

A German Europe?

Empire travels across the continent to investigate the future of the European project, five years into a grinding crisis



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Romania split over Europe's biggest gold mine

Critics claim project will shaft the town of Rosia Montana, but defenders say it's a golden opportunity.

James Reini Last Modified: 27 Oct 2013 11:06

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Rosia Montana, Romania - Andrei Gruber lights a cigarette and points through his kitchen window to

where a Canadian mining firm wants to set up Europe's biggest open cast gold mine and change the face of this sleepy Romanian town forever.

The 28-year-old knows mining well. Gruber's ancestors came to Rosia Montana hundreds of years ago to scour the hills for precious metals. But a scheme by Gabriel Resources is bigger and more destructive than anything this community has seen before.

"Mining is what created Rosia Montana, but that doesn't mean mining should also destroy it," Gruber told Al Jazeera. "They cannot start the project while I'm still here. They can't build a pit over my head. I'd rather be killed at my doorstep."

The plan has raised tensions in Rosia Montana, pitting neighbour against neighbour, as some residents take mining jobs while others oppose the multi-billion-dollar scheme that could boost the size of Romania's economy by one percent.

What began as a local row has snowballed into nation-wide protests, with anti-mine rallies that attract 15,000 people in the capital, Bucharest - giving a Romanian flavour to street action that has rocked Egypt, Turkey, Brazil and other countries this year.

A fractious debate has seen environmentalists, archaeologists and constitutionalists united against a foreign mining consortium, which they say will plunder Romania and pollute the Transylvanian countryside with cyanide.

The biggest benefit is providing jobs in an area of extremely high unemployment. It's the largest investment on the table for Romania.

- Dragos Tanase, manager

Mine supporters laud a much-needed boost to Romania's coffers. They hint at meddling from Moscow and the Hungarian-American tycoon George Soros who, they say, want Romania to remain an economic backwater.

Magdalena Suci, a Rosia Montana resident for 30 years, says Canadian investment is a "great opportunity" for an area that has suffered from high unemployment since the state-owned gold mine stopped digging ore in 2006. She has held several jobs at Rosia Montana Gold Corporation, an entity that is 80 percent owned by Gabriel Resources and 20 percent Romanian-owned.

Suci says she will open a restaurant to cater to tourists who will come when mining money starts flowing. "There are tensions here, but the people in opposition are very few."

Roman times

Gold hunters have flocked to the Apuseni Mountains as far back as Roman times, when miners followed veins of rich ore by digging deep into the hills around Rosia Montana, which means "Red Mountain".

The corporation wants to mine the estimated 314 remaining tons of gold and 1,480 tons of silver by extending Rosia Montana's existing two pits and digging two new ones - ultimately blasting four mountain peaks into rubble.

A processing plant will use cyanide to extract precious metals, and the remaining sludge will be dumped behind a 184-metre-high trailing dam in the nearby Corna Valley during the project's 20-year lifespan.

The company has acquired 60 percent of the required land from 80 percent of owners, says manager Dragos Tanase, adding it will employ 900 staff, drum up new business, and earn Romania's government \$5bn.

"The biggest benefit is providing jobs in an area of extremely high unemployment. It's the largest investment on the table for Romania, and could be the start of a new mining industry and an engine for growth for Romania's future," Tanase says.

He describes the mining project as a key decision for this country of 22 million people, which saw the overthrow and execution of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 but has not yet attracted major foreign investment, despite joining NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007.

Gabriel Resources has been in talks about the mine for 14 years now. The shareholders are frustrated and could sue Romania's government if there is no progress, Tanase adds. "Investors are looking at us. As soon as Rosia Montana starts, many other investors will come to Romania."

Ecological concerns

But environmentalists say the costs are too high. They warn of toxic chemicals and highlight the Baia Mare spill in 2000, when cyanide from a Romanian gold mine leaked into the Danube River, killing fish in the polluted waters of Hungary and Serbia.

"The people of Rosia Montana earn an income from

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programmes.

tourism, making honey and collecting forest fruits like blueberries and cranberries," said Tudor Bradatan, an activist with Mining Watch Romania. "But nobody's going to buy anything from an area with the biggest cyanide lake in Europe."

Cultural watchdogs have also joined the protests. Mining tunnels in the area were originally dug by engineers from the Roman-era and are an archaeological treasure - but many of them will be buried if new mining operations go ahead.



Geologists calculate there are 314 tons of gold [James Reinl]

Anti-mine protests have gathered momentum this year, since the government of Prime Minister Victor Ponta proposed a bill to speed up the approval process. A commission is set to report on the controversial bill on November 10.

Anti-mine protesters have now been joined by nationalists who warn against a foreign company that uses an aggressive television advertisement campaign to convince Romanians, and those who see Ponta's parliamentary bill as unconstitutional.

"A potentially profitable mining project was undermined by the government's haste, incompetence and lack of guts to make a decision on an unpopular subject," says Sorin Ionita, an analyst for Expert Forum, a think-tank. "This is how the cycle of protests started: blaming the government's opacity and, allegedly, corruption in the Rosia Montana gold mining case."

There is too little information about the cost, benefits and risks, and whether the company can pay for any potential environmental disaster.

Ana Otilia Nutu, Expert Forum analyst

The company has abandoned its original plans, which would have involved the bulldozing of Rosia Montana. It now presents the project as a sustainable scheme involved in preservation and the clean-up of past mining activity.

Struan Stevenson, a Scottish member of the European Parliament and president of the body's group on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development, described an "eco-friendly project that ticks all of the biodiversity boxes".

'Filthy' politicians

But many Romanians remain unconvinced.

"No matter how good it might have been, the project has zero credibility and should start from scratch," says Ana Otilia Nutu, an Expert Forum analyst. "There is too little information about the cost, benefits and risks, and whether the company can pay for any potential environmental disaster."

Back in Rosia Montana, Gruber, who runs a hostel decorated with the mining helmets and lamps of his forefathers, says he will fight to the end. Now that this issue has tapped into a broader sense of anger among Romanians, he says he can win.











"Rosia Montana was the spark," he says. "It's not just about the gold mine anymore. It's about how filthy the politicians are and how disgustingly they've been treating this country for too long."

Follow James Reinl on Twitter: @jamesreinl

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mihaela mitelea · 3 days ago

I am happy to finally see the case on Al Jazeera but I'm sad to say that this article is bad. The jobs promised to the Romanians are somewhere around hundreds and Romanians will work there just in the lowest positions, probably as carriers of their own gold to the hands of a foreign corporation. The article doesn't say nothing about the job destruction, somewhere approximately to 40.000.

They are just going to let us an environmental disaster and take everything out of there, they already taken about 150.000 tones just for "analysis" they say. We just have corrupt politicians which work in their own interest and not in the interest of the people. With that amount of money from our own resources we could save our country not just give it away for 1.6 milliard \$ and 56 milliards \$ to go in the pockets of the corporation. I would say this is just modern robbery and destruction of a state not the investment which the company promises. Please take a better look into what is actually happening there.

16 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Rod Kreinbrink → mihaela mitelea · 3 days ago

He who has the gold, makes the rules. " The golden rule."

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



silus · 3 days ago

Disaster will be huge when they stripping depth of 200 meters and reach uranium that is very reactive and the true stake of this exploitation. The greening process will be so impossible and the area that now is a wonder of biodiversity will become a living hell!!!

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Pop Ilie · 3 days ago

Cea mai mare nenorocire care se va abate asupra Zonei " Rosia Montană " dacă guvernul nu oprește Corporația RMGC să exploateze cu cianuri zăcămintul de aur! Se vor pierde mineralele prețioase! România este dezavantajată în acest proiect!

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



onix · 3 days ago

if you look at the landscape and mineral diversity even roman goldmining was disastrous for europe. this looks so ugly it will still be painfull in a hunderdthousand years.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >




Leonard Mayer · 3 days ago

Instead of using old fashioned methods such as cyanide extraction of gold, research should be done to extract gold by using nonpoisonous means with less harm to environment. Plans should be drawn up to use proceeds to repair, restore and recycle environment by growing trees and other vegetation in areas destroyed by mining. Most companies just boast about jobs and about making money selling gold. Big deal! How can you repair environment so that area is restored to nature after gold is removed? How can you restore environment of open pit mine so that people can live nearby without fear of toxicity? What about planting trees and creating vegetation? What about restoring the environment to a fertile state of life instead of death? How much will it cost? Will it ever be carried out?


3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Alif Bay · 3 days ago


 **Bill Day** · 3 days ago
Gold is only for hoarding.
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **silus** · 3 days ago
The Gold is a big LIE!
4 ^ | 1 v · Reply · Share ›

 **KB Jonsson** · 2 days ago
If the Romanian government is serious about this as a boost for the country(And not their own pockets) and serious about their own environment they must do the job themselves as part or full owners with full transparency. There are plenty of such successful examples in Europe. The LKAB mine in Sweden for one.

As EU members I am sure they could get a lot of consultation and experience from these countries. Including measures to conserve the environment.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **ararararar** · 3 days ago
mining industry in a poor country will just mean a shift away from manufacturing and growth towards depending on tax money from a mine, which is not a sustainable and future-proof way of financing a state.

If there is a way to get to that gold without destroying the area, maybe it would be okay, but there is understandably a lack of trust from the population.

In Switzerland, a village of 450 just voted and banned the gold prospecting. They were going to destroy the valley, stay 10 years, then leave, giving 40 million \$ to the locals and taking 1.2 billion \$ of gold away.

I guess municipalities in romania don't have this kind of autonomy and direct democracy.


2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


 **Sebastian Rosca** → **ararararar** · 2 days ago
No, we do not have direct democracy..... most of us don't even know what democracy is. And Gabriel Resources is using every single dime they have to bribe, to misinform and to manipulate. And our politicians are just happy to take millions of dollars in bribes and fu** the population.


This mining project must be stopped at all costs. It's not about just the 317 tonnes of gold, it's the 1200 tonnes of silver + estimated 60 tonnes of Uranium that are very important for Gabriel Resources.


In the end we will be left with a big pool of cyanide, no gold and the money in the politicians pockets. It's not worth it, not now !!!

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **SilviuS** · 9 hours ago
scoateti oamenii in strada,cand isi vor pierde "radacinile"...nu vor mai avea ce sa piarda...
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Sinbad2** · 2 days ago
The mining company will make lots of money, some locals will get jobs, that's about all. Oh and of course the cyanide will destroy all the waterways downstream.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **herald** · 2 days ago
this just sounds like a bad idea. Hope the romanian people can keep it from occurring. A low paying, or even high paying job for 10 years is not worth the destruction of your home for the foreseeable future. Plus the people who will profit, will not share.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **inti** · 2 days ago
I want to have some of that Gold.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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