

Civil society organizations in North Macedonia have been fighting against the opening of new copper and gold mines

Since 2017, civil society organisations from the south-eastern part of North Macedonia have been trying to prove that opening copper and gold mines in their region will harm the environment. The region of Strumica, Bosilovo, and Novo Selo is recognised in the country for its fertile soil and quality agricultural products such as peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco, and corn as well as livestock breeding and as a source of food for the entire country. Hence, citizens oppose the opening of the mine which will mean severe pollution of the soil, air, and water, and thus of life in this area in general.

The revolt of the citizens is so wide that several environmental associations were formed, such as *Zdrava Kotlina* from Strumica, *Eco Dolina* from Novo Selo, and the civil initiative “Save the Strumica Kotlina – stop the mine of death” from Strumica.

From 2004 to 2012, the American-Bulgarian company examined a location one kilometre from the Strumica villages of Ilovica and Shtuka. Then, the mining was handed over to a larger British-Canadian corporation based in London, with the announcement that hundreds of millions of dollars would be invested in Ilovica for the next three decades to exploit gold and copper.

The corporation received the concession to start digging a mine in 2012 and a period of four years according to the Law on Mineral Resources to meet the conditions for exploitation.

That did not happen, but the state took away the concession only in 2019.

Meanwhile, in January 2016, the company received another concession from the state. But even though the same conditions applied, by 2020 conditions were not met. Although the deadlines have passed, civil society organisations are constantly warning through the local media that the competent Ministry of Economy and the government have not yet revoked the concession. In the past few years, civil society organisations have also held public protests announcing that they will not allow a mine to be built in order to prevent an environmental disaster in this area. The *referenda* had a turnout of 40% of the total registered population, but 99% voted against the opening of the mines.

“Our resistance is from 2017. We started publishing documents that we received from Canada, because there the company was transparent, but here it was not. They tried to talk on televised debates but they didn’t know how much we know and how well we prepared because we analysed the elements well. We pointed out many negative consequences and damage to the environment and the unprofitability of investing in mines”, Gjorgi Tanushev, representative of the environmental organisation *Zdrava Kotlina*, told OBCT.

The purification of ores with water will cause groundwater pollution and a dam will be built where the tailings will be stored (the materials that remain after the process of separating the valuable ore fraction). The artificial lake which irrigates the field and provides drinking

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water to the surrounding villages will be polluted. The lake is approximately halfway from the mine to the villages.

The Euromax Resources company believes that, as a direct foreign investment, the mine will have a strong impact on the national economy. It claims that around 1,000 people will be employed in the first two years of construction, and then another 500 during the period of operation of the mine. An additional 2,700 people will be hired through collaborators and suppliers. So far, more than 50 million Euros have been invested in the project, and about 340 are planned for the first phase of construction. The investment project is expected to contribute to the increase of the gross domestic product by 3% annually and to qualify in the top 3 export chapters from the Republic of North Macedonia.

“The project for the mining complex Ilovica-Stuka was developed based on multi-year research on the impact on the environment, applying the highest European and world standards. It will not pollute the soil, water, and air, nor will it pose a danger to human health. Working together, we will all prove that in the new era sustainable mining and agriculture can successfully coexist”, the company told local media.

Yet, organisations will continue to demand that state officials and institutions revoke the second concession, as the 4-year period in which the corporation failed to meet the conditions for the start of exploitation has already passed.

Environmental activists remind that officials are under oath to fulfill their core function – to work for the benefit and protection of all citizens of the Republic – but also point out that the government has failed to respect the clearly expressed will of citizens. They remind that whenever gold and copper mines have been opened in Serbia, Romania, and Turkey there were incidents of water and soil pollution.

Zdrava Kotlina assures that there will be a fight to defend the region from mines because they have information that the Macedonian branch of Euromax Resources is now trying to sell to another company with the intention of starting with the opening of a mine. The company did not comment on this issue for the local media.

In 2019, except for Ilovica-Stuka, the government terminated the contract for the construction of a mine in the neighbouring municipality of Valandovo, Kazandol, due to failure to meet the conditions requiring to build a plant for the exploitation of cathode copper with the capacity to process at least 50% of the exploited ore within two years, Balcanicaucaso writes.