

Chinese Linglong tire factory is being constructed in the city of Zrenjanin. Public debate on Environmental Impact Assessment Study was going to be held in Novi Sad. Citizens who submitted their comments and opinions to the study on the environmental impact assessment of the project of the Linglong tire factory construction gathered in front of the Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province, to participate in the public debate on this study at 10 am, according to an official public announcement. However, representative of the Secretariat for Urbanism and Environmental Protection of Vojvodina Province, the authority that was obliged to ensure the conduct of the public hearing in accordance with the law, began reading the list of "applicants". The official did not have an answer to the repeated question of the RERI representative on the basis of which regulation he singled out the "reported" participants.

Under the grounds of respecting epidemiological measures, the Provincial Secretariat tried to deny and limit the public's right to express its opinion in front of the competent authority, the investor and the study developer. The gathered citizens, representatives of RERI, CSO Građanski preokret and other associations, requested to be granted the right to participate in these proceedings in accordance with the law and that anyone present can attend the public hearing. The competent authority was obliged to provide conditions for that and adequate space in which a larger number of interested citizens can be present in the same time, according to the epidemiological conditions. It was not difficult for the competent authority to assume that the interest of the citizens would be great if we keep in mind that more than 200 objections were received for the previous study. There is certainly an adequate space in Novi Sad that, in accordance with epidemiological measures, can accommodate more than 50 people. It is enough to draw attention to the fact that the assembly hall of Vojvodina province, in which assembly sessions are held without any problems, can accommodate more than 100 people, while respecting all epidemiological measures.

It has become common for public debates on environmental impact assessments to be accompanied by the presence of the police, therefore the law enforcement's interest in this event is no exception. It seems that the police did not become interested in environmental issues in vain, but the presence of the police aims to frighten the citizens who came to exercise their basic civil rights. However, the police officers did not do their job because they did not react to the unlawful actions of the official of the Secretariat, who persistently and very dedicatedly tried to explain to the citizens that they still do not have the right to participate in the public debate- except under some new rules and conditions unknown to all existing regulations.

However, this public debate was also marked by a new circumstance – first the media were told that they could not enter the hall where the public debate is being held, which is an unprecedented violation of media freedom and citizens' right to information. Then, the representative of the competent body, continuing to creatively interpret the regulations that regulate the rights and freedoms of citizens, informed the media that they could enter but without cameras!? Finally, with the remark *"come in but don't make a circus"*, the media are allowed to follow the public debate.

The rulebook governing the procedure for public hearings and the presentation of an environmental impact assessment study is very clear on the right to participate and to comment. First of all, the Rulebook stipulates that the competent body is obliged to inform citizens about the exact time of the public hearing, therefore creative ideas about repeating public presentations indefinitely can only be interpreted as a violation of regulations. All gathered citizens submitted their objections within the set deadline, which without any dilemma qualified them as an interested public that has the right to explain their objections at a public debate. Any subsequent creative interpretations of the regulations represent nothing but a gross violation of the regulations.

The study, which should be the subject of a public debate that was held without public participation, contains elementary shortcomings due to which the Secretariat for Urbanism and Environmental Protection has the duty to reject it as unregulated. Namely, the project holder did not submit the nature protection conditions, although he was obliged, the study did not cover all facilities on the plot on which the construction works are being performed, although it was explicitly ordered. Finally, the developer of the study claims that there are no previous works on the cadastral plot, although everyone can easily determine that the investor is already performing construction works – simply having insight into the central register of the building permits or organizing visit of the terrain.

Source: reri.org.rs