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INTERVIEW

IRRESPONSIBLE MINING UNDERMINES SERBIA-EU RELATIONS

The EU Encourages the Use of Serbia as a Raw Material Base, with Vague Environmental Guarantees and No Benefits for Citizens. In Conditions of Corruption, Weak Rule of Law, and EU Support for the Authorities, Promises from Brussels Seem Unconvincing

Facing the dire consequences of global warming, humanity is compelled to reduce CO₂ emissions and find alternatives to fossil fuel energy. The plan known as the “Green Agenda” entails solutions such as electric vehicles, batteries, solar power plants, wind farms, and other devices that typically require significantly higher consumption of hard-to-access critical minerals, which are scarce in the lithosphere. However, numerous decisions of the green agenda have been made by politicians influenced by profit-driven large capital, with insufficient input from independent experts, considering market laws but not the laws of physics, says Academician Slobodan Vukosavić. Hence, he notes, “the timeframe of profit-oriented planning is too short and cannot accommodate the dynamics of the energy sector.” When we look at the United States, we see that changes in U.S. policy reflect the need to develop technologies that require fewer critical minerals, such as hydrogen cars, the use of solar and wind energy to produce green fuels, nuclear power plants, geothermal energy, biomass, and other sources, Vukosavić points out. “These changes are already having a strong impact on the development plans of key manufacturers,” our interlocutor observes.

In this context, how do you view the current global race for critical raw materials, including the “Jadar” project? How do you perceive the fact that the views of our experts have equally little influence on both our and the European public?

— Decisions made by politicians are increasingly influenced by large capital, while the influence of experts and citizens themselves is diminishing, with their interests often taking a back seat. Leading corporations and financial insti-

tutions influence the adoption of policies and the making of decisions and laws to achieve greater profits, considering the short-term effects of their actions. Public unawareness allows public opinion to be shaped through the media, the imposition of prepared narratives and concepts, substitution of theses, and planned suppression of critical thought. Objective facts and the opinions of experts with integrity are increasingly less accessible to citizens, leading to the degradation of democracy into a facade for the economic interests of the elite. Vital information remains inaccessible to the public, while the media disseminate content designed to promote the interests and projects of interested companies and groups, and to suppress citizen resistance due to the endangerment of their interests. Peer-reviewed and published works by independent experts indicate that the Jadar project would jeopardize the water supply for 2.5 million people in Serbia, threaten agricultural activities, lead to population displacement, and create environmental refugees. However, the ruling regime and narrow interest groups are dedicated to the unscrupulous discrediting of objective views, while interested companies invest in re-educating the public. On the other hand, domestic experts in mining and geology are denied the opportunity to engage in applied geological and other research, leading some to accept offers from multinational companies and produce unfounded studies on the feasibility of mineral exploitation with predetermined positive outcomes. The dissemination of findings that ignore the consequent devastation of the environment further confuses public opinion.

How likely is it that lithium in general, or lithium processed with the technology proposed in our country, will be significant for the EU’s needs?

— The planned exploitation of lithium in the Jadar Valley would require the consumption of significant amounts of fossil fuels, incompatible with the goals of the green agenda. Specifically, it involves substantial quantities of oil derivatives and natural gas. The energy needed to produce lithium carbonate in Jadar is several times greater than the energy required to produce lithium carbonate from brine lakes (in Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and China). Considering that energy has a very significant share in the production cost of raw

GOLD EXPLOITATION PROJECTS POSE A SIGNIFICANT DANGER DUE TO THE AUTHORITIES’ WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS FOR SERBIA AND NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

materials and finished products, it can be concluded that the prospects for profit from lithium obtained in the Jadar Valley are significantly threatened by the exploitation of energy-cheap lithium from brine. This observation aligns with the initial statements of interested companies that they came to the Jadar Valley seeking borates. The price of lithium on the world market has dropped more than eight times in just a few years. One reason is the availability of lithium obtained from brine. Another reason is the growing interest in cars that do not use lithium batteries. In addition to hydrogen, there are sodium batteries that surpass lithium LFP batteries in key technical and price aspects.

You once said that there is “great pressure on countries where institutions are not developed and where there is a high level of corruption to accept opening mining in a traditional and cheap way.” Would it make sense to accept this project with stronger institutions

and modern mining... higher mining royalties...?

— The Jadar project is planned in a fertile, populated area with exceptional potential for agriculture, coupled with a key aquifer system in Serbia. According to available knowledge, there is no way to exploit lithium, boron, cobalt, antimony, nickel, etc., in such areas without the resulting damage being incomparably greater than the benefits. According to estimates by a group of independent economists, the benefit that the Jadar project would bring to Serbia is about twen-

ty times less than the value of the annual raspberry production in the wider area, a production that would be directly or indirectly threatened by the initiation of the Jadar project. According to estimates, compensation for damage due to consequent pollution and remediation costs would far exceed the gross income of investors. Therefore, it is reasonable to continue lithium exploitation only in desert areas, far from key aquifer systems, agriculture, and settlements.

Although all eyes are on lithium, in reality, Serbia has many other companies dealing with other rare mineral deposits. Are such ventures equally risky?

— The company Zijin exploits copper and numerous critical minerals in Bor and Majdanpek. Very significant quantities of European copper are handed over to a non-European company, contrary to the intentions of the EU. Less than 3% of the total market value of minerals remains in Serbia, indicating that European copper is being handed over for next to nothing.

Operations are conducted in such a way that arsenic and cadmium emissions exceed limit values by over thirty times, leading to a significantly increased incidence of non-communicable diseases and deaths. The number of employed Serbian citizens is comparable to the number of oncology patients, and according to projections, the local population (excluding numerous Chinese citizens) will be halved by 2050.

— Environmentally acceptable mining is too expensive, so the EU seeks to “export” its environmental problems elsewhere (Congo, Morocco, Serbia), to countries where the protection of nature, water, human rights, and working conditions is much weaker than in the EU. Although EU representatives generally advocate for adherence to the highest environmental protection standards, exploitation is primarily planned in countries with un-

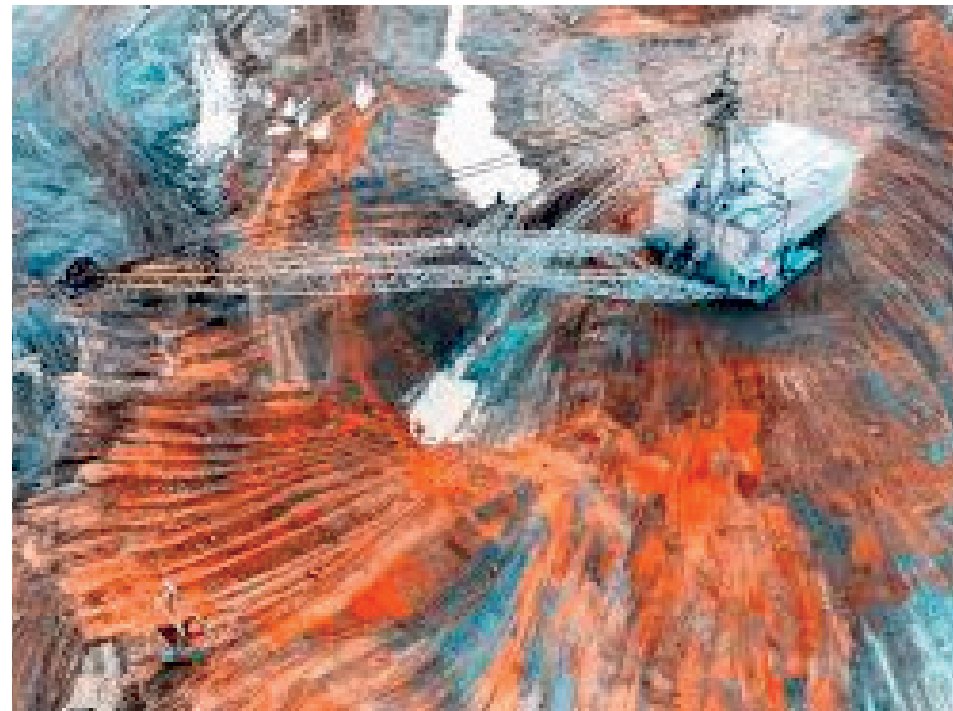
ly in populated areas with successful profitable agriculture and strategic reserves of groundwater. Upper limit values for certain critical pollutants in soil and water have been removed from the regulations, creating the possibility of mining with significant pollution, reducing investor costs, and increasing profit. If the planned mineral exploitation in Serbia is carried out, and if the affected population is not denied basic human rights, then the obstacle to the long-term supply of the EU with minerals from Serbia would be the legitimate right of the population to self-defense.

We live in a time when it is difficult to assess what will happen on the political front. Do you believe that this is a time when potentially long-term bad decisions could be made away from the public eye, or could the existing processes lead us to a new, better agenda in this area?

— Serbia is essentially and fatefully connected to the EU. The EU’s energy and raw material dependence diminishes its global political significance, which negatively affects the situation in Serbia. The prospects of Serbia and the future of mutual relations are influenced by the fact that the EU encourages the use of Serbia as a raw material base for the needs of European industry, with vague guarantees regarding environmental protection in Serbia, with the prospect of significant water devastation and land desertification, without unquestionable insurance and financial instruments for damage compensation, and without any significant financial gain for Serbian citizens. In conditions of widespread corruption, the undisputed dominance of the ruling regime’s top over the judicial, legislative, and executive authorities, inconsistent application of the constitution and laws, and the support that EU officials provide to autocratic authorities in Serbia, the promises coming from Brussels are unconvincing.■

If we compare the EU’s support for other Serbian projects related to the green agenda and what is happening around lithium, how do you think the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans and Serbia should be “read”?

derdeveloped institutional systems, high corruption potential, and populations that do not offer significant resistance to profitable mining at the expense of the environment and population. The latest legal regulations in Serbia create the possibility of opening over 40 mines, main-



THE EROSION OF TRUST THAT THE BROADER SERBIAN PUBLIC HAD IN THE EUROPEAN UNION OPENS THE SPACE FOR THE ACTIONS OF NON-EUROPEAN POWERS, WHICH GOES AGAINST THE INTERESTS OF BOTH SERBIA AND THE UNION

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