

Interview: The fight against the Ilovica-Stuka mine project in Macedonia

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Note from LeftEast editors: *In the spring of 2017 small towns across Macedonia turned into hubs of grassroots struggles against international mining projects in the country. [1] These citizen initiatives shared the same fear: that concessions for exploitation granted as part of a wider policy for attracting FDIs will bring devastating environmental and social consequences with very marginal benefits for the local areas and the country as a whole.*

A particular focal point of the struggle has been the Ilovica-Shtuka mining project for the exploitation of copper and gold, by the Canadian-British company EuroMaxx Resources. They hold two concessions, for 20 km squared, paid for with only 55,000 euros annual concession fee. The Authorities and other proponents have often cited the involvement of the EBRD as a guarantee for the safety of the project, listing its transparency and high standards as a justification for the benefits of the project. However, the [role of the EBRD in this case](#) is compromised as it is both a creditor and shareholder (the EBRD holds 19.99% of the Company's issued and outstanding share capital) in the mining project.

The citizens from the South Eastern region have made clear their opposition to the mine taking several actions organized through three interconnected initiatives: "Zdrava Kotlina", "EkoDolina" and "Youths against the Stuka-Ilovica mine of death". In April and May 2019 protests were organized, in spite of numerous threats by the mining company "Euromaxx resources" against vocal activists including [warnings to press charges](#) for positions expressed on social media.

We interviewed Mitko Ristomanov, anti-mining activist from Zdrava Kotlina which fought against the opening of the Ilovica-Stuka mine, 20 km from the city of Strumica, in southeast Macedonia. Mitko is an architect based in Novo Selo.

1. Why have you opposed the opening of a mine (in Ilovica)?

The entire project for the Ilovitza-Stuka mine is one big and mortally dangerous fraud, in which the soulless exploiters only care about making a profit, regardless of the devastating consequences that it will have on our lives and our environment. With the opening of a mine, the entire agricultural production in the Strumica field would be ruined; agriculture is the pillar of the local economy here and nobody would want to buy products from a region poisoned with dangerous chemicals. This mining project also entails the construction of the highest and largest hydrofoil on the planet as well as the use of thousands of tonnes of dangerous explosives, cyanide and aggressive acids.

2. What have been the different stages of resistance so far? How did the resistance against the Ilovica mine begin?

From the beginning of this story, sometime in 2012, there have been several attempts by the local

population of Stuka and Ilovica to organize themselves against the opening of a mine over their villages. But they were all sabotaged from the very start. We, the activists learned from various sources, primarily from our friends and relatives in Canada, Australia and America about the danger of this mine sometime in early 2017, because in Macedonia the details of this crazy project were classified as a state secret. With the help of social networks in April-May 2017 we gathered a critical group of citizens determined to take action to prevent the opening of this mine of death. Due to the passiveness and failure of the existing environmental associations in Strumica to take any action, (we later learned that they are only interested in receiving grants for some insignificant projects) we created the ecological association Zdrava Kotlina. We immediately launched an initiative for announcing local referendums in the municipalities of Novo Selo and Bosilovo, where the construction of the Ilovitsa-Stuka mine was planned. Throughout the summer of 2017 we went from village to village, from house to house, explaining to our fellow citizens the danger of opening such a mine. Recognizing our enthusiasm and sacrifice for the benefit of the whole community, both old and young, people with different political attitudes and social status joined our struggle. We received significant support from conscientious local entrepreneurs, religious communities, as well as from our emigrants abroad.

At the local referendums held in September 2017, 98% of voters voted against. However, because the country's voting records are not updated to take into account the high number of people that have emigrated, we failed to meet the threshold of 50% +1 vote. Nonetheless, we gained more votes than any other political party in the past. That says a lot about the popular legitimacy of our struggle.

Later on, under the pressure of the mining lobby these local referendums were annulled by the Constitutional Court. This did not discourage us. In October 2017, we founded the ecological association Eko Dolina from Novo Selo. In the period that followed, we jointly organized several protest marches and blockades with over 1000 people, guerrilla actions in several mining forums and "presentations", participated in dozens of public debates and shows in leading media in Macedonia, we also had public encounters with the profiteers from the mining company- Euromaxx Resources. We took an active part in the adoption of the law banning the use of cyanide and sulfuric acid in open mines, as well as in finding legal reasons and illegitimacy in the procedures. Due to this it was recently announced by the Government that it intends to revoke what is an expired concession by Euromaxx. The resistance culminated with the 18-day blockade of the road that leads to the Ograzden Mountain, blocking the so-called "archaeologists" from the Strumica Museum and the wild diggers of Euromaxx, which were there to perform illegitimate preliminary archaeological researches at the concession space, as part of the procedure for opening the mine.

3. Have you interacted /cooperated with other anti-mining initiatives from inside and outside the country?

We are part of an unofficial network of activists and eco-organizations called "The Southeast against mines", which includes not only activists from Strumica and Novo Selo but also from other towns like Bogdanci, Valandovo and Gevgelija. The exchange of information, experiences and ideas has helped us a lot in our joint struggle for a healthy environment against the mines of death. Outside of Macedonia we do not have many important contacts with similar initiatives to our own (besides our emigrant communities), although we are constantly monitoring such and similar developments abroad.

4. Who were / are your allies in the fight?

All conscientious citizens of our region and Macedonia in general. Our emigrants abroad, conscientious local entrepreneurs and locals from the most affected Stuka and Ilovica, as well as

from the surrounding villages, had a special contribution. Almost all political actors, regardless of their party affiliation tried to achieve political points through our struggle, but only a very small number of them provided real support and contribution to our struggle.

5. What were your goals and tactics?

Unconditionally stopping the construction of the Ilovitsa-Stuka mine; using all the legally allowed means – protest actions, agitation and constant speaking of the truth, as well as persistence to endure regardless of how hopeless it sometimes seemed. Unlike us, our corporate opponents had at their disposal almost unlimited resources; they used dishonest methods: massive purchases of media content, bribes and attempts at corruption of the broad masses and prominent authoritative individuals, as well as attempts to discredit and spread lies about us activists.

6. What are the biggest challenges / obstacles you faced as activists?

When they failed in their early attempts to bribe us and to intimidate us personally, they began to indirectly threaten us with the lives of our loved ones. After they did not succeed, they sued us for speaking the truth – because in this way we allegedly damaged the already non-existent reputation of their corporation. There were also more attempts for our criminal prosecution under absurd and fictitious charges in order to neutralize us. We were constantly confronted with their colorful lies and outrageous propaganda that we supposedly received some fabulous sums of money for what we did voluntarily and for the general good.

7. What was the attitude by the institutions and the Government regarding Ilovica? Would you say that there is a difference in the attitude of the current from the previous government?

Individuals from the previous government had abused their position and authority by classifying as state secrets the assessment on the influence of the future mine on the environment. The very procedure for granting 86 concessions for detailed geological research in the eastern part of Macedonia by the previous Government was conducted in an extremely suspicious, non-transparent and undemocratic way. The same goes for the so-called public hearings regarding these mines; they took place without or with minimal public participation under “the carpet”. However, despite the fact that the present government generally shows greater openness and a sense of citizens’ concerns regarding the mines of death, key officials, regardless of party affiliation, guided by their personal interests, have long dragged on and delayed the solution of this burning problem. We welcomed the correct by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia to revoke the first expired Euramaxx concession for the Ilovitsa-Stuka mine. We know that apart from us activists, the government was facing even more pressure from certain foreign power centers, which in every way possible lobbied for the opening of the mines of death.

8. Do you consider that there is a danger of renewal of concessions considering measures such as the new draft law on urbanization proposed by the current Government?

Environmental associations Eko Dolina and Zdrava Kotlina took an active part in the public debate in the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia on the Draft Law on Urban Planning, which has entered into the parliamentary procedure. Particularly controversial is the provision by which hydroelectric power plants, mines and similar objects are defined as buildings of state importance and thus the Government will have the discretion to decide on these without any public participation. In this case, private initiatives are problematically defined as a matter of state interest. In addition, this draft law runs counter to the Constitution and must not pass, because the possibility of its eventual abuse and re-issuance of concessions in the face of the non-functioning of our institutions is enormous.

9. What are the goals in the next period?

Protecting the location from future profiteers by launching an action to declare Ograzden Mountain a National Park. We will be active in several actions for forestation as well as prevention of total logging that occurs on certain hills of Ograzden. We also will fight against the mine of death at Dvoriste, also on Ograzden. In addition, we plan to dedicate ourselves to solving other environmental problems in our country – illegal landfills, sorting and waste reduction, energy (non) efficiency of facilities, promotion of organic production, etc.

10. How could other activists / citizens from the country or abroad help / activate the fight with the next period?

Each of us should think globally and act locally. We believe that all environmental problems are solvable only by voluntary and unselfish engagement, solidarity and sacrifice. If there is a need for massiveness in any of our actions in the future we will notify everyone through our sites on social networks. Sharing the published information from us is also helpful.

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Footnotes

[1] Although the exact number of concessions granted during Gruevski's rule is not clear, it is known that at least 80 such concessions had been granted since 2012, when the government introduced new legislation aimed at increasing business activities and investment [in the mining sector](#). The new legislation also introduced shorter, simpler and faster procedures for granting mining permits and concessions, and for the easy and almost automatic conversion of explorative concessions into exploration concessions, which allow construction and exploitation works to commence.