

The mining plant near Loznica, which could satisfy 10% of the global demand for lithium, is planned to open in 2023. For these purposes, the Government of Serbia and representatives of Rio Tinto signed a Memorandum on Understanding in 2017, which relates to the development of world-class lithium-borate deposits in Jadar villages of Brezjak, Slatina, Stupnica and Nedeljice. In addition, the Spatial Plan for the road Loznica-Valjevo was amended to provide the necessary infrastructure for Rio Tinto.

A third protest was held near Loznica city against a lithium mine that the British-Australian company Rio Tinto intends to open in Jadar Basin in Western Serbia. Hundreds of citizens protested on October 27 in Brezjak settlement, in front of the branch office of the second largest mining corporation in the world, which plans to exploit world-class deposits of lithium ore – and, according to experts and activists, destroy everything around it. Their concern is heightened by the company's unwillingness to inform the public about the project and negotiate its details with the local community, as well as by the examples of Rio Tinto's destructive actions across the planet.

Back in 2004, geologists from Rio Tinto discovered the presence of sodium-lithium-borosilicate, a hitherto unknown mineral later named jadarit, in the vicinity of Loznica. Detailed research, completed at the beginning of this year, showed that there are 136 million tons of jadarit ore, containing high concentrations of lithium and boron. That is why the "Jadar" deposit was ranked as one of the most important lithium deposits in the world. Lithium is used in computer, telecommunications and aerospace industries, as well as in the production of batteries for electric vehicles. Their use is promoted in programs supporting "green" traffic and reduction of carbon footprint, introduced by an increasing number of countries in the fight against global warming. Although the price of lithium has stagnated in recent years, and even fallen this year (primarily due to reduced demand in China), it has long been expected that 2022 and 2023 will mark a turning point after which the price of lithium will only rise. These estimates are backed up by China's recent announcement that it plans to become carbon neutral by 2060. China is already the largest consumer of lithium and manufacturer of electric cars – but it's also responsible for a third of global carbon dioxide emissions. This means that China will have to speed up its transition to green development and green transport if it wants to fulfil its promises.

Representatives of the mining giant claim that they will implement all environmental protection measures within the "framework allowed by legal solutions in Serbia". Their teams, as reported by the media, are working on a detailed determination of the potential environmental impacts of the project, as part of a feasibility study that should be completed by the middle of next year. Domestic officials speak affirmatively about the "Jadar" project,

in which Rio Tinto has invested more than 200 million US dollars, and plans to invest as much by the end of 2021, presenting it as a great opportunity for the development of Western Serbia.

However, the local population has been worried and sceptical from the beginning. As Žaklina Živković from the Right to Water initiative, one of the environmental organizations that joined last week's protest, told Mašina, the spatial plan envisaging a lithium mine was adopted despite great resistance from the local community, and the land use conversion was kept out of the public eye.

For clarification we turned to Miroslav Mijatović, president of the Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team (PAKT), the organizer of the protest in Brezjak, who has been following the plans for the mine in Jadar from the beginning. According to him, Rio Tinto does not listen to the needs and dilemmas of the local community and activists, who have met with company representatives several times in the past two years, attended public presentations and discussions. Communication has always been one-way:

So, they presented their plans to us, without any adequate answers to our questions. This is exactly how Rio Tinto and the Ministry of Construction "pushed through" the Special Purpose Spatial Plan for the mine, with public hearings taking place during the winter holiday season. We declared the Plan and the accompanying study invalid, less because of the time when the public hearings were held, and more because the Spatial Plan and the Study did not provide answers to two key questions: how lithium and boron will be extracted from jadarite, and what will be the chemical composition of the waste loaves to be disposed of in the tailings.

Activists warn that there is no official information about the details of the project, and that Rio Tinto again refuses to provide them upon request, hiding behind the rules on business and commercial secrecy. Mijatović draws attention to the fact that the location of the landfill is still unknown, as well as the future place of storage of the elements that will remain after the separation of lithium and silicon. A toxic cocktail of chemicals used to extract lithium from the soil could infiltrate nearby rivers, streams and drinking water supplies, activists say, polluting the Jadar, Drina and Sava rivers and threatening Loznica, Šabac, Sremska Mitrovica and Belgrade. Rio Tinto provides scanty and contradictory statements on these matters:

If we read in the papers that the director of the "Jadar" project claims that the composition of the waste will be almost identical to the composition of the soil where it will be disposed of, it's not logical that at the same time the firm announces that it will install impermeable protection in order not to contaminate soil and groundwater.

Mijatović also draws attention to the fact that, according to the projections of climatologists, western Serbia will be the part of the country most susceptible to climate change in the future - which puts it in greater danger of droughts, floods and lack of drinking water. The consumption of 8,000 cubic meters of water per day (200-350 cubic meters per hour) by Rio Tinto, could contribute to this:

This part of Jadar has already had problems with drinking water during summer, and experience suggests that the company will have an advantage over citizens when it comes to deciding whose water needs will be more important. In the rainy season, those 8,000 cubic meters from Rio Tinto should be counted in. If floods have been frequent so far, what will happen in the future?

In addition to the hitherto expressed behaviour of Rio Tinto representatives and local authorities when it comes to this project, examples of environmental devastation done in favour of other “development” projects, which are numerous in Serbia, provide locals and activists a solid base to build their worries on. Investor requirements are prioritized to the detriment of local community and environmental needs too many a time to be listed one by one.

Enemies of the earth

Even greater fear for the fate of Jadar is provoked by news of the damage that Rio Tinto has already caused in other parts of the world. Mijatović explains that the astonishing data that the PAKT obtained through their associates belonging to the international network “Friends of the Earth” strengthened their determination to oppose the construction of the mine in Loznica:

A civil war broke out in Papua New Guinea after a civil uprising. It, unfortunately, lasted a full 10 years, killing 10% of the population of Bougainville - the largest of the Solomon Islands. Amy was also used in Madagascar, where a Rio Tinto mine was blocked by citizens, this time to rescue the miners and the management from the blockade.

Rio Tinto blew up an Aboriginal archaeological site and shrine in Western Australia in May, destroying caves in which traces of the presence of the ancestors of the indigenous population, as old as 46,000 years, were found. Protests and negotiations did not help. Although the company’s representatives later apologized, and several managers were fired, the damage to Rio Tinto remained at the level of reputation, because “everything was done according to the law” - precisely as it is claimed that it will be in Jadar.

The beastly greed for resources and financial profit also steered turbulent political events in Bolivia, in whose mountains lie a quarter of the known lithium reserves. The former president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, was overthrown last year through a coup, after he had

implemented a strategy of nationalization of mineral resources for ten years. During the reign of the Morales Movement for Socialism (MAS), lithium was declared a strategic treasure. MAS also tried to develop Bolivia from an exporter of crude lithium to a manufacturer and exporter of lithium batteries. Even the conservative Financial Times assessed Morales' strategy in mining as a factor in the success of the 2006-2014 economy, which no less than tripled in that time.

With such a policy, the MAS limited the possibilities of exploitation of raw materials for multinational mining companies and manufacturers of electric transport devices, which is why it is suspected that they, in conjunction with the US government, could have been the organizers of the coup. In response to such an accusation, Elon Musk, owner of the Tesla company, tweeted in July 2020 that "We will coup whoever we want! Deal with it". Equally dissatisfied with the nationalization of mineral wealth and the limitation of individual dividends were representatives of the Bolivian middle class, primarily those involved in lithium business.

A year of neoliberal rule in Bolivia brought a destruction of institutions and strategies which the MAS struggled to build, a weakening of the economy, rising poverty, deepening social inequalities and - a new change of government. Morales' long-time finance minister, Luis Arce, recently took over the presidency, continuing a policy of keeping lithium profits national.

Rio Tinto profits, the local population is left with environmental devastation

In the meantime, it remains unclear what the Rio Tinto mine might bring to Serbia, apart from environmental risks. In an interview with N1, Vladimir Simic, a professor at the Faculty of Mining and Geology, stated that we can only, by analogy with other mineral raw materials, assume that the state will collect 5% of the profits, but can't say anything for sure, because lithium doesn't appear in the existing laws. Žaklina Živković believes the essence of this story to be that the turn has come to natural resources to be ruthlessly sold off without taking into account the interests of citizens, after Serbian industry had been privatized and thoroughly destroyed.

Jadar is a poor region, whose economy relies heavily on agricultural production, beekeeping and tourism, and a project of this size will completely destroy any prospect for sustainable development. Even with the best available technologies, lithium mining leaves huge consequences on groundwater and surface water, soil, air quality - so, I don't know what kind of a cost benefit analysis can show that such a thing is good for the local community, she explains.

Locals and activists have already protested against the mine several times. According to

Rio Tinto lithium mine in Serbia is obstruction of sustainable development

Mijatović, they will continue to operate synchronized:

We are preparing letters to relevant European institutions, and appeals to decisions that began to arrive to locals regarding the conversion of agricultural into construction land done without their knowledge, which is quite a scandal.

Source: masina.rs