

# Housing Crisis in a Hungarian Romani Settlement Due to Environmental Damage: The Case of the Municipality of Recsk and a Local Mine

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## Abstract

This study is a compilation of recent articles from the Hungarian press about the case of Recsk, a settlement in northern Hungary where Andesite-Bau Ltd., was awarded a permit to operate during the Covid-19 pandemic. The mining pushed ahead despite being in close proximity to its Romani neighbours. Individuals were traumatised and their property was damaged by the mine's explosives; later, deforestation at the site resulted in a mudslide which inundated Romani streets below the mine. Environmental racism is at play at this contested site, for neither before the mine opening nor after the mudslide did any Recsk villagers contribute to a relocation of Romani families to safer areas. To this day, victims have not received compensation or been able to move to safe residences. The owner of the mine project does not admit any wrongdoing, although an official investigation found that the mine caused the damage. Compensation offered by the government has not been forthcoming, and housing solutions offered by the state impose additional financial burdens on the victims. It is difficult to find a legal basis that would provide a satisfactory solution to the affected community.

## Keywords

- Environmental justice
- Housing security
- Human rights
- Mining
- Racism
- Roma

## Introduction

Located in the rugged Mátra Mountains of Hungary's Heves County, Recsk and its surroundings have been known for mining ore deposits since the eighteenth century. Copper, lead, and zinc were first extracted, later followed by gold and silver mined by a Hungarian mining concern (*Magyar Királyi Állami Mátrabánya*) since the 1930s. Moreover, in the 1950s, a forced labour camp operated next to the *Csákánykő* quarry in Recsk. Two quarries operate several kilometres away from the village to this day, while metal ore mining has been discontinued for some time.

In 2020, a company based in Debrecen, Andezit-Bau Ltd., approached the municipality's administration with a proposal to establish a new andesite quarry on Valéria Hill. This third quarry on the outskirts of Recsk is in the immediate vicinity of a settlement of 2,500 inhabitants, and the entrance to the site is less than 250 metres from Hunyadi Street, noted for its Romani population and individuals with low social status (according to 2011 census data, 13 per cent of the village population belong to the Roma ethnic group). According to locals, these residents did not choose the site voluntarily; the settlement's leaders designated the area for Romani families who were building houses with the help of social housing policy benefits twenty years ago.

To start any official licensing procedure, the company only needed the land in question to be reclassified for mining. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the mayor, Sándor Nagy (formerly of Jobbik, now independent), held the power necessary to decide on this permit almost single-handedly. Municipal council members had some knowledge of this decision, for during the public health emergency they were given special authority<sup>[1]</sup> to exercise all the functions and powers of the council of representatives. Later, it turned out the municipality's officers had ignored the undeniable fact that Romani family housing was situated in close proximity to the quarry, and they did little to ensure the affected population was informed properly about the planned mine on their doorstep. According to Dezső Farkas, head of the local Roma minority self-government in Recsk, only one public hearing was announced by the municipality in 2019. By then, very few people had been reached for comment, and no legal path was available to stop the reclassification process.

The mayor and the mining company agreed without objection on a settlement planning concept, in which the investor bears the costs, and the municipality amends its local settlement plan and building codes accordingly. An amendment to the regulation document<sup>[2]</sup> describes the expected consequences of the quarry's operation as follows: "The proposed development will neither contribute to a good quality of life nor healthy living conditions in the immediate environment, but the plan does attempt to mitigate these. Forest cover will disappear completely, habitat destruction is expected, and the impact on people's quality of life is well understood" (Recsk Municipality 2020, 11).

1 Pursuant to Section 46 (4) of Act CXXVIII of 2011 on Disaster Management and the Amendment of Certain Related Acts.

2 Available online: <https://www.recsk.hu/?module=news&action=getfile&fid=293753>.

Despite such a forecast, the opening and operation of the Recsk VII andesite mine went ahead and was approved by several authorities, including local government, the Mine Inspectorate (*Országos Bányakapitányság*), the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Regulated Activities Inspectorate.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 1. Problems

Permits in Hungary do not specify how far a mine must be from residential housing. The decisive item is rather the noise level. A 2021 Environmental Impact Assessment published by the Heves County Office states that blasting, crushing, cleaning, and haulage must be at least 600 metres from residential homes.<sup>[4]</sup> The assessment concludes that there will not be any air quality, noise, or pollutant impacts in excess of human health and safety limits during the mine's planned 40-year operation near residential homes.

Hence, with all the paperwork in place, the work on the mining site began in February 2023. The residents of Hunyadi Street suddenly were confronted by a mine opening a few metres above their houses, with all the attendant consequences: between eight and ten blasts annually, dust, machinery, mud, trucks, and so forth. People living in the area were not informed about the interruptions, according to their statements. Blasts went unannounced, so residents ran from their houses in alarm during the explosions, fearing earthquakes and then reporting subsequent damage to their houses.

When the online portal 24.hu visited the settlement in March 2023, several residents – and the mayor – spoke out in the investigative report (Nagy 2023b).<sup>[5]</sup> Residents listed the problems regarding the mine: “I thought someone had driven a car into the side of my house because it was so strong. The foreman suggested it was not good that earth has been piled on top of the hill as a protective barrier, for when a big rain comes, it will turn into mud and will slide down on us all. He says that the problem is that it's close, too close. And the work, the noise is disturbing.” Despite the dangers, no one informed them about the mine or about the blasts. Local residents honestly fear for their physical safety and that the hillside may collapse.

Another resident of Hunyadi Street said: “The mayor and the entrepreneur think that they can do this because 150 *cigány* live here on Hunyadi Street. They wouldn't dare to do it near Hungarian homes.” In an article by 24.hu, the mayor, Sándor Nagy, admits that the mine is very close to a populated settlement. When asked why nothing was done to move the residents to a safer place, despite the multi-billion-forint investment, he gave the following answer: “People would lynch me if the [*G*]ypsy neighbourhood were to be moved into the village. The suggestion is completely absurd. Who would dare do that?”

3 The authority was established in 2021 based on Act XXXII. It regulates and supervises a large portfolio including cyber security, gambling, geology, judicial enforcement, liquidations, mining, and tobacco. Available online: <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2100032.tv>.

4 Available online: [https://www.kormanyhivatal.hu/download/5/7e/37000/KVO\\_3030-34-2021\\_KÖZLEMÉNY-határozat%20kivonat\\_alairt.pdf](https://www.kormanyhivatal.hu/download/5/7e/37000/KVO_3030-34-2021_KÖZLEMÉNY-határozat%20kivonat_alairt.pdf).

5 Available online: <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/03/17/recsk-robbantas-kobanya-szegenyseg-riport>.

In the end, people's fears in Recsk were confirmed when heavy rain fell on 8 June 2023, resulting in waste from the mine flooding houses on Hunyadi Street. Substantial media coverage followed in the immediate aftermath. A new 24.hu investigative report series on the Recsk case<sup>[6]</sup> (Nagy 2023c) described the situation as the following: "All the tailings and alluvium washed down the mountain and my home was gone [...] This is the mine, guys, this is the mine! [...] Guys, the whole mountain has come down! [...] And the contractor said it was safe. It's safe, you can see for yourself!"

As a result, a total of 70–80 people were affected, and about 40 people had to be moved. Some had relatives who were able to take them in, but many were unable to find decent accommodation. During the rescue, racial discrimination also made it difficult to house Roma without accommodation. The owners of guesthouses and other facilities in the area did not accept Romani guests or refused them on the grounds of full occupancy. The local government made a half-hearted effort to create temporary accommodation for them in the minority club and in the village's dilapidated sports hall, while the mine owner distributed emergency aid to the families. The police did not let the residents back to their homes until the end of June.

## 2. Responsibility, Accountability, State Intervention

Due to adjoining forest clearance by Andezit Bau Ltd., a large amount of water from the hill above the houses washed away a dam built from excavated soil. According to locals, drainage ditches were dug only after the waste tailings had already spilled over the houses below. After the rainy period subsided, the dam was rebuilt.

After the events in June 2023, Hungary's Mines Inspectorate, under the Authority for the Supervision of Regulated Activities, launched an investigation into the case. The investigation determined that the mining company was not operating in accordance with the so-called technical operating plan.

- They cleared the entire area of vegetation, especially in areas where mining was not planned until 2025 or 2026.
- Sludge and so-called tailings ponds (storage for waste materials from mining) were mis-placed and deviated from the original plans.
- The slope towards Hunyadi Street is steeper than shown in the plans.

As a result, Hungary's Mining Department fined Andezit Bau Ltd., three million forints (€ 7,300) and ordered them, among other things, to cover the slope of the mine with vegetation (Nagy 2023a).<sup>[7]</sup> However, the mine's managers have not publicly acknowledged these findings; moreover, they have denied any responsibility (Szalai 2023).<sup>[8]</sup>

6 Available online: <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/06/14/recsk-banya-iszap-falu-kikoltoztetes-riport>.

7 Available online: <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/12/06/recsk-banya-jogsertes-vizsgalat-banyahatosag>.

8 Available online: [https://nepszava.hu/3216098\\_recsk-sarlavina-karterites-per-banyaceg](https://nepszava.hu/3216098_recsk-sarlavina-karterites-per-banyaceg).

Although the mine has since been found responsible for the disaster, the Recsk mayor and village leadership still are looking to Hungary's central government for a solution, as they have been from the start. Negotiations were launched at the level of the Ministry of Interior to repair the damage. Miklós Dukai, state secretary for local governments, informed the public that 500 million forints<sup>[9]</sup> (Czinkóczy 2023) from the central budget would be used to help Recsk residents whose houses were damaged by the mudslide in early June due to “*extraordinary weather*.” In other words, the government blamed the weather for the damage.

This statement is also significant because, until the mining company's responsibility came to light, decision-makers publicly emphasised the victims' responsibility as homeowners. According to Miklós Dukai, the properties were uninsured, despite the responsibility of private owners to insure their properties.<sup>[10]</sup> László Horváth, Fidesz MP for the Recsk District, questioned the ownership and use-status of some properties, saying that they were built on municipal land without building or housing permits. This statement foreshadowed that the government and the municipality would look for excuses and want to shift the responsibility to the victims instead of providing necessary and urgent government assistance. Hungary's prime minister withdrew the decision (1269/2023) on the 500-million-forint compensation in September 2024.<sup>[11]</sup>

Several rumours about social rental housing schemes have circulated in Recsk, but these ideas have not been substantiated and there has been a lot of controversy among locals. The municipality would like to avoid housing solutions for victims and residents of Hunyadi Street, yet the mayor and some non-Romani residents explained to a *Népszava* journalist<sup>[12]</sup> (Doros 2023) that “there is a part of Hunyadi Street with uninhabited, dilapidated houses, and if they were demolished, they could develop suitable plots on a new site.” Non-Romani inhabitants also expressed that they would like Roma to continue living on the outskirts of the village, in a virtually isolated settlement away from the centre, and not in front of their “eyes.”

As part of the state intervention, the MR Community Housing Fund (a government-financed agency) – established by the Hungarian Reformed Church and the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service – contacted the affected families in the autumn of 2023.

According to one resident, before the MR Community Housing Funds were released, they were offered containers as compensation. They were imagined as social rented housing, and users were expected to

9 Available online: <https://444.hu/2023/07/12/a-kormany-ugy-tesz-mintha-a-ner-es-ugyved-banyaja-ott-sem-lett-volna-a-recski-hegyomlasnal>.

10 Available online: <https://kormany.hu/hirek/otszazmillio-forinttal-segiti-a-kormany-a-recsken-megrongalodott-hazak-helyzetenek-rendezeset>.

11 *Hungarian Official Gazette*. 2023. A Kormány 1269/2023 (VII. 10.) Korm. Határozata a Recsk Nagyközséget 2023. június 8-án ért rendkívüli időjárási körülmény következtében károsodott lakóingatlanok helyzetének rendezéséről 102: 5206; *Hungarian Official Gazette*. 2024. A Kormány 1291/2024 (IX. 19.) Korm. határozata kormányhatározatok felülvizsgálatáról 93: 6675, Item 121. Available online: <https://magyarkozlony.hu>.

12 Available online: [https://nepszava.hu/3199707\\_sarlavina-elotelet-recsk-banya-riport#google\\_vignette](https://nepszava.hu/3199707_sarlavina-elotelet-recsk-banya-riport#google_vignette).

pay a monthly rent, even if their own property was made uninhabitable by the operation of the private mine. Residents did not accept this offer, and the options offered by the MR Housing Fund ignored the fact that they were trapped in a housing crisis through no fault of their own. Residents reported being unable to get help to resolve their situation<sup>[13]</sup> (Nagy 2023d). Some opinions shared by locals follow:

László M.: Now they say that it's good, they are helping us to sell the house, and we had to fill in a form. I said to them, sorry, but how do they want to sell it? Who wants to buy it? [...] They also say that if they can sell it, and we choose a house from the MR Housing Fund, they will give us the option of paying in instalments. Excuse me, we own our own property, and we have to buy another flat so that I can move there because of the mine.

Julianna: Can we rent a flat, is that the offer? They're going to flood me with mud, and then I must pay to live in a property that doesn't belong to me, but at least they won't flood it? This is ridiculous. Sell the flat and buy another one? Who wants to come here, I ask you? Who wants to buy this apartment after what happened here with the mine?

The environmental damage in the area is significant. It cannot escape our attention that the damage caused to the property of people living beneath the mine was due to irregular work and faulty engineering that significantly damaged the natural environment. Hungary's mining authority also considered as a matter of particular gravity that the mining contractor deviated significantly from its planned mining activities and authorised a technical operations plan in which forest clearance significantly exceeded the authorised level. In other words, these elements impact the long-term quality of life of the residents of Hunyadi Street. Nevertheless, the mine remains in operation today despite the deviation from its permitted activities.

## Conclusions Regarding Social and Environmental Justice

The Reck case has clear implications for both social and environmental justice in which housing security is key. On this front, domestic legal options should be examined along the lines of environmental justice and environmental racism. For instance, housing is not a fundamental right under Hungary's Basic Law. Those investments and omissions that affect areas of lower housing value that people have been living in for many years, weak advocacy communities, poor people and minority groups seldom protest and are not seen as negotiating partners. Vulnerable groups cannot defend their private property against state and private investors or actors with political power. Their housing is at risk because of unclear ownership of land and buildings, and there is no affordable housing alternative for low-income families in Reck or elsewhere in Hungary.

Nonetheless, there are a few legal regulations on this matter. According to Section 23 of Book 5 (Law on Property) of Hungary's Civil Code (Civil Code),<sup>[14]</sup> "The owner is obliged to refrain from any conduct

13 Available online: <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/11/24/reck-banya-sarlavina-kartalanitas-riport/amp>.

14 Act V of 2013, § 5:23, General Private Law Limitation on the Use of Property.

that would unnecessarily disturb others, in particular neighbours, or that would endanger the exercise of their rights.” The Civil Code also provides for liability for non-contractual damage. The relevant sections of the Civil Code may form a basis for legal proceedings, since it can be established without a doubt that the operation of the mine has disturbed the residents of Hunyadi Street. As a consequence of unregulated events at the mine, affected residents could not exercise their right to property, causing many residents to leave their uninhabitable properties, while others have remained and live in constant peril.

In addition, Andezit Bau Ltd., has violated the terms of the various environmental permits issued by the authorities, as established by a decision of the Hungary’s Mining Authority (Captaincy?), and has caused considerable environmental damage.

The European Parliament and the European Council are exerting pressure on member states to act, and they have reached an interim agreement on criminal law’s protection of the environment. Overall, the EU is taking strong action against environmental damage: defining new categories and clarifying existing definitions of offences and strengthening sanctions against those who seriously damage the environment.<sup>[15]</sup>

Despite this pressure, Hungary has re-interpreted the effort to further protect corporate and state interests in mining. Since 23 November 2023, the Hungarian government’s decree on the Environmental Protection Authorities Contract (432/2023 (IX.21)) entered into force, which prioritises the economic interests of polluters and other health-damaging operators, effectively protecting them for the duration of any contract.<sup>[16]</sup> Clearly, there is a need to generate significant changes in the field of legal protection and to use and develop the available legal instruments.

The case of the Recsk mine also shows that the available procedures and regulations are inadequate and fail to protect disadvantaged groups with weak representation or other low-income groups. According to the Aarhus Convention ratified by Hungary in 1998,<sup>[17]</sup> implementation is not localised, and the case of Recsk demonstrates that all three pillars – access to information, participation in decision-making, and right to legal remedy – were violated, and there were no mechanisms available for the public to enforce the relevant parts of Hungary’s Environmental Law.

Environmental justice and the promotion of equalities and democratic approaches are hardly on the agenda of decision-makers and social movements in Hungary. Environmental democracy and environmental justice approaches must be promoted and used, as they could elevate and amplify the voices of actors and populations that historically and systematically have been excluded from national, regional, and global decisions.

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15 European Commission. Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip\\_23\\_5817/IP\\_23\\_5817\\_EN.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_23_5817/IP_23_5817_EN.pdf).

16 Government Decree (432/2023 (IX.21)). Available online: <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2300432.kor#>.

17 2001 Act LXXXI, which, in addition to the Aarhus Convention adopted in 1998.

## Epilogue

For the moment the case is in the prosecution phase and not yet in court according to a recent article on the case (Bakró-Nagy 2025). Unfortunately, after the mine inspectorate had established the mine's responsibility, in January 2025 Heves County Police closed the investigation on the grounds that the company is not guilty and that the houses concerned were in bad condition, despite a criminal charge of occupational endangerment (not for compensation). The attorney representing Romani families from Recsk has asked the court to exclude Heves County Police from the proceedings. This key legal step would remove police jurisdiction over the mine's territory because of a conflict of interest during the police investigation (for example, their main witness was the environmental expert who was doing the preparation work for Andezit-Bau Ltd., before the mine opened). The families' legal representative says a recent decision dismissing their complaint is full of contradictions because "while they establish the violations and liability of the mining company, they go beyond it and there is no criminal consequence for doing so." A new legal process has been introduced that can be applied to force a trial. The conclusion of the rule of law procedure (done by the EU Commission) has led to a new domestic regulation, which allows anyone to file a motion for reconsideration in criminal cases involving public authority or public money. In such cases, the court decides whether the prosecution's decision was lawful. If not, the prosecutor's office is ordered to prosecute. Sources close to the case indicate that the Romani plaintiffs intend to take the case further, filing a motion for reconsideration.

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