

About 14 percent of the total electricity in Serbia is produced in Kostolac thermal power plants. This information is not a secret and can be easily found. What isn't written anywhere is the fact that the inhabitants of Old Kostolac and the surrounding villages are "collateral damage" of the production process, which enables the daily routine of the rest of Serbia. That is why they haven't known a normal life for many years. Ash pits, polluted air, dirty water and various diseases are their everyday life. Protection of the environment and the health of local residents is only text on paper, for the sake of pro forma.

Long ago, in 1870. A mine was opened and exploitation of coal in the surroundings of Kostolac started. The greatest credit goes to the Belgrade industrialist and visionary Đorđe Weifert, who, in the spirit of industrialization, expanded the family business from the brewery to the mining of coal ore. At his invitation, today's Kobalova Street was inhabited by the first colony of miners who, in the then industrially backward Serbia, found their fortune precisely in mining.

Eastern of Kostolac, towards the Mlava river, there is a road leading to the before mentioned Kobalova Street – the core of the Old Kostolac settlement. Once the place where the industrialization and modernization of Serbia began, Old Kostolac is today a dilapidated and sad settlement, which in appearance does not differ much from the old mining colony. As then, and now, most people are engaged in the same mining trade, working in the Kostolac mines and thermal power plant basins. The only difference is that former miners arrived here in search of a better life, while today's inhabitants of Old Kostolac, especially the younger ones, as well as other surrounding villages such as Drmno, Kličevac or Klenovnik, are looking to escape from this area as soon as possible. Many would ask themselves why, what else do they need besides safe and good salaries, such as the service in the energy sector offers? However, when you go there, when you talk to them, the answer becomes very obvious. Nothing can replace health.

The Institute for Public Health "Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut" prepared the study "Improvements in the management of contaminated localities in Serbia". According to their findings, there are several black spots in Serbia, localities where business entities as polluters question the health of people living in the area. The settlement of Old Kostolac, as well as the surrounding villages that stretch around the coal mines, fall, according to this study, into ecologically devastated areas. About 14 percent of the total electricity in Serbia is produced in thermal power plants Kostolac "A" and "B".

Aside that, according to the data of Elektroprivreda Srbije, only one surface mine is active. The entire complex annually exploits nine million tons of coal, and produces 6,000,000 MWh of electricity.

In 2002, Stari Kostolac had 1,300 inhabitants, Kličevac about the same, Drmno about a thousand, and Klenovnik a little less.

Today, in times of energy crisis caused by unforeseen geopolitical events in Eastern Europe, electrical energy is worth like pure gold. However, how much are the lives of people in the areas where it is produced worth? According to the way the state treats them, it turns out that they are not worth anything at all, that they are just collateral damage so the rest of the country can live normally. They haven't been able to do that for a long time, and the fact that they were sacrificed for the sake of the "greater good" is no consolation to them. They are the ones who get sick and die.

Residents of the Kobalova Street

All these places are another classic example of a trapped environment. Those who work in the power plant or in the mines, and there are many of them, have good salaries for which the only condition, whenever the talk about the environment is raised, is to keep quiet. What many do not understand is that this is also a kind of blackmail and fear – that they will lose their jobs. They are guided by the logic that they cannot do anything on their own, and that they will lose what little they have. The municipality is certainly not on their side, nor does it understand them. Admittedly, that's nothing new, it's always been like that.

At the very beginning of the populated part of Kobalova Street, we find a few residents who are curiously watching a car with Belgrade registrations. Rarely anyone from the outside goes there. Roads haven't led many people through this street for a long time. They want to talk, they say there are many problems, but no one wants to listen. One of the residents explains that she recently had cancer surgery.

A few hundred meters away there is an ash pit. Until you experience it live, it is difficult to understand it – a huge expanse covered with black coal dust, you need to strain your eyes to see the end. It is similar to the desert, when the view is blurred by the endless sand. They say that access is not allowed, and very quickly it becomes clear why. Left completely exposed and unprotected, with only minor parts periodically watered, the ash pit seems to be waiting for the wind to blow from the north to scatter the dust all around.

On the plateau of the hill around which Kobalova Street curves, in 1924, the Church of St. Georgije was built, as an endowment of ship-owner Dragutin B. Todić. Next to it, on the same hill, a wealthy entrepreneur built a smaller villa for his wife Lepasava. They say he chose the location because of the imposing view that reached the Danube itself and the mouth of the Mlava river into it. Today, the house stands neglected and dilapidated, all its pride that distinguished it there, on the hill above Old Kostolac, has disappeared. As well as the view. The ruin now watches over the ashes in silence.

One of the residents of Kobalova Street says that they have been “polluted for years” because of the ash dump, adding that “everyone is hiding it”, and that “no one is allowed to say anything”, because “power plants and mines are a source of income for the people “. When a small nor’easter blows, “the street lights turn on here”, that’s how thick the ash deposits are. He adds that Elektroprivreda Srbije “seems to be doing them a favor because they pay less for electricity”, but that, in fact, “health is much more important”. On the other hand, as he says, they cannot actually have a garden, that is, they can only plant what can somehow be washed. “We can’t plant cabbage, because as soon as it covers the dust, it’s completely black”, explains the interlocutor somewhat angrily, adding that “if the ash gets into the house, it can no longer be cleaned”. “It’s terrible to live in such a ghetto,” concludes the interlocutor.

Others complain about the drinking water. They say that before they had normal water because they were connected to the water supply from Kostolac. The problem, they say, occurred when they were diverted to another source of water supply. Although the competent authorities claim that the water is “bacteriologically and chemically correct”, residents claim that it “smells”, that it is red and that it “runs like mud”. One of them adds that they have benefits for water, in the sense of privileges up to 30 cubic meters, and that is why they are asked “what else do they want, when they have water for free”. They, on the other hand, angrily retort that “the water is for nothing”, and one says that he went to the market that morning to “buy a bottle of water for making coffee”.

In New Kostolac, or just Kostolac as the small town between Požarevac and the old core of Weifert’s colony is called today, it is much more lively. Admittedly, they are not on the first strike. However, there are many who work in the small town from Old Kostolac, Drmno, Klenovnik or Kličevac. Near the local market, we are with a woman who comes to work in New Kostolac every day, while she lives with her family somewhere between Old and New. We find her in a crowd, but she agrees to talk to us. She makes us coffee with a worried face and begins his story. She says that she moved to Old Kostolac several years ago with her two children. No one from the neighborhood informed them that the water was not bacteriologically correct, so they used it normally for two years, including as drinking water. She claims that both she and her daughter fell ill in the meantime, but also that more or less everyone on the street “has some illness”. She explains that she went to the water supply company in August to ask for a water tank to be installed in the settlement, but they refused her, adding that they “don’t know what she’s talking about”, that it’s all “nonsense”, and that the water is “bacteriologically correct” for drink”. You have no right to appeal: if your water is polluted, it is polluted,” says the interlocutor sadly and with noticeable

disappointment in her voice. She adds that water is not the only problem because they are the first to be hit: they are located between an ash pit, two thermal power plants and a garbage dump. She complains about the same problem as other residents of Kobalova Street – ash. “I dry my laundry exclusively in the house, it is not possible to go and spend time outside, normally to sit outside”; believes that they are deprived of “some normal things”. While showing us the nighttime footage of the ash drift, she explains that, when the ash rises, you can’t see the car parked in front of the gate from the front door, and it’s “only about thirty meters away”.

None of them want to speak by their first and last names, they are afraid, they say, if it is found out, they will be put on the “black list”, even those who no longer work in the power plant or in the mines – later, whenever something is wrong plumbing or heating, “cause a problem”.

One of the residents of Stari Kostolac, who previously worked at the thermal power plant, explains that the filters have existed since before, and that sulphurization was recently carried out – a purification process to reduce dust and sulfur dioxide emissions. However, as he says, “how they work is a story in itself”, sometimes it is “black smoke”, and they “often fall out”. Dr. Andreja Stojić, from the Institute of Physics in Belgrade, explains that the problem with pollution from thermal power plants, including these plants in Kostolac, is complex, and that it is systematically approached incorrectly in Serbia, but also in other European countries. Dr. focuses on “only a few fractions of suspended (PM) particles, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and ozone, only a few organic compounds and only a few heavy metals”. This can be seen from the measurements carried out by the stations of the Environmental Protection Agency SEPA. According to their findings, the air quality in Kostolac is very often characterized as “excellent”, so many would wonder what’s this text all about.

Furthermore, the physicist explains that “it does not represent even a hundredth, and very likely not even a thousandth part” of what would have to be known in order to understand the impact of air quality on human health. As he says, “volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, organic compounds with chlorine, persistent organic pollutants, as well as heavy metals” emitted by a thermal power plant are ignored. The US Environmental Protection Agency has classified them as mutagenic, toxic and carcinogenic compounds. Chimneys of thermal power plants in Kostolac have filters. No one disputes that. Even if everything works in the best order, is that enough? Stojić believes that it is not. He says that “the regulations do not follow the level of understanding of the environment and science”, that they stick to what was current “fifty years ago”, and that “everything is

done pro forma”.

Polluted air, illegal measurements, ash pits, defective water, as well as the resulting various illnesses of the inhabitants of Kobalova Street and the surrounding villages, are the past and the present of this region. If something doesn't change drastically, it will become the future. In addition, in villages like Drmno or Kličevac, the walls of the houses are massively cracking, because they are “eaten” by the coal mines that are all around them and that are constantly expanding. In this second settlement, a local welcomed us, and while drinking coffee explained what is happening to him, as well as most of his neighbors. Due to the expansion of the excavations, their houses are sinking, the underground water has been disrupted, and their basements are flooded, and the state refuses to evict them. He says that there is no longer a normal life there. The cracked walls are best seen in Drmno, but some of the residents there allegedly received money to relocate. Some have “forgotten” it, so they are procrastinating or looking for more, but they are certainly not a representative example of the fate of the Weifert miners' colonies.

Every serious illness is resolved by a council of doctors. First of all, it should be recognized that the problem is big, that it's complex and that the competences to solve it should be combined, Andreja Stojić is clear, “our society is far from that at the moment”. In the end he adds: only conversation, association, agreement and work, Vreme writes.