

# Introduction of cyanide leaching of gold in Bulgaria

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CEE Bankwatch Network's mission is to prevent environmentally and socially harmful impacts of international development finance, and to promote alternative solutions and public participation.

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In Bulgaria the cyanide leaching of gold is presently not applied. The mining sector uses cyanide for flotation processing of lead, but the concentration of cyanides in this process is significantly lower than in the cyanide leaching of gold.

Since 2004 there are several investment proposals for introduction of cyanide leaching for gold extraction. These are Chelopech copper mine, Kurdjali lead and zinc processing facility, investment proposal in Krumovgrad for a new open pit mine and a cyanide leaching facility, Plovdiv lead and zinc processing facility, and at least two more at the stage of deposit exploration.

All of these proposals have caused significant public opposition both from local communities and national and regional environmental groups. Subscriptions of 10 000 signatures against the open pit mine and cyanide facility in Krumovgrad, 14 432 signatures supporting a legislative ban of the cyanide leaching technology in 2008, petitions were submitted at the European and Bulgarian Parliaments.

As a result of the aforementioned petitions, members of the European Parliament's Petitions Committee visited the tailings dam of Chelopech on 29 October 2008. Kathy Sinnott, the Vice-chairwoman of the Petitions Committee stated at a press conference after the visit: "The local tailings dam is so overfilled that the first torrential rain might result in the dam's spilling and poisoning of the drinking water of two million people living downstream on the Maritsa River." Despite the strong reservations of Chelopech Mining regarding the competence of the MEPs and the content of the draft report from the fact finding visit to Bulgaria, the final report was approved after a review on 11 February 2009 with a recommendation that the Bulgarian Government evaluates and analyses the pollution problem and the impact on the health of citizens in the concerned regions.

The EIA documentation on the most advanced investment proposals in Chelopech, Kurdjali and Krumovgrad gives information about the risks and the gaps of the projects. The major legal drawbacks of the EIA process were:

- no information campaign and very narrow scope of the public consultations with communities living downstream from the mine: although, in Chelopech case, more than one million people live downstream on the Maritsa river, the biggest river on the territory of the country, which crosses into neighbouring Greece (known as Evros river there). These people were denied the right to be informed and consulted;
- there has been no procedure of consultations according to the Espoo Convention for EIA in trans-boundary context with communities from Greece, in spite of the declared interest by NGOs and local communities;
- accident response plans for the operation and transportation of toxic materials were not presented for public scrutiny as part of the EIA consultations nor the IPPC or SEVEZO applications.

All of the above are requirements according to the Directive 2006/21/EC on the management of waste from the extractive industries.

The recent decision of the Supreme Administrative Court on Chelopech EIA (attached at the documentation) underlines other serious gaps as: non adequate assessment of the existing environmental and health conditions at the region and the cyanide technology which cannot be considered as Best Available Technique (BAT) being used only in Arisona, USA at experimental stage. The Supreme Administrative Court's decision returns the EIA for improvement and reassessment of the EIA Report.

At the three above mentioned investment proposals the assessment of the tailings facilities is not included at the EIA documentation. The TMF of Gorubso Kurdjali does not cover the requirements of the Mining Waste Directive because of the lack of suitable isolation layer. Both cyanide installations and TMF proposed in the EIA's of Chelopech and Kurdjali fails to comply with Regulation 7 of the Ministry of Health on the required distances between industrial installations and settlements. The decision of the Health Ministry on the Chelopech case allowed a reduction of the distance, however, it involved a conflict of interest – the same civil servants were first hired by the Company to write the section of the EIA about the health risks, and afterwards signed a positive statement on the EIA as state employees.

At the permits granted for Chelopech and Kurdjali cases, the Ministry of Environment and Waters direct a preliminary execution of the constructions which can be considered as violation of the precautionary principle stated at the Art. 174 (2) Treaty of the EC.

Furthermore, Bulgarian mining and environmental experts from Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Underground Resources Association and other organizations members of the “Cyanide free Bulgaria” Coalition have brought up the risks for the environment and human health, and have argued that the application of the cyanide technology is not appropriate given:

- the climate conditions in the region, eg. high precipitation and regular floods in the last 4 years;

- high density of the population downstream from the mine;

They have pointed to the cyanide spill examples of Baia Mare in Romania and Kumtor in Kyrgyzstan, in which the application of cyanide leaching has led to devastating effects on rivers and communities by incidents relating to both rupture of tailings dam wall caused by heavy rainfall, and to transportation accident. The cyanide leaching is a contradictory method subject of national and regional legislative bans, initiatives for EU level ban at the European parliament (written declaration 85/2007) and UNECE (initiative of the Visegrad environmental ministers and the Britain environmental minister).

If all investment proposals will be realized, Bulgaria will become the most “cyanide” country in EU, where, according to the EIA Reports, in EU exists barely five or six cyanide leaching facilities (the cyanide leaching is applied only for 7% of the gold and silver extraction in EU). Despite this fact, the Ministry of Environment and Waters refuses to assess the cumulative effect of the facilities on the dense river network.

### **For more information**

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