

Rio Sava Exploration is a Serbian subsidiary of the Rio Tinto Group, registered to perform geological and mining works. In Serbia, it is developing the Jadar project near Loznica, within which it intends to open an underground mine for the exploitation of jadarite, from which lithium is planned to be extracted, a mineral used for the production of batteries. Lithium is crucial for the transition to renewables, but mining it is environmentally costly, experts warn.

Two Serbian NGOs, the Coalition against Environmental Corruption and the Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team, PAKT, on Tuesday said they had filed charges against Rio Sava Exploration and China Communications and Construction, CCCC, and their subcontractors, for environmental pollution. Criminal charges against Rio Sava Exploration were filed because, since 2015, allegedly violating environmental regulations, it has polluted water and land in the wider area of the Jadar Valley in western Serbia.

The company installed about 125 observation facilities for monitoring the groundwater level, most of which leaked in the meantime, so that groundwater with dangerous substances spilt onto plots of the locals, causing them significant material damage, the NGOs claim.

In the meantime, the company concluded agreements on compensation for damages with several of the injured parties, "and in that way acknowledged the damage caused to the environment", the NGOs' official statement regarding the charges said.

They also filed charges against CCCC and Serbian officials in the public water enterprise Srbijavode and the town administration of Cacak, in Western Serbia.

They have charged them with environmental pollution and damage to dams, embankments and water facilities, because Chinese company, they claim, without valid documentation and projects, illegally exploited gravel to construct a highway near the wells that serve as an alternative supply of drinking water to Cacak.

Critics say bilateral agreements between Serbia and China are a way of fast-tracking Chinese investments, circumventing Serbian law in a range of areas.

Both Rio Tinto and CCCC have drawn criticism for months from local communities and experts because of their impact negative impact on the environment and, as they see, their privileged position with the authorities.

Rio Tinto is a mining giant, but its investments all over the world are notorious for their impact on local communities and on the environment. They are accused of being responsible for "multiple human rights violations" in Papua New Guinea, according to a report from the Human Rights Law Centre.

The company has been also criticized for its investments in Madagascar, Mongolia, Mozambique, India, Indonesia, China and the US, and has been accused of environmental and working violations, but also of bribery.

Most recently, in May 2020, Rio Tinto demolished an Australian Aboriginal sacred site in

Juukan Gorge, Western Australia, which had evidence of 46,000 years of continuous human occupation and was considered the only inland prehistoric site in Australia. The company later apologised and several CEOs of the company have since resigned.

In 2017, Rio Tinto has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Serbia's government regarding the Jadar lithium extracting project.

Several officials announced the deal as crucial for Serbia, including President Aleksandar Vucic, who said the project will benefit the economy and criticised the environmentalist NGOs, accusing them of being paid from abroad for their actions. Vucic announced a potential referendum on the matter if the criticism continued.

BIRN recently revealed the details of talks between the Serbian ambassador to the EU Ana Hrustanovic and Lawrence Dechambenoit, Rio Tinto's chief foreign officer, in Brussels on June 8, in which the company "is considering the possibility of faster realization of the current project" and possible expansion of the project, after talks with Vucic on June 1.

Several opposition leaders in Serbia have publicly claimed they were instructed not to criticize the current government regarding the Rio Tinto project by the US Special Envoy, Matthew Palmer, during his meeting with opposition politicians in June this year.

Source: balkaninsight.com