

The EU should intervene in the debate over Romania's controversial Rosia Montana mining project

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A number of protests have taken place in Romania over a planned mining project at Rosia Montana in the north of the country. [Simona Manea](#) argues that the EU should take a more active role in the debate, particularly given its attempts to lead efforts to implement the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to shape the UN debate on the post-MDGs Agenda. She notes that the project would pose significant concerns for the environment, and that the EU could help strengthen opposition within Romania by choosing to act on existing environmental legislation.



The EU's low-profile position on the controversial gold mining project in Romania's [Rosia Montana](#) is at odds with its proclaimed leadership in shaping the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Agenda. The EU's lack of a firm position in this case calls into question its commitment to sustainable development and environmental legislation.

For the past eight weeks, tens of thousands of Romanians have taken to the streets in cities across Romania and Europe in the country's largest demonstrations for two decades. The protests are fast becoming Europe's largest environmental movement, in opposition to the proposed gold mining project in Rosia Montana, a small village in northern Romania. Using cyanide-based technologies, the Canadian firm Gabriel Resources Ltd wants to extract from the site, the largest of its kind in Europe, around 300 tonnes of gold and 1,600 tonnes of silver. The company promises around 800 jobs over the seventeen year exploration, with a higher employment number in the initial years. The value of the gold to be extracted stands at over 20 billion USD.

The cash-strapped Romanian state, which has a 25 per cent stake in the project and would levy a 6 per cent royalty on the gold extracted, has given the project its approval and tabled a draft law in Parliament in late August. If passed, the law would give the go-ahead for the exploration by allowing Gabriel Resources to expropriate land on the site of the proposed mine from the remaining land owners who oppose the project. Voting has been postponed until a special Parliamentary Commission, set up as a response to the unprecedented public mobilisation, evaluates the project.



Rosia Montana protest, Credit: Elena Dumitru (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The EU has been conspicuously silent on the issue. Only when prompted about the European Commission's position on the project, the Commissioner for Environment, Mr Janez Potocnik, [stated](#) on September 9 that the responsibility for applying EU legislation rests with the Romanian government. This is not surprising as EU institutions have been divided on the use of cyanide-mining technologies. On May 5 2010, the European Parliament voted in favour of a [Resolution](#) that urged the Commission to take the legislative steps implied by existing EU legislation, such as the Water Framework Directive, to ban cyanide mining technologies. The Commission has so far

insisted that Member States have the freedom to take up the implementation of the Resolution. According to the Commission, the EU Mining Waste Directive contains strict provisions that would reduce the risks to the environment and public health (see [European Parliament Questions](#)).

The Commission's stance on Rosia Montana and on the broader issue of cyanide mining technologies represents an unfortunate position given the desire of the EU to set the tone of the debate on the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals Agenda. In the opening speech of a [Commission-organised event](#) in July framed around the UN published Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, Development Commissioner, Mr. Andris Piebalgs, who is also one of the signatories of the [Report](#), highlighted sustainable development as the driving philosophy behind economic activities. Mr Potočník seemed to agree. He also asserted the need for a comprehensive approach that linked the proposed 12 universal goals into a more coherent framework. This is the policy line also supported by the [EU Council's Conclusions](#) on the Overarching Post 2015 Agenda, of June 25 2013.

The EU's proclaimed intention to place environmental sustainability at the core of its post-2015 MDGs Strategy, and to achieve 'policy coherence' for development in the EU and abroad, must be buttressed by action. Rosia Montana should serve as the EU's test case. The EU could start by using all institutional means to put pressure on the Romanian government to rethink its position vis-à-vis the project. The Water Framework Directive and Hazardous Waste Directive are appropriate tools in this context. [The Romanian Academy](#) and the [Romanian Institute of Geology](#) have already indicated that the geological set up of Corna Valley, with its numerous water springs, rock fissures and high rock permeability, means that the cyanide-contaminated water will leak into the region's waterbed.

The Commission should therefore consider extending the precautionary principle, which underpins European climate and environmental policy, to the use of cyanide mining technologies in the EU. Similarly to radioactive water, the cyanide-contaminated water used in extracting the metals must be contained and cannot be released into the ground. In Rosia Montana, the exploration will use around 12,000 tones of cyanide annually compared to, for example, 1,000 tones Europe wide, totalling a staggering 204 million tones throughout the lifetime of the mine. The contaminated water must be placed in a 400m deep and 8km wide pond, which is meant to last forever.

As history shows, the impact on the environment, public health and on the long-term sustainability of communities can be dire when unpredictable weather patterns, failing maintenance standards and human error meet. The spill of cyanide-contaminated water at another Romanian mine in Baia Mare in 2000, which involved 'only' 100 tones of cyanide tainted water, has been deemed Europe's worst environmental disaster since Chernobyl. This should convince EU decision-makers that some economic activities carry too high an economic, environmental and social cost.

In choosing to act on its environmental legislation, the Commission would give an impetus to sustainable economic activities in the region, which UNESCO advisory body ICOMOS considers worthy of being counted as a world heritage site due to its unique pre-Roman, Roman and Medieval mining galleries. Not least, the Commission would also lend legitimacy to Romanian state institutions, which delivered legal judgments and feasibility studies against the project in spite of corporate and government pressure to the contrary. In short, Rosia Montana would be an opportunity to link in a coherent strategy, as the EU intends for its post-2015 MDGs Agenda, sustainable development, good governance and the promotion of effective state institutions.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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