

Romania has asked the United Nations to make a Transylvanian village boasting 18th century houses and intact Roman mining shafts into a World Heritage site in a surprise 11th hour move that could protect it from a gold mine project.

The request to list Rosia Montana was announced as the government of Dacian Ciolos handed over power this week to the incoming Social Democrat Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu, who won elections last month.

Romania's outgoing culture minister said in a statement late Thursday that a request had been sent to the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

This was an unexpected move by the government, which last week stated it would not proceed with the UNESCO application that dates back to 2011 and has been caught up in a fight over a gold project.

"Protection of national treasures is one of the main responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture," said an online statement by the government.

Rosia Montana, which sits atop one of Europe's largest gold deposits, has been at the center of a battle between villagers and the Canada-listed mining company Gabriel Resources for more than 15 years.

Gabriel Resources said the \$1.5 billion project to build Europe's largest gold mine would provide a major boost for Romania's economy and create hundreds of jobs for the Transylvania region — the legendary home of Dracula.

But Rosia Montana's residents feared the mine would destroy their village and surrounding hills and farm lands as well as pollute the local environment.

Campaign groups cautiously welcomed the government's application to UNESCO, but said the battle had not yet been won.

"We have won this battle so many times, but the company just kept coming back with new allies and new governments," Tudor Bradatan, a spokesman for the "Save Rosia Montana" campaign, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by telephone.

No one from Gabriel Resources was immediately available to comment.

Protests biggest since 1990s

Opposition to the mine ignited a wave of national protests in 2013 described as the biggest since the early 1990s anti-communist marches.

Under pressure from locals and global environmentalists, the then government blocked the mine, but last year Gabriel Resources took the fight to the World Bank's international arbitration tribunal to seek a reported \$4 billion in compensation.

The tribunal began hearing the case September 23 but no second hearing is yet set.

source: voanews.com