

Public controversy surrounding lithium in Serbia has been going on for years. The current government, representing the interests of the Rio Tinto company, has been convincing the citizens of Serbia for years that lithium is a historic development opportunity, comparing Serbia to El Dorado?! The question arises, why does the state avoid mentioning the negative sides of Rio Tinto?

Under the pressure of the December protests in 2021, and the blocking of the highway at the Gazela bridge, the state “officially” withdrew from all projects related to lithium mining in Serbia, and thus supposedly put an end to the topic. Is this the end of the Rio Tinto saga? It's not. Today, we have daily situations where officials are preparing the ground for the return of the opening of lithium mines, both by Rio Tinto and other companies, such as Ultra Lithium and Eurolithium. This is just the beginning. It is time to analyze this problem according to the following points:

## **1. The facts**

Although insider information from the company Rio Tinto and the Government of the Republic of Serbia claimed that the ban on lithium was not true, but only to buy time before the elections, the citizens, like the protest organizers themselves, believed the representatives of the authorities and withdrew from the protests and blockades because they respected their word. What happened in the meantime?

With a false promise to ban lithium, the government managed to kill the energy of the protests and the anger of the people that threatened to jeopardize the April elections. The citizens were convinced that they had achieved victory by their actions because they trusted the word of the state leadership. However, none of the companies that plan to mine and process lithium (Rio Tinto, Eurolithium, Ultra Lithium and others) closed their offices in Serbia (which would be a logical move for any company that received a state ban), but continued to buy land. around future mines and haul heavy machinery. The deceived people achieved a Pyrrhic victory, while the government avoided a revolution. The government and Rio Tinto still don't seem to understand that this is only half time and that the current score is state 1 - citizens 0.

Rio Tinto was told to put up with it and continue to work in silence, only to continue publicly with their activities after 10 months, while they recently announced competitions for new jobs. We ask why a company that has been officially “forbidden” by the state to mine lithium is hiring new staff? It's just proof that Rio Tinto never had any intention of giving up on the lithium mine.

In the meantime, we learned that the government issued 60 permits for lithium exploration in the territory of the Republic of Serbia! Why permits if the lithium ban is officially in place? In Rekovac, despite the official ban, work continued on the planned lithium mine, so the citizens blocked the work while the state watched silently.

Rio Tinto states on its profile that, in addition to Argentina and the United States, it also works in Serbia (Loznica). No serious company keeps information on its website (over a year old) that it is still planning work in Serbia, unless it is true.

Rio Tinto states on its website that it plans 1,000 jobs in the long term and over 2,000 jobs during the construction phase. Why so many jobs if they are forbidden to work?

Rio Tinto hired domestic experts to make positive studies on the impact on the environment, while rejecting the already made negative studies, and threatening the same experts with lawsuits that they may not speak about it publicly because of the signed Confidentiality Agreement. Domestic experts are obviously not interested in the fact that they are working against the interests of their country and people, endangering the environment, health, land, and rivers. The Faculty of Biology is the first institution that spoke about it publicly, but they were silenced by the media due to the Confidentiality Agreement.

**Environmental Impact Study:** Does it make sense for the Environmental Impact Study to be funded by Rio Tinto instead of being done by an independent company? Rio Tinto's funding of the study is a classic conflict of interest. I am asking whether I, or any other person/association, as an independent person, can finance the Environmental Impact Study? If the answer is no - why can't they while Rio Tinto is allowed, even though it is in a conflict of interest? Who in their right mind can believe that Rio Tinto will finance and publish negative Environmental Impact Studies? So far we have seen that there are several negative studies (eg the Faculty of Biology) that Rio Tinto is hiding from the public, threatening the authors with Non-Disclosure Agreements.

Rio Tinto's media preparation implies that hired local experts, university professors, whom Rio Tinto sends in cooperation with the state to visit the state-controlled media and whose editorial policy the state can influence, advocating the thesis that lithium mines are not such a bad solution for state and that they do not have a large negative impact on the environment while they kept silent that these experts are on the payroll of Rio Tinto, i.e. that they are paid to represent the interests of the company. Otherwise, they would be summarily dismissed. Such experts are compromised and in a conflict of interest, and their goal is to prepare citizens for lithium mines because most citizens believe the information they hear in the media, regardless of the fact that it is untrue.

Rio Tinto finances state universities, asking them for support for its project in Jadro. This is called corruption, for which deans and professors will have to be held criminally responsible for abuse of official position.

Would Rio Tinto open lithium mines across the EU if allowed? Of course he would. Well, only Germany has three times more lithium than Serbia. The EU will not allow Rio Tinto to open its mines on its territory because they are aware of the environmental consequences, but at the same time they are ready to turn a blind eye to the destruction of the environment if lithium mines are opened throughout Serbia, because Europe needs lithium batteries, while

Serbia has enough close for cheaper shipping compared to North and South America.

## **2. Privatization of the Jaroslav Černi Institute**

In order to justify their project, Rio Tinto employees often refer to a positive opinion from the compromised Jaroslav Černi Institute (the only institute dealing with water in Serbia), which, under the pressure of the state, after 74 years, was privatized for only 2.5 million euros by the Millennium Team, even though the Anti-Corruption Council demanded that the privatization be overturned. The question arises why the state does not listen to what the Council for the fight against corruption says? What is the point of the existence of this Council if their conclusions are not acted upon? Is it corruption in action by the state?

Obviously it is!

Černi (allegedly under political pressure) gave positive opinions for all ecologically debatable projects in Serbia (Makiško polje, Belgrade na vodi, Rio Tinto, Rekovac/Levač...) and now it is in the hands of the Millennium team, a company that is allegedly close to the government. There is a justified danger that in the future the Millennium Team will control to whom Jaroslav Černi will give positive opinions, which will depend on the permits for all future projects in Serbia.

## **3. Does the affair with lithium mines end with Rio Tinto? By no means! This is just the beginning**

In addition to the Jadra valley (Loznica) where Rio Tinto is planning its excavations, the company EuroLithium in Rekovac (Levač) continues to bring in heavy machinery that is already ready for excavation. Citizens revolted and organized round-the-clock vigils to prevent the excavations until the police wanted to interfere, even though they were supposed to act and prevent further work by the EuroLithium company. The works have stopped and will not continue because the company EuroLithium, as well as Rio Tinto, do not want to risk a physical confrontation with the local population, which would motivate the people to rebel, which would make their further business much more difficult.

Lithium mines are planned at 40-60 locations throughout Serbia, in the Loznica-Vranje-Bor triangle. Over two million of our citizens live in that territory, where many of them will have to move out of their homes, while others will have their living environment (land, water) threatened. Other lithium mining companies are on standby, waiting to see how the currently resigned Rio Tinto fares. If Rio Tinto goes ahead with its plans, the other 59 sites will be wide open for lithium mining.

For example, the company Ultra Lithium received seven exploration permits in the Republic of Serbia - through its local subsidiary, Ultra Balkans doo - for the mines Valjevo, Kragujevac, Blace, Koceljeva, Trnava, Istok, Preljina and Ladevci from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Ministry mining. Application permits for research cover a total area of 676.54 km<sup>2</sup>.

The Government of the Republic of Serbia claims that only Serbia has lithium deposits, which, of course, is not true. Lithium is also found in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Greece and Turkey. The fact that someone drew the borders does not mean that lithium, which has been under the ground for thousands of years, “moved” to Serbia. Also, lithium can be found in many EU countries, while it is most abundant in Germany (three times more than in Serbia).which does not think of allowing companies like Rio Tinto to open mines in their territory. The question arises why the mentioned countries are not in the same lithium fever for the opening of a lithium mine that should bring them tens of billions of euros in profit? Are those countries greedy for money or is it in their national interest to preserve their natural resources and prevent the destruction of their country?

**The issue of lithium is neither a political nor an economic issue, this has become a matter of life and death, on which the future of us and our children depends.** I don't care if the lithium companies are from the east or the west! **No company that does not respect EU environmental standards and that is not allowed to mine and process lithium on the territory of the European Union, cannot work on the territory of the Republic of Serbia either! Point.**

#### **4. How does Rio Tinto work?**

Rio Tinto is a corporation with a value of 60 billion euros that is used to using all possible means to achieve its goals. This summer, the Chinese became the single largest shareholder of Rio Tinto.

The company Rio Tinto (Rio Sava) has hired people in charge of constantly observing, monitoring and recording everything negative that appears about the company in public. Their PR teams are constantly on the alert to immediately respond to every statement in the media with a denial, forcing the media to publish their statements that are more political marketing ploy than they have anything to do with the truth. Until now, my articles about Rio Tinto have been regularly tried to be refuted, stating falsehoods and claiming the opposite without any evidence. Calls to organize a TV duel where we will present our arguments are still regularly ignored.

When they deny, they always accuse by name anyone who criticizes Rio Tinto's way of doing business, telling falsehoods that they are a socially responsible company that prioritizes the environment, which so far has not been demonstrated in any of their lithium mines around the world. Discrediting the opponent is their priority, although until now they have not realized that by doing so they are only promoting the opposite side, harming themselves. No company in Serbia has become as hated as Rio Tinto. Citizens are becoming more and more aware of the consequences, although the state media is trying to confuse citizens through broadcasts, claiming that lithium is not as dangerous as claimed, although there is not a single lithium mine in the world that meets environmental standards. The legal

representative of Rio Tinto (Rio Sava) Colin McKay is in the latest issue of NIN (December 8, 2022), **THE GOVERNMENT OF SERBIA NEVER MADE A DECISION ON THE LITHIUM MINING BAN THAT WOULD APPLY TO RIO TINTO!**”And what are we going to do now? Is this proof that the Government of the Republic of Serbia lied to its citizens? Of course it is.

Rio Tinto is used to doing business in corrupt countries like Serbia, paying politicians to lobby for their company (which could be seen in the media in previous years). **At one time, Rio Tinto announced that it was ready to talk to the leaders of the opposition in order to explain to them that lithium would not endanger the environment.**

Although it seems to me that they are indirectly offering a bribe in this way, trying to convince the leaders of the opposition not to oppose the opening of the lithium mine. **For persuasion, they increasingly use EU and US officials who, in talks with opposition leaders, set conditions that the Rio Tinto project should not be hindered.**

The coming period will show which political organizations will reconcile in public appearances and protests against Rio Tinto, as well as which organizations have not signed the Social Agreement. So far, **the political organizations that do not want to commit in writing that they will be against Rio Tinto and lithium are Nebojša Zelenović (Coalition Moramo)**, who became famous with a video from Brussels where he claimed that they are looking for a solution for Rio Tinto with the EU Greens, as well as **We are not strangling Belgrade, which has repeatedly refused to sign the Social Agreement.** Insider information from several parties claims that both political organizations have received orders from Brussels that they must not sign the Social Agreement. It is not clear to anyone which organization can claim to be against Rio Tinto, while at the same time refusing to officially sign it. **Any political organization that refuses to sign the Social Agreement cannot be considered an opponent of Rio Tinto and the lithium mine, but only their ally.**

Rio Tinto has its own list containing the names of all the people who speak negatively about the company and who are against lithium mining, who are on their measures, whose social media accounts are monitored daily. Since we have mostly listened to inept explanations from Rio Tinto representatives, it is necessary to get answers from the authorities to the following questions:

Is there an official ban on lithium mining by the Government of the Republic of Serbia? If there is, then Rio Tinto is lying, for which it should bear the consequences, close its offices and leave the Republic of Serbia. If it doesn't exist, then the state has deliberately lied to its citizens, which is why it should bear the consequences!

Why does Rio Tinto continue to buy land in the Jadra Valley if they have no intention of mining lithium there? Until now, they have not mentioned that they will be engaged in

agriculture.

Was such a statement by the head of state just buying time to appease the protesters who blocked the Gazelle Bridge in December before the April elections?

## 5. Processing of lithium

We all already know the consequences of lithium processing around the world, regardless of whether the lithium is mined, from salt rocks or from geothermal sources. In the world, one ton of lithium requires over 1000 tons/cubic of water mixed with sulfuric acid, which after processing becomes poisoned and can no longer be used. Such water ends up in the soil, streams and rivers, which permanently destroys the environment and endangers the health of citizens. Only the planned lithium mine in Loznica is estimated to contain 148 million tons of lithium, while Rio Tinto will consume over 1,000 tons of sulfuric acid per day, which will eventually have to end somewhere. Rio Tinto had previously inquired about the abandoned Viscose factory in Loznica, where they wanted to use their discharge pipes to discharge their poisoned waste water directly into the Drina. And that's not all.

In addition to the sulfuric acid used for lithium processing, the citizens do not know that 15,000 cyanide tanks will be used in Loznica alone (as explained by the vice-chancellor of Belgrade University Prof. Dr. Ratko Ristić). And mines are planned in 40-60 locations! If only one tank were to spill, it would be an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions. This is precisely why no EU country will allow Rio Tinto to process lithium and destroy the environment on its territory. The citizens of Serbia, in contrast to the state leadership, refuse to be a dumping ground for the EU, where fertile land will be destroyed and streams, rivers and lakes will be poisoned, where the population will be forcibly relocated in order to provide lithium batteries for the EU market.

The representatives of the Rio Tinto company claim in their denials that all of this is not true and that their new technologies will not destroy the environment. The problem is that these new technologies do not want to show, justifying it as a trade secret, with the oft-repeated phrase "take our word for it"! **Rio Tinto has no answer as to why they have not opened lithium mines in the EU with these "new technologies" while at the same time they are convincing the citizens of Serbia to allow them to open lithium mines in Serbia.** Until Rio Tinto opens its lithium mines in Germany (which has three times more lithium than Serbia), there is no logic in opening them in Serbia either.

## 6. Confrontations

In order to clarify the dangers of lithium processing, I have repeatedly sought media confrontations with Rio Tinto management. Director Rio Tinto has repeatedly refused to be a guest on shows (like "Impression of the Week"), because she didn't like the interviewees! Is it logical that the director of Rio Tinto, who is accused of destroying the environment, sets the conditions with whom she will exchange opinions. She'd probably like to be a guest on a

show with some of the experts on Rio Tinto's payroll and choose the questions to ask her. Rio Tinto "became famous" with a video advertised on the media, where the company misled the public that they were producing green energy. Even the ambassadors of certain countries claimed that lithium is green energy, probably not knowing what the lithium processing procedure looks like in which sulfuric acid and cyanide are used. Such a video caused a counter effect, provoking the anger of the people who rioted and blocked the highway near the Gazelle Bridge. Realizing their mistake, Rio Tinto employees were ordered to mediate truce and not expose themselves until the dust settled. That truce still holds while the project continues to be carried out quietly away from the public eye.

### **7. How to solve the problem called Rio Tinto?**

All employees of the company Rio Tinto (Rio Sava) should know that they are accomplices because they are well aware of the consequences of poisoning water and fertile soil, as well as that they will be held criminally responsible together with the management. They are paid to misinform the public, to shoot commercials where they try to present themselves as an environmentally conscientious company, even though they have been leaving devastation behind for decades all over the world. In some countries, civil war broke out because of their business, where over 10,000 people lost their lives, while children who bathe in rivers poisoned by Rio Tinto have living wounds.

In order to check whether the company Rio Tinto, despite the "ban" of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, continues its work in violation of the laws, as an environmental protection analyst, I propose the following solutions:

That the Government of the Republic of Serbia **should publish a document in which it is written that there is a ban on working with lithium**, because the representatives of Rio Tinto were obviously not informed, or they were well informed, which means that the citizens were deceived.

Publicly **publish the list of all employees on the Jadar Rio Tinto (Rio Sava) project in Serbia**. Citizens have the right to know who are the people who are ready to endanger their water, land, and health for a lot of money, despite the "official ban" of the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

Publicly **publish the list of all experts (especially university professors and scientific researchers) who are engaged in the Rio Tinto project**. Those people write fake positive environmental impact studies for money, while colleges get money through cooperative agreements. In the modern world, this is called corruption and it is criminally responsible! Citizens have the right to know who are the experts among us who, despite strong warnings, are working to destroy the environment in order to achieve financial gain. To **cancel the Confidentiality Agreements** signed with the Faculty of Biology as well as with other institutions, so that their experts could tell in detail what consequences await us

without Rio Tinto threatening them with a lawsuit.

**That all political organizations undertake that all employees who actively participated in projects related to lithium in the company Rio Tinto (as well as all other companies that work with lithium) will be prosecuted and prosecuted, that professors and researchers will be stripped of their scientific titles, that their work contracts in institutions will be canceled** due to the criminal offense of deliberately misleading the public, endangering the environment, land, rivers and the health of the citizens of Serbia. **A prison sentence must be sought for such crimes. No fines and suspended sentences are out of the question.**

**That the company Rio Tinto , which is officially forbidden to work in Serbia, be ordered to close all its offices (in Belgrade and Loznica) and leave the territory of the Republic of Serbia within a month.**

As an environmentally friendly **solution for lithium batteries**, new technologies have already been developed - **lithium batteries that do not leave any consequences for the environment** , are of better quality and last longer than lithium batteries. Alternative solutions are hydrogen batteries, as well as aluminum, sulfur and salt batteries, which will soon be in use.

**That statesmen stop telling falsehoods that Germany is already working extensively with lithium** because currently only a pilot project is being developed to obtain lithium through geothermal waters and not from jadarite ore (for which sulfuric acid must be used) as planned in Loznica. At the same time, Germany is currently only in the experimental phase and their institute is still working on pilot plants where research is carried out because they have not yet reached the level of cleanliness that corresponds to the environmental requirements of the EU.

## **8. Conclusion**

The problem is that nobody is accountable in corrupt Serbia, so the people on Rio Tinto's payroll relaxed, thinking that they will not suffer any consequences because they "cooperate" with the state. It is time for them to be warned that they are accomplices who will be held accountable for their actions. If they are ready to live and work under such pressure, because this kind of crime does not get old - good luck to them, they will need it. So far, I have not met a single person who supports the Rio Tinto project, except for the company's employees (who are financially dependent), although many of them do not support, but work there because their existence depends on it. Many Rio Tinto employees have already resigned (both out of conscience and public pressure), while a large number of employees are actively looking for new jobs in other companies in order to "clean up" and escape in time.

The state has reconciled and defends itself to every question about Rio Tinto by saying that



it is officially forbidden to work with lithium. The fact that the state tacitly approves the continuation of the activities of Rio Tinto and other companies, avoiding to react, means that this government is deliberately deceiving its citizens. My assessment is that it will remain so until the April elections in Belgrade, because the government does not want to risk a new blocking of the Gazelle, a rebellion of the people that will cause them to lose power in Belgrade. Even though it is a local election, Rio Tinto is one of the few topics that can bring citizens of Belgrade to the streets.

I am personally convinced that the state will not give up its intention to push through the lithium mines, and knowing that citizens will not give up defending their lives and the lives of their children, I am afraid that incidents and physical conflicts will escalate in the future. That's why I ask the question, does someone have to die in order to prevent the lithium farce? Are we facing a civil war like the one in Papua New Guinea where over 10,000 people lost their lives due to a lithium mine that poisoned all drinking water sources? How many people need to lose their lives for someone from the government to say enough is enough, we don't want a civil war, Energija Balkana writes.