

“We moved here in 1987. When the Americans took over, the pollution was barely felt because they improved the filters. But since Chinese HBIS took over the plant, they have increased production and everything is out of control, claims Dragana, a cook in a nearby kindergarten. “My grandchildren tell me, ‘Grandma, we’re not coming to your place, it’s dirty and you won’t let us play outside.” she complains as she lights the first autumn fire, smiling in spite of everything. Like most of the locals, she painted the facade red, to be less annoyed, because everything turns red anyway.

HBIS delivers 100,000 tons of steel products per month, and when both furnaces are operating, as much as 160,000 tons per month. The maximum annual production has been reached and it is now officially the largest exporter of goods from Serbia. Government would like more. But in February 2019, the European Union (EU) introduced a global quota for steel imports.

“All capital investments in the environment were made by US Steel between 2006 and 2011, but it is a technology that needs to be maintained, and in its current state it cannot withstand this production intensity,” explains the expert, who wishes to remain anonymous. According to his information, most of the pollution comes from the first agglomeration where ore is prepared, It usually arrives by barge and is reloaded into trucks in the port of Smederevo. This is done by a subcontractor who does not cover an otherwise excessive load, and the transport itself is polluted by diffuse emissions. The prepared ore goes to the blast furnace, then to the steel plant, and both have emissions. It’s those “sequins,” black and red powder. As much as 700 tons of dust are emitted annually through the emitters.

To all this should be added the problem of slag, which was obtained during production in blast furnaces as a residue. The Law on Waste Management does not apply to the steel plant, since it was exempted by the act of the National Assembly of Serbia from 2016. Another Lex specialis, which allows the slag that was in the area of the Smederevo Ironworks before the arrival of the HBIS management can be moved without taking the measures that are mandatory when it comes to hazardous waste. Thus, in recent years, over three million tons of slag have been “exported” from the Ironworks. Part of it is buried in the area that belongs to the city of Smederevo, intended for a regional landfill, and the rest and the newly formed slag are disposed of near Vranovo and Radinac, creating gray-black hills about twenty meters high, in the open.

Pollution and consequences

What exactly does steel plant poison and what is its share in the total pollution? The environmental impact study was supposed to answer the question, but it was not. Smederevo is otherwise polluted due to the combined influence of heating, traffic and industry. Namely, according to the report of the Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) published in October 2020, in 2019 the air in Smederevo was category III, that is,

excessively polluted. The most to blame are suspended PM10 and PM2.5 particles, known as invisible air killers, dust less than 10 microns, a mixture of solid particles of smoke, soot, dust and acid, along with heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, nickel and arsenic. PM2.5 particles reach the body even easier, because they are smaller. In the center of Smederevo, the measuring station Carina recorded in 2019 51µg / m³ PM10 particles on average and exceeding 121 days a year, and 50µg / m³ is allowed and no more than 30 days a year. In Radinac, US Steel measured pollution and maintained the station. Nobody took it over. Only at the end of last year, SEPA put the sampler of suspended particles back into operation in the immediate vicinity of the Ironworks, in the gate of the church in Radinac. The results are worrying. Over 200 µg / m³ in the height of the heating season, January 2020, 80 µg / m³ PM10 in June, 85 µg / m³ PM10 in July, 70 µg / m³ PM10 in August. So, the relationship between the work of the Ironworks and air pollution is direct. And not only the air is polluted, but also the water, primarily by the unsecured disposal of slag. In the report on the health safety of drinking water in Serbia, which was published in 2020 by the Institute for Public Health for 2019, 23.6 percent of water is physically and chemically defective, while the average for Smederevo is 8.9 percent.

The health consequences of these pollutants are well known. In its annual report, SEPA emphasizes: "Numerous impact studies have shown a link between the average annual value of PM10 and the health effects on the urban population, because these particles penetrate directly into the lungs where they cause inflammation and worsen the health of people with heart and lung disease." The study Health Impact of Air Pollution, prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO), states that between 2010 and 2015, exposure to PM2.5 particles caused 3,585 premature deaths each year in 11 Serbian cities, including Smederevo. If nothing changes, over the next ten years, Serbian citizens are expected to lose 150,865 years of life due to air pollution.

"We count close to 6,500 patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in Smederevo, and among them every sixth has a severe form. There is a certain connection between lung cancer and air pollution, we believe it is 20 percent," says pneumophysiologist Dragan Radinac, although insisting that it is not known which part is caused by the emissions of the Ironworks, and which are caused by the city's oil boilers, individual fireplaces, traffic and smoking.

In a special inclusion on the panel "Fight for Air" of the Mixer Festival in October this year, Professor of Human Genetics Dr. Miodrag Stojković shared the knowledge from studies on the impact of air pollution on sterility and causing genetic disorders. Data on the cause of dementia and Alzheimer's disease are also presented. And when it comes to slag, which contains large amounts of harmful metals, sulfur and phosphorus, numerous studies also warn of the damage to human health, as well as the consequences for soil content and groundwater contamination.

No improvements

State institutions are aware of all this information.

Asked what he did, the Protector of Citizens Zoran Pasalic answered that he was informed by the Ministry of Environmental Protection on October 2 this year that Smederevo Ironworks had taken measures to lower the level of pollution, and that he was now carefully monitoring the work of the competent Ministry and the City of Smederevo.

The administration of the City of Smederevo also did not deign to answer the inquiries, but the official website clearly shows that for the mayor Jovan Bec, from the ranks of the ruling party, no objections to the business of HBIS are possible. On the contrary, on October 6, a meeting was held with Director Song Sihai and General Manager Zhao Yun. On its website, the city administration points out that the atmosphere was pleasant and the cooperation so far has been successful. Not a word about red and black dust, hazardous waste, people who suffer. It is not surprising, knowing that the obligatory proposal of measures for improving the air quality in Smederevo was approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, and was not adopted by the City Assembly until 2020.

Protests without results

At the end of August this year, the protests of the citizens, which were initiated by the Association "Fortress", intensified. "There were between 400 and 500 people on August 22, gathered under the slogan 'For all children,' and some decided to sue," explains activist Nikola Krstic. "In January last year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a meeting with HBIS. It was promised that the problem of red rain would be solved by July this year, the new agglomeration would be put into operation and the old one extinguished by September 1. It was also agreed that trucks have tarpaulins when transporting slag, to achieve a green belt, remove the hills of slag. No result has been achieved ", Krstic points out and promises further struggle, ie. and the involvement of EU institutions.

At the end of August, the UNESCO Department of Bioethics for Europe sided with the citizens, appealed to the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, to appoint those responsible for the dramatic air pollution in Smederevo and its surroundings, and to announce what he plans to do on that occasion.

However, only the director of SEPA, Filip Radovic, reacted: "Citizens' protests due to pollution are used exclusively for political purposes." He explains the high level of air pollution in Smederevo, which was caused by the work of the local ironworks, by the "successful work" of those plants, and that pollution is a phenomenon that occurs "in all countries" that had "rapid economic growth".

What can Nadica Markovic from Radinac (43) say about this, who regularly loses her voice for three or four months a year? "The doctor told me that it was from the dust from the

Ironworks, they even confirmed it at the Military Medical Academy. It happens every time I work in the garden," she says.

For Mirko Popovic, program director of the Renewable Energy and Environment Regulatory Institute (RERI), Serbia is late in adopting the Air Protection Strategy and numerous bylaws, and there are not enough mechanisms to implement regulations from the EU. But, according to him, the state has an obligation to urgently inform the population and take measures, because that is the purpose of its existence.

The question remains who and when will be responsible for the inaction, especially for not displacing the most endangered residents, the residents of Radinac, Ralje and Vranovo. Are the lives of children, their parents and neighbors worth several million euros, how much would the relocation cost, knowing what profit the Ironworks and the state make?

Source: vreme.com