the company temporarily suspended the operation of the smelter and started the overhaul in November, because, as they explained, the cause of excessive emissions was a malfunction in the equipment of the plant.

North of the town, near the villages of Ostrelj and Veliki Krivelj, near which two mines have been operating for years – “Veliki Krivelj” and “Cerovo”, a third one was opened in March 2020 – “Cerovo 2”. Due to the larger volume of mining, a new flotation tailings is slowly but surely rising near Veliki Krivelj – an endless hill of gray dust where waste material generated in the mining process is deposited. On the other side of the mine, near the village of Ostrelj, the old flotation tailings pond has been a source of environmental problems for the locals living in the area for years. Flotation is a plant within a mining complex where the separation of ores that are mixed in nature is performed. Unnecessary surpluses of land with which ore is mined refer to special landfills called flotation tailings. This country, explains for the BBC in Serbian the former occupational safety engineer of RTB Bor Toplica Marjanovic, “contains everything that the earth’s bowels contain – copper, iron, arsenic and

heavy metals.”

“When it rains, those substances flow into the ground, polluting the soil and groundwater,” explains Marjanovic, now a pensioner and environmental activist in Bor.

On the other, southern side of the city, between the villages of Brestovac, Slatina and Metovnica, a completely new mine “Chukaru Peki” is emerging – according to investigative studies, one of the largest deposits of copper and gold in the world. Seventy-year-old Draga Nestorovic and her son Bojan compare the sounds of underground blasting, which paves the way for a new mine, with the bombing. Thanks to the habit of looking at the clock when it breaks, Bojan also knows exactly when he heard the first explosion on the construction site of the new mine – on December 28, 2018 at 6:15 p.m. Since then, say the Nestorovic, the blasting has been heard “day and night”, with such intensity that “shakes and plates on the table”.

Metovnica, a village about four kilometers from Bor, is not connected to the city water supply, so each yard has a well as the only source of clean water.

“Since we used to run out of water for four or five days, we bought a 1,000-liter tank ourselves,” says Verica.

So now they store the water that the city authorities deliver to them in cisterns. However, pouring water into the well is not a complete solution to their problem, because the water, Zivkovici explains, is no longer retained. The drying up of the hundred-year-old well left Miroljub and Jelica deeply worried about how they would feed the goats – the only source of income.

As explained in the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment, the Study is a document which “analyzes and evaluates the quality of environmental factors and their sensitivity in a certain area and the mutual influences of existing and planned activities.

“This document envisages the direct and indirect harmful effects of the project on environmental factors, as well as measures and conditions for the prevention, reduction and elimination of harmful effects on the environment and human health.”

However, according to the study, none of the 75 registered households in Metovnica is under the direct influence of the new mine, because they are not included in the narrow monitoring zone, the Bor environmental association “Chukaru Peki” points out in an interview with the BBC. The Zivkovic sometimes turn to the nearest neighbors, about half a kilometer away, but “they have less and less”. This is not the only problem – cracks have started to appear on the inner walls of the house. Across the hill, near the neighbors, the householders in Vladimirovic’s household are carefully climbing the concrete staircase that separated from the wall. It is similar with Nestorovic, who say that they are especially

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worried about the crack along the lower floor of the house. The people of Metovnica were left without any protection, according to the environmental association “Chukaru Peki” from Bor.

When the Study was presented to residents of Bor in February 2019, the association submitted objections to the Ministry of Environmental Protection, which were not accepted. At that time, they, among other things, demanded that the borders of the narrower zone of environmental impact monitoring be expanded to include the village of Metovnica. The company’s environmental responsibility has been temporarily suspended, say the research team of the Center for International Private Enterprises (CIPE) from America. The researchers of the Center analyzed the strategic partnership agreement concluded between the Chinese mining giant, the Government of Serbia and RTB Bor. With this agreement, which is publicly available on the Government’s website, the Chinese giant Zijin Mining Group took over 63% of the ownership over RTB Bor. He states that the agreement emphasizes the necessity of making a study on environmental protection, which should determine the extent of pollution and develop an action plan that would improve the situation. Serbia should thus help the company prepare an environmental action plan and obtain the necessary permits from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, so that everything is in accordance with the applicable laws. Although this agreement “removed a large burden from the backs of Serbian citizens and found a new way for RTB to work, while the Chinese investment is of great importance for the Bor region”, Novakovic wonders “how much this investment is really in the interest of the citizens”. Even after more than two months, the Government of the Republic of Serbia did not answer the BBC’s questions. Source: b92.net