

Rio Tinto's projected lithium mining project in Serbia is a backward step in terms of the 'green transition

Rio Tinto's projected lithium mining project in Serbia is a backward step in terms of the 'green transition' Europe needs to make, MEP Thomas Waitz tells BIRN in an interview. Thomas Waitz is an organic permaculture farmer, a beekeeper, a forester, a long time environmental and peace activist, but also a co-chair of the European Green Party and an Austrian MEP in the European Parliament.

He recently visited Serbia because, he said, environmental topics have finally reached the public debate there, along with the rise of new green political options.

"There are more and more [Serbian] civil initiatives standing up for civil rights and social justice, but also for environmental causes. And that is all very encouraging development and, linked to that, we also have new political mobilization happening, not just in Serbia, but in the surrounding countries", Waitz told BIRN in an interview.

During his visit, Waitz met members of the Ne Davimo Beograd movement, formed to mobilize public opinion against a large and far from transparent Sava riverside development project in Belgrade, and a new green platform called Action, led by Nebojsa Zelenovic, former mayor of the western town of Sabac and leader of the Zajedno za Srbiju [Together for Serbia] party.

"I visited both of them and a lot of civil society initiatives to see what is going on and to gather information for my work in the European Parliament", he said.

Asked about the hottest environmental topic in Serbia right now, the planned investment in lithium mining by the Anglo-Australian multinational corporation Rio Tinto, criticized by activists and locals for its likely environmental impact and lack of transparency, the Austrian MEP echoed many of their criticisms.

"The main questions for me are: has there been an environmental impact assessment, did the local communities have a say, were they involved, and is there transparency about the contract [and] about those profiting from these deals? I see none of these criteria met for this concrete project", he said.

"This mining project does not meet any modern European standards, which you have to take into account of in any mining project within the EU and I would heavily advocate that we should also demand these rules from accession countries [like Serbia] and in the immediate neighborhood", he said. "In its current state, I think this project is a scandal", Waitz told BIRN.

Faced by harsh criticism of the project by locals and environmental activists, Rio Tinto and Serbia's government have denied claims of no-transparency, and that the deal has already been sealed behind closed doors.

A Rio Tinto statement on July 27 said that in order to minimize the mine's impact on the

local community, it would be built in accordance with the highest environmental standards. The company also stressed that before all the relevant approvals, permits and licenses are obtained, everything will be done in the cooperation with locals, NGOs and Serbia's government.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who previously had meetings with company representatives, said most recently on August 28 that no final decision on project had been taken, and the final outcome would depend on a referendum held either at a regional or national level.

Serbia's Energetics Minister, Zorana Mihajlovic, however, on August 18, during a meeting with Australian Ambassador Ruth Stewart, described the project as strategically important. She said she believed that Rio Tinto would fulfill all conditions, in accordance with the highest standards of environmental protection, and that Serbia will get its lithium mine. Several opposition leaders in Serbia have claimed the US Special Envoy, Matthew Palmer, instructed them not to criticize the government on the Rio Tinto project during his meeting with opposition politicians in June.

Asked about this alleged political pressure to give the go-ahead to the mine, from which the EU may also benefit Waitz conceded that such mines may be needed if we want a new industrial revolution based on electricity as the main source of energy.

But he stressed that poor countries with dysfunctional institutions tend to be the first choice of multinational corporations.

"The mining companies prefer to approach countries with low environmental standards and dysfunctional institutions, where they are granted free land, are free from tax, and get free infrastructure, or even concrete subsidies for the jobs they are creating and, especially, let's say, little control, little transparency", he told BIRN.

"These circumstances in nearly all cases lead to environmental devastation and to disrespect and disregard for and mistreatment of the local communities", he added.

Europe's growing Greens risk losing their way

Green parties emerged from the radical social activism in the 1960s, but also from the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s at the time of the Cold War.

Decades on, they now have a place in European mainstream politics. Greens today are no longer only environmentalist lobbyists but also classical political parties, capable of winning elections in the most important EU countries.

In Germany, the most powerful EU country, they could lead the next government. Asked about the responsibility and power Greens are gaining, and about fears that they will abandon their principles as many Social Democrats did in recent decades, influenced by

neo-liberal ideologies, Waitz says every politician needs to be prepared for this.

"Greens are called on to stick to their basic values and their promises. And yes, if you enter a coalition government, you need to make compromises. But that does not mean you have to give up your basic values and goals - and this is key also for greens," he said.

"It would be a good lesson for greens to remember what has happened to social democrats in some countries, to call on them to stick to their path and deliver as well as they can on their promises; otherwise, they will end up the same," Waitz emphasized.

He thinks that that Europe as a continent can be a world leader when it comes to green transition, mentioning the European Green Deal launched in 2019, whose goal is to reshape economies in a way to make Europe carbon neutral by 2050 and cut carbon emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030, compared with 1990 levels.

"In the end, the Greens voted against the climate law since it was not ambitious enough, but we were co-negotiating it," he recalled.

"Both positions had their point. Having a climate law obliges states to really deliver on reductions of CO₂, and is a historic step forward, unique in the globe, putting Europe in the forefront against global warming, and we should cherish this," Waitz told BIRN.

He said this change will not be easy, since the fossil fuel industries are still influential.

"These are huge industries, which see their profits swimming down the drain. There is huge resistance to overcoming their business model, so there are a lot of lobbyists; it is a hard path and we have to fight for every step," he said.

Fears about the impact on the poor

The European Green Deal, but also wider announcements of green transitions in the world, have been criticized by many as insufficient without prior wealth redistribution, since the cost of the transition will fall mostly on the poorer countries and poorer parts of societies. France's grassroots Gillet Jaunes ["Yellow Vests"] protests started in the opposition to the French government's fuel taxation, aimed at financing climate-change reforms, claiming it will fall on the back of the working and middle classes.

Poor and underdeveloped countries whose economies are still based on "dirty" industries outsourced from the rich countries are even more concerned.

Fears about job losses and the high costs of a green transition and of a lack of technology and know-how can be misused by the rich countries of the Global North.

But Waitz insists there is no alternative to cutting global CO₂ emissions, adding that the rich countries need to be in the front of a just transition.

"There is a need to share some of the wealth, and to share with some less wealthy countries, because climate knows no borders, and it would not make sense for some rich countries to

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switch to renewables while others pollute the same way. We would not accomplish anything by that", he stressed.

Waitz said that the EU is making progress in that way, noting that within the EU solidarity mechanism, established due to the Covid-19 crisis, the rich countries have "put cash on the table, taking loans at low interest rates that they are sharing now with less rich countries.

"All that comes with actively supporting not-so-developed countries to keep up and also co-finance this green transition", he said.

"That is the right thing to do, and this is also what EU tries to do with [Western Balkan six] WB6 countries, of course on a lower level, because they are still not [EU] members - which I regret", Waitz stressed.

Explaining the interconnection of all regions when it comes to tackling climate changes, he referred to EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, CBAM.

This in practice means that EU importers will buy carbon certificates corresponding with the goods that have been produced under the EU's carbon pricing rules.

"This CO2 toll is only for products from countries that have not set their own CO2 pricing in their own economic systems. And why do we need to do that?" he asked.

"If we price CO2 at a high level within EU, but not do that on imported goods, the industry will immediately outsource production to other countries and we will not see any CO2 reduction at all", he explained.

"It is very important that this money is used for transition in EU, but also to support less wealthy countries to start their own green transition", Waitz concluded.

Source: Balkan Insight