

A French-Swiss citizen, Roth moved to Romania in 2002 and soon after started coordinating a campaign to save Rosia Montana. She moved to Rosia Montana at a time when few in Romania had heard of the village and learnt Romanian by communicating with her neighbours. She speaks the language with a distinctive “ardelean” or mountain accent.

The picturesque village of Rosia Montana is nestled in the Apuseni Mountains. Canadian mining company Gabriel Resources has for two decades tried unsuccessfully to build Europe’s largest gold mine. Recognising the value of the site, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a UNESCO expert advisory body, recommended in 2018 that Rosia Montana be included on the UN cultural agency’s list of world heritage sites in danger. It was the latest hitch in a string of delays to an application process that started three years ago. In the end, the Romanian government reactivated the file on the application. Romania’s last-minute decision to seek UNESCO protection for a mountain village threatened by gold mining speaks volumes about the value of civic action, an award-winning environmentalist says.

Critics say the plan in the mineral-rich Western Romanian Carpathian mountain range would deface the village and surrounding peaks and place a giant cyanide pool in the area. The region is rich in architectural and cultural heritage, including the most extensive mining system known from the ancient Roman world, remnants of Roman, medieval and modern mining settlements as well as churches belonging to five denominations.

Experts were confident that if Romania completed an application to have Rosia Montana added to the list, UNESCO would give it protected status. Yet on January 22, the Romanian government said it would not file the application by the end-of-month deadline.

Locals and activists were not surprised by the government’s foot-dragging. In early 2017, a previous Romanian administration had also left it to the last minute to submit the paperwork. Then in the summer of 2018, yet another government (led by the then ruling Social Democratic Party, or PSD) suspended the application.

January 31 of this year was the last moment the government of the National Liberal Party (which has since collapsed) could reactivate the file.

Why all the reluctance?

In 2013, when Gabriel Resources came close to building the mine, massive protests across Romania forced the government to pull back.

In 2015, Gabriel Resources sued Romania at the International Centre for Settlement of

Investment Disputes, the World Bank's commercial arbitration court, reportedly seeking up to \$4 billion (3.6 billion euros) in damages. That case is ongoing.

The company argues it has invested close to \$1 billion in the project and that it needs to be compensated for losses caused by the Romanian government's indecision. Successive Romanian governments have feared the UNESCO status could be used against Romania in the arbitration case.

"Gabriel Resources' bill is in the amount of between three and four billion US dollars," Stephanie Roth, a prominent environmental activist, told BIRN in a phone interview.

"Even if a deal is cut and the amount is reduced, it would still be billions of dollars. No government would want to have to explain to its citizens why it must pay this much money from the budget to a Canadian company. That's not how you win elections.

"While locals from Rosia Montana went to courts of law in Romania, where effort-by-effort they proved the corruption and illegalties during the manifold permitting processes, these commercial tribunals are there to let you get away with murder."

She added: "All the permits ever granted to Gabriel Resources for the gold mine were struck down by courts of law in Romania. Yet, the company can still turn to this tribunal to circumvent rule of law. All the proceedings are shrouded in secrecy and handled in far-away places such as Washington D.C. Commercial arbitration is complete bonkers because it ignores those who pay the real costs: the locals of Rosia Montana and the citizens of Romania."

Roth worked closely with a group of committed architects, lawyers and activists to build what became Romania's most prominent environmental campaign — and one of the most high-profile in Europe.

In 2005, she received the Goldman Environmental Prize — widely known as "the Nobel of environmentalists" — for her efforts.

For the first time in two decades, Roth said she feels Rosia Montana is safe, even though a no-confidence motion toppled the Romanian government just days after it refiled the application.

"Ever since the arbitration case started, I've been constantly aware that the Romanian government could cut a deal with Gabriel Resources, allowing the company to build the mine in exchange for reducing the compensation amount," she said.

"UNESCO status means that Gabriel will face enormous international reputational costs if it still pushes to build the mine there."

Asked how it feels to have victory within reach after two decades of campaigning, Roth said her happiness was increased exponentially by knowing that it is shared with so many people

in Romania and abroad who have contributed over the years to the success.

“Back in 2013, the call on the street was, ‘Together we Save Rosia Montana,’ and that’s the call I feel closest to,” Roth said.

Over two decades, the campaign to save Rosia Montana drew in so many people that it became a national endeavor, from the locals who never gave up on their village to the activists who moved there and the architects who restored Rosia Montana’s historical buildings.

Then there were the pro bono lawyers who went to court over mining permits and the tens of thousands who protested weekly in 2013 in dozens of towns in Romania and abroad.

“The government only filed the application because of public pressure,” Roth said. “Just look at the incredible mobilisation since the government said it would not file. Through [activist group] Declic, people sent 15,000 letters to the prime minister, huge panels shaming the government into filing were placed in the centre of Bucharest, then the president was approached.

“You could see people wanting to act. This liberal government has always wanted to present itself in opposition to the Social Democrats [the party that withdrew the UNESCO file in 2018]. They want to be associated with the energy of street protests in the last years, and now they were doing exactly the same as PSD. People got really angry.”

To many, including Roth, protests in defence of Rosia Montana in 2013 had a cathartic role for Romanian society. They helped restore people’s faith in civic action, their belief that they could have an impact on the politics of the country. The tactics developed during those weeks were used to defend other causes, from forests to the rule of law.

“This truly was the revolution of our generation,” Roth said, referring to a well-known slogan from the 2013 Rosia Montana protests.

“If you look around to the region, to [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orban in Hungary or Law and Justice in Poland, you know Romania is in a better place.”

When Culture Minister Bogdan Gheorghiu announced the resumption of the UNESCO application process on January 31, he also said the government would develop a general urban plan for Rosia Montana and channel EU funds to the region.

So far, those trying to renovate buildings or open businesses in Rosia Montana had been prevented from doing so by the lack of an urban plan — a legal limbo that benefited Gabriel Resources, which could claim the locality was dead and the only salvation was mining.

“If someone asked me what are my three most burning issues before Friday [January 31], I would have said precisely that: the UNESCO application, the urban plan and money for the region,” Roth said. “We got it all, by people power.”

“Now’s the time to head to Rosia Montana and do what we couldn’t before: restore houses and the community. The more we do this, the less weight the Gabriel Resources arguments will have.”

Will Roth herself, now based in Berlin, be heading back to Rosia Montana?

“Of course I will,” she said with a smile. “I’ve only heard about this news, so I just need a bit of time to figure out the logistics.”

She continued: “I can’t wait to contribute to the place free from Gabriel Resources’ fear. And to be honest, I can’t wait to do this with my close friends from Rosia Montana. There is no place like home. Rosia Montana is my home.”

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