

Oldest Romanian mine closes after 156 years

November 1 2015



A miner is seen at the end of his last shift at the coal mine in the Romanian city of Petrila, on October 30, 2015

The lift rose slowly, bringing workers to the surface for the last time at Romania's Petrila mine, ending production at what was once a proud symbol of the country's coal industry.

Petrila, the oldest mine in Romania and until now the deepest in Europe, with shafts going down as far as 940 metres (3,100 feet), opened in 1859 when the country was still part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

It hit peak production in 1983 when workers extracted 1.2 million tonnes of coal—falling to just 110,000 tonnes last year.

Since a programme was launched in 1997 aimed at making the industry more profitable, Romania's southwestern Jiu valley, home to most of the mines, has been a shadow of its former self.

Before the fall of communism, the country had 55,000 miners—now there are as few as 6,000.

For those whose lives were indelibly stained with Petrila's black dust, the end of the final shift on Friday was a sombre moment.

"For our rulers this might be a celebration but for us it's a burial," said Ionel Tinca, a pit worker for 40 years who started work at Petrila when he was 17.

A colleague who asked to remain nameless lamented the closure.

"A year from now this place will be completely levelled and grassed over, to return it to how it was in 1859. It's very sad," he said.

Romania, an EU member since 2007, committed itself four years ago to ending state subsidies for coal production and turning instead to greener energy sources.



A miner next to mining carriages as he waits for the last shift at the coal mine in the Romanian city of Petrila, on October 30, 2015

In Petrila's heyday, its buildings and walkways seethed with miners. Over the last few weeks just a few dozen workers have lined up to take their lamps and make the descent to the deep coalfaces, where temperatures can reach up to 60 degrees Celsius (140 Fahrenheit).

Next year the pit's equipment, including a giant Siemens motor that has been running since 1945, will be sold for scrap metal and most of the buildings demolished.

The closure will have a major impact on the village of Petrila, manager Ion Simion told AFP.

"It's a huge loss on the economic and social level," he said.

There has been talk of new projects to encourage tourism and create jobs for the area. But for now "these are just promises," Simion said.

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