

“Citizens must not allow themselves to be brought to the finished act, that the economic interest has priority over the environment”

The hastily announced start of the construction of the Chinese tire factory Shanghai Linglong and the economic resurgence of Zrenjanin, as announced by local decision-makers, prompted controversy as there are currently no credible estimates of the environmental impact of future tire factory. Although at this stage there is no legal obligation for the investor to produce a study on the environmental impact of the plant, environmentalists believe that the study should already have been preventative. At the same time, all three levels of government claim that the work on the study is not currently their responsibility. Interlocutors of the Vojvodina Research and Analysis Center (VOICE) warn that tire production is everything but a clean industry.

Igor Jezdimirovic, Chairman of the Board of the Environmental Engineers, believes that it is devastating that so much is being prepared, invested and promised, without considering the aspect of environmental impact, primarily on human health. According to him, it is highly debatable whether in this case there will be a will to put the economy aside for the sake of stories about ecology and human health.

“The whole system of impact analysis through the Law on Environmental Impact is to make it a preventative measure, not to do something when there is no return. We must, through a preventative measure, see if we need such an investment and what are the consequences for human health and the environment,” Jezdimirovic warned.

A connoisseur of manufacturing technology in the rubber industry, whose name is known to the newsroom, believes that air quality will depend on the technology itself, which is currently unknown to the public, and is not even listed on the company’s website. “As far as the environmental impact study is concerned, I can only say that it is currently unavailable because no Chinese manufacturer has asked for it,” said a VOICE interlocutor, who, because of the nature of the business he is doing, wanted to remain anonymous.

The Ministry of Environment states that they are not competent to handle this administrative matter and that they can only confirm their earlier response when they were approached by the Zrenjanin Civic Turn movement.

A similar response was received from the VOICE editorial staff from the Provincial Secretariat for Urbanism and Environmental Protection, which did not respond to requests to certain environmental organizations beforehand.

“For the project that is subject to the environmental impact assessment, we have not yet been asked to make a decision, nor has this body had contact with the management of the

mentioned company,” that was the secretariat’s response in November.

A more extensive response came from the last instance in this series – the City of Zrenjanin,. According to Mayor Cedomir Janjic’s office, the realization of the project of the Chinese company “Linglong” consists of several stages, so at the moment such study is not even needed.

“In the first phase, a Chinese company obtained a building permit that did not require an Environmental Impact Study. In the continuation of the project, an Environmental Impact Study is also essential when applying for a construction permit”, VOICE was quoted as saying.

The Chinese investor has so far obtained a building permit in March for the construction of an extremely long and wide fence around the future plant, and at the beginning of May a certificate of registration of works approved for that permit has been issued and the decision has been issued by the Provincial Secretariat for Energy, Construction and Transport.

The decision approving the commencement of works states that the facility (fence) is not on the list of objects for which an environmental impact study is required. The fence around the factory is completely finished, as the VOICE reporter could ascertain recently. Several heavy machineries have already been parked in the circle of the future factory and it seems that the day when construction will begin is near. This means that a Chinese investor should submit an environmental impact study soon.

In the Regulation establishing the list of projects subjected to mandatory impact assessment and the list of projects for which environmental impact assessment may be required, the rubber industry is classified in another list, which means that the competent authority could also release Shanghai Linglong from that obligation.

Revolted citizens, environmentalists, political parties...

Because of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study, the first civic-turned-activists came out to the public in early May, when Shanghai Linglong got a permission to start construction work.

Shortly after, Greenpeace Serbia responded, urging that work on the Shanghai Linglong Tire Factory must be suspended until a study on the environmental impact of the plant was presented to the public. “Greenpeace Serbia believes that the existence of this study is vital in order for the works to get started at all and that it is compulsory under domestic and EU

law,” Greenpeace said, announcing that their legal team will initiate legal proceedings and seek suspension of investment in Zrenjanin since the basic legal regulations are not respected. The unknown about the environmental impact assessment was also criticized by opposition political parties.

According to the VOICE interviewee, who demanded anonymity, the technology that will be used at the future factory in Zrenjanin is new. “If the protection systems are maintained, then the emission of harmful substances and wastewater should be within the allowed limits,” he said, adding that it was good for the citizens of Zrenjanin that the plant was displaced from the city and that it would not pollute the city itself.

Talking about the raw materials used, he said that such factories have many mixing capacities where the ingredients of the rubber are mixed, such as soot, chalk, essential oils and stearin (a sulfur-based derivative).

“The problem with soot in the air is that it is present if it is not stored well. The same is the case with chalk and sulfur. This also applies to the production process itself. If it is not rounded, then the wind will carry harmful substances and spread them around the environment,” said the VOICE interlocutor.

For Igor Jezdimirovic without impact analysis, which should be done in an expert manner, and without public debate on this, it is very difficult to see the consequences. He assessed that citizens should not be allowed to be brought to the finished act, that the economic interest has priority over the environment.

Tire manufacturing, Jezdimirovic believes, is certainly not pure technology such as making games or software. “It certainly has environmental consequences and it is therefore necessary to analyze the consequences as soon as possible so that we can see exactly where the waste water will flow, what gases we will have, what kind of waste we can expect,” he said.

It is absurd for Jezdimirovic that the most fertile land in Serbia and Europe is given for the construction of industry. “Fertile land is not created as our decision makers imagine. We have inherited this and need to pass on to future generations. While Europe sees a future in healthy food production and a clean environment, we are looking for a future in technology that the Chinese want to abandon too,” said VOICE.

The City of Zrenjanin: Impact study will be done in the continuation of project implementation

The Mayor of Zrenjanin said that the Environmental Impact Study would “be indispensable in the continuation of the project, when applying for a building permit”.

“The Study itself must be made available to the public, where all interested citizens will be able to view it. For this reason, we believe that it is unnecessary to mislead the citizens of Zrenjanin and Serbia, because everything has been done in accordance with the law so far,” the reply states.

Regarding the allegations on dirty industry, the mayor’s office estimated that it was not the first tire production plant in Serbia, that it had existed for decades and that no pollution complaints had been reported so far.

“In Zrenjanin, sadly for the malicious individuals, a state-of-the-art and fully automated factory will be built and all environmental parameters will be respected. The equipment manufacturer itself demands the highest standards of environmental protection, which is as important to us as the economic investment in our city,” said Cedomir Janjic’s office.

“Today we aspire to join the EU and the basic question is whether that plant can meet EU standards and – if it can – why not be built in an EU country but in Serbia,” said Igor Jezdimirovic and warned that the Zrenjanin factory tires may one day become a stumbling block when Serbia negotiates with the EU on what needs to be improved in the environmental field.

Reminding that the Smederevo Ironworks and Bor Mining and Smelter Basin are Chinese investments that are well-known pollution points in Serbia, Jezdimirovic warned that if we were already used to polluting our environment, countries in the immediate environment will not want to put up with that.

“Where there is a cross-border impact, the local public must also be informed.

Unfortunately, I am afraid that Zrenjanin has shown a serious disadvantage in the previous period when it was in a position to make strategic decisions. Building a water factory and looking for a solution after the investment is proven to be bad and much more expensive.

That is why I urge the profession to get involved and inform the public, and to enter into an open debate whether we need this facility, in what way and with what technology,

”Jezdimirovic concluded.

VOICE reporters were also convinced that the start of the construction of the plant was approaching. The investor has built a complete wall around the future plant, several kilometers long (Zrenjanin citizens already call it the “Chinese wall”). As we learn, procedures are underway regarding the electricity and plumbing infrastructure.

According to a Chinese investor announcement, the plant will be built in three phases, with the first phase set to be completed in 2021. The complete completion of the works is

announced for March 2025. When the plant is fully built, it should produce 3,600 tons of finished products or 13.6 million pieces of tires annually.

Linglong has six factories, and the one in Zrenjanin will be the second plant outside China (Linglong has a factory in Thailand since 2014). The plant will cover an area of 130 hectares and its total area will be 393,660 square meters.

The company website states “that new technologies such as artificial intelligence, mobile research, big data and industrial robots will be applied at the Zrenjanin factory, and that the production itself will mean” excellent quality, green production and top brand.”

Given that production is scheduled to begin as early as 2021, this makes the rubber industry expert skeptical. “I am skeptical about the success of the plant because the annual production of 13 million tires is projected. The biggest problem for a Chinese company will be the transfer of goods. Existing railways and roads in Zrenjanin can hardly handle it, which can potentially be a big problem, ”a VOICE source warned.

Source: voice.org.rs