

The Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto is examining the possibility to start mining jadarite, a lithium and boron mineral unique to western Serbia. It said it expects to reach the investment decision next year.

Faced with public outrage, President Aleksandar Vučić said a local referendum would be held on letting Rio Tinto mine lithium in Serbia's west. Even though the multinational company is yet to reach an investment decision, activist Marija Alimpić said the company bought land from 36 families and that it is telling the rest their properties would be expropriated.

If Rio Tinto starts to extract lithium, arsenic will be deposited in the tailings and the entire area will be unfit for agriculture, said Dragana Đorđević, an advisor at the Institute of Chemistry, Technology and Metallurgy (IHTM) of the University of Belgrade. She told Nova S television that the company would leave toxins behind and that its managers would "probably get bonuses.

Rio Tinto threatening with expropriation

Representatives of Rio Tinto are now "threatening with expropriation," telling people the state would take their land, and 36 families in the Jadar area near Loznica already decided to sell their properties and leave, Marija Alimpić from the Protect Jadar and Rađevina association said at the same TV show. Government officials would need to prove there is a public interest for such a move, she stressed and called on the locals not to sell land to the multinational company.

"We don't want those tons of sulfuric acid. We aren't going to let them take our river, our land, the air. We won't let them have a single blade of grass for someone's mad profits," Alimpić said.

Everyone is fleeing

After a series of protests, the last of which occurred while he was at a meeting with Rio Tinto's management, President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić suggested a referendum would be held "either in the municipalities or the county" that is affected. He said there are now 19,697 residents in the 22 surrounding villages or 11% less than nine years ago.

"Everyone" in the Drina river area, now with 100,000 inhabitants, "is fleeing" to seek their fortune elsewhere, in Vučić's words. He said that a European carmaker, which he didn't name, could produce 450,000 electric vehicles per year with batteries from Serbian lithium and lift the gross domestic product of Serbia by 22.2% compared to last year's figures.

Environmental groups said transparency and media visibility for opposing views would be an essential condition for a democratic referendum, while some say the vote should be held on a national level. Namely, Rio Tinto is leading the way but there are also other companies searching for lithium deposits in different areas.

Professor Miljana Tomović from the Faculty of Biology at the University of Belgrade said the people must know their great-grandchildren would still feel the impact if the mine is built.

In her opinion, the project threatens 140 species with extinction.

Environmental protection measures are unknown

After Vučić said Rio Tinto will have invested USD 450 million by the end of the year and that the environment would be protected in line with the strictest standards, Protect Jadar and Rađevina and the Coalition for Sustainable Mining said no one but him knows what measures the company would conduct.

The mining giant claimed it would invest more than USD 100 million in environmental protection. Critics say there is no estimate of the potential damage and point to the lack of environmental and feasibility studies, which could determine the actual expenditure needs in the segment.

A group called Kreni-promeni earlier launched an online petition against the mining project. Almost 90,000 people signed it so far.

Miroslav Mijatović from the Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team (PAKT) told N1 that Rio Tinto is hiding the details of its investments and that they could later be used to annul five years worth of mining royalties.

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mining and Energy Zorana Mihajlović underscored there is no contract yet with the company and that it would be signed after the plebiscite. She added that all business activities in the sector must be performed in a way that makes the environment “healthier.”

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