

Wasting as Social Wealth

Industrial Toxic Waste and the Limits of Environmental Politics

by **Damir Arsenijević**

In early February 2023, the government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina announced it would allocate around 1 million Euros to clear out carcinogenic toluene diisocyanate (TDI) waste from the privatized and disassembled Chlor-Alkali Power Plant (known locally by its Bosnian acronym, HAK). The HAK plant is located a few kilometers from the entrance of the city of Tuzla, in north-eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Provisional estimates of the volume of this carcinogenic waste range from 1370 to 1750 tons.¹

Such an announcement ought to be greeted as welcome news, except that the Federal government completely glosses over and disguises the following glaring fact: that, insidiously, for over 30 years, TDI waste has been poisoning and killing Tuzla's citizens because the Polish company Organika, which bought and privatized HAK, buried it in and around HAK, in unknown locations, with complete disregard for safety regulations.² Now, the already impoverished population of Bosnia and Herzegovina are forced to use scarce public funds to clean up a deadly threat, created by the private owner, and

forced to accept a culture of impunity for such illegal acts of environmental violence.

In this article, I establish and argue for the connection between environmental violence, international finance, and power in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I will also propose a reframing and reconceptualization of the dominant narratives of privatization and deindustrialization of Bosnia and Herzegovina that coincided with the immediate ending of the 1992–1995 war.

Examining hazardous waste as a symptom of the never-ending transition of socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina into a so-called capitalist liberal democracy re-politicizes the process of “wasting” environments and human lives, revealing it as part and parcel of such transition. In other words, the argument that companies which privatized unprofitable industries in Bosnia and Herzegovina had little time or financial interest properly to dispose of hazardous waste is a cynical smokescreen and should be vigorously challenged. The opposite is true – there is immense value to these privatizing companies in the exploitation of the



Corroding pipes in HAK factory with unknown quantities of chlorine.

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“wasting” environment and to the “wasting” and “wasting away” of social relations precisely to extract profit, in the form of cheap labor. In an already decimated and despoiled landscape – geographically, economically, politically, and socially – cheap labor is the ultimate “resource” being “extracted” from those war-traumatized communities that already live in abject poverty. This is what should be conceptualized as environmental violence.

The Value of Waste in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Reframing the Debate

“The children are born ill and when people start living here, they know what it is that they will die from.”³ Thus speaks Goran Stojak, the head of small local community called Bukinje, in the catchment area of the city of Tuzla, located directly across the road from the coal-operated Tuzla Thermal Power Plant and its five coal slurry sites. He speaks of the decimation of this local community due to various types of cancer and the horrifying silence surrounding these deaths by the public health institutions and by the authorities. In her research, con-

ducted for a local non-governmental organization Centar za ekologiju i energiju [Center for Ecology and Energy], Dr Nurka Pranjić, from the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health of the University of Tuzla School of Medicine, found that the mortality rate from cancer in Bukinje stood at 53% compared to other neighborhoods in Tuzla.⁴ The five coal slurry sites cover an area of 250 hectares (or 330 football fields), and are continuous sources of contamination of earth, water, and air. Coal combustion residuals in the slurry have been found to contain high levels of arsenic, cadmium, chrome, lead, and mercury.⁵ Waste waters near the slurry sites contaminate agricultural land used by the local population. In summertime, winds stir up and carry the contaminated coal slurry dust and scatter it further afield.

That Bukinje stands as a metonym for the poisoning of the country at large by industrial waste is evident in this fact: Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks as the second deadliest country in the world by the UN Environment Programme as indicated in the number of

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Huge metal domes
in HAK with aban-
doned toxic pro-
pylene dioxide.

PHOTO: SANJA HORIĆ/
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deaths per head of population caused by air pollution.⁶ Emissions of sulfur dioxide (SO₂) have been recorded as exceeding the permitted limits by 166 times: for example, in the city of Zenica in 2015⁷ whilst, according to the initiative “Unmask My City”, Tuzla Thermal Power Plant is one of the ten heaviest polluters in Europe. It is estimated that air pollution costs Bosnia and Herzegovina 21.5% of its GDP annually.⁸ In terms of lives lost due to pollution, starker figures are reported by the European Environment Agency. In its 2020 report on air quality in Europe, the EEA estimates that a staggering 60,500 years of life are lost each year in Bosnia and Herzegovina because of air pollution.⁹

Deindustrialized zones in Bosnia and Herzegovina house abandoned and unguarded toxic industrial waste that also kills daily. The feigned care by Bosnian authorities in allocating 1 million Euros for a clean-up, mentioned in the first paragraph of this article, comes after decades of disregard of and the imposition of silence about the deaths of impoverished metal pickers. Unaware of the true danger of the place, these desperate people would enter the unguarded HAK site to scavenge for scrap metal, and in the process, would then be exposed to residues of chlorine gas left over in corroding pipes. Even more concerning is that

the authorities made no mention of other types of toxic waste that remain unguarded after the factory was privatized: 120 corroding barrels of mercury, 47 tons of propylene dioxide, and unknown quantities of chlorine. The authorities, through such feigned care, try to erase their own complicity in how hazardous waste came to be illegally dumped there in the first place. This is an attempt to conceal their own responsibility for these unnecessary deaths because, for almost three decades, these toxins – in the earth, the air and the water – have been poisoning communities. Thus, this abandoned toxic waste has come to be regarded as a natural catastrophe, disconnected from its actual history and politics.

The case of HAK is not an isolated situation, but is more of a symptom that can be observed in the application of wider processes and policies applied throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina as it was deindustrialized following the end of the 1992–1995 war: first a factory would be devalued through lack of investment and neglect; then receivership would be declared, leaving workers stranded with years of unpaid salaries; a private investor would buy a factory at a ridiculously cheap price, making promises to restart production, a commitment which would speedily be reneged on. Ultimately, a factory would be stripped of all valuable assets –

including all the monitoring and safety systems for hazardous materials – workers would lose their jobs, until abandoned hazardous waste, openly apparent and deliberately concealed, was all that was left, unguarded and leaking their deadly poison into communities.

Historically, at the end of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, deindustrialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and indeed throughout Yugoslavia, was shaped by the increasingly authoritarian mode of social, cultural, and economic regulation, a comprehensive US-led regime, which George Steinmetz has termed “authoritarian post-Fordism.” This regime amalgamates two political approaches that characterized the post-Fordist mode of capital accumulation and regulation, which were formerly divided between the domestic mode (relatively democratic and open), and a foreign imperialist mode (authoritarian and closed).¹⁰ Through the authoritarian regime, organized labor was destroyed and a self-regulatory mode was introduced and fostered amongst the labor force, characterized by willing self-domination and the workers’ fight for violent domination over others. With organized labor in disarray, privatization and deregulation are ideologically represented as a quasi-objective, and necessary for growth, which further contributes to capital’s systemic imperatives to maximize returns on investment. For industry in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this meant an “open season” scenario for greedy capital, in which the name of the game was not to drive down the production costs, but rather to purchase factories cheaply and to extract value from them. The perceived “value” lay not only in stripping them of assets, but also in abandoning and hiding toxic waste – itself a perverted source of value – to be extracted through a range of activities: from structural projects, feasibility studies, working groups, foreign and domestic expert companies: all laying claim to public funds allocations to address environmental instability, each applicant claiming that it could be the one to deliver that remediation. However, it is ultimately the poisoned population that

continues to pay: whether it is families going into debt to afford treatments for the effects of toxic waste, or in the population’s acquiescing to the use of public funds – citizens’ money in the first place – to pay for the clearing up of toxic waste.

It was only in the aftermath of the large-scale, country-wide 2014 workers’ protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina that studies on deindustrialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged, examining critically the extent to which voucher-style privatization of companies had led to gross socio-economic injustice.¹¹ In the academic discourse, this attempted to shift the focus from identity politics, which was dominated by the fetishization of ethnicity, to a new problem – that of the widening class gap and rising levels of poverty in Bosnian society. Whilst this is an important and much-needed shift in discussion, it still engages insufficiently with the authoritarian dimension of capital accumulation during the war and in its immediate aftermath.

Crucial for the understanding of the authoritarian dimension of value extraction and capital accumulation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the need to go beyond analyzing toxic industrial waste as a mere unforeseen consequence of factory privatizations. The toxic waste and contaminated environment are active agents that continuously produce their effects and continue to have a certain value that can still be extracted: as such, they occupy a structural position in capital accumulation – in that they shape the production of subjectivities under the authoritarian regime of capital accumulation. It is from the vantage point of hidden industrial toxic waste that we must examine the transformation of both property – as socialist Yugoslav socially-owned property or *društvena svojina* – and also the transformation and destruction of organized labor – from the political subject, enshrined in the socialist constitution as the working people or *radni narod*, to disenfranchised “mere workers” in the deindustrializing privatization context. It is precisely in such a reframing, as proposed here, that illumination of a key process in the production of the perfect authoritarian post-Fordist subject

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Toxic waste that remain unguarded after the factory was privatized: 120 corroding barrels of mercury, 47 tons of propylene dioxide, and unknown quantities of chlorine.

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Deaths caused by environmental violence – slow or quick – continue in the aftermath of war.

in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be conceptualized as “wasting”.

Wasting offers us a perspective to focus on socio-political relations in which people and nature are created as waste from the outset. This is to understand that the current form of social domination in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was initiated by privatization is grounded in “wasting” as a form of social wealth that confronts and paralyzes living labor—the workers. Wasting depresses the value of the working bodies. Further, as Zsuzsa Gille argues, a waste regime is a form of social organization that precisely labels that which counts as waste and arranges its displacement.¹² The position of Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with other countries that are not EU members, but are surrounded by EU-member states, is one of a deliberately created political waste ground; these countries are zones of exception, in which toxic narratives of instability and hopelessness are circulating: a “political dump” surrounded by “political paradise”. In this sense, Marco Armiero rightly detects the *Wasteocene*, as a frame that both examines the inner workings of how social relations come to be wasted, and thus are productive of wealth and security for some, at the cost of othering and excluding certain populations. The *Wasteocene* also politicizes disposable bodies and environments that “sabotage” – in the eyes of its beneficiaries – the social domination implied in waste as a form of social wealth.¹³ As I have argued elsewhere, this is a form of *waste colonialism*, which refers to the deindustrializing practices of finance capital that greedily exploit factories, strip them of their assets, remove capital from communities where these factories are located, and then exit, leaving toxic substances, unemployment, and toxic narratives to circulate in these communities.¹⁴

Now, we can properly examine the quotation by Goran Stojak at the beginning of this subsection that shows how populations are produced as mere bodies, who are now sacrificed for marginal gain. Is this not the ultimate end point of what Wendy Brown calls “sacrificial citizenship”¹⁵ – as “citizen” in its oblatory

function in relation to the imperative of growth in the increasingly authoritarian practices of finance capital? Our working day becomes extended to a lifetime: as time that our bodies spend filtering and metabolizing the toxins from industrial waste: from when we are born, we know what will cause our deaths. This is a sacrificial abstract form of domination in which value is extracted from communities where all children have cancers; from metal-pickers who inhale chlorine and their lungs burn; from impoverished agricultural communities using contaminated water; from people who venture into unmarked areas with landmines who are killed by them. All of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a shrine in which a sacrificial ritual takes place daily: deaths caused by environmental violence – slow or quick – continue in the aftermath of war; populations unwittingly relinquish their lives; ethno-capitalist elites, as the current high priests, demanding ever more deaths, rulers of time and space who exert the power to proclaim if and when there will have been enough dying. We are in the domain of the mythic, in the domain of destiny. In this domain, there is no space for subjectivity.

HAK – the Site of Fear

HAK was built between 1972 and 1976 with British and Canadian investment. It used to be one of the largest socialist Yugoslav mining and chemical industrial complexes, employing around two thousand workers from communities in the region of North-Eastern Bosnia. In 1979, the Japanese company, Mitsui, invested in the building of the second phase – HAK 2 plant – that produced toluene diisocyanate (TDI), a material used in the making of flexible foam. As a result of the domestic and international exports of its products, HAK reached the apex of its production and financial fortunes. Now, it sits as an unexploded bomb – encasing the huge volumes of toxic waste that lie unsupervised in its over-ground spheres and its underground pipes, with yet more toxic waste buried in unmarked locations around the ground on which the former factory sits. It is a dystopic site.

HAK struggled to revive production in the

immediate aftermath of the 1992-1995 war. There was no political will to find investments that would achieve the revival of this industrial giant, which was one of the major local employers pre-war. This marked the start of “open season” on HAK for speculators. Between late 1999 and 2002, the HAK workers carried out a series of strikes. By 2001, the workers’ salaries were 5 years in arrears. An already difficult situation was exacerbated by electricity and water state-owned suppliers threatening to cut the supply of utilities to the plant. During wartime, HAK workers undertook to keep the plant running and to supply necessary products to the military, hospitals, power plants, and to the population in general, without remuneration. Now, only a few years after the war, these war-time contributions went unrecognized. By then, the company was in receivership.

During receivership, decisions were made to start dismantling the plant in order to pay down the company’s debts. This set the tone for the rest of Bosnian industry as to what path the receivership would take: the realization of assets rather than the revival of production. Enes Husarić, a HAK worker, remembers this as a moment when he almost burst into tears on hearing that the Electrolysis Plant was to be dismantled:

2004, in January, the Chief Receiver comes to see me as says ‘I have a proposal’, ‘What proposal’, I asked? He says: ‘We’ll take down the Electrolysis Plant’. I almost burst into tears.... I said, ‘I won’t be a part of it’. I got angry, went to the plant, and slumped down on the verge of tears. On January 7, 2004, a team arrived to dismantle the Electrolysis Plant, copper is the first to be picked. In the first picking, we stripped 22 tons and 640 kilos of copper. Pure copper. Then 20 or so tons of titanium, some 50 or so tons of aluminum. And the third picking, in April, some 16 additional tons of copper. Only iron remained. And the command hall was destroyed.¹⁶

In 2006, the Polish company Organika bought one part of HAK (renamed “Polihem” in the privatization process) and already, by 2007, it had started laying off workers. Workers remember how Organika threatened any worker attempting to form unions with instant dismissal. The corporate subterfuge that Organika carried out involved renegeing on the promise to double production, firing the workers, and starting to dismantle the production plant and selling it as scrap metal. As the HAK trade union leader, Miralem Ibrišimović, recounts:

Organika disbanded the rescue teams, halved the number of firefighters, halved the number of workers in production plants, stopped the acquisition of protection equipment and gear for workers, and above all stopped mercury waste treatment, so that mercury was directly spilled into the Jala river.¹⁷

Organika completely neglected hazardous waste, primarily mercury, which was abandoned on site after the electrolysis plant was dismantled. There are allegations that some quantity of mercury was sold to Canadian companies, whilst the slurry containing unknown residual quantities of mercury was ordered by the management to be packed into plastic barrels and was just left lying in the shell of the factory. After the electricity supply to the plant was cut off, disabling the monitoring gauges for hazardous chemicals held at the plant, it was impossible to estimate the remaining quantities of chlorine in tanks. These abandoned unknown quantities of chlorine probably pose the most hazardous threat to the population and to the environment. However, this problem is completely shut down in public discourse.

GIKIL – the Culture of Impunity

GIKIL (*Global Ispat koksna industrija Lukevac*) is the leading producer of metallurgical coking coal in the region of South-East Europe. Through various ownership schemes, the GIKIL plant has been co-owned by the Mittal family since 2003. GIKIL has neglected

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GIKIL 5, producer of metallurgical coking coal, is operating since 2018 without environmental permit.

PHOTO: SANJA HORIĆ/FRONT SLOBODEL



environmental protection to such an extent that outcomes and impacts of major accidents are now becoming unavoidably seen and felt: i.e. worker injuries, mass fish die-offs in the Spreča River, and threats to the life of the surrounding population. The company lost its environmental permit due to ammonia and tar spills in 2018, when, due to public pressure, criminal charges for breaking environmental protection laws were filed. At this point, in order to avoid personal responsibility, the CEO and the owner of GIKIL, together with their associates, fled Bosnia and Herzegovina. The company, meanwhile, ignored the order to stop production and continues, to this day, to operate without an environmental permit.

GIKIL was created as a merger between the local chemical company Lukavac (KHK) and Global Infrastructure Holdings Limited. Subsequent changes to the privatization contract list Global Steel Holdings Ltd (GSHL) from India as the co-owner. The court register breaks down the ownership of GIKIL thus: 67% owned by the Tuzla Canton Government and the remaining 33% owned by GSHL. However, this apportioning of ownership is

not reflected in day-to-day production and practice. For over ten years, the India-based and owned GSHL has been fully managing and making the decisions about GIKIL's operations that have been detrimental both for the workers of GIKIL and for the environment. The journalist Amarildo Gutic succinctly outlines the illegality underpinning GSHL's dealings within GIKIL:

GSHL never fulfilled the contractual obligation to invest 43 million euros in the coking coal producing plant. Additionally, it drove the plant into debt. It mortgaged GIKIL to obtain loans worth several million euros which it then showed as investments. GSHL also bought raw materials from its foreign affiliate companies and represented this as an investment into GIKIL. As a result, GIKIL's debt has ballooned to 160 million dollars. Millions of euros were extracted out of GIKIL and were billed as 'consultancy fees', which consultancy services were then provided by affiliate companies from India.¹⁸

Artificially created financial losses provided GIKIL with the financial rationale to scrap health and safety measures for workers, to stop payments of salaries to workers, and to commence laying off the skilled workforce, all of which led to environmental accidents. Zijad Šehabović, the former lead engineer in GIKIL says:

People who buy factories eschew environmental protection obligations because this is an additional cost. But this cannot be allowed to be neglected. If the focus is on the extraction of profit alone, then you have a great number of people whose health is affected because of pollution, which costs far more than the profit extracted. The problem has been constant layoffs of the workforce. We've seen a decrease in the workforce and no modernization or automatization of production that would make up for the contraction in the size and skill-base of that workforce. This leads to many things happening without proper supervision. This, in turn, leads to conditions for environmental catastrophes to happen. If you lay off the skilled workforce and don't replace them, then such catastrophes are bound to happen.¹⁹

At the beginning of August 2018, a major environmental accident occurred. A reservoir with ammonia containing tar exploded. The chemicals were released into the River Spreča, whilst also being released into the atmosphere. The Spreča River flows through 12 municipalities and impacts on the lives of around half a million people, many of whom rely on the river for agriculture. Tomislav Ljubić, the main prosecutor of the Tuzla Canton Prosecutorial Office, commented on the scope of this accident in stark terms: “[...] the cost of preserving 1,000 jobs in GIKIL may be the poisoning of half a million people in Tuzla Canton”.²⁰

A couple of days later, on 9 August 2018, Mr. Ljubić further assessed the level of environmental catastrophe:

To put it clearly, one person with whom we have been in touch commented thus: ‘To hell with the fish and the ducks. This is so dangerous for the health, lives, and bodies of the people’. Our prosecutors went to the factory by order of the court. And what they found there was horrifying. It is a different planet there. Workers walk around carrying glasses of milk and have no protection whatsoever. Our prosecutors came back from the factory having lost their voices because of their exposure to the fumes being released in the factory.²¹

Environmental activists of the non-governmental organization Eko Forum Lukavac regularly pointed to how each Tuzla Canton government favored GIKIL and disregarded the reports of pollution provided to them by environmental activists. In our conversation, Mr. Bajazit Okić from Eko Forum Lukavac depicted their activist struggle against pollution produced by GIKIL in this testimony:

In 2 years alone, there were 15 official reports by the inspectorate and each of these recorded and established the existence of excess pollution. Whenever we reported environmental accidents in GIKIL, GIKIL management always negated this and claimed that no accident had happened. This is the way in which they have been deceiving the public. Our authorities kept shifting responsibility amongst themselves every time we threatened to file lawsuits. And then we decided to file lawsuits...our legislation is so weak that it permits company owners to extract profit at the expense of the health of the people.²²

He added, with regret, that if citizens' protests and reports of pollution had been taken seriously, the major catastrophe of August 2018 could have been avoided.

According to him, particularly insidious have

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been the corrupt practices of the municipal and cantonal authorities and the lies that GIKIL management has spread within the community, i.e. that the aim of Eko Forum Lukavac was to close down GIKIL. This is how predatory capital combines the threat of toxicity together with the threat of poverty in order to force the affected communities to become docile subjects that will sacrifice their health for the profit of big companies.

Conclusion

Discussion around environmental violence and rights suffers from a paralyzing dichotomy: rights of the disenfranchised groups vs. violence of actors causing environmental instability. The question is: how to move beyond the liberal rights-based approach and demands-based politics, in which the state is perceived as the agent that grants rights, putting those who are disenfranchised in a subservient position to demand? In this article, I suggest that the core concept for the understanding of deindustrialization of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the production of new subjectivities in this process is the practice of wasting. Wasting not only produces people as waste but also diminishes, devalues, and ultimately destroys social relations by producing and circulating toxic narratives of hopelessness and despair. How can communities overcome such paralysis caused by terror and reverse a destructive extraction of value from them in a protracted dying? In other words, in the face of such destruction, how can communities imagine any form of a hopeful future in which they can play a part and in, doing so, thrive? What is the form of recuperative and restorative politics?

It begins by naming as toxic the symbolic violence that produces the terror which paralyzes, by confronting it head on, and by putting an end to it. This was done in the 2014 workers' protests, whose slogan was "we are in protest for production". Such a powerful slogan reverberated across the communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enabled connections, which are still ongoing, between workers, students, war veterans, artists, and activists. The workers' action goes beyond a mere strike

insofar as it redraws the contours of political action. Production here is not a vague glorification of just more work; it is a production of a different possibility, a human action for the sake of the "living labor", not for a "mere worker". Therefore, it is on the side of productive life that nurtures and enlarges the capacities and conditions for life to thrive, not merely survive in a protracted death. This is a move from being a victim to being a political subject. Choosing life means ending the social domination whose foundation is wasting as social wealth. ●

Note: The photos are taken from the film HAK – mjesto straha [HAK – Place of Fear] directed by Azra Jašarević, Damir Arsenijević and Sanja Hori (Production: Association Freedom Front Tuzla, December 2020). Available at: https://youtu.be/u3sC_teDyFs

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