

E7 | THE STRUGGLE AGAINST A DESTRUCTIVE MINING PROJECT IN GREECE

Background

In December 2003, the assets of the Cassandra Mines (in north-east Halkidiki, Greece) and mining concessions covering 317 square kilometres of public forest were transferred to the Greek state for 11 million euros. They were sold the same day to Hellas Gold S.A. for the same price without prior economic assessment of the assets and without an open tender being floated.¹ Eldorado Gold Corporation (based in Vancouver, Canada) owns 95 per cent of the assets of Hellas Gold S.A. The market capitalization value of Eldorado Gold is 2.3 billion euros, and the value of the minerals in Halkidiki is estimated to be 15.5 billion euros (over seven times the current assets of Eldorado Gold). Eldorado Gold has full ownership of the minerals in the concessions granted and there are no arrangements through which the government can claim royalties (Triantafyllidis 2012).

The holdings of Hellas Gold S.A. include an existing mine, a new open-pit and underground mine in Skouries, an underground mine in Olympiada, an 8.5-kilometre underground tunnel for the transport of ore, a copper-gold metallurgy plant, a sulphuric acid plant, four tailing disposal and storage sites, an industrial port, and rights to the exploration of fourteen other potential mining areas (HELLAS GOLD S.A. – ENVECO S.A. 2010). In July 2011 the Greek state approved the plan for mining in the area after an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The assessment is supposed to have included public consultations, but the government made a complete mockery of the process to legitimize its sale of the mining concessions to Hellas Gold S.A. (Technical Chamber of Greece 2011).

Impacts

Several independent studies have shown that the proposed mining project exceeds the carrying capacity of the area. The impacts and consequences will be significant and irreversible both on the environment and on the local economy, which is based on agriculture and tourism.²

The Kakkavos mountain supplies water to the entire region of north-east Halkidiki (Triantafyllidis 2012) and the proposed mining activity will directly and irreversibly affect the region's water resources. Ore dust will pour huge amounts of toxic pollutants into the region's environment. It has been estimated that full-scale mining operations will throw up 4,324 tonnes of ore dust every



Image E7.1 Protesters facing tear-gas shells from police in Halkidiki (Hellenic Mining Watch)

hour (HELLAS GOLD S.A. – ENVECO S.A. 2010). The dust will have high levels of sulphur compounds of heavy metals, such as antimony, arsenic, barium, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, manganese, nickel, lead, mercury, zinc, etc. The soil will be contaminated with heavy metals and the mining activity will cause the topsoil to dry up over a radius of several kilometres from the open pit. Severe soil erosion is expected to occur, leading subsequently to catastrophic floods (Panagiotopoulos 2012).

The mining activity poses serious risks for workers, residents and visitors to the region. Workers in gold mines are known to have a lower life expectancy. They often suffer from many kinds of cancer (trachea and bronchi, lung, stomach and liver), pulmonary tuberculosis, silicosis, pleural diseases, hearing loss, increased prevalence of bacterial and viral infections, diseases of the blood, skin and musculoskeletal system. The presence of heavy metals, even at very low concentrations, increases the risks of a number of conditions such as anaemia, hypertension, central nervous system disorders (especially in children), a range of respiratory disorders, renal failure, gastroenteritis, kidney disease, liver damage, cancer, hepatitis and liver cirrhosis (Benos A 2012).

Genesis of a popular struggle

The sale of the mining concessions to Hellas Gold S.A. is a transfer of public assets for the accumulation of private profits. In the process, extremely serious and wide-ranging environmental impacts have been transferred on to local communities. The government of Greece has imposed a decision that will not lead to any economic benefit to the country or the people in the region. At the same time, the government's decision condemns the region to



Image E7.2 March in Thessaloniki, Greece, against the mining project in Halkidiki (Alexis Benos)

environmental degradation and destruction. A clear realization of these issues has led to the development of a popular and sustained struggle in the region against the mining contract.

To take forward the struggle against the mining contract, several scientific studies have been commissioned by local community organizations, which rebut the hollow claims made by the government. Lawsuits have been filed at the Council of State (Greece's Supreme Administrative Court) challenging the state's 2011 EIA approval. The struggle has led to mass mobilization of the people in the area and campaigns are being organized to inform people about the impending threats posed by the mining company. Several demonstrations have taken place in the cities of the regions and in the habitations, higher up in the mountains.

The Greek government continues to disregard the voices of communities struggling against the project. After initially ignoring the growing protests, the government has now begun a disinformation campaign, claiming that the struggle is being led by a small minority of people in the region. The government has also dubbed the struggle as 'anti-development' and as being led by 'a terrorist organization'. State repression and police violence have escalated rapidly since March 2012.³ The popular struggle of Halkidiki has been attacked repeatedly, and the government has tried various methods to discredit and criminalize the struggle. Unfortunately, a significant section of the mainstream Greek media has chosen to side with the government's position.

A 2012 Reuters article entitled ‘Greece’s triangle of power’ draws attention to the ‘interplay between politics, big business and powerful media owners’ (Grey and Kyriakidou 2012). The attitude of the mainstream media in Greece is in sharp contrast to the response by significant sections of the international media. The struggle against the mining contract in Halkidiki has received wide coverage in the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, Associated Press, *France2*, *Weiner Zeitung*, *El País*, ARD, the *New Statesman*, Inter Press Service, the *Globe and Mail* and the *Independent*.

In 2012, three big demonstrations in the Kakkavos mountain (in August, September and October⁴) were countered by the police with extreme violence. The police used tear gas and shot rubber bullets at the protesters, beat up and injured several of them, and arrested many others (Amnesty International 2012). After the demonstration in August, the special police forces invaded the village of Ierissos and indiscriminately attacked people (including children, the elderly, pregnant women and even tourists).

Since February 2013, Halkidiki has become the target of what can only be described as a ‘police state’. The residents of the area face intimidation and repeated violation of civil, political and human rights. Instances abound of arbitrary arrests of large numbers of people (including young students), disappearances of citizens, and several hours of interrogation of those arrested.

In March 2013, more than two hundred riot policemen invaded the village of Ierissos. The police resorted to unjustified and excessive use of force, made extensive use of chemicals (including in a schoolyard filled with students) and



Image E7.3 Popular mobilization in Greece against the mining project in Halkidiki (Hellenic Mining Watch)

even injured an eleven-month-old baby. A few days later, at 3 a.m., armoured special police forces invaded the homes of two residents by forcibly breaking into their houses. They were arrested after sustained interrogation. Three months later, two more residents were imprisoned and all four were kept in prison for periods ranging from four to six months.

The movement in Halkidiki includes peaceful people who have diverse ideologies. The only ‘weapons’ they use are scientific evidence, objective information, social action and solidarity. They are supported by collectives, institutions, organizations, parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties, political institutions, Canadian politicians and European social and political organizations. The strength of the movement is manifest in the participation of thousands of people in demonstrations and other public activities.

Women are playing a central role in this social struggle. They have left behind their ‘traditional’ roles, and are participating in all facets of this struggle. In their open letter⁵ they introduce themselves as follows:

We are the great-grandmothers who experienced the occupation during World War II and decided – never again fascism. We are the grandmothers who experienced civil war and declared – never again war.

We are the mothers who saw our children becoming immigrants and declared – never again racism. We are the daughters who experienced the dictatorship and declared – never again authoritarian regimes.

We are the granddaughters who have never before experienced occupation, civil war, immigration or dictatorship and are now experiencing all of them simultaneously. We are the great granddaughters who dream, who hope, who demand a better future.

They also state:

They attacked us with tear gas and chemicals, they chased after us, they beat us, they arrested us, they interrogated us, they invaded our homes and schools. They accused us of not respecting the laws. They called us uneducated, uninformed and disobedient women, liars and even terrorists! We endured though all this. Besides, we brought our children into this world with untold pain and we are raising them with incredible effort. We will not be intimidated by terrorizing practices.

The society in Halkidiki was traditionally conservative, but the threat of the mining project has radicalized it. People have learned to organize without ‘leaders’. They have learned to discuss, to listen, to understand and then to synthesize the opinions of many different people. They now understand the deeply political nature of the present conflict with the company and the government and they now also understand the need to take positions on all social issues. Halkidiki’s movement states:

Our movement could only be against all social and political structures that are based on authoritarian and racist attitudes. We are opposed to segregation and discrimination of people based on origin, sex, skin colour, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or political ideology. The authoritarian and racist attitudes – especially in these difficult times experienced by our societies – tend to perpetuate a vicious cycle of violence. A cycle of violence that we strive to crack.

The experiences of their struggle have led people to start believing that perhaps the natural state of humans is not selfishness, but cooperation and solidarity. They now question the economy that is based on over-consumption and over-exploitation of nature. The people of Halkidiki strive for the right to live with dignity. They are fighting against the rape of nature, justice and human rights. They are struggling for the right to participate in the decision-making processes. They strive to keep alive a creative dialogue of many different voices.

Notes

1 Law N 3220/2004, *Official Government Gazette*, 15A/28.01.2004 (in Greek).

2 'Impacts of gold mining in Halkidiki', soshalkidiki.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/impacts-of-gold-mining.pdf.

3 See video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU1Xc3cv3as.

4 See video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RibWbVt4Bg&list=UUoKjW4kyoLEVTMtEllvutBQ&index=55.

5 soshalkidiki.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/women_en.pdf.

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Triantafyllidis, G. (2012) *Appearances of gold in Northern Greece and production by extraction of the rock: the fate of 'interchangeable metal' on water ecosystems* (in Greek).