

The consequence of the dissatisfaction of the citizens who sent clear messages to the public was the opening of a new arena of political conflict. While the government is coming out with the vision of “Green Serbia”, in addition to the Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own movement, which has been dealing with the issue of ecology since its establishment, new “green” actors are appearing in the opposition bloc. Thus, we have the newly founded group of Nebojsa Zelenović, which is a kind of conglomerate of environmental associations from 60 cities, but also a strong campaign of the Party of Freedom and Justice Dragan Djilas, which turned its visual identity in a few days and subordinated it to the green agenda.

At the press conference of President Aleksandar Vučić, held on June 4, we heard, among other things, that the voice of the people (for power) is the voice of God. On that occasion, he also announced a potential municipal or district referendum on the project of building the Jadar mine of the Rio Tinto company, which would deal with the exploitation of lithium in the vicinity of Loznica. At the same time, groups of citizens and part of the professional public agreed that the danger to the environment is great, and the process itself is insufficiently transparent. Due to this and similar examples throughout Serbia, such as the business of mine RTB Bor, Ironworks Železara Smederevo, Ling Long factory and others, citizens have been protesting for months and demanding that the business of companies that have a potentially high risk to the environment be reconsidered. Although investments of this type are not a problem in themselves, on the contrary – they bring new knowledge and technologies to underdeveloped countries like Serbia, accelerate the development of the domestic market and significantly contribute to increasing employment – attention must be paid to what are called negative externalities in theory. side effects. In all the above cases, the biggest externality is certainly the endangerment of the environment.

Environmental policies as a mobilizing factor

The association of citizens around environmental issues has gained political significance, especially after the so-called an environmental uprising that mobilized numerous green policy activists. In addition to the association Let’s Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina, many other local organizations appeared there, which started the fight in various ways with the goal of calling the authorities to account and stopping the implementation of controversial projects. The negative externalities that have arisen as a consequence of circumventing environmental regulations, establishing non-transparent agreements between companies and the state and neglecting mandatory feasibility studies, in addition to the increasingly visible activism of citizens, lead to more political parties’ interest in these topics.

On the one hand, the ruling party claims that the environment and the green transition of

the economy are among the priorities of the state, but also that projects like Jadar are a great chance for economic development that can bring as much as 19 billion euros in annual income. On the other hand, we have groups of citizens, a number of environmentalists, and even opposition parties, who claim that weighing between the economy and ecology is “too expensive” and that on the example of mine RTB Bor, which the government calls a green mine, we see that the companies themselves environmental standards cannot believe. However, we asked Marko Vujić from the Faculty of Political Sciences what the real political potential of environmental movements is in our country and whether they can provide some major changes.

“It could not be said that the potential of activism in the sphere of ecology is so strong that it can bring about radical changes. However, the courageous fact is that an increasing number of movements with broader social goals have incorporated environmental issues into the most important parts of their agendas. Also, local activism and local paritization is a positive indicator that in the near future, ecology could become an integrative factor of wider political activism in Serbia, “Vujić points out.

The case of the Ironworks - Železara Smederevo

That the environmental problems caused by the poor business of the companies that are presented as strategic partners of Serbia are great, is confirmed by the data of the Environmental Protection Agency on air quality, as well as reports of the Trampoline Institute on water quality in Smederevo. According to their data, the settlement of Radinac, where the Ironworks is located, is one of the 10 blackest points in Serbia, according to the organization of the Fortress.

“Yards and houses are covered with red and black dust, which makes breathing difficult. It also covers crops that are placed on the Smederevo market, which makes the situation even more dangerous, because that dust, which citizens colloquially call “steel”, cannot be removed with ordinary water, but only with soap, ” said Nikola Kolja Krstić from the organization Fortress.

He also states that the study conducted by Serbian researchers in 2013, which concerned the impact of the Ironworks on malignant diseases in Smederevo, showed that the highest percentage of patients is in Radinac, out of all 29 Smederevo villages.

“After the arrival of HBIS in 2016, production was significantly raised, and technology was neglected due to lack of maintenance, so we have reasonable doubts that the percentage of patients with malignant diseases has jumped,” says Krstić, adding that citizens are directly endangered in settlements around Železara.

The Fortress movement is not for shutting down the Ironworks, because as they say, “it is extremely important for the economy of Smederevo, since it employs 5,000 workers, and another 10,000 people who cooperate with it or have an economic interest in working indirectly depend on it”. However, Krstić points out that “it is crucial for the state to ensure respect for the laws that the Chinese company violates on a daily basis, with clear sanctions for that.”

The Fortress Movement also launched its PVO (Against Air Defense) initiative and came up with six short-term, but concrete, solutions. These are the installation of filters at the plants, the obligatory tarpaulins on the trucks transporting slag, the planting of a wide green belt around the Ironworks, the installation of water cannons, the construction of two bicycle paths towards the Ironworks and the prohibition of inadequate slag disposal.

The case of mine RTB Bor

We can see that the Ironworks in Smederevo is not an isolated case on the example of the Mining and Smelting Basin Bor. Zijin mining, a Chinese company that bought 63% of the ownership of RTB Bor in 2018, has been calling on numerous groups of citizens for responsibility for the extreme deterioration of the air in Bor for years. The amounts of sulfur dioxide in the air are often several times higher than allowed by law.

That Zijin’s mining company has a bad reputation in the media when it comes to environmental pollution, we could see back in 2010 in a Reuters report on the situation when thousands of fish were killed or poisoned due to acid spills from their mine into the Ting River. affected the water supply of over 60,000 people.

Referendum and achievements

However, the announcement of a possible referendum that is closely related to the issue of ecology and emphasizing the “vision of a green Serbia” shows that this topic can be a disruptive factor in maintaining the ideal image of rapid progress and prosperity that is an important part of the SNS image. This is particularly relevant in the context of the forthcoming elections, where environmental policies may play a more significant role than in previous election cycles.

“Ecology is a more relevant topic in the next elections than in the previous ones, but in the near future there will probably not be a topic on which the elections will be won.” “Since we are still a predominantly poor society, ecology will not be a priority in the 2022 campaign, but over time, an increasing number of citizens will take into account the solutions that parties offer voters in the election campaigns,” Vučićević said. at the Faculty of Political Sciences and adds that economic and living standards issues, the attitude towards resolving

The struggle for the environment is whole new arena of political conflict in Serbia

the status of Kosovo are probably still the most important arenas of conflict.

Opinion polls conducted by Talas in late April show that air pollution, mini-hydropower plants and the opening of lithium mines are issues that worry Serbian citizens less than low living standards and poverty, unemployment and layoffs, and the economic consequences of the virus epidemic. corona, the departure of young people abroad. We can also see that the concerns of the opposition and the voters of the government are quite different, so only 11.2% of the voters of Aleksandar Vučić are very worried about the issue of hydroelectric power plants, but even 46.7% of the voters of the opposition. The data are similar when it comes to the opening of the lithium mine, where the voters of the parties in power are much less worried than the voters of the opposition, with a percentage difference of almost 40%.

Source: talas.rs