

Environmentalists, and the EU, have long voiced concern over a toxic waste site on the banks of the Danube in northern Hungary. So why do most locals living nearby quietly tolerate it?

The red dust came from the waste reservoirs of a now-shuttered alumina factory on the banks of the Danube River that separates the Hungarian settlement of Almásfüzitő from Slovakia to the north. So Almásfüzitő's 2,000 residents were happy when, in the mid-1980s, the waste treatment company that manages the site began covering up the waste, a solidified red sludge separated from the river by a permeable mud wall. The red dust has gone, but concern shifted to the mix of hazardous and non-hazardous waste that is being used to cover the sludge.

The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, has taken Hungary to task over the toxic waste of Almásfüzitő, but to little effect.

Gergely Simon, regional toxic expert at the Hungarian arm of Greenpeace, calls it an "endless story". It is a story of the Commission's inability to hold Hungary to account, of the country's powerless or non-existent environmental bodies, of the manipulation of basic science and how communist-era factory settlements have to adapt to survive.

The red dust from the reservoirs might have gone, but, said László Nagy, "the bad news is that it has become a hazardous waste cemetery."

A settlement divided

Toxic waste aside, Almásfüzitő appears to have a lot going for it.

Nestled in lush vegetation, the village boasts shiny sports facilities, a recently-renovated replica Roman settlement, a boat club, almost zero unemployment and connections by road and rail to the capital, Budapest, and nearby towns.

Almásfüzitő itself is actually made up of Upper Almásfüzitő and Lower Almásfüzitő, a few kilometres apart. Almásfüzitő mayor László Beró is the child of a couple who moved to the village to work in the alumina factory that opened its doors in 1947, taking up residence in Upper Almásfüzitő in one of the apartment blocks built specially for the workers of one-factory towns and villages across then communist Hungary.

But while Upper Almásfüzitő benefited from an influx professional workers, Lower Almásfüzitő was "neglected," said Beró.

Where the apartment blocks that Beró grew up in are part of Hungary's protected communist-era architectural heritage, Lower Almásfüzitő, a 30-minute walk downstream, could be a poster boy for post-industrial decline.

Here, the homes never fell under the protection of the state-run alumina factory, but it is

this part of the village that hosts the only remaining industrial activity - industrial packaging and lubricant factories and the waste treatment facility atop the last red sludge reservoir yet to be covered.

It's a state of affairs that suits Upper Almásfüzitő - removed from any immediate impact of the toxic waste, but benefiting from the money produced by the economic activity in Lower Almásfüzitő since both the upper and lower parts of the village are classified as one administrative unit. The local municipality receives an industrial tax, while Tatai Environmental Protection Ltd, TKV, which manages the waste site, makes regular donations to local cultural and educational activities. With the exception of Nagy, few other residents complain about the situation.

Alexandra Czeglédi, an anthropologist who spent months interviewing locals about life in the settlement, interpreted this seeming lack of concern as a reflection of the fact that few but those who live right next to the red mud really sense the pollution.

"The damage is not in our face, it is not screaming like physical violence might or, let's say, when we see that someone is polluting the river in front of us and fish are dying," said Czeglédi. "Rather, it is a kind of chemical pollution that takes time, and people tend to ignore long term consequences."

Mayor Beró, often seen sporting an 'I Love Almásfüzitő' t-shirt, takes a pragmatic stance. He sees part of his job as collecting resources to improve life in the locality. He points out that the waste company has valid licences, passes tests and that no one has been able to prove the claims of environmentalists that there has been a poisoning of the soil or water. "If it's not like Chernobyl, that's okay," he said, and added, with a laugh, "I haven't seen any proof of toxic materials. I've seen the big tomatoes they have grown on the topsoil, but I wasn't brave enough to eat them."

'Best available technology'

Marta Vetier, a Budapest-based environmental scientist, argued that mixing hazardous and non-hazardous waste to form topsoil is scientifically unsound. Testing the topsoil for hazardous chemicals might show that it is within the permitted levels, she said, but it does not mean that the dangerous substances have been treated and pose no threat, just that they have been diluted. These materials include heavy metals, which are non-biodegradable she added.

Pálma Paróczy, TKV's Communication Coordinator, dismissed this, saying "the recultivation work we carry out at our holding pond is waste recovery."

"The processed wastes become natural components again through appropriate treatment

and controlled biological and chemical processes. The waste we use is degraded to the same materials that are found in natural soil. This technology is a widespread solution used by both domestic and international companies,” she said.

“The Government Office has stated that the processing used by Tatai Environmental Protection Co. is the best available technology of its kind.”

Paróczy said the “covering work” at the reservoir is expected to be finished “in the early 2020s”. She insisted that waste is delivered to the site in a “controlled manner.”

Infringement procedure on ice

The European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, spoke up in 2012, launching an ‘infringement procedure’ against Hungary over the red sludge reservoirs in Almásfüzitő, complaining that some waste management activities aimed at rehabilitating the facility had been “carried out incorrectly, with consequences for the protection of human health and the environment.” It cited the mixing of hazardous waste with other types of waste, contrary to EU law.

Under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who took power in 2010, Budapest and the Commission have clashed repeatedly over what Brussels says is the erosion of democratic freedoms and the rule of law in Hungary. Environmental protection is particularly vulnerable, given there is no state-level environmental authority or ministry, leaving regional government offices in charge and official information hard to come by for journalists. The powers of the country’s environmental ombudsman were significantly restricted in 2012.

Simon, of Greenpeace Hungary, said the Commission had switched its focus to more “systemic problems” rather than specific cases.

“But since it’s obvious that it [Almásfüzitő] is not in line with EU legislation, they cannot close the case,” he said.

“It’s kind of an endless story for us.”

Speaking in December last year, Simon said the EU was waiting for Hungary to issue a new permit, after the original expired in 2015. A new permit arrived in 2019, when rumours began circulating that the waste site would be bought by a venture capital fund owned by the Mészáros Group of Lőrinc Mészáros, a business mogul and childhood friend of Orban. Mészáros made the purchase in April this year and another new permit landed in May. The latest sets lower permitted levels for hazardous materials and has been given a cautious welcome by Greenpeace. Greenpeace, however, stressed that the real test would be whether authorities strictly enforce the terms. The organisation also underlined that the reservoir itself remains a threat to the Danube given what it says is inadequate insulation and the risk

of pollutants entering the river water.

Reservoir here, happiness there

In 2011, Greenpeace activists entered the site and wrote STOP in large white letter on the surface of the reservoir so it could be seen from the sky.

A horse rider and grandfather at 56, Nagy lives just a few hundred metres from the waste site in Lower Almásfüzitő. While many locals were reluctant to speak on-record, often complaining of the simplistic negative portrayal of the settlement in the media, something for which some also blame Greenpeace, Nagy has been speaking out for years. He complains of the smell wafting from the site, which he worries is being breathed in by his baby granddaughter.

TKV's Paróczy said reports of smells coming from the site were always investigated and suggested they could come from elsewhere. She declined to name the companies depositing waste at the site, citing customer confidentiality.

Nagy swings between righteous anger and begrudging acceptance of the situation. There are fewer people in Lower Almásfüzitő, making it all but impossible, he argues, to take electoral control over the administrative unit that governs the entire settlement, including the more affluent and populous Upper Almásfüzitő.

Here's the reservoir," Nagy said. "Over there is happiness."

Source: balkaninsight.com