

Sulfur dioxide, nickel, lead, arsenic, mercury – these are the vapors and particulates inhaled by the citizens of Bor every day in quantities that exceed the limits, which are the result of the operation of the Zijin Copper smelter and sulfuric acid factory in this city in the northeast of Serbia.

The evaporation of sulfur dioxide in the air above Bor, for example, at one point, was 800 micrograms per cubic meter, which is six and a half times the allowable limit of 125 micrograms. In the last ten days, there have been situations where the number was even 20 times higher, and a record deviation was recorded on June 27 this year when in the morning of this evaporation there were as high as 2,983 micrograms per cubic meter.

Due to the problems with the air they breathe, the citizens of Bor have organized two protests in the last month. They require competent republic and local institutions to address the problem, which they claim has intensified since January 2019.

“Bor has never been a spa, we all know here that we are an industrial-mining town, but exceeding the legal limits has been extremely rare for the last two years, until the privatization of RTB. So, since January, there are already repeated pollution,” said in a statement to Radio Free Europe Irena Zivkovic, from the Bor Association of Citizens” A Choice Exists “who regularly participates in protests and talks with representatives of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Local Self-Government of Serbia with her fellow citizens.

Badly made new smelter

The former Bor Mining and Smelter Basin, the only copper and precious metal producer in Serbia, was taken over by Chinese company Zidjin Mining at the end of December 2018. Protesting citizens say the increased concentration of harmful fumes and particulates began when the new owner came in and increased production.

“The reason for this is a factory that was unprepared to be put into operation and not properly designed from the beginning. That is the reason, we all know, and they know it from the leadership of Zidjin Copper as well,” says Zivkovic.

Radio Free Europe did not receive an answer from Zidjin when asked what it plans to do. In fact, the company has so far only addressed the public only once, on September 18 this year – in a written statement.

“Environmental problems have been ignored for over a hundred years. The former RTB company neglected the necessary measures of exhaust gas desulphurization during the

construction of the smelter and the smelter equipment is very outdated,” said Zidjin Copper, among others.

‘Little wonder of Serbia’

However, a new smelter and sulfuric acid plant at the Bor Bor smelter opened about five years ago. Since the beginning of construction in 2011, the state has invested around € 250 million for the construction of facilities with modern technology. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, at the ceremony marking the completion of construction, called the plant “a small miracle of Serbia”.

“Because if thousands of people have jobs here, if people see that their children will have a job, if their air is not polluted and they will be able to raise and care for their children in Bor and its surroundings, then Bor has its future, then the mines they have their future here,” said Aleksandar Vucic, then Prime Minister of Serbia, on December 23, 2014.

Air pollution has shown throughout this 2019, however, it remains a problem. This is evidenced by the daily official data of the Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) Irena Zivkovic believes that the responsibility is not only on the Chinese owner. She claims that in 2015, hired engineers also warned state institutions and the Government that new facilities, despite the investments, were not fully operational. The problem, Zivkovic claims, was not immediately apparent because production until the arrival of the Chinese company, she said, was only 30 to 40 percent of total capacity, which consequently did not significantly affect air quality. With the arrival of Zidjin, production has doubled. With it, pollution did as well.

An investor in the first place?

According to the citizens of Bor, the state does not want to start solving the problem for now. They have talked to representatives of local self-government and the Ministry of Environmental Protection on several occasions, but, as Irena Zivkovic states, they all shift responsibilities from one institution to another.

“Whether this was done intentionally so that the state of Serbia could not oppose the profit or the way foreign investors work, or is it by chance, we do not know but, well, we ask that it be done because the law simply requires them,” she says .

Radio Free Europe has not yet received a response from the Ministry of the Environment on what the country plans to do. It was explained that the Ministry had forwarded the request

to the RSE “to the competent services, that the topic was complex, but that the Ministry would try to provide the answers at its disposal.”

Radio Free Europe did not receive any comment from local government representatives.

Consequences

While Bor residents are waiting for the competent institutions to address the issue specifically, doctors warn of the devastating health effects of those who breathe polluted air on a daily basis.

Professor Dr. Branimir Nestorovic, a specialist in pulmonology, pediatrics and allergology, said in an interview with RSE that sulfur dioxide was a particular problem.

“Because gases penetrate deeper into the lungs and in general through the skin and inhalation of these substances over long periods of time can lead to serious lung damage. Of course, the particles are not harmless either. For example, arsenic heavy metals, when they enter the body, are absorbed and never released from the body again,” Nestorovic explains and concludes:

“In the long run, you can expect damage to all possible organs, all the modern diseases that exist can be expected to develop over a period of time in those who have a genetic predisposition and have been exposed for a long time. Therefore, it is not only a matter of the respiratory tract, but there will be a host of chronic diseases for 10, 15 years. ”

Aware of the consequences, the citizens of Bor say that they do not give up on pressure on the authorities to solve the problem. State and local institutions were given a deadline of October 24. otherwise, they say, there will be the radicalization of protests.

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