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Georgia: Greens and Gold Don't Mix

Behind the Headlines – 6

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CRS Issue 736, 28 May 14



English

Protesters are trying to stop work on a gold mining project that threatens to destroy a prehistoric site.

They have camped out for more than a month in Kazreti, a village in the Bolnisi district of southeastern Georgia, the location of the Sakdrisi gold mine – said to be the world's oldest – which contains many prehistoric artifacts and has never been fully explored.

The site used to be covered by a heritage protection order, but the government lifted that last year, clearing the way for Russian-owned RMG firm, which has rights in the wider area, to start excavations and gold extraction. Officially, there is no link between the archaeological ruling and the lucrative revenue prospects.

More recently, the government ordered work at Sakdrisi to halt until an international team carried out an investigation into the site's archaeological merits.

Since no baseline assessment has been conducted, the campaign group Green Alternative points to environmental concerns about the impact of such a commercial mining project. A 2012 survey found that vegetables from fields irrigated by the Mashavera river, which runs past the mine area, had so many heavy metal traces that they would not be allowed for sale in the European Union.

The future of the site is thrown into further uncertainty by the fact that RMG's operating license expires next year, when another company will take over – but with no rights to the Sakdrisi site, as that was still protected when the contract was awarded.

Heather Yundt produced this edition of Behind the Headlines, a radio programme made by IWPR Georgia.

*The programme is part of IWPR's **Building Bridges/Building Capacity in the South Caucasus** programme, funded by the Norwegian foreign ministry. The contents of the programme do not reflect the views of the funder.*

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