

# Resisting Green Extractivism: The Case of Lithium Mining in Serbia



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# Abstract

This thesis examines the forms of resistance which have emerged in response to planned lithium mining projects in Serbia. Lithium is a metallic element crucial for electric vehicles and other low carbon technologies, and it is widely understood as necessary for the so-called ‘green’ transition. The Jadar Project, led by the multinational mining corporation Rio Tinto, was set to become one of the first and largest lithium mines in Europe. Plans for lithium extraction have emerged across rural parts of Serbia, triggering widespread protests in 2021. Led by the local communities of mostly farmers and agricultural workers, the mass protests attracted tens of thousands of people and ultimately resulted in the cancellation of the Jadar Project in January 2022 by the government, a decision which was however nullified two and a half years later. The future of the project remains uncertain, while the resistance is ongoing.

I argue in this thesis that the anti-lithium mining movement in Serbia presents a major challenge to green extractivism as the driving logic behind the dominant climate policies which are based on technofixes, resource extraction and infinite economic growth. Based on ethnographic engagement with the local communities and their allies who are resisting lithium mining in Serbia – where no lithium mine has been constructed – I highlight the need to pay attention to the cases where extraction is only anticipated and yet resisted on a mass scale. Conceptually, this thesis contributes to the theoretical conversations about the expansion of the concept of extractivism not only as physical extraction but also as logic with material impacts even before any extraction can take place. Guided by critical, decolonial and feminist methodologies which place commitment to the research participants at their centre, this thesis also contributes to scholarship on ethnography’s relation to extractivism.

The large-scale resistance to lithium mining in Serbia presents a case of at least partially or temporarily successful mobilisation against green extractivism. I explore this across three empirical articles which form the core of this thesis. First, I focus on the local relationship with

the land and the attachments that emerge in the wake of the anticipation of lithium mining, arguing that they offer an opportunity for weaving international networks of solidarity. Second, I offer the concept of *violent politics* to argue that multiple forms of violence and toxicity emerge in the uncertainty surrounding the Jadar Project and in the context of systemic forms of oppression. Finally, I suggest that the mass refusal of the green transition based on extractivism signals pathways towards post-*green* extractivism and a challenge to what I refer to as a *mono-green future*. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the scholarship on extractivism, environmental justice, resistance studies and political ecology more broadly. As green extractivism rapidly expands across the Global North and the Global South, fuelled by the climate state of emergency and increasing militarisation, I advance the appreciation for resistance in its multiple forms, offering an opening for the futures as always equally multiple.

**Key words:** green extractivism, resistance, lithium, violence, futures, Serbia

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# List of Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIA	Bezbednosno-informativna agencija ( <i>Serbian Security Intelligence Agency</i> )
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CRMs	critical raw materials
CRMA	Critical Raw Materials Act
CSOs	civil society organisations
CUREC	Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee
EIA	environmental impact assessment
EU	European Union
EVs	electric vehicles
IEA	International Energy Agency
IFDT	Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju ( <i>Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory</i> )
LDV	light-duty vehicles
LIB	lithium-ion battery
LMN	London Mining Network
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
Mt	Megaton (equivalent to 1 million metric tons, or 1 billion kilograms)
NDJ	Ne Damo Jadar ( <i>We don't give Jadar</i> )
NGOs	non-governmental organisations

NIMBY	not in my backyard
NZE	Net Zero Emissions by 2050 Scenario
oSGH	occupied Syrian Golan Heights
oWS	occupied Western Sahara
REE	rare earth elements
RERI	Regulatorni institut za obnovljivu energiju i životnu sredinu ( <i>Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute</i> )
RTS	Radio-televizija Srbije ( <i>Radio Television of Serbia</i> )
SEOS	Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije ( <i>Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia</i> )
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka ( <i>Serbian Progressive Party</i> )
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WWI	World War 1
WW2	World War 2

# Transliteration

Serbian words and names appear throughout the text. Below are some specific letters of the Serbian alphabet and how are they pronounced.

- c is pronounced like the English *ts* in the word *tsunami*
- č is pronounced like the English *ch* in the word *chocolate*, but harder
- ć is pronounced like the English *ch* in the word *chocolate*, but softer; or like the word *tune* in British English
- š is pronounced like the English *sh* in the word *shoe*
- ž is pronounced like the French *je* or the English *s* in the word *measure*
- j is pronounced like the English *y* in the word *yes*
- dj (đ) is pronounced like the English *j* in the word *joy*, but softer
- dž is pronounced like the English *j* in the word *joy*, but harder
- nj is pronounced like the French *gn* in the word *champagne*
- lj is pronounced like the English *li* in the word *million*

# 1 | Introduction

The sun was shining through the dark clouds. It just stopped raining. The drops of water on the dark grass reflected the sunlight.

“We have to mow the grass,” Nebojša told Zlatko, as if to apologise that I had to cross the wet field to get to their ‘headquarters.’

But I liked the long grass. It looked like we were surrounded by a green sea. The headquarters smelled of freshly cut wood. Nebojša Petković, Zlatko Kokanović and their friends, neighbours and allies built it themselves on a part of Zlatko’s land which he wasn’t using for agriculture activities. It’s a simple wooden structure, with one half fully indoors and the other half covered by a tile roof but no walls, overlooking the hilly fields around. The building has been serving as a meeting point for the local community, for hosting guests or organising events. Zlatko and Nebojša highlighted the practical importance of the headquarters, but they also stressed its symbolic value. On the other side of the street, right above the headquarters, are abandoned houses that the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto bought from some residents of the Jadar Valley as it was moving forward with its plan to construct an underground lithium mine. The symbolic significance lies in the fact that while the company is destroying the houses, they are building something from scratch, Nebojša and Zlatko explained. The family homes of Zlatko and Nebojša are located merely a few hundred metres away from the headquarters in the village of Gornje Nedeljice in the Jadar Valley, in the western part of Serbia, where the residents found themselves in the heart of one of the most significant environmental justice conflicts in Europe. They are determined to resist the opening of the lithium mine.



*Figure 1: The 'headquarters' built by the local residents of the Jadar Valley and their allies who are resisting lithium mining in the region, May 2023. Picture my own, April 2023.*

I visited the Jadar Valley many times. In May 2023, the local community invited a few friends and allies against lithium mining from across Serbia to celebrate May Day. We gathered together in the “headquarters,” with the Serbian folk tradition requiring us to stay up all night. The sky turned dark pink and orange as the sun set, and once it got dark, Zlatko picked up an accordion and sang folk songs in his deep voice. A huge fire kept us warm, and I spent a long time watching the sparkles shoot up towards the sky where they disappeared over the background of stars that were so clearly visible. Still, I couldn’t stay up all night, and I slept in Vladan’s home in the neighbouring village. The next morning, I got woken up by a rooster. Vladan is a beekeeper from the wider Jadar Valley who is also resisting lithium mining in Serbia. He and his family were

already up, sitting in the garden. I joined them, soaking up the gentle morning sun, sipping coffee and letting their homemade honey melt in my mouth.

“All of this is our living room,” Vladan said about their huge garden and the nearby bee yard. “I am a free man; the bees and nature gave me the freedom to think and to say what I want. I don’t depend on anyone for employment. That’s why I fight against the mine,” he explained.

Vladan and his family moved to one of the villages in the Jadar Valley, leaving behind their life in a city and deciding to work as beekeepers instead. Most of the residents of the villages in the Jadar Valley are farmers or agricultural workers, relying on the soil for their livelihoods.

Rio Tinto’s lithium mining complex would run through the fields and villages of the Jadar Valley, which led to part of the local community organising itself against the project. Their resistance has become a key contestation of the green transition as it is dominantly envisioned, dependent on the continuous extractivism of lithium and other so-called critical raw materials (CRMs). It also points to fundamental tensions between dominant climate policies and environmental protection.

“There is no such thing as green mining. What is green are fields and leaves because of chlorophyll, that is green. What they want to do here can never be green,” Marijana, another resident of the Jadar Valley, told me during our interview from February 2022.

Marijana’s quote captures a pivotal aspect of this thesis which emerges from long-term ethnographic engagement with the local communities and their allies resisting lithium mining in Serbia. I argue that the anti-lithium movement presents a major challenge to the logics of green extractivism and hence to the dominant visions of the so-called ‘green transition.’

The Jadar Project, led by Rio Tinto, one of the largest mining corporations in the world, was set to become the biggest lithium mine in Europe (Boffey, 2021; Reuters, 2024). It would produce 2.3 million tons of lithium carbonate over 40 years of expected mine life, making it one of the largest lithium greenfield mines in the world (Rio Tinto, 2025b). The construction of the mine

was due to commence in 2022 and the production of lithium in 2026 (Rio Tinto, 2021). Yet the project attracted widespread resistance from the local community who have supported by their allies ranging from environmental activists, civil society, university professors and scientists, artists, student and climate movements, as well as journalists and oppositional politicians, and many others. Resistance against the Jadar Project evolved into a broad coalition of actors, with the protests having attracted tens of thousands of people over the years. With the protests escalating into mass blockades between November 2021 and January 2022, the government was ultimately forced to revoke the mining licences on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2022 (Sekularac, 2022). Resistance has continued despite the cancellation, with the local communities and their allies mistrustful of the government's genuine intention to renounce the project. Indeed, less than two and a half years after the cancellation, in July 2024, the government reinstated the licences (Reuters, 2024) and swiftly signed a Memorandum of Understanding on value chains for raw materials, batteries and electric vehicles (EVs) with the EU (European Commission, 2024b). The Jadar Project has continuously evolved throughout my research and the writing of the thesis, with the latest development suggesting that the project was halted by Rio Tinto in November 2025 as the company placed it under the "care and maintenance" regime (Hunt, 2025).

Resistance against lithium mining in Serbia has remained ongoing, spreading to different locations across the country which are also impacted by lithium explorations, and forming connections with other communities in the region and beyond which have also been affected by the new wave of green extractivism. The protests in Serbia foreground the role of lithium at the centre of the shifting geopolitics of the energy transition, alongside other critical raw materials (CRMs) that include cobalt, nickel, graphite, rare earth elements (REEs) and many others. These metals and minerals are essential for low-carbon technologies such as photovoltaics, wind turbines, or EVs, and the demand for them is expected to sharply accelerate, changing existing geopolitical relations and material dependencies (Djukanović, 2025). The demand for lithium is poised to increase most dramatically, over 8 times by 2040 under the Net-Zero Emissions (NZE) scenario, the most ambitious climate action scenario analysed by the International Energy Agency

(2024b). The growth in consumption of lithium is largely driven by EVs that are expected to account for over 80% of lithium demand by 2050 (IEA, 2024a). These predictions are notably imperfect. The rapid expansion of Artificial Intelligent (AI), data centres and militarisation will likely lead to a massive increase in energy use and CRMs, the demand of which will be even more difficult to reliably predict.

The changing significance of lithium can therefore be situated in the wider context of how the climate crisis shifts geopolitical relations, as the Global North in general, and the United States (US) and the EU in particular, move to secure access to CRMs. This is particularly the case since the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine further revealed these dependencies (Vandermeeren, 2024). CRMs are highly geographically concentrated, more so than fossil fuels, and vulnerable to geopolitical and security risks (IEA, 2021), while the supply chain of low-carbon technologies is largely dominated by China (IEA, 2023b). It is in this context that the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) establishes the policy framework to ensure the bloc's access to CRMs by increasing domestic mining and processing as well as forming strategic partnerships with third countries (European Commission, 2024a), such as with Serbia in 2024. The dominant climate policies and proposals are heavily dependent on extractivism, paradigms of continuous economic growth, and technological innovation (Zografos, 2022; Zografos & Robbins, 2020). Long histories of colonialism and extractivism mark a divide between the Global South where mining takes place, and the Global North where the materials are enjoyed. Yet the sense of climate emergency and the renewed geopolitical competition for the control of the supply chains reveal these relations as dynamic, expanding towards onshoring and nearshoring of mining projects (Riofrancos, 2023).

This thesis is thus concerned with resistance which emerged in response to planned lithium mining in Serbia.

The thesis is an empirically grounded investigation of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia in the context of how the logic of extractivism is expanding under the climate emergency. In close

dialogue with the fields of political ecology, environmental justice, resistance and extractivism studies, the thesis particularly builds on and interrogates the concept of green extractivism. Green extractivism represents a “new phase in the complex relationship between mining and the environment, whereby extraction and valorisation of mineral resources is rendered not only compatible with ‘sustainable development’, but *necessary* to it and the possibility of a ‘low-carbon’ future” (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022, p. 16, italics in the original). I argue that what is distinct about green extractivism is the moral imperative strengthened by the climate emergency which casts projects from solar panels to data centres to lithium mines as urgently needed to save the planet. Such discursive and imaginative power forecloses alternative visions, making any resistance ever more difficult – while no less frequent. It is in that context that I argue that the anti-lithium movement in Serbia fundamentally challenges the logic of green extractivism as multiple forms of resistance arise before any physical extraction of lithium has taken place. This research thus attends to the temporalities and geographies of resistance which have attracted tens of thousands of people over the course of several years. I describe how the shifting geopolitical dynamics between the Global North and the Global South, or the core and the periphery, are deeply embedded in the local histories and memories in the Balkans and in the relationship with the land (Article 1). The uncertainty of the project and the anticipation of pollution present a particular form of violence and toxicity that the local community is subjected to under what I theorise as *violent politics* (Article 2). The collective refusal of lithium mining then not only exposes the issues of the green transition based on extractivism but also challenges what I refer to as *a mono-green future* while signalling pathways towards post-*green* extractivism (Article 3).

Methodologically, the thesis is an ethnographic investigation into forms of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia. My ethnographic engagement is operating at the intersection of research and activism which is ongoing, extending beyond the temporality of thesis writing. The “field” work took place for a total of at least 18 months between 2022 and 2024, with the boundary between “field” and “home,” or research and activism, often indistinct. The research is centred around close engagement with the local communities and their allies resisting lithium mining. While the

Rio Tinto's proposed lithium mine in the Jadar Valley is the biggest and the most advanced project, other locations across Serbia have seen – and resisted – lithium explorations led by various companies. Many of these sites are united under SEOS (Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia, *Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije*), an umbrella organisation which brings together six different associations of local communities from across Serbia, including the Jadar Valley. In addition to the local communities, their allies have included non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), scientists and academics, student and climate groups, artists, journalists, oppositional politicians, and many others. Ethnographic engagement is supplemented by 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews, with direct quotes of my research participants included throughout the thesis.

As the commitment to my research participants extends beyond research and towards orientations of solidarity, relationality and reciprocity, I subscribe to the critical, feminist and decolonial ethnographic traditions (see for instance Chari & Donner, 2010; Checker, 2014; Gani & Khan, 2024; Onís & Pezzullo, 2017). My methodological approach is premised upon the understanding of ethnography as a “sensitivity” (McGranahan, 2018, p. 7), “rather than a toolkit method” (Gutierrez et al., 2021, p. 67) where ethnography becomes a mode of relating, centring ethics of care. At the same time, my personal position reflects post-Yugoslav legacies which influence research and field work (see Hromadžić, 2023; Stavrevska et al., 2023). As a diasporic Serbian, I am a native speaker, I hold a Serbian passport, I have extended family and many friends in Serbia, but I was born and raised elsewhere. My position is thus reflective of the fluidity of the boundary between an insider and outsider, and scholar and activist (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), while the relationships developed during the ‘field’ work move beyond “research participation.” Out of this ethnographic engagement stems a lifelong commitment to the anti-extractivist struggles in the Balkans, rooted in my personal heritage as well as in the solidarities that have emerged over the past few years.

The mass protests which erupted against lithium mining in November and December 2021 marked some of the largest protests since the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milošević in 2001, with solidarity protests taking place in front of the Serbian embassies across the world as well as in the Rio Tinto headquarters in London. The scale of the protests that have attracted tens of thousands of people despite the international pressure to open the mine, particularly from the EU and the US (European Commission, 2024b; U. S. Embassy in Serbia, 2024), speaks to the significance of the resistance. This research seeks to attend to the forms of contestations of green extractivism which emerge in the wake of the plans to mine lithium in Serbia. Focusing on the case of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia provides an opportunity to expand the understanding of extractivism and its impacts, the violence and toxicities, and the temporalities of anticipation and futures. Crucially, my argument is that the resistance also signals a struggle for the opening of the multiplicity of visions of the green transition. It disrupts the dominant imaginations of what I refer to as a mono-green future, the hegemonic and monolithic vision of the green transition based on extractivism, technofixes and economic growth. A mono-green future invisibilises the forms of harm that the new mining rush for critical raw materials holds while seeking to foreclose alternative visions of the future. As Massey puts it, “only if the future is open is there any ground for a politics which can make a difference” (2005, p. 11). In what follows, I detail the aims and questions of this research which point to some of these openings which emerge through resistance to lithium mining in Serbia.

## 1.2 Research aims and questions

This research project emerged during my MPhil (two-year master’s course) in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance at the University of Oxford between 2020 and 2022 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. My interest evolved towards the different environmental justice conflicts in the Balkans, the region where I am originally from, and their interconnectedness. The struggles

ranged from protests against the air pollution largely caused by coal power plants to the rapid development of small hydropower plants that have been enclosing rivers across the Balkans, along with, at the time, more marginal protests against lithium mining. In my CUREC form (submitted to the Oxford ethics committee for an approval of fieldwork) from October 2021 I wrote: “The key area of interest is the tension between the ‘dirty’ energy sources such as the coal power plants which have been directly linked to the increased mortality rate in Serbia [...], and energy sources that are portrayed as ‘clean’ or ‘sustainable’, including the hydropower plants or lithium and borates mining.” Yet in just a few weeks since I submitted the CUREC form, the mass protests against lithium mining erupted across the country. I became captivated by the sheer scale of the protests, seeing how the tens of thousands of people blocking roads, bridges and highways were pointing to more fundamental contestations of the green transition than the usual narratives around “not in my back yard” (NIMBY) could explain. Over the following months, I refined the aims and the research questions that I wished to pursue.

The central aim of this thesis is to *investigate the multitemporal geographies of extractivism and of resistance that emerge in the context of planned lithium mining projects in Serbia*. This aim is pursued through three research questions that are addressed by the empirical articles:

- What forms of attachment reverberate in the context of the shifting geopolitical relations of green extractivism between the Global North and the Global South? How do struggles against lithium mining in Serbia unsettle histories, memories, and the relationship with the land? (Article 1)
- How are the uncertainties and anticipation around lithium mining implicated in multi-temporal forms of violence and toxicity? How are these related to other forms of violence? (Article 2)
- How does the refusal of lithium mining challenge a mono-green future of green extractivism? What openings, visions and imaginaries of futures emerge out of this refusal? (Article 3)

Overall, the thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on extractivism through long-term ethnographic engagement. Building on the notion of green extractivism, this thesis raises the question of *what kinds of imaginations are being powered by lithium and other critical raw materials?* Extractivism then emerges not as a process of material extraction but as a logic that stretches from mining explorations to imaginations of the future. Yet this contribution is not only concerned with the conceptual expansion of the logics of green extractivism. I focus on expanding the understanding of the breadth of resistance movements against extractivist projects, particularly by paying attention to the temporalities and imaginaries that unfold in the wake of the struggle. Central to this aim are affective, embodied and sensorial experiences of resisting extractivist projects, including those which do not go ahead as planned. Paying attention to resistance before a mega-project is developed points to the ways in which extractivism is already producing uncertainty, violence and foreclosing alternative futures and imaginaries – yet this process is still being resisted. These aims are underpinned by methodological conversations on ethnography, asking *how we can research extractivism without reproducing the extractivist logic of academia.* In the following section, I describe how the thesis is structured in order to address these research aims and questions.

### 1.3 The structure of the thesis

This thesis follows an unconventional path, involving the 2+2 route where the DPhil is preceded by two years of MPhil. It is an article-based thesis, comprised of three academic articles which have been submitted to peer reviewed journals by the date of submission of the DPhil. While the article-based thesis offers the advantage of publishing my research during the DPhil, it also has some limitations. Because the articles need to function as standalone pieces, written to be read independently of the other parts of the thesis, some repetition of the key literature and methodological points across the articles is inevitable. Moreover, it is more difficult for one article to refer to another, as may be the case in a more traditionally structured thesis. The work of

drawing these connections is undertaken in the framing document which is comprised of the introduction, background and context, literature review and methodology which precede the three articles, and the conclusion which follows them. I also use footnotes across the thesis to signpost the reader and to highlight some of the links across the thesis.

The structure of the thesis is the following. In Chapter 2: Background and Context, I describe the particularities of the Jadar Project, tracing its evolution from the discovery of the mineral *jadarite* to the cancellation of the project and later the nullification of the cancellation. I outline the geopolitical context of the rapidly rising demand for lithium and the monolithisation of the green transition as based on continuous extractivism, economic growth and technological innovation rather than on systemic change. Against this backdrop of the increasingly solidifying imperative to mine lithium, I offer a description of the evolution of resistance in Serbia. At the end of the chapter, I provide a timeline of crucial events surrounding resistance to lithium mining in Serbia to assist the reader in navigating the context.

Chapter 3: Geographies of Resistance to Green Extractivism offers an overview of the key literature this thesis contributes to. To avoid unnecessary duplication, not all literature on which the individual articles are based is reviewed in this chapter, but it serves as an overview of the main concepts and theoretical discussions. I begin by tracing the origins of the concept of extractivism as intertwined with the colonialist and capitalist logics of progress and development, with the concept emerging from Latin America to account for these historical and material injustices. I then focus on the more recent debates around the expansion of the concept as it moves towards increasingly diverse geographies and examples of extractivism that move beyond physical extraction, also encompassing extractivism as a logic or ontology. Green extractivism then denotes not only those activities which become recast under the emergency of climate change as saving the planet rather than destroying it, but also the logic behind them. I also focus on the geographies of extractivism between the Global North and the Global South, cores and peripheries, addressing the related concepts of (green) colonialism and the (green) sacrifice zone,

and the specificities of Serbia and the Balkans more broadly. Finally, I describe the key literature on resistance to extractivism, especially in relation to violence and the temporalities of anticipation and futures, such as in the cases I research where no physical extraction has taken place.

In Chapter 4: Ethnography of Extractivism and Resistance in Serbia, I describe the methods, methodologies and ethics employed in this thesis, particularly drawing on critical, decolonial and feminist traditions in geography. I build the methodological framework around my ethnographic involvement bordering research and activism, and I engage with the long history of militant, activist and critical ethnography. Crucially, I address the critiques of ethnography as an *extractive* method and reflect on the connections between focusing on extractivism while engaging in academic research as a form of knowledge extraction. I then describe my positionality between an insider and outsider researcher in Serbia based on my diasporic identity, and I theorise *diasporic ethnography* as accounting for the shared estrangement but also intimacy that informs my methodological practice.

The methodological chapter is followed by an intermezzo, The Positionality of Border Crossing, in which I expand on my positionality and describe a profoundly personal memory of border crossing between Serbia and the rest of Europe, or crossing from within the EU to the outside of the EU. While the vignette zooms in on a particular event which took place before the start of my research, I use it in this thesis to bring closer my experience of conducting field work, reflecting on my position and privilege between an insider and an outsider, and weaving it together with some of the arguments of the thesis. I intend for the intermezzo to serve as a bridge between the framing document and the three articles which follow.

In addition to the Intermezzo, I include three poems written by two of my research participants, Ljiljana Bralović and Jevdjenije Julijan Dimitrijević in between the empirical articles to create space for their own expression as well as to allude to some of connections across the articles in a more imaginative way.

Article 1, *Between Peripheries and Solidarities: Resisting Green Extractivism in Serbia*, is the first substantive article of the thesis, published as part of the special issue titled *Semiperipheral Natures: Environmental Reverberations in the Balkans* in the journal *East European Politics & Societies and Cultures*. The article is concerned with the multiple forms of attachments that emerge in the wake of lithium mining projects in Serbia and the expansion of green extractivism across the Balkans more broadly. Based on close ethnographic engagement with the affected local communities and their allies, I describe the local relationships with the soil, land, history, and memory, and their reverberation and remobilisation. What emerges is a particular sense of peripheralisation and Balkanisation, of being designated a colony or a sacrifice zone, a forgotten corner of Europe where lithium mining is to take place. Crucially, however, as this article shows, what also becomes possible is the formation of solidarities across the Global North and the Global South based on common struggles and shared experiences of attachment to the land.

Article 2, *'We Live the Violence, We Resist the Violence: Violent and Toxic Politics of Lithium Mining Efforts in Serbia*, is the second analytical article published as part of the special issue titled *Reconceptualising Toxicity and Environmental Justice* in the journal *BioSocieties*. This article focuses on how multiple forms of violence and toxicity manifest in regard to lithium mining projects in Serbia, despite no lithium mines having been constructed. The article examines how the uncertainty around the future of the project brings the experience of violence in the present, problematising the binary between material and immaterial toxicity. This is explored through an unexpected connection that emerges between lithium explorations and two mass shootings on the 3rd and 4th of May 2023, the former being the first school shooting in the history of Serbia and the wider region. Both the lithium mining projects and the mass shootings became, for many Serbians, manifestations of the systemic violence in the country, resulting in protest movements that attracted tens of thousands of people. I thus theorise "violent politics" in the conceptual conversation with "toxic politics" to account for political situations characterised by violence in its multiplicity. Violent politics reveal both violence and toxicity as historically situated and embedded in power relations, and at the same time porous, trafficking between the

material and immaterial, slow and acute, yet still being resisted. This article seeks to contribute to debates in environmental justice and extractivism scholarship on reconceptualising toxicity and violence.

The third and final analytical article is titled *Post-Green Extractivism: Geographies of Refusing Lithium Mining in Serbia*, published as part of the special issue *Grey Extractivism: Global Connections of 'Green Extractivism' at the Intersections of Mining and Energy* in the journal *Globalizations*. This article is concerned with the politics and geographies of refusal of what is set to become Europe's biggest lithium mine. While the future of the Jadar Project remains uncertain, its refusal on a mass scale offers important insights into contesting the monolithisation of the green transition. Post-extractivism and postdevelopmentalism present well-established challenges to coloniality, modernity, development and exploitation of resources, particularly from the Indigenous and peasant contexts in Latin America, to the extent that Acosta (2017) writes of the need for "'de-growth' in the North and post-extractivism in the South." Yet accounting for the rapid expansion of green extractivism towards Europe and the Global North (del Marmol & Vaccaro, 2020; Riofrancos, 2020), this article focuses on post-green extractivism from rural Serbia. The article brings together three empirical examples of refusal as being emancipatory and affirmative, rather than passive. It is through the refusal of the mono-green futures of growth and extractivism that post-green extractivism is enacted as an opening of alternative visions and of the futures that can be otherwise.

The concluding chapter summarises the main arguments of the thesis, foregrounding the contribution of this thesis in attending to the unique case of mass resistance to lithium mining which presents a fundamental challenge to the green transition and highlighting the experience of violence, uncertainty, anticipation and refusal. The expansion of green extractivism and the position of Serbia between the EU and the rest of Europe serve to interrogate the binary between the Global North and the Global South, periphery and the core. This research also offers crucial insights into the temporality of resistance where no physical extraction has yet taken place, while

focusing on the violence and toxicity that such anticipation brings about. The categorical refusal of lithium extraction highlights the affirmative and emancipatory potential of refusal to radically reimagine how green futures could look.

Finally, I include an afterword titled *Collective Writing, Thinking and Being – Through the Genocide and Beyond*, which recognises the broader context in which this thesis has emerged. This includes bearing witness to the ongoing genocide in Gaza and beyond. I suggest that there is no “thesis-as-usual” in the times of the genocide, and this is particularly the case for a thesis concerned with extractivism. At the time when students and professors are being attacked for their opposition to the genocide, and at the time when extractivism is expanding globally at an unprecedented rate, recognising the interconnectedness of these violent logics is urgently needed. The afterword thus also acts as a gesture towards the connections between extractivism and violence, genocide and ecocide



*Figure 2: A view of the wider Jadar Valley. Picture my own, April 2023.*

## 2 | Background and Context

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides important background information about resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, and most notably to the Jadar Project led by one of the largest multinational mining corporations Rio Tinto. First, I describe the Jadar Valley, western Serbia, as the key site of the struggle against lithium mining in Serbia, focusing on its geographical properties and the role of agriculture in the region. Second, I focus on the discovery of a new mineral *jadarite* in 2004 and its significance for Rio Tinto, describing its evolution over the years from a curiosity to one of the most important mining projects in Europe. Third, I outline the emergence of the anti-lithium movement in response to the project, describing the main actors who range from the local community to their allies, including professors, scientists, opposition politicians, as well as members of the student and climate movements. Fourth, I describe the particular geopolitical moment of lithium, emerging from the dominant technocratic paradigms on the green transition, the imperative of economic growth, overreliance on technological solutions, and geopolitical competition over the control of supply chains. Relatedly, I then describe the role of the EU and the strategic partnership on critical raw materials signed between the EU and Serbia as a candidate country. Finally, I provide a timeline which highlights what I consider to be the key events related to resistance to lithium mining in Serbia to help the reader navigate the context.



*Figure 3: Celebrating Easter in front of the local church in the Jadar Valley. The fields in the background on the left are the location of the planned mine. Picture my own, May 2024.*

## 2.2 Jadar Valley

Located in western Serbia, approximately 140 kilometres from the capital Belgrade, close to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, lies the Jadar Valley. The Jadar Valley is a central location to this thesis as it marks the area of the proposed Jadar Project, owned and operated by Rio Tinto, as well as the place from which resistance to lithium mining in Serbia emerged. The Jadar Valley is the home of several of my research participants who live in the villages in the area, most of them in the village of Gornje Nedeljice, and who have organised themselves to resist the mining project, as I expand on in the subsection 2.4 Resisting the Jadar Project. I use the term Jadar Valley across the thesis to loosely denote the villages in the area impacted by the Jadar Project which

include Gornje Nedeljice, Donje Nedeljice, Brezjak, Slatina, Stupnica, Draginac, Šurice and others. A part of the affected area is sometimes also referred to as Radjevina. The largest nearby city is Loznica, which is also the administrative centre for the Jadar Valley, with 19,515 inhabitants according to the 2022 census, whereas the entire administrative area had a population of 72,062 (Statistical Institute of Serbia, 2023). Gornje Nedeljice has a population of 561 inhabitants according to the 2022 census (Statistical Institute of Serbia, 2023). The region is located in Šumadija and Western Serbia, one of the five statistical regions of Serbia, in the district of Mačva. According to an activist group Marš sa Drine! (Get off Drina!), the project, if constructed, would adversely impact 22 villages and estimated an 19,000 people (2025).

The Jadar Valley is named after the local river Jadar which is 75 km long. The planned underground mine is envisaged between the Jadar River and the Korenita River, its right tributary. The Jadar River is a right tributary to the Drina River, which is 346 km long and a key river in the Balkans, forming a large part of the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The Drina is the longest tributary of the Sava River, which flows into the Danube in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. The Jadar Valley is considered to be rich in rivers as well as underground waters, making it exceptionally fertile, but also prone to flooding – which has been frequently highlighted by my research participants as another key argument against the mining project. Most notably, in 2014, floods affected an area with both active and historic mining operations and caused a collapse of a tailing dam of the Stolice antimony mine, which was closed in 1987. More than 100,000 cubic metres of tailing slurry entered a tributary of the Jadar River (Recovery Needs Assessment, 2014, p. 96). The legacy of the toxicity of the past, as well as the awareness about other polluting mining projects in the country, most notably the Bor and Majdanpek mining complex operated by the Chinese company Zijin, underpins the local resistance to lithium mining.



*Figure 4: Drina River. Picture my own, February 2024.*

Most of my research participants from the Jadar Valley are farmers, dedicated to agriculture, livestock or beekeeping, with dominant produce being meat and dairy, cereal and honey. The hilly landscape is divided in small fields of numerous private landowners. The potential contamination of water reserves, both underground and above the ground, is thus one of the main concerns that has led to the mobilisation against the proposed lithium mine. The Mačva district has 37,660 agricultural farms, the second highest number in the country, following only the Zlatibor district to its south with 43,085 (Statistical Institute of Serbia, 2024). In Serbia, there are a total of 508,325 registered agriculture farms in Serbia, out of which 99.6% are considered family agriculture farms (ibid.). Serbia is a significant agricultural produced, net exporter to the EU, mostly of fruits and nuts, vegetables, cereals and sugar, with 19.2% of total employment being in agriculture (DG AGRI, 2025, p. 2). A few owners in the country hold disproportionately vast areas of agricultural

land, notably due to the undue processes of the post-socialist transition and privatisation (Bulatović, 2024), yet the majority of farmers resisting lithium mining in the Jadar Valley are small to average landowners. For instance, Zlatko Kokanović, my research participant who is a farmer and a vet from Gornje Nedeljice and one of the well-known anti-lithium mining activists, possesses a farm with 20 dairy cows, several chickens and 30 hectares of arable land (ARD & N1, 2024).



*Figure 5: Beekeeping in the wider Jadar Valley. Photo my own, May 2023.*

The area designated for the special purpose for the implementation of the Jadar Project is 2,031 hectares (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 2019). Many of my research participants from the local communities in the Jadar Valley have stressed that, despite the company operating in the area at least since 2004, when the new mineral was discovered, it was

only during the past few years that the scale of the project became evident and the need to organise against it emerged. Citing a lack of information and communication from Rio Tinto, they initially believed that the size of the project would be significantly smaller. It was not until November 2019 that the draft Spatial Plan<sup>1</sup> and the associated documents were made available for public consultation for 30 days between 25th November and 24 December 2019 (ibid.) before being passed into law in March 2020 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 26/2020). According to Miroslav from the local anti-corruption NGO, only then the scale of the project became apparent, while he stressed the difficulty of accessing information and engaging with public consultation for the local community without any prior experience. As explained by Marica<sup>2</sup>, my research participant from Rekovac in an interview from February 2022:

“They [locals of the Jadar Valley] had no idea what was to come. They were slowly cooked like a frog, they [the Rio Tinto employees] infiltrated the society, donated to schools, came into their houses to visit, for Slavas<sup>3</sup> and so on. They were convincing locals that it is a very small area in question, and they presented the project in a completely different way.”

The metaphor of a cooking frog refers to a common belief that a frog will jump out if placed into boiling water, but not if it is first placed into tepid water which is gradually being heated up. Through the metaphor, my research participants described the slow involvement of Rio Tinto within the local life since the discovery of jadarite, until a much more imminent danger once the concrete plans for the underground mine materialised.

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<sup>1</sup> Full title: “Draft of the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the ‘Jadar’ Project of Exploitation and Processing of Jadarite Mineral”.

<sup>2</sup> As explained in the methodology chapter, some names have been changed while other have not, but I do not indicate when that is the case.

<sup>3</sup> Slava is a Serbian Orthodox Christian tradition, glorifying a family's saint patron's day, believed to be the protector of a family. Slavas are celebrated on different days throughout the year depending on the saint patron. Extended family and friends are invited over for a Slava.

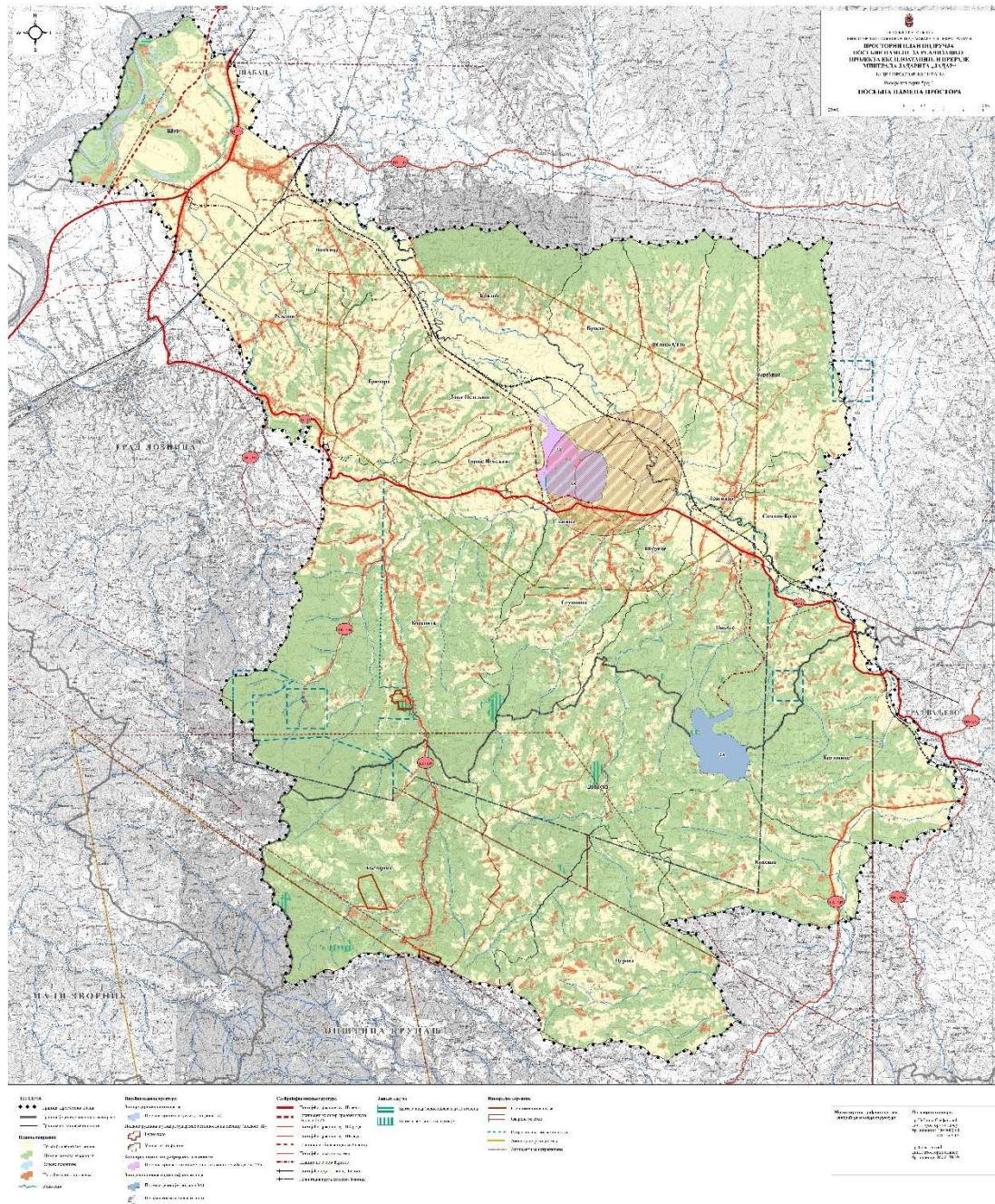
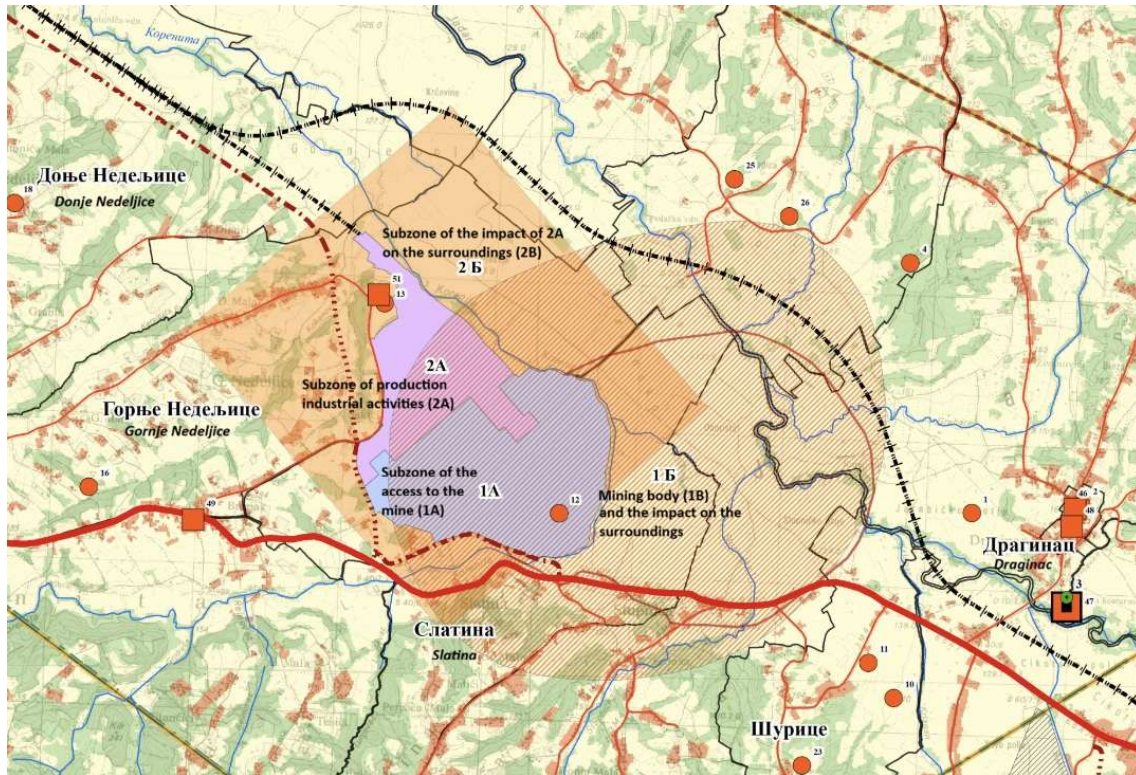


Figure 6: Spatial plan for the special purpose area for the implementation of the Jadar Project. Source: Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure (2019).



*Figure 7: Zoom-in on the mining area of the special purpose area for the implementation of the Jadar Project. Source: Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure (2019). English descriptions and transliteration my own.*

Ana, my research participant from the wider Jadar Valley, explained in our interview from February 2022, that she believed that the company representatives must have been taken by surprise when the resistance to the project began to form:

[The resistance to the mining project] was a huge shock for the company, they had been operating there for 17 years, and no one said a thing, they were working well with locals, got close to them, they went to Slavias, to birthdays, those employees who lived in the villages alongside locals.

Apart from attending Slavias and birthdays, Rio Tinto also invested significantly in the local community. According to the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS), the company donated money to the health centre in one of the villages of the Jadar Valley, a local football club,

an elementary school or offered voucher for shopping in agricultural stores (Djordjević & Sekulić, 2021). The company also donated tens of thousands of euros to a local cultural centre as the company has a legal obligation to fund archaeological research, in this case concerned with the nearby archaeological site Paulje (ibid). According to my research participants, a critical turning point came in autumn 2020 when, without their knowledge, the status of their land was changed from agricultural and forestry land to land in a construction area based on a request from the City of Loznica. CINS reported that the fee for the status change was paid by Rio Tinto, even though the company was not the owner of the land at the time, and that the change resulted in higher taxes for the landowners as well as potential inability to access some agricultural subsidies (ibid). Since then, the local community began to get informed and organised, with initial protests emerging in the Jadar Valley in 2020.<sup>4</sup> In the next subsection, I describe the evolution of the project since the discovery of jadarite and the involvement of Rio Tinto.



*Figure 8: Aerial photo of the Jadar Valley and the local church. Source: Stalex Photography*

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<sup>4</sup> I describe this further in the subsection 2.7 Timeline of the key events.

## 2.3 Rio Tinto and jadarite

Jadarite, a new mineral which is not found anywhere else in the world, was discovered in 2004 in the Jadar Valley by four Rio Tinto geologists, led by a Serbian geologists Nenad Grubin. The team had funding only for two exploration drills within an area of more than 60 square kilometres which the exploration permit initially covered (Dragojlo, 2022). In the first drill hole, they found substantial evidence of borates, which Rio Tinto was looking for, while in the second, a new substance was discovered which contained both borates and lithium (Rio Tinto, 2019). “To discover a new mineral is not that rare. But to find a new mineral in the large quantity as we have in the Jadar Valley is remarkable,” Grubin commented on the discovery for Rio Tinto (ibid.). Yet the Jadar region was of geological interest already during the Yugoslav period, with research emerging as early as in the 1960s (Obradović et al., 1997). In the 1990s, Prof Jelena Obradović at the Faculty of Mining and Geology, University of Belgrade, led a team analysing the presence of borates, indicating a high content in the Jadar Valley, with Nenad Grubin working as her research assistant (Dragojlo, 2022). Rio Tinto researchers noticed journal articles produced by the team, sparking the interest of the company and marking the beginning of the collaboration (ibid.). In 2001, following the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milošević and Serbia’s opening to the global markets, Rio Sava Explorations was established as Rio Tinto’s subsidiary in Serbia, with Nenad Grubin becoming its first director (ibid.).



*Figure 9: Jadarite. Source: Rio Tinto (2019).*

By 2007, jadarite was making global headlines for a rather curious reason – it was found to have an almost identical chemical composition to a fictional element *kryptonite*. In the story of Superman, who was sent from outer space to Earth, a solid green mineral kryptonite is his only weakness. Dr Christopher J. Stanley, a mineralogist from the Natural History Museum in London who established that jadarite was indeed a new mineral, explained in an interview how he found out about the peculiar relationship between jadarite and kryptonite:

“Towards the end of my research, I searched the web using the mineral’s chemical formula – sodium lithium boron silicate hydroxide – and was amazed to discover that same scientific name written on a case of rock containing kryptonite stolen by Lex Luther from a museum in the film Superman Returns.

The new mineral does not contain fluorine and is white rather than green, but in all other respects the chemistry matches that for the rock containing kryptonite.

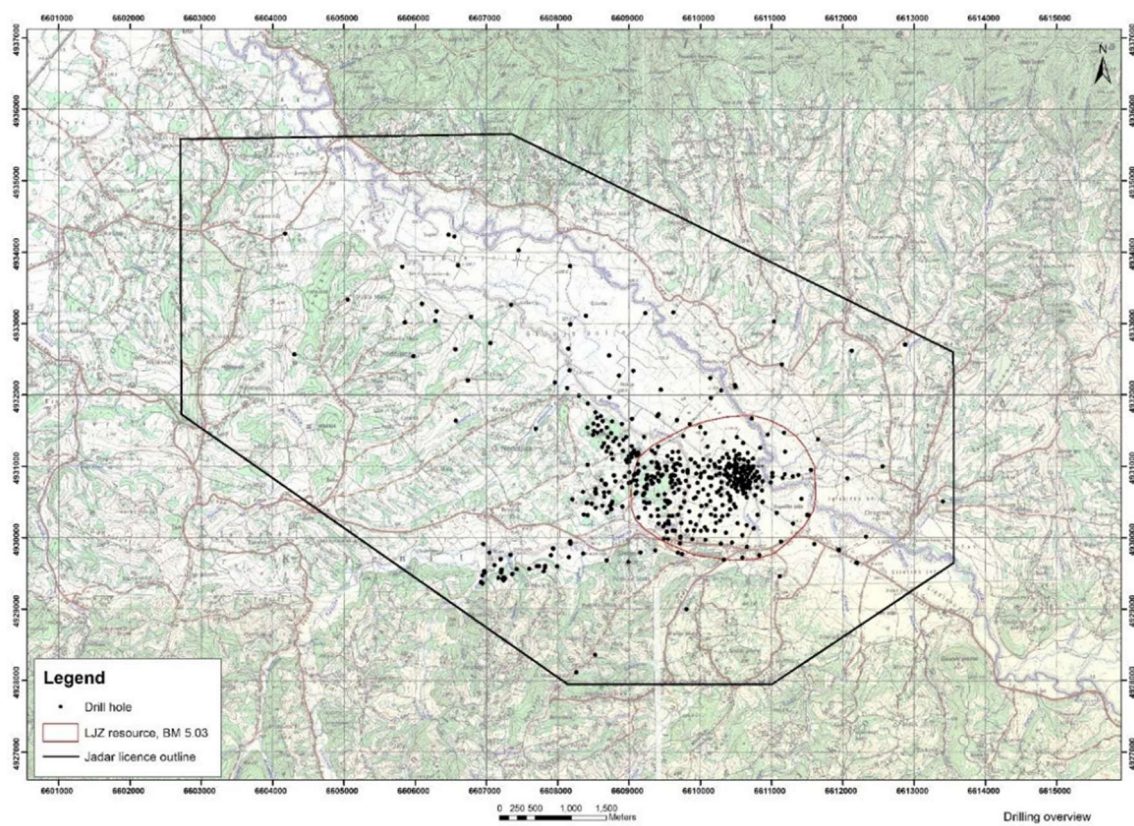
We will have to be careful with it – we wouldn’t want to deprive Earth of its most famous superhero!” (The Natural History Museum London, 2007)

The news became one of the most popular stories of 2007 on the BBC in the UK (BBC, 2007) and was named the top 10<sup>th</sup> scientific discovery of 2007 by TIME magazine (Mahr, 2007). With headlines such as “Superman ‘S’ stands for Serbia” (Reuters, 2007) or “Kryptonite is Real” (Keim, 2007), the chemical composition of jadarite went viral. Yet in another interview, Stanley emphasised the crucial distinction between kryptonite and jadarite: “It's not green. It's white, and it's powdery, and actually it's pretty *boring*” (NPR, 2007 emphasis added). Similarly, it was stressed in the international media that jadarite’s “properties are certainly not miraculous” (ČTK, 2007).

But jadarite, named after the local river Jadar, which flows through the valley, has turned out to be anything but boring. As lithium-sodium borosilicate,  $\text{LiNaSiB}_3\text{O}_7(\text{OH})$ , jadarite contains lithium and borates, both of which can be commercially extracted. It was found to have an “ideal composition” (Tabelin et al., 2021) and to have an unusually high content of lithium (Kesler et al., 2012, p. 66). If developed, the Jadar Project would become Europe's largest lithium mine and one of the biggest lithium greenfield mines in the world (Rio Tinto, 2025b). While jadarite is mostly concentrated in the Jadar Valley, Serbia, the deposit stretches to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The area is the only known deposit of jadarite in the world (Christmann et al., 2015), representing a “‘non-conventional’ world-class lithium deposit” (Gourcerol et al., 2019, p. 499). Thus, while the implications of the discovery mobilised a range of visions and imaginations about the future, *boring* is not one of them. Jadarite has become a central element in political turmoil in Serbia, with tens of thousands of people protesting the mining projects for years.

The importance of the Jadar Project has increased significantly over the years, following the lengthy processes of establishing the economic and technical viability of the potential underground lithium mine. The Jadar Project began with two exploration drills in an effort to find borates, with the second drill leading to the discovery of jadarite. Almost twenty years later, in February 2022, Rio Tinto reported 518 exploratory diamond drill holes, having drilled a total of 204.7 km below the surface, at depths between 100 and 720 metres underground (Rio Tinto,

2022). As of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023, the indicated mineral resources of the Jadar Project were estimated at 85 Mt of lithium at the 1.76% grade of Li<sub>2</sub>O, and 14 Mt of borates (2024a, p. 320), representing a “giant deposit” of lithium (Gourcerol et al., 2019). Jadarite mineralisation occurs in depths from 100 metres to 720 metres below the surface, with the highest value found in the so-called Lower Jadarite Zone (LJZ) which Rio Tinto classified as Mineral Resource (2022, p. 19). In July 2021, Rio Tinto committed 2.4 billion USD to the project, calling it one of the “largest industrial investments in Serbia” (Rio Tinto, 2021).



*Figure 10: Exploratory licence map of the drillholes. LJZ refers to the Lower Jadarite Zone, denoted by the red circle, which has been classified as Mineral Resource. Source: Rio Tinto (2022, p. 14).*

The Jadar Project would place Rio Tinto as one of the ten largest lithium manufacturers globally, producing 2.3 million tonnes of lithium carbonate over the 40 years of the expected mine life (Rio Tinto, 2025b). In turn, the company has promised to position Serbia as a major global producer,

with the mine potentially contributing 1% directly and 4% indirectly to the Serbian GDP, creating 2,100 jobs during construction and 1,000 jobs once production starts (ibid.). The interest in mining lithium has expanded beyond the Jadar Valley, with companies such as Euro Balkan Lithium, Asena Investment, Balkan Istraživanja (Balkan Mining and Minerals), and Geomin Pro seeking to explore lithium across the country and the wider region (Dragojlo, 2022). According to data from 2021, the value of confirmed mineral reserves in Serbia was 200 billion USD, with the government aiming to increase the contribution of the mining sector to the GDP from 1.9% to 4-5% over the five years, adopting legislation which is intended to ease the access of investors and increase extraction (Spasić, 2021). There is thus a growing pressure on local communities from the national government and international actors to open new mines across Serbia, which goes hand in hand with the rising demand for CRMs and shifting geopolitics. In the next section, I describe how the resistance to lithium mining plans in Serbia emerged, becoming a major challenge to the shifting geopolitics of decarbonisation and extractivism.

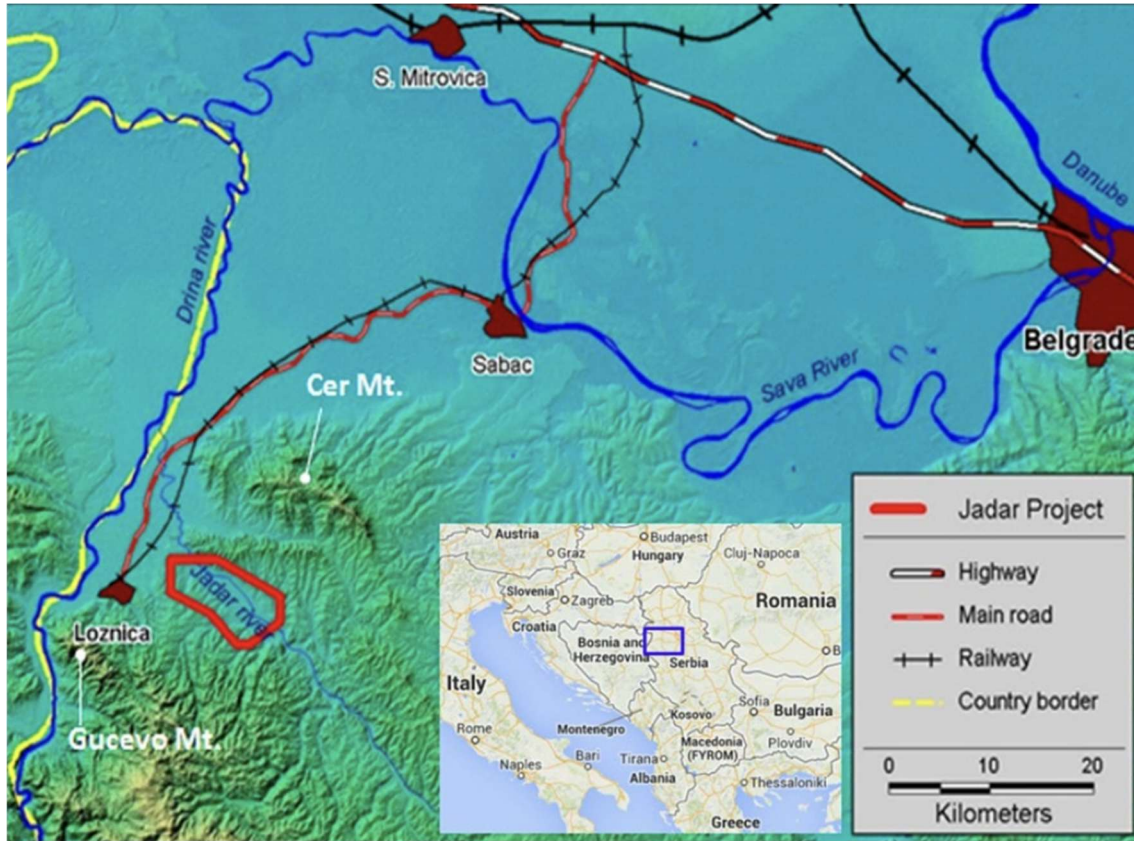


Figure 11: Jadar Project location map, Rio Tinto's representation of the area. Source: Rio Tinto (2022, p. 2). The figure highlights Loznica, the biggest city in the area, Šabac and the capital Belgrade, as well as the connecting roads and railways.

## 2.4 Resisting the Jadar Project

Over the years since the discovery of jadarite, Rio Tinto continued to establish the economic viability of the mining project. Finally, around 2020, it moved forward with the process of land acquisition and began to buy out houses and property in the zone of the planned mine. Based on the company data, there were 52 permanently occupied households within the radius of the planned mine, out of which the company bought 50, and 23 non-permanently occupied residential buildings, out of which it bought 18 (Rio Tinto, 2025a). According to Rio Tinto, the company holds 162 hectares of land “which is equivalent to 63% of the proposed project footprint and 92% of the affected households” (Rio Tinto, 2025c). Many of my research participants dispute the

company data and argue that the community holds most of the required land even though the company bought most of the houses.<sup>5</sup> Yet through the process of the buyout, most notably between 2020 and 2021, the community was divided between those who sold their property and those who refused to do so. The divisions are not only personal but also visual and spatial, as the sold houses have been left to fall apart, often concentrated in several streets – what has been referred to as psychological war by my research participants.<sup>6</sup> It was the refusal of some members of the local community to sell their property and leave their land which marked the beginning of mass resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, attracting dozens of allied organisations and tens of thousands of supporters.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 12: Houses in the Jadar Valley bought by Rio Tinto. Picture my own, February 2024.*

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<sup>5</sup> I expand on the information in this paragraph in Article 3.

<sup>6</sup> I expand on this argument in Article 2.

<sup>7</sup> I expand on this argument in Article 3.



*Figure 13: Aerial photo of the houses bought by Rio Tinto in the Jadar Valley. Photo: Nathalie Bertrams.*

Resistance to lithium mining in Serbia has attracted an unusually wide range of actors with different motivations and backgrounds, stretching across the political spectrum, and bridging the rural and urban areas. While the local community of the Jadar Valley is central to resisting lithium mining in Serbia, it is not the only one. The resistance spread to other locations across the country which have also been impacted by lithium explorations. In October 2021, these communities together formed SEOS (Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia, *Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije*), an umbrella organisation which they created in October 2021 to bring together communities across Serbia that are resisting lithium mining. SEOS includes local associations from six different locations across Serbia impacted by lithium explorations – Gornje Nedeljice, Dobrinja, Pranjani, Kosjerić, Rekovac and Jagodina, each of which has dozens of members. Additionally, another location, the city of Valjevo and its surroundings, has its own organisation against lithium mining that is no longer a member of SEOS. This demonstrates the range and diversity of the resistance across Serbia, as well as across the different stages of the

development of the mining projects, from mere explorations to concrete plans to construct the mine.<sup>8</sup> Most of my research participants are members of SEOS. While they are typically farmers and agriculture workers, the local communities also include people who do not economically depend on the land and the soil, but who are resisting the mining projects regardless. My research participants have included teachers who work in the villages, people who live in the villages but commute to the nearby cities for work, or people who have been able to return to the villages and work online.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the local communities have been supported by their allies, activists, campaigners and organisers. While the members of the local communities could be considered activists, I am using a simplified binary between the ‘locals’ and the ‘activists’ to distinguish between those who live in the affected areas and those who do not. The distinction, however, is important, as I later describe the toxicity and violence that the uncertainty around the Jadar Project brings about, which is a specific experience of those who are directly affected by the potential pollution and displacement<sup>10</sup>. Activists who are allies of the local communities, but who do not live in the affected areas are also essential to the anti-lithium movement. They are typically based in Belgrade or other cities and are a members of NGOs, CSOs, informal campaign or activist groups, and these include organisations such as PAKT (Podrinjski Anti-korupcijski Tim, *Pordinje Anti-corruption Team*), Kreni Promeni (*Go Change*), Marš sa Drine (*Get off Drina*), Ekološki ustanak (*Ecological Uprising*), Bunt protiv izumiranja (*Extinction Rebellion Serbia*), or Pravo na vodu (*The Right to Water*), to name a few. They would also typically have more experience with “activism” than the local communities, sharing their experience on organising, using social media, creating online petitions and so on. Notably, it was environmental and climate organisations such as Bunt protiv izumiranja (*Extinction Rebellion Serbia*) and Pravo na vodu (*The Right to Water*), which played a fundamental role in verbalising the connections between anti-extractivism and

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<sup>8</sup> I expand on this argument in Article 3.

<sup>9</sup> I expand on the connection between the livelihoods and the attachment to the land in Article 1.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this in detail in Article 2.

climate activism, asserting that resistance to lithium mining in Serbia strengthens the need for both environmental justice and climate justice.

Other actors, whom I also include under the broad term of activists, include professors, scientists and academics who came out to publicly speak against the projects, oppositional politicians (or activists who entered party politics during the years of the anti-lithium movement), journalists, lawyers, actors, writers, students and many others. It is in this sense that I also consider myself an “activist” and a member of the broad movement, but not a member of the affected local communities. Crucially, on a political spectrum, the movement against lithium mining in Serbia spans across the left and the right, includes queer people and nationalists, supporters of Russia and the EU, people of different faiths and atheists, *chetniks* and *partizans*, democrats and monarchists. It is a strikingly broad coalition mobilising hundreds of thousands of people with one shared goal – to prevent lithium mining in Serbia from taking place. As I expand on later across the thesis, I suggest that it is the creation of the broad alliance between the locals and the activists, people based both in rural and urban areas, which was one of the main reasons behind the massification of the protests.

These actors converged together in autumn 2021, when the Parliament intended to pass two controversial laws – the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Expropriation and the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative. The law on expropriation was largely interpreted by the critics as intended to ease the expropriation of private property for the sake of investors such as Rio Tinto (N1, 2021). The protests escalated into blockades of roads, bridges and highways, which were taking place weekly, typically on Saturday at 2 PM for approximately one hour. At the height of the protests, in December 2021, there were blockades at more than 50 different locations across the country taking place simultaneously while the blockade of the highway in Belgrade attracted tens of thousands of people. Solidarity protests were also organised across the world, typically led by the Serbian diaspora and taking place in Paris, Berlin, Prague, as well as in front of the Rio Tinto headquarters in London and the United Nations Headquarters in New York (Al Jazeera

Balkans, 2021). The blockades continued until January 2022 when the government was ultimately forced to cancel the Jadar Project. Yet only two and a half years later, in July 2024, the cancellation was nullified, while the resistance has continued.<sup>11</sup> In the following section, I describe the nullification and the role of the EU and other international actors in supporting the project.



*Figure 14: Blockade of the Gazela highway in Belgrade, 4th December 2021. Photo: Marko Risović.*

## 2.5 EU and the strategic partnership

Major geopolitical events such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the material dependencies of Western countries not only on Russia but also on China (Vandermeeren, 2024). Reducing these dependencies while increasing the competitiveness of the

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<sup>11</sup> I describe the evolution of the protests in greater detail in section 2.7 *Timeline of the key events*.

EU and the control over the supply chains has emerged in recent years as a primary policy objective, particularly as the tensions between the US and China continue to rise (see for instance Gonçalves, 2024). Lithium refining is heavily concentrated in China which is responsible for 60-70% of this process (IEA, 2023a) and almost 85% of battery cell production capacity (IEA, 2024c). The EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) which entered into force in May 2024 is a flagship policy aimed at establishing a framework for governance of CRMs, including lithium, focused on boosting the EU's domestic capacities of extraction and processing of CRMs. The CRMA sets four main targets for increasing domestic capacity by 2030 (European Commission, 2024a):

1. At least 10% of the EU's annual consumption for extraction
2. At least 40% of the EU's annual consumption for processing
3. At least 25% of the EU's annual consumption for recycling
4. No more than 65% of the EU's annual consumption from a single third country

The EU currently accounts for just 3% of global metal<sup>12</sup> production while it consumes 25-30% of the world's metals despite representing only 6% of the global population (Marin et al., 2023). Achieving these targets requires not only ramping up the mining production within the EU, but also in other countries which are considered potential partners. This is referred to as nearshoring and friendshoring, describing the expansion of mining projects closer to "home" and establishing geopolitical alliances, trade agreements and strategic partnerships with the third countries (see Bogojević, 2024 on Serbia; Müller et al., 2024; Riofrancos, 2023).

In summer 2024, in the span of just a few days, the situation with the Jadar Project began to rapidly develop again. On 11<sup>th</sup> July, the Constitutional Court of Serbia ruled that the government decree from January 2022 which cancelled the Spatial Plan for the Jadar Project was unconstitutional and unlawful (Todorović, 2024a). Since the government's decision cancelling

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<sup>12</sup> This refers to metals in general, not just the critical raw materials, but is illustrative of some of the dependencies that the CRMA aims to reduce.

the project was issued in January 2022, my research participants have voiced that it is likely a publicity stunt to stop the protests before the presidential and early parliamentary elections which were taking place in April 2022. They have continued to protest despite the official cancellation, demanding a complete ban on lithium mining in Serbia as a guarantee. The protests escalated again in the summer 2024. In the span of just a few days, as I detail in the Timeline section below, the government issued a new decree reinstating the Jadar Project, citing the court's decision. For the observers in Serbia, this was an evident theatre play where the constitutional court controlled by the regime gave the governing party a justification to nullify the cancellation. Two days later, a delegation of EU representatives arrived in Serbia to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which established the Strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and EVs.

The signing of the Strategic Partnership essentially established the official support of the EU for the Jadar Project. Apart from the Serbian government ministers and President Aleksandar Vučić, the signing was also attended by the then-Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz, and the Italian and US ambassadors to Serbia (Government of Serbia, 2024). Additionally, the Letter of Intent on the development of the e-mobility value chain in the Republic of Serbia was signed by the Serbian Minister of Economy, the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), but among others also the CEOs of Mercedes-Benz and Rio Tinto (*ibid.*). The geopolitical priorities of the Western powers then go hand in hand with the interests of the multinational corporations, as well as the national government, converging together to push for the Jadar Project. While the strategic partnerships are non-binding agreements, they signal an intent for close cooperation between the signatories, particularly in the area of CRMs and their value chains. In 2023, the EU also signed strategic partnerships with Zambia and DR Congo despite the well-documented human rights abuses related to the mining of cobalt and copper (Müller et al., 2024, p. 9). In Serbia, the signing has been largely interpreted by my research participants as the EU's declaration of support for President Vučić despite the democratic backsliding and growing oppression of activists and civil society.

Summer months are usually considered a dead season for protests in Serbia amid the scorching heat in Belgrade and many people leaving for holidays. Despite the rush to sign the MoU before the resistance could meaningfully mobilise, people gathered to protest in front of the Constitutional Court as the ruling was being made. Throughout July, protests started erupting in cities and towns across Serbia, yet these were not organised by SEOS nor by the activist organisations mentioned above. Rather, spontaneous protests took place in dozens of cities including Arandjelovac, Barajevo, Bogatić, Kraljevo, Ljig, Požega, Šabac, Valjevo and many others. While these are smaller cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, and often located hundreds of kilometres from the Jadar Valley, the research group Arhiv javnih skupovina (Archive of Public Gatherings) highlights that these protests against lithium could be considered some of the biggest in the history of the country if adjusted per capita. That makes lithium a bigger motivation to protest than the election fraud, violence, or Kosovo according to the Archive (N1, 2024). The local protests converged in Belgrade on 10<sup>th</sup> August, attracting tens of thousands of people and marking one of the biggest protests against lithium in Serbia to date, and resulting in an overnight blockade of the central railway station. Following that, activists and protestors have been faced with the most violent and oppressive measures to date, including death threats, police interrogations, prison sentences, home raids, as well as having their phones illegally hacked by the Serbian domestic security agency BIA using Israeli technology, as an investigation by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and Amnesty International has proven (Tešić, 2024). In the following section, I describe the broader geopolitics of lithium mining to further illustrate the significance of the scale of the resistance.



*Figure 15: Overnight blockade of the central railway station in response to the signing of the Strategic Partnership with the EU, August 2024. Picture my own.*

## 2.6 Geopolitics of lithium

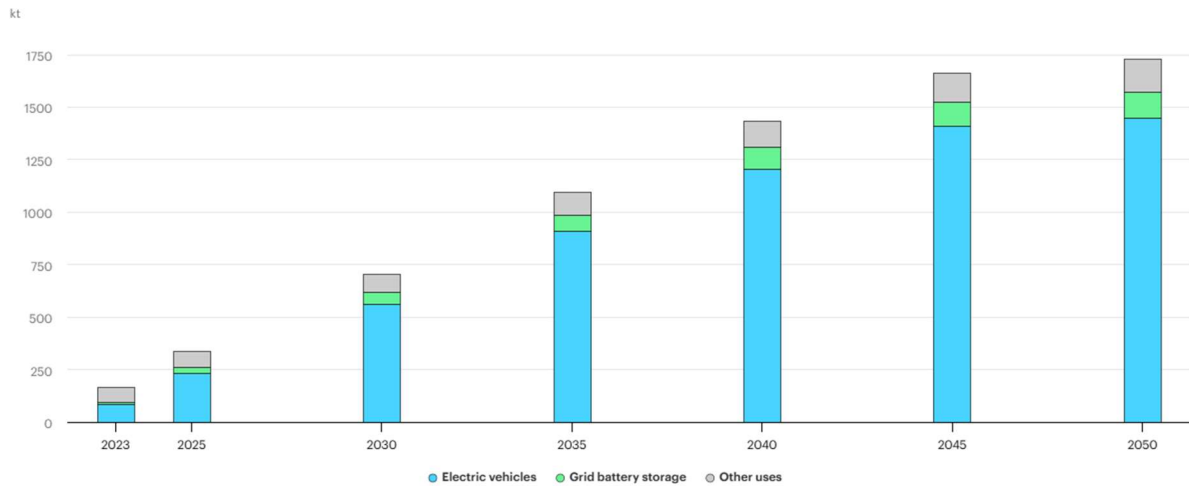
As demand for certain materials accelerates dramatically under the pretext of the green transition, geoeconomic and geopolitical implications of these changes are crystallising. Lithium is the third element of the periodic table and the first of the alkali metals (Kavanagh et al., 2018); it is the lightest and least dense solid element that is also the most electropositive metal (Tarascon, 2010). These properties make it an essential component of lithium-based batteries such as lithium-ion batteries (LIBs). LIBs are the state-of-the-art technology for energy storage for “essentially every application” (Armand et al., 2020), from mobile phones to stationary storage systems to most recently and most notably the EVs for which they are considered “the ideal power source” (Kim et al., 2019). The chemical properties of lithium also make it highly reactive and flammable, which became apparent in several controversies around the difficulty of extinguishing fires in EVs (see Sun et al., 2020 for a review). Its reactivity means lithium is only present in nature in

compounds, typically in brines or solid minerals (such as in the case of jadarite), with an estimated 87% of the global reserves in the former and 13% in the latter (Agusdinata et al., 2018).

Most of the global reserves are found in the so-called “lithium triangle” of Bolivia, Argentina and Chile (23 million tons, 22 million tons and 11 million tons respectively), followed by Australia (8.7 million tons) (U.S. Geological Survey, 2024). In Europe, the largest resources are found in Germany (3.8 million tons), Czechia (1.3 million tons) and Serbia (1.2 million tons) (ibid.). Currently, the only lithium-producing country in Europe is Portugal, representing approximately 0.097% of global primary production in 2021 (RMIS, 2024). Out of all CRMs, it is lithium for which the demand is poised to rise the most dramatically – more than 8 times by 2040 under the Net-Zero Emissions (NZE) scenario, the most ambitious climate action scenario analysed by the IEA (2024b). According to the CRMA, the EU’s demand for lithium is expected to increase twelvefold by 2030 and twenty-onefold by 2050 (European Commission, 2024a). While lithium is used in batteries for a range of applications from smartphones, laptops or medical devices, the growth in demand is largely driven by EVs which are expected to account for more than 80% of the demand by 2050 (see Figure 2, IEA, 2024a).

Thus, while CRMs are essential for low-carbon technology, it is the green transition based on continuous economic growth through individual consumerism rather than systemic solutions (such as decreasing car dependency and supporting public and active transport) that is driving the unprecedented expansion of extractivism. In a 2020 study published in *Nature Climate Change*, the authors note that remaining within the 2°C sectoral emission budget for light-duty vehicles (LDVs) by 2050 in the US would require 90% of the LDV fleet to be electric, or 351 million EVs on the roads (Milovanoff et al., 2020, pp. 1104–1105). Such a fleet would result in electricity demand that is equivalent to 41% of electricity generated in the US in 2018; its material demand between 2019 and 2050 would represent 8% of the world’s known terrestrial lithium resources (62 Mt in 2019) and 29% of global cobalt resources (25 Mt in 2019) (ibid.). Climate strategies

based on extractivism are thus both profoundly unsustainable, requiring an unprecedented amount of resources and energy.



*Figure 16: The growth in demand of lithium is driven by EVs which are expected to account for more than 80% of the demand by 2040 under the NZE Scenario. Between 2022 and 2023, the use of lithium in electric vehicles was for the first time ever higher than in all other applications including consumer electronics, glass and ceramics, lubricants and medical uses. Source: IEA (2024a).*

Crucially, the materiality – as well as the temporality – of the shifting geopolitics must be emphasised. The centrality of the critical raw materials signals the need to rematerialise abstract understandings of the green, energy, or digital transitions, recognising their profound dependence on mining and extractivism. Indeed, scholars have emphasised the need to pay attention to the “elemental” in geographical thinking (Engelmann & McCormack, 2021; McCormack, 2015), as well as to the “geo” in geopolitics, bringing together *geo*-politics with the very function of geology and the Earth systems (Clark, 2014; Clark & Yusoff, 2017). Rather than “conflating” geopolitics with “global politics or political geography” (Elden, 2013, p. 49), what is needed is a

“richer comprehension of the technological, lively and elemental matter that constitutes world politics” (Klinke, 2021, p. 2).

In the Balkans, geological activities of ancient lakes which were shifting in cycles of millions of years led to intensive sedimentation of minerals throughout the Neogene period. The area of the Pannonian Basin in the region is considered exceptionally rich in natural resources such as coal, oil shapes, lithium and borates (Bechtel et al., 2018; Krstić et al., 2012; Mrazovac & Vojinović-Miloradov, 2011; Obradović et al., 1997). Steinberg and Peter highlight that “it is the movement (through space and time) of liquids—seas, rivers, streams, lakes—and also solids (that is, ice) and gasses (that is, wind) that deposit materials that form strata, and it is these deposits that ultimately inform the geological, sequential concepts of time that emerge from current studies of the environment” (2015, p. 255). Writing from the context of lithium mining in Chile, Bonelli and Gamba through their alliance between chemistry and anthropology argue that it is this “*deep-time meta-chemistry*, which allows us to think of lithium as an ancestral material” (2024, p. 20). Building on Krenak’s proposal of an *Ancestral Future*, Bonelli and Gamba emphasise the need for “imagining the future from a planetary past, thereby displacing the modern obsession with lineal, progressive time and the messianic promises of modern technology.” Such calls are essential as the minerals formed in Neogene, meaning “newborn,” are to be extracted in the Anthropocene at an unprecedented scale in order to solve its very cause through the promises of technofixes. As Bonelli and Gamba write, “if the future can be imagined, it is ancestral, for it already permeates the deep-time of present underground brines” (2024, p. 6). In the following chapters of this thesis, I argue that the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia presents an opening for the alternative futures to be imagined and enacted. Before that, I outline the key events that have marked the controversy surrounding the Jadar Project.

## 2.7 Timeline of the key events

This subsection details key events related to resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, tracing the development of the Jadar Project as well as the backlash it has faced. Crucially, the overview, while detailed, is inherently imperfect and partial, based on my personal views and my research through which I define the key events. Moreover, the timeline of the key events is not intended to invisibilise ‘non-events’ such as the labour behind coordinating the movement and its many different actors, organising workshops, talks and lectures organised by SEOS to spread awareness about the issues of lithium mining, submitting requests for information, issuing statements, giving interviews (including to researchers such as myself) or supporting other movements such as the Serbia Against Violence protests in 2023 or the student protests since November 2024. The timeline is provided to help the reader orient themselves in the thesis as well as to understand the broader context.

### 2000

**5th October 2000** – the regime of Slobodan Milošević is overthrown, with the first democratic government being established as a result.

### 2001

**16<sup>th</sup> May** – Rio Tinto enters the Serbian market through its subsidiary Rio Sava Exploration d.o.o. (Rio Tinto, 2025b).

### 2003

**12<sup>th</sup> March 2003** – Zoran Djindjić, Serbia’s first Prime Minister following Milošević’s regime, is assassinated.

### 2004

**8<sup>th</sup> June** – Rio Sava Explorations receives the first permits on the geological explorations from the Ministry of Mining and Energy (Official Gazette RS 44/95) for the area number 1561 in the Jadar Valley (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

A new mineral is discovered by Rio Tinto's Serbian and international geologists during an exploration programme for borates in the Balkans (Rio Tinto, 2024a).

### **2007**

The mineral is named and classified as *jadarite*, found to be rich in lithium and borates (Stanley et al., 2007).

### **2008**

Rio Tinto conducts early exploration drills in the Jadar Valley (Rio Tinto, 2025b).

### **2011**

Rio Tinto reports over 50 engineering solutions considered for creating a mine of the newly discovered mineral (Rio Tinto, 2025b).

### **2013**

Rio Tinto commissions a pilot processing plant for jadarite at the research centre in Bundoora, Australia (Rio Tinto, 2025b).

### **2017**

**24<sup>th</sup> July** – a Memorandum of Understanding is signed between the Serbian government and Rio Tinto / Rio Sava Explorations to progress the Jadar Project by establishing working groups between the government and the company (Rio Tinto, 2017).

**10<sup>th</sup> October** – a working group on the implementation of the Jadar Project is formed by the government with the Official Gazette 91/2017 (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

## 2018

**14<sup>th</sup> April** – Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić meets Rio Tinto representatives in London during her visit to the United Kingdom, discussing the Jadar Project and the company's investments in Serbia (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

## 2019

**25<sup>th</sup> November** – the draft Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the 'Jadar' Project<sup>13</sup> and the associated documents for the Jadar Project are made available for public consultation in the city of Loznica for 30 days until 24<sup>th</sup> December 2019 (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 2019).

## 2020

**20<sup>th</sup> January** – the public consultation meeting of the draft Spatial Plan takes place in Loznica city hall (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 2019). The publication of the draft Spatial Plan is referred to by some research participants as the first moment when they realised the scope of the project, despite the company operating in the area since 2004. From then on, the local community begins to learn more about the project and the first protests erupt in the following months.

**14<sup>th</sup> February** – the “last extension of the Jadar exploration licence expired [...], with no legal basis for further extension of its term,” according to Rio Tinto (Rio Tinto, 2024a, p. 335). RERI

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<sup>13</sup> Full title “Draft of the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the 'Jadar' Project of Exploitation and Processing of Jadarite Mineral” and “Strategic Assessment Report of the Impact of the Spatial Plan on the Environment” (“Nacrt prostornog plana područja posebne namene za realizaciju projekta eksploatacije i prerade minerala jadarita 'Jadar'” and “Izveštaj o strateškoj proceni uticaja prostornog plana područja posebne namene za realizaciju projekta eksploatacije i prerade minerala jadarita 'Jadar' na životnu sredinu”).

(Regulatorni institut za obnovljivu energiju i životnu sredinu, *Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute*), a Serbian legal NGO, revealed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2023 that the Serbian Ministry of Mining and Energy has in the previous two years extended the deadline for Rio Tinto to complete the necessary documentation eleven times (N1, 2023).

**20<sup>th</sup> February** – the Spatial Plan of the special purpose area for the Jadar project (PPN Jadar) is adopted by the government.

**13<sup>th</sup> March** – the Spatial Plan is established by law (Official Gazette no. 26/2020).

**30<sup>th</sup> July** – Rio Tinto’s Pre-Feasibility study is completed, demonstrating the potential of the Jadar Project for the production of battery-grade lithium carbonate and boric acid. Rio Tinto then progresses the Jadar Project from a Pre-Feasibility Study to a Feasibility Study, committing 200 million USD to fund the study and “the completion of detailed engineering designs, as well as permitting and land acquisition by the end of 2021, in line with the initial project schedule” (Rio Tinto, 2020a). As we now know, land acquisition was not completed by the end of 2021 since some of the local residents refused to sell their property to the company.

**2<sup>nd</sup> October** – one of the first larger protests takes place in the Jadar Valley, organised by a civil society organisation PAKT (Podrinjski Anti-korupcijski Tim, *Pordinje Anti-corruption Team*) and the residents of the upper Jadar Valley (PAKT, 2020).

**27<sup>th</sup> October** – another local protest takes place in the village of Brezjak, Jadar Valley, in front of the Rio Tinto office. It is attended by several hundred people (Pravo na vodu, 2020). Media reports that the “[v]oices of discontent over Rio Tinto’s jadarite mine investment in Serbia grow louder” (Balkan Green Energy News, 2020).

**19<sup>th</sup> November** – Prime Minister Ana Brnabić sets up a new working group for the implementation of the Jadar Project, with over 30 members. These included Zorana Mihajlović, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mining and Energy, who was the head of the working

group, Jovanka Atanacković, State Secretary in the Ministry of Mining and Energy, Ivica Kojić, the chief of staff of President Aleksandar Vučić, and Danilo Cicmil, the president's special adviser, as well as Michael Shiraev, Second Secretary at the Australian Embassy in Serbia, and Stephen Ndegwa, World Bank Country Manager for Serbia (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

**11<sup>th</sup> December** – Rio Tinto declares the Jadar Project a maiden Ore Reserve of the lithium-borates project that is 100% owned by the company and updates the resources and reserves. “The Ore Reserve is 16.6 Mt at 1.81% Li<sub>2</sub>O and 13.4% B<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>,” “[t]he Mineral Resource comprises 55.2 Mt of Indicated Resource at 1.68% Li<sub>2</sub>O and 17.9% B<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> with an additional 84.1 Mt of Inferred Resource at 1.84% Li<sub>2</sub>O and 12.6% B<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>” (Rio Tinto, 2020b).

## 2021

**5<sup>th</sup> March** – Rio Tinto announces the beginning of the construction of the mine for 2022, disregarding local concerns. Vesna Prodanović, then-general manager of Rio Sava Exploration, says that “[t]his will be a mine for the 21st century” (Balkan Green Energy News, 2021a).

**9<sup>th</sup> April** – the activists from the organisations Kreni-Promeni, Marš sa Drine and the local organisation Ne Damo Jadar staged a protest in front of the Rio Tinto headquarters in Belgrade on the occasion of the Rio Tinto AGM taking place in London (Nova S, 2021). The activists showed the company symbolic red cards.

**10<sup>th</sup> April** – a protest titled “Ecological uprising” attracts several thousand protestors in front of the Parliament over environmental and health problems in the country. These have included the struggles against small hydropower plants, air pollution, but also lithium mining (Prvi Prvi Na Skali, 2021).

**6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May** – The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) hosts a two-day scientific conference to discuss the Jadar Project (SANU, 2021). The academics were largely critical of the project and published the conference proceedings at the end of 2021, with the conclusion stating:

“A group of eminent researchers concludes in their author’s text that the implementation of the "Jadar" project would lead to massive devastation of space, permanent changes in the character of the landscape, degradation of biodiversity, soil, forests, surface and underground water, displacement of the local population, cessation of sustainable and profitable agricultural activities, and establishing a scenario of permanent risk to the health of residents of nearby villages and the city of Loznica. The authors also conclude that the continuation of the uncontrolled realization of similar mining projects would lead to serious ecosystem disturbances, environmental degradation and would be an indicator of the inability of the state, but also of the wider social community, to see the harm of such activities to the public interest” (Prvi Prvi Na Skali, 2024).

My research participants have referred to the SANU conference as one of the crucial moments of the Serbian scientists, academics and experts openly speaking up against the project.

**1<sup>st</sup> June** – President Aleksandar Vučić met with the Rio Tinto delegation, including the company’s chair, Jakob Stausholm (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

**27<sup>th</sup> July** – Rio Tinto commits 2.4 billion USD to the Jadar Project. The press release stated: “Jadar will be one of the largest industrial investments in Serbia, contributing 1% directly and 4% indirectly to GDP, with many Serbian suppliers involved in the construction of the mine. Rio Tinto is committed to help develop local businesses so that they can support the operation over the coming decades. It will also be a significant employer, creating 2,100 jobs during construction and 1,000 mining and processing jobs once in production.” Rio Tinto Chief Executive Jakob Stausholm said on the occasion of the announcement that “[w]e are committed to upholding the highest environmental standards and building sustainable futures for the communities where we operate. We recognise that in progressing this project, we must listen to and respect the views of all stakeholders” (Rio Tinto, 2021).

**29<sup>th</sup> July** – the city of Loznica adopts a city spatial plan that includes the spatial plan of the Jadar Project. Residents of the Jadar Valley gathered in front of the city hall to protest the decision (Todorović, 2021a). Smaller protests continue to escalate in the Jadar Valley over the summer.

**11<sup>th</sup> September** – a second “Ecological uprising” is organised by over 60 organisations, titled “Uprising for survival – people versus Rio Tinto.” It takes place in front of the Parliament, and it is attended by several thousands of people, and the locals from the Jadar Valley travel to Belgrade to speak at the protest. While the April “Ecological uprising” was centred around multiple environmental issues, I suggest that this event marks not only the first in the series of large-scale protests against Rio Tinto, notably held in the capital city, but also the emergence of resistance against lithium mining as the main environmental issue in the country. The key demand is for the government to revoke its commitments to Rio Tinto (Balkan Green Energy News, 2021b).



*Figure 17: Ecological Uprising protest in September 2021. Photo: Gradjanske inicijative.*

**14<sup>th</sup> September** – then-chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel visits Serbia shortly before the end of her term, infamously proclaiming that Germany is interested in Serbia’s lithium (Todorović, 2021b). The statement became well-known and cited by the activists against lithium mining, often using it to illustrate the extent of Western support for the mining project.

**30<sup>th</sup> October** – SEOS Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia, Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije) is formed in cooperation with the Marš sa Drine (Get off Drina) activist group (Prvi Prvi Na Skali, 2022). The founding members included:

- Ne damo Jadar (from Gornje Nedeljice)
- Marš s Kolubare (from Valjevo)
- Suvoborska greda (from Pranjani)
- Eko brigada Jagodina (from Jagodina)
- Neko brine za Levač (from Rekovac)
- Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (from Dobrinja)

**November** – protests begin to escalate, taking place across Serbia.

**23<sup>rd</sup> November** – the Parliament debates two controversial laws, the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Expropriation and the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative. Protestors gather in front of the Parliament, seeing the law on expropriation as intended for the ease of investors, as the expropriation would become simplified if a project is declared to be of public interest. The law on referendum is interpreted as facilitating consent in decision-making processes (N1, 2021).

**27<sup>th</sup> November** – the protests escalate with citizens blocking roads, highways and bridges across Serbia. In Belgrade, this marks the first blockade of the Gazela bridge and the highway that runs through the city. This is considered to be the key moment in the struggle as it was uncertain whether the blockade would be able to take place. While on one side of the bridge, activists were surrounded by the police who did not let them move, protesters who gathered spontaneously on

the other side of the bridge across the river were able to enter the highway and block the traffic with their own bodies. This success marked the moment of the highway becoming a key site of protest, being blocked numerous for diverse reasons since then. The blockades continue to take place every Saturday for approximately one hour and they spread across Serbia.

**4<sup>th</sup> December** – marks the height of the protests, with more than 50 different cities blocked across the country. Videos emerged of creative efforts to block the traffic. In some towns where there were not enough people for a sustained blockade, the protesters were going back and forth for an hour on a zebra crossing. The blockade of Gazela in Belgrade attracted tens of thousands of people.

**8<sup>th</sup> December** – following weeks of pressure, the government withdraws the Law on Expropriation and amends the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). This is seen as the major achievement of the protests, with a part of the movement announcing victory and the end of the blockades. A part of the movement, which is constituted of the local communities, rejects the sense of victory and continues to organise the weekly blockades, which take place, albeit at a much smaller scale, throughout the holiday season until mid-January.

## 2022

**20<sup>th</sup> January** – following months of blockades, the government announces the official cancellation of the Spatial Plan, and with that the cancellation of the Jadar Project (Sekularac, 2022). Resistance led by the local communities continues despite the cancellation, demanding a complete ban on lithium mining in Serbia as a guarantee. The research participants interpreted the government's manoeuvre as a pre-election stunt, which took place less than 4 months after the cancellation.

In this pre-election period, an oppositional coalition is formed under the name Moramo (We Must), campaigning on the issues of water, air, soil and against lithium mining. It includes some anti-lithium activists who decided to enter party politics.

## **February**

**10-15<sup>th</sup> February** – the local communities organise a protest camp in front of the President's Residency, staying there for five nights.

**3<sup>rd</sup> April** – Parliamentary, Local and Presidential super-elections take place.

The coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS, Srpska napredna stranka) and President Vučić again wins overwhelmingly, including in the Loznica region. A newly created oppositional party Moramo (We Must), which supported the blockades, entered the Parliament in what is interpreted as a success within the illiberal political regime of Serbia.

The protests continue throughout the year, but with a much smaller attendance. In many ways, the cancellation and the elections have taken the wind out of the movement.

**7<sup>th</sup> April** – just a few days after being re-elected, President Aleksandar Vučić expressed regret over the cancellation and called it a great mistake (Danas, 2022). Such a statement contributes to the conviction of the local community and their allies that the cancellation is merely a part of the pre-election campaign.

**18<sup>th</sup> May** – the people's initiative on the ban of lithium and borate mining in Serbia is submitted to the Parliament, with more than 38,000 notarised signatures of citizens across Serbia which were collected over several months. Any initiative with over 30,000 signatures must be discussed in the Parliament within six months. Instead, the initiative has allegedly disappeared and was never discussed (Insajder, 2024).

**10<sup>th</sup> July** – Representatives of nine organisations from Portugal, Spain, Chile, Germany and Serbia sign the Jadar Declaration on international solidarity in resisting lithium mining and protecting the environment (Todorović, 2022).<sup>14</sup>

### **September-December**

The local communities of the municipality of Rekovac block the exploration site, preventing geological drilling.<sup>15</sup>

## **2023**

**3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> May** – two tragic shootings lead to a mass wave of protests that attracts tens of thousands of people<sup>16</sup>. The anti-lithium movement actively supports the protests which are referred to as Serbia Against Violence. The movement against violence again attracts tens of thousands of people over several months. With that, the struggle against lithium mining becomes less visible in the months that follow, with organising activities focused on smaller events rather than large protests.

**November** – the protests against violence which have continued for months now morph into a political campaign of the opposition parties.

**17<sup>th</sup> December** – the parliamentary elections take place with a lot of hope that they will finally bring about change, considering the months of protests since May 2023. Still, the coalition led by the SNS party and President Vučić wins again across Serbia, with some exceptions on the local level. With many indications of election fraud, the elections in Belgrade were later repeated in June 2024.

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<sup>14</sup> I describe the importance of international solidarity in Article 1.

<sup>15</sup> I expand on these blockades of exploration drills in Article 3.

<sup>16</sup> I discuss their connections with the resistance to lithium mining in Article 3

## 2024

### February

**15-18<sup>th</sup> February** – a Serbian NGO Pravo na vodu (*The Right to Water*) organises an international gathering on extractivism, bringing together local activists against lithium mining from across the world as well as large international NGOs.

**2<sup>nd</sup> June** – a rerun of local elections is held, including in Belgrade, six months after the elections on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2023 sparked protests because of alleged fraud. The opposition is divided as some called for the boycott of the rerun since the conditions have not improved for the elections to be considered fair. A coalition led by the ruling SNS party and President Vučić wins again (Stojanović, 2024).

**13<sup>th</sup> June** – Rio Tinto releases a “draft” environmental impact assessment (EIA) on the Jadar Project. Over 2,000 pages of draft studies were intended to demonstrate that the project can be safely developed (Rio Tinto, 2024b). Yet the release did not signal the start of the formal EIA process as the project was still cancelled at the time. Instead, they provided an opportunity to overwhelm the public with the information.

**15<sup>th</sup> June** – Emboldened by the victory in the local elections, President Vučić declares in an interview for the Financial Times that Serbia is set to give the Jadar Project the green light. Vučić cited the “new guarantees” from Rio Tinto as well as the EU that the environmental concerns will be addressed as the reason behind the decision (Dunai et al., 2024). This was the first such proclamation since the cancellation of the project in January 2022.

**28<sup>th</sup> June** – a protest in Loznica attracts a several thousands of people. The activists say they give the government 40 days before the protests will escalate.

**8<sup>th</sup> July** – seven people are arrested for blocking the railroad in Loznica, the city closest to the Jadar Project. Zlatko Kokanović and Nebojša Petković from Ne damo Jadar (SEOS) are among the arrested (Todorović, 2024b).

**11<sup>th</sup> July** – the Serbian Constitutional Court declares the government decree from January 2022 which cancelled the spatial plan for the Jadar Project as unconstitutional and unlawful (Todorović, 2024a).

**16<sup>th</sup> July** – the Serbian government issues a new decree which reinstates the Jadar Project, citing the decision of the Constitutional Court from the week before (Todorović, 2024b).

**18<sup>th</sup> July** – only two days later, the delegation of the EU arrives in Belgrade for the “High-Level Summit on critical raw materials in Belgrade,” and the Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal Maroš Šefčovič signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the Serbian Minister of Mining and Energy Dubravka Djedović Handanović. It marked the launch of the “strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles” (European Commission, 2024b).

Spontaneous protests erupt in smaller towns and cities across Serbia. These are typically local grassroots groups and are very significant because they often have no connection with the Jadar Valley or with Belgrade-based activist organisations. These are bottom-up solidarity protests that attract tens of thousands of people despite the SEOS committing itself to 40 days of silence.

**10<sup>th</sup> August** – the weeks of smaller protests across Serbia culminate in a mass protest in Belgrade following the 40 days. It is considered one of the largest protests against lithium mining to date. It marks the culmination of dissatisfaction with the government’s continuous support of the project despite widespread resistance. It results in overnight blockades of two railway stations in Belgrade, with the organisers explicitly stating that they are targeting the movement of goods and capital.

**11<sup>th</sup> August** – in the early hours of the following day, anti-terrorist forces are employed to disperse the blockade. Three activists are arrested.

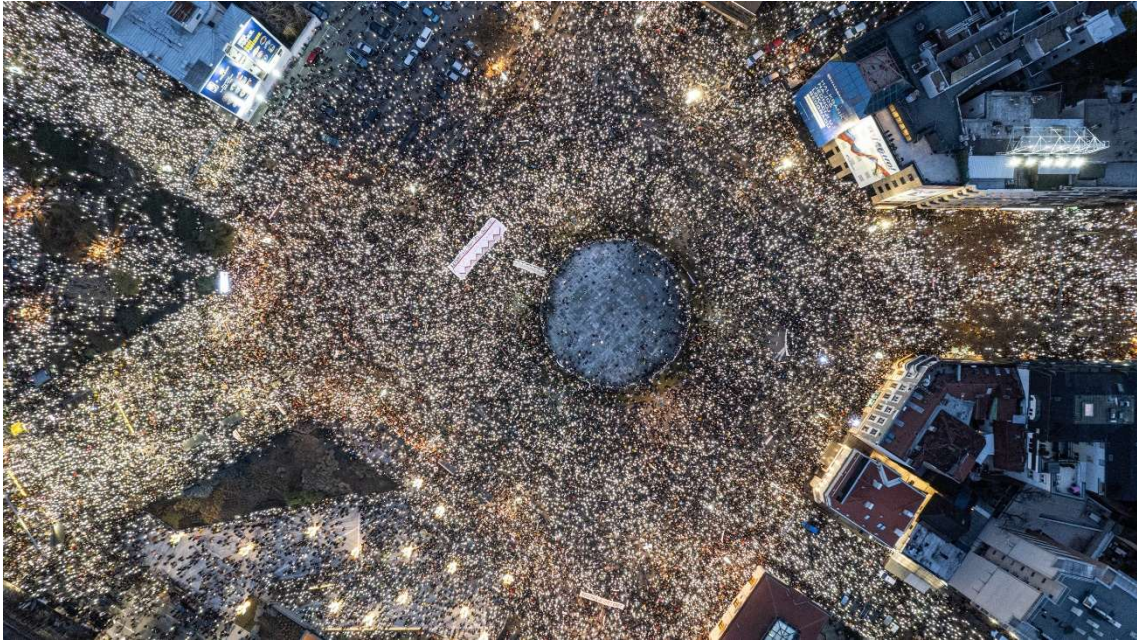
**13<sup>th</sup> August** – following the pressure, the three activists are released after three days. Some of them are later arrested again as the student protests erupt in November.

Yet the oppression continues to escalate, with over 60 activists detained in the following weeks.

**1<sup>st</sup> November** – an outdoor part of the concrete roof of a newly renovated main train station in Novi Sad collapses, killing 15 people. In the following weeks and months, a wave of protests and blockades erupted across the country, led by the students who blocked their own faculties and universities. The student protests against corruption and for systemic change are ongoing, and resulting in some of the largest protests in the history of Serbia as well as the wider region. They present the biggest challenge to the regime of President Vučić to date, surpassing both the protests against lithium and the protests against violence in their size and temporal scale. The protests have also been classified by some as the largest student movement in Europe since 1968 (Gercama, 2025).

## 2025

**13<sup>st</sup> November** – Bloomberg reports that Rio Tinto ‘mothballs’ the Jadar Project, placing it under a ‘care and maintenance’ regime, citing an internal memo (Hunt, 2025). A Rio Tinto spokesperson declined to comment on the decision but confirmed the content of the memo. My research participants remain wary, noting that the project was already officially cancelled and then reinstated once before.



*Figure 18: An aerial photo of the student protest in Slavija, Belgrade, 22nd December 2024. The protest has attracted an estimated 100,000 people. Photo: Vreme.*

# 3 | Literature Review: Geographies of Resistance to Green Extractivism

## 3.1 Introduction

“What even is extractivism? Can they not just say mining so that we know what we’re talking about,” one of my research participants whispered to me at an international gathering on extractivism which took place in February 2024 in Belgrade, organised by the Serbian NGO Pravo na Vodu (*The Right to Water*). The research participant is one of the most visible faces of SEOS, the umbrella organisation which unites local associations against lithium mining. The question was not declared publicly, and it does not necessarily represent a position of the movement, yet it marks a private moment of doubt which is illustrative of some of the difficulties that navigating concepts among a wide range of actors and voices brings about. I offer this example as a starting point for this chapter to reflect on my use of extractivism as a key concept of this thesis.

The gathering on extractivism brought together researchers, Serbian NGO and CSO professionals, representatives of large international NGOs, including the European Environmental Bureau, Earthworks, and Yes to Life No to Mining, as well as members of communities affected by extractivism from across Serbia and globally. With participants from Peru, Ecuador, Portugal and the US arriving in the Jadar Valley to share their experiences, myself acting as a translator, a sense of solidarity was established, grounded in the strong relationship with the land.<sup>17</sup> What was significant about the gathering were the efforts to reflect the usage of extractivism globally as an organising concept (Chagnon et al., 2022). While certainly not the first, this effort was among the most visible ones through the internationalisation of the struggle, bringing together activists from across the world under the banner of extractivism. Despite the challenges of translating a concept,

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<sup>17</sup> I expand on the construction of global anti-extractivist solidarities in Article 1.

both in a literal sense and in a political sense, extractivism here serves as a bridge between different geographies as well as temporalities of extraction – from the pre-extraction phase of planning in Serbia to the large-scale extraction in Latin America and elsewhere.

In Serbian, the Jadar Project is mostly referred to simply as a mining project (*rudarski projekat* in Serbian), with the potential process being described as mining (*rudarenje* in Serbian) or extraction (*ekstrakcija* in Serbian). At the gathering, the organisers offered a Serbian translation of extractivism as *izrabljivanje*, which can also be translated as exploitation, yet the Serbian version of extractivism simply as *ekstraktivizam* is also common. In the past few years, *ekstraktivizam* has also proliferated within the Serbian academia, with the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) organising an academic conference in November 2025 titled Green Extractivism on the (Semi)Periphery: The Jadar Project (*Zeleni ekstraktivizam na (polu)periferiji: Projekat Jadar*). Similarly, an edited volume titled Lithium Mining and Environmental (In)Justice (Nikolić & Erić, 2025) was published by the IFDT in December 2025 both in English and Serbian, bringing together texts on lithium mining and extractivism from authors from Serbia, Argentina, Chile, Portugal and elsewhere, to which I also contributed (Djukanović, 2025b).

Thinking in terms of extractivism allows me to make ethical, political and conceptual connections, which this chapter is centred around, relating resistance to lithium mining in Serbia with anti-extractivist struggles elsewhere. First, I outline the key debates around extractivism, paying particular attention to the question of its conceptual expansion and potential dangers of its “dematerialisation” (the loss of focus solely on physical extraction). I explain how this thesis contributes to the literature on extractivism by expanding on its understanding not as a particular material process but as a logic that can stretch from research methodologies<sup>18</sup> to mining explorations. Second, I describe the concept of green extractivism to account for the specificities of the so-called critical raw materials and particularly lithium in the context of the green transition. Third, I trace the geographical expansion of green extractivism as moving beyond the Global

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<sup>18</sup> I expand on methodologies and ethnographies *as* extractivism in the next chapter.

North/Global South binary and across increasingly diverse geographies. Here I outline some key debates around the Global North and South, sacrifice zones, peripheries and colonialism, bringing in the importance of paying attention to the Balkans as a region that problematises many of these concepts. Finally, I focus on resistance and temporalities of extractivism, highlighting the significance of anticipation of the extractivist projects, such as in the case of Serbia. I foreground the affective, embodied and sensorial experiences of anticipating and resisting extractivism, while highlighting the notions of future and temporality in the context of the climate crisis.



*Figure 19: A sign in the Jadar Valley stating "we don't give Jadar!", April 2023. Picture my own.*

## 3.2 Conceptualising extraction and extractivism

So why cannot we just say mining? What work is the concept of extractivism doing and why am I employing it in this thesis despite some of the critique it has faced? Szeman and Wenzel (2021, p. 505) argue that “[t]he term ‘extractivism’ has quickly become the name for every process and practice through which value is generated for capitalism” while Murrey and Mollett warn that “extraction is not a metaphor” (2023). What is the relationship between extraction and extractivism? Or, put differently, “when does the *act* of resource extraction become a policy, an ideology, or a logic of extractivism?” (Szeman & Wenzel, 2021, p. 506). To Szeman and Wenzel, the fundamental question is: “by what set of imaginative, cognitive, economic, and other material operations does nature *become* figured as a resource? [...] [H]ow do fossils become fuels that power both engines *and* imaginations? (2021, pp. 508–509). By extension, this thesis raises the question of *what kinds of imaginations are being powered by lithium and other critical raw materials?* How are these imaginations resisted and what alternatives are being imagined? And how do these new imaginations, if they are new at all, relate to the long histories of other forms of extraction and extractivism?

Szeman and Wenzel distinguish between “extraction as a concrete, physical practice, on the one hand, and extractivism as the cultural and ideological rationale that either motivates extraction or is the consequence of it” (2021, p. 508). They suggest this distinction is critical in order to (re)establish the focus on the materiality of extraction and to go against the “loss of analytical precision” of extractivism as a concept (2021, p. 505). They warn against extractivism becoming yet another synonym for the “exploitative badness” and “villainous forces” alongside capitalism, neoliberalism, globalisation or colonialism (2021, p. 510), arguing that:

“the potential gains of identifying congruences among various modes of (ab)using things (human, nonhuman, or inhuman; inanimate or inanimate; material or immaterial) to make or get other things, in situations of unequal power, may be far outweighed by the loss of conceptual precision and force

necessary to understand and intervene in the interwoven politics of nature, labour, and knowledge” (2021, p. 512).

Yet speaking of gains and losses risks reproducing the zero-sum thinking that fails to recognise the entire worlds that are in between. These “things” – human or nonhuman, animate<sup>19</sup> or inanimate, material or immaterial – are not divided in clearly cut boundaries, but rather are fluid, permeable and constantly shifting. Identifying congruences between them also serves to demonstrate this relationality and interconnectedness. I argue across this thesis for attending to the malleability and fluidity of many of the conceptual borders and binaries, whether in terms of the binary between the Global North and the Global South<sup>20</sup>, the binary between material and immaterial toxicity<sup>21</sup>, or expanding the concept of extractivism. Crucially, I will also argue that such conceptual expansions do not preclude resistance, as the case of Serbia demonstrates.

These theoretical debates about extractivism have been well established within Latin American scholarship. The concept of extractivism originates in Latin America where scholars have been concerned with understanding the long history of colonial and imperial modes of exploitation and accumulation (Aráoz, 2013; Gudynas, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2018). Extractivism in its classical sense refers to “activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export” (Acosta, 2013, p. 62). Natural resources typically refer to mining and extraction of minerals and fossil fuels, but also forestry (Kröger & Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2021), agriculture (Veltmeyer & Ezquerro-Cañete, 2023; see Hokkanen, 2024 on soil extractivism), or fishery (Márquez Pérez, 2024). A concept of neoextractivism was introduced to account for the expansion in extraction from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was no longer led by colonial forces but by the state, closely cooperating with multinational capital while redistributing some of the revenue to fund social programmes (Svampa, 2015). Neoextractivism thus became a dominant model of development pursued by progressive and neoliberal

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<sup>19</sup> I assume that one of the words used by Szeman and Wenzel is supposed to say “animate,” but I do not correct it in the original citation where they write of “inanimate and inanimate” things (2021, p. 512).

<sup>20</sup> As I address in Article 1.

<sup>21</sup> As I address in Article 2.

governments alike (Andrade, 2022) that promoted it as an expression of sovereignty over their own resources in Latin America (Acosta, 2013; Burchardt & Dietz, 2014; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2014) and beyond (see Ayelazuno, 2014 for an analysis of ‘new extractivism’ in Ghana). Ye and colleagues propose ten defining features of extractivism, including “the creation of a monopoly over the resources,” “close intertwinements between state and private capital groups,” and extractivism being “constituted by, and through, inequalities” (2020, pp. 156–157).

While more recently, the understanding of extractivism has been applied beyond resource extraction, some authors, such as Szeman and Wenzel (2021), have cautioned against an expansive understanding of extractivism, believing that its definition should be limited to the physical and material extraction of natural resources. The risk here is that an overly broad understanding of extractivism impedes resistance (see Gudynas, 2018). Gago and Mezzandra, on the other hand, strongly argue for “radicalizing the notion of extractivism” (2017, p. 577) and for the conceptual expansion of both “the categories of extraction and extractivism” (2017, p. 586) in order to understand the processes of financialisation and accumulation of capital in Latin America. Grosfoguel (2019), building on the work of Acosta (2013), Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) and Betasamosake Simpson (2013), describes at length colonial epistemic and ontological extractivism: the coopting of Indigenous or collective ideas even by scholars who claim to be speaking in the name of decolonisation. Thus, despite the insistence of some of the scholars on maintaining the focus on the extraction of “natural resources,” the use of the framework of extractivism has inevitably expanded by theorists and social movements alike to include not only epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2019), but also financial extractivism (Bruna, 2023a; de los Reyes, 2022; Gago & Mezzadra, 2017), digital extractivism (Chagnon et al., 2021), data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) or knowledge extractivism in relation to AI (Pasquinelli & Joler, 2021), and many others.

Extractivism can then occupy both the general and the specific position, yet expanding across increasingly diverse materials – and materialities – of extraction. Chagnon and colleagues (2022)

argue along these lines for understanding extractivism as an “organising concept,” “a way of world-making, determining, and making demands on most aspects of modern societies, and on the overall organization of the world system and its dynamics” (2022, p. 761). While certainly present in other economic systems such as in the Soviet Union (Ocaklı & Niewöhner, 2022), extractivism has become “a fundamental expression of global capitalism” (Chagnon et al., 2022, p. 761). Chagnon and colleagues introduce the concept of “global extractivism” to account for the expansion of extractivism as a “way of organising life” on a scale of “planetary significance,” focusing on how it has developed from a modality of European colonialism and imperialism to an all-encompassing logic of global capitalism. Similarly, Dunlap and Jakobsen use the term “total extractivism” to describe how “the techno-capitalist world system harbors a rapacious appetite for all life—total consumption of human and non-human resources—that destructively reconfigures the earth” and characterise the capitalist imperatives towards extractivism as “Worldeaters” (2020, p. 1). Through such understanding, extractivism emerges as a set of ontological technologies and practices, a way of thinking that fundamentally relies on violence in its multiple senses (Durante et al., 2021; Tornel, 2023).

Analysing the case of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia contributes to these conceptual debates in a distinctive way because it was stopped – or at least suspended – before the construction began. But can we talk about extractivism where no extraction has taken place? Is it, in other words, a “case” of extractivism (see Castree, 2005 on case studies)? While taking seriously Murrey and Mollett’s emphasis on the need to “respond to the metaphorization of extraction by (re)asserting the need for persistent analysis on the material and embodied effects and consequences of extractivisms” (2023, p. 760), this thesis argues that paying attention to the cases where no extraction has taken place reveals the multitude of multitemporal effects of extractivism on landscapes, bodies and movements. When Szeman and Wenzel argue that “[t]his metaphorization [...] involves a simultaneous dematerialisation, losing the very thing that gives extractivism its conceptual bite” (2021, p. 511), they fail to consider cases such as the one I research, where materiality must be problematised beyond the physical extraction of resources

from the earth. Even though lithium in Serbia is not mined, the controversy of the project is already having *material* effects, from houses that are falling apart, exploration drills with toxic spillages, to bodies of local residents and activists that bear the brunt of psychological violence<sup>22</sup>. Expanding the concept of extractivism thus does not mean losing the focus on the material, but instead is an invitation to complicate what can be constituted as such.

In other words, I argue that extractivist logic can operate without material extraction while still having material effects. Moreover, even those works that focus on the extractivist logic rather than merely on the physical extraction have largely emphasised its role as a global modality of financial and capital accumulation, rather than focusing on the affective, embodied and sensorial experiences of uncertainty and anticipation which emerge as central in the context of the uncertainty around lithium mining in Serbia (see Gómez-Barris, 2017 for a notable exception). Such understanding of extractivism then also complicates temporality of extraction, as it becomes multi-temporal<sup>23</sup>. In the next section, I outline how the extractivist logic is expanding towards lithium and other critical raw materials based on the technocratic approach to the climate emergency.

### 3.3 Greening extractivism

“Everyone who is interested in the green transition, everyone who is interested in us heading towards electrification, and that means not just electric vehicles, but also renewable energy, should be an ally of the Jadar Project.”

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<sup>22</sup> These questions are further addressed in Article 2 where I discuss the violence and toxicity of anticipating mining which can materialise through diverse cases such as the destruction of the sold houses or the exploration drills.

<sup>23</sup> I expand on this point in the subsection 3.5 *Resistance, anticipation and futures*.

These are the words of Marijanti Babić, Rio Tinto’s Country Head for Serbia<sup>24</sup> from 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2024, two days before the Rio Tinto AGM in London<sup>25</sup> (Dnevnik, 2024). What emerges out of statements such as this one, and hundreds of others from Serbian politicians, EU officials, foreign ambassadors, corporate representatives and many others, is the construction of lithium in general and the Jadar Project in particular as essential for the green transition. While all extractivist projects are being hailed by their promoters as opportunities for the progress of individual countries, environmental destruction has become “accepted as the inevitable cost of achieving development” (Acosta, 2013, p. 62). Similarly, Chagnon and colleagues argue that extractivism is “diametrically opposed to the concept and practices of sustainability” (2022, p. 762). Yet, what happens when extractivism of a certain kind of resource – in this case lithium – is presented by interest groups not as in opposition to sustainability but as being in its very heart? I suggest that what is novel about green extractivism is the scale of its moral claim advanced by the mining industry as well as the broader political and economic interest groups – that extractivism is not only compatible with environmental protection because of the advancement of technologies (as one form of a technofix), but is even playing an indispensable role in saving the planet due to the need for CRMs in low-carbon technology (as another form of a technofix).

Indeed, Voskoboynik and Andreucci conceptualise green extractivism as framing resource exploitation “not only as compatible with climate change, but indeed as necessary to its mitigation” (2022, p. 1; see also Andreucci et al., 2023; Bruna, 2023a). Green extractivism thus accounts for the ongoing rapid expansion of extractivist projects and the mining industry in particular under the pretext of tackling climate change. For Voskoboynik and Andreucci, green

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<sup>24</sup> Marijanti Babić is Rio Tinto’s Country Head for Serbia as of at least August 2023 (the exact date is unspecified in publicly available resources). A Country Head for Serbia is a position that has seen several people come and go over a short period of time, something highlighted by my research participants who would often joke about different Country Heads who have “fallen flat on their face” as they tried to push forward with the Jadar Project. The local organisation Ne Damo Jadar announced in November 2024 that Babić too has been removed from her position (NDJ, 2024). This information could not be verified as Rio Tinto has not published any announcement on the matter.

<sup>25</sup> I attended the Rio Tinto AGM in April 2024, and I expand on the experience in Chapter 4 on methodology and in Article 3.

extractivism is signalled by “the fantasy of an environmentally and climatically benign resource frontier, of an ultimate technological and ecological fix capable of fuelling local and national development while saving global capital from its own ecological contradictions” (2022, p. 809). Such transition is based on continuous economic growth and technofixes rather than on a systemic change (see Hickel & Kallis, 2020). For Anlauf (2016), the current lithium rush presents a “greening” of the imperial mode of living where everyday practices rely heavily on global expropriation and appropriation of resources based on unequal, imperial relations (Brand & Wissen, 2013). Rather than being an alternative to the highly consumerist mode of living, current dominant strategies to tackle climate change make it “possible to keep up a fossilist consumption pattern of symbolic significance for the imperial mode of living” (2016: 166). Thus, what is hegemonically referred to as a green or sustainable future is fundamentally dependent on the continuous expansion of extractivist frontiers, from critical raw materials to the low carbon infrastructure.

Dominant green transition strategies from the Green New Deal in the US to the European Green Deal in the EU are heavily reliant on extractivism (Zografos, 2022), requiring an unprecedented amount of raw materials (Anlauf, 2016; Zografos & Robbins, 2020). Mining itself remains a major cause of pollution and toxicity globally (Carvalho, 2017) while being heavily resisted by the impacted communities (Bebbington & Humphreys Bebbington, 2018; Conde, 2017).<sup>26</sup> Yet the mining industry has sought to recast itself as more sustainable, cleaner and greener, particularly by relying on technology developments and the advancement of so-called “smart” mining. Mining is projected to become more efficient and safer, with innovation proliferating in the areas of the automation (Ge et al., 2022) and robotics of mining (Marshall et al., 2016) that are portrayed as increasing the safety of the workers by being deployed to explore hazardous areas (Günther et al., 2019). Strategies such as “green” and “climate-smart mining” and recycling (Hodgkinson & Smith, 2021; Jiskani et al., 2021) are being rapidly developed. Extractivism is thus becoming

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<sup>26</sup> See Article 2 on the discussion of violence of the green transition.

framed as not only greener but also smarter (Brodie, 2024; Bruna, 2022). It is important for scholars of resistance to extractivism not to ignore these developments as the argument of improved technology and safety is becoming increasingly prominent, as is the imperative imposed by the climate state of exception. With the developing technology, widespread resistance from local communities, and the imperative of mining needed for the green transition, extractivism is now “on the verge of reaching out into space” (Bösel, 2022, p. 16), with the legal framework for space extractivism already largely in place (Storr, 2021), similarly to deep sea mining (Childs, 2020).

Green extractivism as a relatively novel concept is enmeshed in various conceptual conversations within the broader critical interrogation of the green transition, extending beyond mining. Green extractivism is closely related to green colonialism (Dorn, 2022; Lang et al., 2024), green sacrifice zones (Zografos & Robbins, 2020; see also Valenzuela-Fuentes et al., 2021; Scott & Smith, 2017), or green grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012; Núñez et al., 2022), often in overlapping ways (see Dunlap & Riquito, 2023 on the relationship between green extractivism and green grabbing). Moreover, green extractivism has been employed to analyse a range of cases, discussing wind energy development from Western Sahara (Alkhalili et al., 2023) to Mexico (Dunlap & Arce, 2022) or Colombia (Ulloa, 2023), “solar extractivism” in China (Hu, 2023), “hydroelectric extractivism” in Mexico (Post, 2022), extractive economies around wind and solar energy projects in Greece (Argenti & Knight, 2015), green steel on Sami land in Sweden (de Leeuw & Vogl, 2024) and even analysing jaguar conservation in Mexico through green extractivism (Ruelas & Dunlap, 2023). Núñez et al. (2022) use the term eco-extractivism to denote colonial and extractivist logics of conservation projects while Hernandez and Newell (2022) analyse lithium extraction in the lithium triangle of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina through the concept of renewable extractivism. Brodie analyses data centres as technologies of green extractivism, making visible the connections between the green and digital transitions (2024).

Yet some scholars have argued that the “newness” of green extractivism overshadows the old and “dirty” infrastructures on which it relies – or on what has been termed “grey extractivism” (Wiegink et al, upcoming special issue). Dunlap and colleagues highlight how green extractivism “depends on multi-layered and networked extractivisms” which underlie the entire webs and networks of the supply chains, from infrastructure such as energy grids, pipelines, chemicals, to factories and warehouses” (2024, p. 442). Regardless of the dependence, the authors highlight two key features that distinguish green extractivism from extractivism: first, “it uses socioecological, weather and climate crises to generate new or reinforce existing 'green' markets or profit-generating activities” and second, “it involves the mobilization of claims of ecological sustainability, 'carbon neutrality' and combating climate change in order to legitimize and rationalize extraction” (Dunlap et al., 2024, pp. 447–448). Building on this, I argue that what is distinct about green extractivism is the discursive power of the climate emergency whose urgency and moral signalling make it possible to cast projects ranging from solar panels to mining to data centres as saving the planet, making any resistance ever more difficult – while no less frequent. Emergency in this sense is both urgent and ‘slow’ where “the intersection of stalled time and disastrous time foreclose capacities to become otherwise” (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 632). Those resisting extractivist projects have commonly been accused of hindering progress and development, in the Western understandings of linearity and growth (see Bebbington & Humphreys Bebbington, 2018; Conde, 2017). But those resisting green extractivist projects are now, additionally, being accused of hindering efforts to save the planet, as some of the statements by Rio Tinto representatives or politicians in favour of the Jadar Project show.

Moreover, as Ulloa argues, green extractivism produces a particular aesthetic regime of dispossession where “aesthetic representations of the future try to legitimize energy transition as something urgent and immediate” while erasing alternative visions of time, space or development (Ulloa, 2023, p. 6). It is in this sense that not only the aesthetical but also the experiences of uncertainty, anticipation, toxicity and violence are crucial, as this thesis argues. I want to suggest that it is the particular temporality of the anticipation of large number of green extractivist projects

which are being currently planned or developed – and resisted – across the planet that further highlights the need to pay attention to extractivism before physical extraction has taken place, and the affective dimensions of it. I suggest that the anticipated scale of extraction under green extractivism is likely to be unprecedented, as some of the prediction highlighted in Chapter 2: Background and Context show. In the following section, I address how this anticipated expansion of green extractivism translates geographically, with extractivist projects extending across increasingly diverse geographies, further complicating the binary understanding of the categories such as the Global North or the Global South.

### 3.4 Colonialism, sacrifice zones and peripheries

If the critical raw materials are “at the forefront of future extractive landscapes,” as Voskoboynik and Andreucci write (2022, p. 788), where are those landscapes and what do they look like? With the material (and immaterial) extraction expanding at an unprecedented scale globally, and the conceptual expansion of extractivism as an all-encompassing logic of the green transition, it also expands geographically. Several scholars have noted the continuous coloniality of green extractivism. For Anlauf, green technologies “spatially and temporarily externalize socio-ecological costs and constitute a continuation of the Global North’s imperial mode of living” (2016, p. 176). Similarly, particularly electromobility and lithium mining present an “eco-coloniality” that reproduces the structural and historical asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South (Jerez et al., 2023, p. 73). For Dietz, the energy transition in Europe brings green extractivism to Latin America (2023). Andreucci and colleagues highlight how “a capital-driven shift to low-carbon technologies, primarily in the North, is organically linked with the production of sacrifice zones of extraction and dispossession, concentrated in the South” (2023, p. 2). Some scholars of the Global South have even commended certain aspects of the EU’s Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) aimed at increased material security and sovereignty such as “home-shoring the mining and processing in a way that reduces extractivism in the Global South”

(Bassey et al., 2023) since for them “the decarbonization of the North through green growth depends on a new phase of environmental despoliation of the Global South, which has once again become a sacrifice zone” (ibid.).

Yet this over-reliance on the binary categories such as the North and South misses out on an opportunity to account for the nuances that emerge in the shifting and expanding logic of green extractivism. The logic of extractivism and infinite capitalist growth follows the imperative to mine wherever and whenever possible. To believe that more extractivism in the Global North will result in less extractivism in the Global South fundamentally misinterprets its ontology of the continuous expansion. Riofrancos calls for the greater attention to “lithium onshoring,” highlighting how the existing studies have been “neglecting dynamics within the Global North—the site of the most surprising changes to the global geography of lithium mining” (2023, p. 23). In other words, the front lines – or frontiers – of lithium have shifted, and even if this shift has not (yet) resulted in physical extraction as there are no significant commercial lithium mines in Europe, it is still *material* in the expansive sense of the concept, as well as discursive and imagined. Such changes call on us to embrace the complexity of the rapidly changing material relations across the world, and to take seriously the shifting geographies of extractivism. As Riofrancos highlights: “The emerging map and sheer volume of planetary extraction will intensify unequal ecological exchange at multiple scales: within Global North countries, where policy makers seek to expand domestic extraction; between the Global North and South; and in territories that defy easy classification in either supranational category” (2023, p. 26). Similarly, del Marmol and Vaccaro (2020) trace the shift away from conservation and tourism that have until recently been “almost exclusive developmentalist frameworks available for the peripheral areas of rural Europe” (2020, p. 48), tracking the return of extractivism to Europe.

To think of extractivism in Europe as somehow decolonial, as for instance alluded to by Bassey and colleagues (2023), homogenises Europe as a category and underestimates the massive expansion of extractivism across multiple geographies. Crucially, it also ignores the already

forming global solidarities, particularly among the communities that face lithium extraction, with activists from the Americas connecting with those in the Jadar Valley as well as in Spain and Portugal and many other places<sup>27</sup>. What is needed are networks of solidarity rather than duality between the Global North and the Global South. Ramón Grosfoguel, Puerto Rican sociologist, writes:

“Extractivism is the pillage and plunder witnessed from the colonial age to the neoliberal neocolonialism of the present day. It involves the looting, dispossession, theft, and appropriation of the resources of the global South (the South of the North, and the South within the North) for the benefit of certain demographic minorities on this planet who constitute the global North (the North of the South, and the North within the South) and are considered racially superior, comprising the capitalist elites within the world system” (2019, p. 205).

His distinction between the Global North and the Global South which centres power relations rather than geographical location is instructive here – while *geographies* of extractivism still *matter*. Throughout this thesis, I insist on the importance of nuancing the widely used terms such as the Global North and the Global South for the sake of resisting the logic of extractivism as a whole. Arboleda’s analysis of the “planetary mine” (2020) shows the extractive flows as moving in new directions, making “the geographies of extraction ubiquitous at a global scale” (Tornel, 2023, p. 850). Yet, as Tornel strongly argues, this “does not mean that the expansion or the experience of extractivism ceases to reproduce imperial and neocolonial forms of domination” (ibid.). Crucially, by insisting on the nuancing of the terms, I do not argue for their doing away, particularly as Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea highlight the importance of the South not as a territory but as an analytical tool (2022). Instead, the expanding logic of green extractivism reveals the

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<sup>27</sup> I expand on the international solidarities in relation to lithium mining in Serbia in Article 1.

complexity of the relations between the Global North and the Global South and highlights the limitations of applying these terms to describe the future landscapes and territories of extraction.

I thus argue against the reproduction of the binary division between the Global North and the Global South, often resulting in the dismissal of the shifting material and geopolitical flows of nearshoring, and, intentionally or not, concealing the global solidarities which have already been forming. Crucially, however, some scholars who have focused on the growing number of struggles in the Global North have been too quick to apply the same concepts used to describe resistance to extractivism in the Global South. Alkhalili and colleagues, writing about wind energy developments in occupied Western Sahara (oWS) and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights (oSGH), have powerfully warned against “the tendency to misuse concepts such as colonialism in ways that trivialize history and the power structure inherited from it,” “reduc[ing] colonialism to a phenomenon that takes place in Europe today in similar manner to occupied territories where settler colonialism never stopped its reproduction” (2023, p. 3). Taking issue particularly with Dunlap’s concept of “infrastructural colonization” (2020; see also Dunlap & Laratte, 2022) discussed in the context of France and Spain, Alkhalili and colleagues argue that “a sharp and a careful distinction needs to be made with green neoliberalism being pursued in the European countryside” on one hand, and “communities seeking self-determination on their colonized lands” on the other (2023, p. 6)<sup>28</sup>. Yet at the same time, when Alkhalili and colleagues write that “the colonial legacy that persists in both the oSGH and oWS is not at all the case for the European context, which hasn’t been and is not colonized” (2023, p. 6) they are contributing to the erasure of those histories and memories that have indeed been colonised, particularly in the context of

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<sup>28</sup> Dunlap responds to the critique of Alkhalili and colleagues, arguing that a distinction has to be made between “infrastructural colonization” and colonialism: “While it should not be conflated with (settler) *colonialism*, infrastructural *colonization* seeks to identify the roots and mechanisms of the colonial model, specifically how habitats and peoples are captured, psycho-politically captivated and together accumulated into an extractivist political economy” (Dunlap, 2023, p. 2 emphasis added for clarity) Moreover, infrastructural colonization “implicitly recognizes state formation as colonialism” (ibid.).

eastern Europe and the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, or the Soviet Union (Todorova, 2005)<sup>29</sup>.

Green extractivism highlights how terms such as the Global North and the Global South are no longer applicable in any simple way. The urgency of the climate crisis results in the expansion of extractivist projects across the South, North, the deep sea and space. The example of the lithium mining projects in Serbia offers a crucial contribution to these debates, occupying a liminal position in regard to Europe both historically and in the present. Writing from the Balkan extractivist frontier, from post-war and post-socialist contexts, offers an additional voice in the choir of resistance against extractivist projects across the world. Scholars of and from the Balkans have offered fundamental reconceptualisations on the liminal position between the Global North and the Global South (Boatca, 2006; Matković, 2014; Vasiljević, 2018), as well as between the coloniser and the colonised (see Arsenijević, 2022; Petkovska, 2023; Vilenica, 2023 on decoloniality from the semi-periphery). While the conceptual boundaries between the Global North and the Global South, and between Europe and the rest of the world are simplifying, more nuance is needed as the growing number of scholars uncritically applies the concept of colonialism to the cases in the Global North, including in western Europe and within the EU, as Alkhalili and colleagues (2023) rightly point out. In the following subsection, I expand on the particularities of mining and extractivism in Serbia in the post-socialist context.

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<sup>29</sup> Some of these points are again highlighted in Article 1 where I expand on them.

### 3.5 Post-socialist landscapes of transition

The Jadar Project in Serbia has been distinctly characterised as *the* green transition project not only for the country but also for the EU. Yet in Serbia and other post-socialist and post-war landscapes, a transition is a loaded term, with serious – and material – implications for politics, geopolitics as well as resistance. Barry and Gambino importantly note that “the present period is one in which infrastructural projects have come to be justified as contributions to ‘transition’ and as responses to climate change” (2024, p. 352). Bridge et al. note that the energy transition itself is a spatial and geographical process “involving the reconfiguration of current patterns and scales of economic and social activity” (2013, p. 331). Bouzarovski et al. bring together an analysis of energy infrastructure systems and territories as spatially contingent upon each other through the example of gas infrastructure in Europe (2015). Similarly, Barry centres the importance of materials and territories in relation to politics by focusing on the case of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2013). Focusing on the case of the post-socialist states of central and eastern Europe, Bouzarovski argues that the reforms of the energy sector did not follow ‘neat’ neoliberal theories but rather were marked by perpetual tensions with the local context, histories and power relations (2009). Such works highlight the contingent relationship between landscapes, territories, infrastructures and materials, which are critical to understanding transitions in their broader sense – including the green transition and the corresponding green extractivism.

In the case of some parts of eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Serbia, the green transition is occurring not following the post-socialist and neoliberal transition, but in parallel to it. The post-socialist transition of countries in central and eastern Europe since 1989 marks a profound reconfiguration of political and economic systems as a departure from socialism (Verdery, 1991), alongside the transformation of identity and property, including private ownership (Verdery, 1998). In the post-Yugoslav context, such a transition is further complicated through the violent wars of the 1990s and a post-war transition which followed. Crucially, however, the transitions are characterised by a distinct sense of continuation, with relentless and perpetual ‘catching up’,

often through large-scale infrastructural and extractivist projects. As Štiks and Horvat put it, “a period of violence, conflict or general instability and economic hardship has been followed by a seemingly endless transition to liberal democracy and a neoliberal economy” (2014, p. 83). In such an understanding, the ethnic and nationalist violence of the 1990s has also undergone a transition, turned into perpetual neoliberalisation and privatisation which too bring about distinct forms of violence.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the violence of the Yugoslav wars continues to extend in time through lingering transitional justice (Campbell, 2007; Jeffrey & Jakala, 2012) and memory politics (Lazic, 2013). Materially, toxic inheritance of wars and socialist militarisation continues to poison soil and rivers, exacerbated by postwar neoliberal dispossession (Hodžić, 2023 on Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Neoliberalisation, toxicity and unsustainable growth mix together in the booming mining industry in Serbia and beyond. Scholars have described the global resource boom since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the overall increase in the global material footprint and the exploitation of natural resources dramatically expanding in size and pace (Conde, 2017; Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020; Nygren et al., 2022). Bridge traces how neoliberal reform and economic liberalisation drove the global mining ‘bonanza’ (2004), especially across the Global South. Needed for this boom are the narratives of ‘resource triumphalism’ and ‘postscarcity’ where “the availability of natural resources no longer poses a limiting factor on economic growth” (Bridge, 2001, p. 2149). Jacka powerfully argued several years ago that “[t]he production and consumption of mineral resources far exceed anything we have ever witnessed historically” (Jacka, 2018, p. 62). Indeed, it has long been established that “[t]he mining industry moves more earth than any other human endeavor” (Kirsch, 2010, p. 87). It is then difficult to imagine how much more earth will be moved in the upcoming decades, justified by requiring critical raw materials for the global energy transformation and the low-carbon industries (Kuzemko et al., 2025; Sovacool et al., 2020), yet increasingly so especially for militarisation, digitalisation and AI development.

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<sup>30</sup> I expand on this point in Article 2.

Kojola analyses “extractive populism” as a mobilisation of nationalist discourses and authoritarianism under the pretext of bringing back a “good life” (2019). Bridge et al. similarly point to the rise of economic nationalism where energy projects (and I would add mining) are “harnessed to claims for national security and development in ways that occlude the particular interests of private capital and suppress dissent” (2018, p. 2). In Serbia, the “neoliberal authoritarianism” (Piletić, 2022) currently led by the President Aleksandar Vučić has used large-scale infrastructural projects, ranging from mines and factories to railways and airports, to both promote economic development and strengthen the country’s geopolitical position, skilfully navigating the contracts and concessions between Russian, Chinese, EU, US, Turkish or Israeli companies. It is in this context that scholars and commentators have described Serbia as becoming a “mining colony”, particularly in relation to the Western pressure to construct the Jadar lithium mine (Bárcena, 2024; Matković, 2024; Weizman & Ahmatović, 2025). Yet such a framing risks invisibilising the role of internal politics in the country as well as the post-socialist and green transitions more broadly as the cornerstone of the ongoing mining “bonanza” in the region.

Vujošević et al. argue that the post-socialist transition in Serbia can be defined as “unsustainable”, having followed the model of “growth without development” based on poorly executed reforms (Vujošević et al., 2012). In such an environment, large infrastructure projects continue to be presented as a path towards development, as is the case with the Jadar Project. Applicable parallels have been described in the context of Turkey as “bulldozer capitalism” (Evren, 2022) or “bulldozer neoliberalism” (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011). Similarly, Çaylı analyses extractivism and resistance to it in Turkish Kurdistan, which “has not only continued unabated throughout the neoliberal-democratic transition from ‘war’ to ‘peace’ but has also structured the latter paradigm on the former” (2021, p. 929, see also 2025). These contributions point to the critical importance of paying attention not only to the process of neoliberalisation and post-socialist transition, but also to the post-war transition. From the post-war and post-socialist transitions, to now the green transition, which is resulting in conflicts on a local level, from mining to hydropower (Piletić,

2023) to forestry (Petrova, 2014), a distinct sense of being *lost in transition* emerges.<sup>31</sup> Overlapping temporalities of transition then also correspond to overlapping forms of and causes for resistance. The Jadar Project is thus not only an infrastructural project for the green transition, but also another step in the neoliberal transition, as well as acting as a vehicle of Europeanisation through the enlargement process.<sup>32</sup> In the following section, I describe the role of temporality of resistance and extractivism.

### 3.6 Resistance, anticipation and futures

If I contend that green extractivism is distinct from other forms of extractivism for its scale, sense of urgency and performative insistence on saving the world, is then resistance to green extractivism distinct from other forms of resistance? I develop this discussion in Article 3 which is centred around the concepts of refusal and post-green extractivism. Here I use the questions as a starting point to think about geographies of resistance to which this research contributes (Katz, 2001; Keith & Pile, 1997; Paddison et al., 2002; Pile, 1997). Hughes warns that “geographers remain wedded to particular coordinates – of intention, linearity and opposition – that serve to determine in advance what comes to be termed as resistance” (2020, p. 1143). In response, she calls “for geographers to engage with resistance in *emergence*” (Hughes, 2020, p. 1143). The case of resisting lithium mining before any mining has taken place then offers important insights into the questions of resistance, emergence and anticipation. Scholars across the social sciences have been concerned with resistance to extractivism and mining projects (see Conde, 2017 for a review). Critical questions here are those behind the motivation to resist (Conde & Le Billon, 2017; Özen & Özen, 2017), different strategies ranging from engaging with scientists and knowledge production to legal procedures (Conde, 2014; Conde et al., 2023; Conde & Walter,

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<sup>31</sup> I expand on this argument in Article 2.

<sup>32</sup> I expand on these arguments in Article 1.

2022), and the perceptions of success and victory (Özkaynak & Rodríguez-Labajos, 2012; Walter & Wagner, 2021).

Crucially, Conde notes how many movements through their resistance not only reject the developmentalist discourses but also “create, recover or re-affirm a development path that rejects mining, in the process proposing alternative development models” (2017, p. 81). Indigenous and peasant communities in Latin America have been vocal proponents of alternative worldviews, foregrounding the understanding of nature that is not based on dualism and domination (Isla, 2022; Seoane et al., 2013; Zibechi, 2023). Activists, social movements and Indigenous people across the continent and beyond have articulated explicit alternatives to extractivism, ranging from post-extractivism to postdevelopmentalism (Dunlap & Tornel, 2024), Indigenous cosmologies, the notion of *buen vivir* and many others (Kothari et al., 2014; Riofrancos, 2017; Ulloa, 2017)<sup>33</sup>. Explicitly decolonial resistance led by rural women has also been analysed in Colombia (Rodríguez Castro, 2021). Mass resistance against lithium mining has been seen across Latin America (Fornillo, 2018; Jerez et al., 2021; Mejia-Muñoz & Babidge, 2023; Puente & Argento, 2015), notably in the “lithium triangle” of Chile (Babidge, 2021; Jerez et al., 2021), Argentina (Dorn & Ruiz Peyré, 2020) and Bolivia (Bos & Forget, 2021). It is in these contexts that the local communities “resist not just the means by which lithium is extracted, but the entire logic of extractive and neocolonial capitalism” (Kerr, 2022, p. 40)<sup>34</sup>.

With the onshoring of critical raw material mining projects, resistance has also grown across Europe and beyond. Protests, blockades, camps and campaigns have emerged against lithium mining projects in Portugal (Araújo et al., 2022; Canelas & Carvalho, 2023; Dunlap & Riquito, 2023; Silva & Sareen, 2023) and Spain (Noever Castelos, 2023). Yet Gómez-Barris, writing about extractivism in Latin America, calls for “pushing away from a paradigm of mere resistance into the more layered terrain of potential, moving within and beyond the extractive zone” (2017, p.

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<sup>33</sup> Article 3 is concerned with the notion of postextractivism, bringing it together with what I refer to as “post” green extractivism.

<sup>34</sup> In Article 3, I argue that what is also being resisted is the dominant vision of the green transition based on extractivism.

xv). Similarly, geographers have more recently contributed to broadening understandings of resistance from “predetermined, intentional and recognisable” (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1566) as emergent (Hughes, 2020), emotional (Murrey, 2016), relational and entangled (Hughes, 2023), particularly from critical, feminist and decolonial scholars. These theoretical developments are reflective of broader conversations on resistance from anthropology, ethnography, political ecology and environmental justice studies, where resistance and activism have been theorised within contexts of pollution, toxicity and slowness (Bond, 2021; Checker, 2014; Graeber, 2009; Liboiron, 2021; Lora-Wainwright, 2017; Maskovsky, 2013; Tironi, 2018)<sup>35</sup>. As I noted in the 3.3 *Greening extractivism* subsection, the cases of resistance to green extractivism in Europe, many of which are merely speculative or anticipated, point to the role of potential and refusal of the dominant narratives surrounding the green transition. They also highlight affective, embodied and sensorial experiences of resisting extractive projects that go beyond the physical extraction.

To what extent do the specific temporalities of resistance to extractivism affect our understandings of its geographies? Green extractivism of lithium mining in Serbia, like elsewhere in Europe, is being resisted before any material extraction could have taken place. What makes the case of Serbia distinct is the scale of the resistance, with protests attracting hundreds of thousands of people over several years. Scholars have noted the complex temporality of natural resource extraction (Fent & Kojola, 2020) and infrastructural mega-projects, the promotion of which fundamentally relies on the future promises of prosperity and development such as for instance in the case of large dams in Lesotho (Braun, 2020). At the same time, the temporalities of projects are often more short-sighted than the Indigenous temporalities that include the emphasis on kinship and nonhuman relations, such as in the case of Anishinaabe resistance to pipeline projects in Canada (Awasis, 2020). Crucial here is the aspect of the “not yet” of disaster (Weszkalnys, 2014) that offers important insights to the questions of temporality and resistance. Analysing a heavy mineral sands mining project in Senegal where no mining had yet occurred, Fent suggests

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<sup>35</sup> These developments are further addressed in Article 3 that focuses on refusal, further opening up the questions of resistance. Article 2 addresses the anticipation of toxicity.

that “experiences of and resistances to dispossession are mediated by the folding together of temporal frames and diverse displacements” (2020, p. 877; see also Morosin, 2020 on resisting mining in Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico before any mining permissions have been issued). As Fent puts it, “people anticipate and resist potential future displacements that promise to create capitalist value while compounding historical inequalities and ongoing ecological loss” (2020, p. 882). Crucially, such uncertainty and anticipation already constitute a form of violence.

Writing about the politics of violence in extractivism, Glaab and Stuvøy highlight how “violence has an essential temporal dimension” (Glaab & Stuvøy, 2021, p. 31). Drawing on Mbembe’s conceptualisation of necropolitics as the “capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11), Deberdt and Le Billon argue that “the necropolitics of the green transition is most visible in the green extractivism that affects the uncarbonised class, whose territories (but more rarely labour) provides the “raw materials” of the green transition” (2024, p. 1279; see also Dunlap & Laratte, 2022). Velicu, introducing the concept of prospective environmental injustice, argues strongly that “there is a prospective character of environmental injustice in the many ways people are harmed while merely ‘waiting’ for an ‘actual harm’ to happen” (Velicu, 2020, p. 420). In other words, while the importance of timing and temporality was key in stopping or at least delaying lithium mining in Serbia, harm was already done and violence produced, as I describe in detail in Article 2. At the same time, the temporalities not only of resistance but also of the materials that are (to be) extracted are always multiple. I understand the multifaceted and multitemporal forms of resistance through the notion of the political situation which moves beyond isolated events to focus on the “relations to a moving field of other controversies, conflicts and events, including those that have occurred in the past and that might occur in the future” (Barry, 2012, p. 330)<sup>36</sup>.

The pre-extraction phase of anticipation (Kama, 2020), speculation (Weszkalnys, 2015), prospectivity (Weszkalnys, 2016), delays (Fent, 2020) or social engineering (Verweijen &

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<sup>36</sup> I build on the concept of the political situation in Article 2 to theorise my contribution of *violent politics*.

Dunlap, 2021) is essential to the rich scholarship on geographies and temporalities of extractivism that this thesis contributes to. By organising at a massive scale with tens of thousands of people protesting before the construction of the mine, the anti-lithium movement resisted the project before substantive material and environmental damage could have occurred. The movement in Serbia prevented several controversial laws from being adopted in autumn 2021, it forced the government to officially cancel the project in January 2022, and no expropriation of houses and property has occurred to date. Crucially, the mass mobilisation of autumn 2021 and winter 2022 took place during a key political juncture, several months before the triple election of April 2022 (presidential, parliamentary, and some local). Thus, the particular timing – before extraction and before elections – allowed for the resistance to emerge on a mass scale. What is more, the protests erupted not only before the construction of the lithium mine in Serbia, but before the construction of *any* commercially significant lithium mine in Europe. The Jadar mine, considered essential for the EU's effort to secure access to lithium and increase its material sovereignty and control over the supply chains, was set to become a flagship mining project on a European level. The resistance has thus taken place at the very beginning of the green transition based on mining of critical raw materials and expanding green extractivism.

By stopping or at least significantly delaying the project, the resistance marked a fundamental contestation of the hegemonic green transition at its onset. Araújo et al. describe how, in Portugal, the term “mined future” has been used by the local population resisting lithium mining to describe the “unfolding [of] a battle of visions of the future” (2022, p. 1). Similarly, Jaramillo and Carmona analyse what they refer to as “temporal enclosures” in the context of an open-pit coal mine in Colombia where “mining companies aim to restrict imaginable outcomes to those that favour them, producing the sense of a manageable and inescapable future in which forthcoming activities are presented as both inevitable and desirable” (2022, p. 11). This is particularly relevant in the case of lithium around which a concrete vision of the future is constructed based on green extractivism as a technical solution to climate change (see for instance Carrasco et al., 2023). A range of corporate powers, as well as the governing national and international stakeholders and

multiple other actors, are temporally enclosing the alternative visions of the future in the climate crisis. The green future based on the continuous expansion of extractivism is then presented as the only viable option and the only possible future. Those who are resisting lithium mining in Serbia have thus not only resisted the project itself but also the “temporal enclosure” of the future (Jaramillo & Carmona, 2022), protesting not only mining of their land and soil but also of their future.

### 3.7 Conclusion

Building on the growing literature on green extractivism across the Global North and the Global South, I suggest that the imperative to mine critical raw materials under the climate emergency presents a new and particular challenge to the local communities that are resisting extractivist projects. While the narratives of progress, development and salvation are not new but a continuation of the long histories of extractivism, what is distinct is the scale to which materials are required for the green transition and the hegemonic insistence that such projects will bring not only economic prosperity to the respective nation-states but will also be crucial for “solving” climate change and saving the planet. At the same time, while scholars have been debating whether to conceptually sharpen extractivism or to embrace its looseness, *extraction* has continued to relentlessly expand. The green transition signals a shift in the logic of extractivism as the US and the EU promote the onshoring of green technologies under the pretext of security and sovereignty. The urgency of climate change becomes co-opted as the driving force for the expansion of capital and resources through green extractivism.

The concept of green extractivism emerges as central to this thesis through particular encounters during my research, including the example with my research participant, which I described at the beginning of this chapter, or experiencing first-hand the insistence of the mining industry to extract lithium for the sake of the green transition, such as during the Rio Tinto AGM in April

2024<sup>37</sup>. This thesis builds on the expansive visions of extractivism as a logic and an ontology that allow to capture the particularities of cases where the material extraction is not (yet) occurring. I use green extractivism as a set of orientations through which other concepts such as toxicity, violence, periphery, refusal, environmental justice, or the political situation can be held together. While not everything in this thesis is reducible to green extractivism, these concepts collectively direct our attention to the oppressive imperative to extract lithium, the anticipation of the extraction, and how that influences resistance. While related concepts such as green grabbing, (green) sacrifice zones, and (green) colonialism are relevant, I employ green extractivism to account for the situation where most of the land has not been grabbed, where communities have not been sacrificed, but are instead continuously resisting that sacrifice, and where they have not faced devastation associated with the physical extraction of the resources.

By focusing on the logic of green extractivism and its shifting expansion across geographies, what emerges as central is the agency of the activists and communities in Serbia who resist it, their power and the massive scale of the protests. Thus, even the seemingly totalising imaginaries of green extractivism are being resisted, as this thesis emphasises. My analysis of the case of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia contributes to the geographies – and temporalities – both of extractivism and of resistance to it, as they unfold in the wake of the Jadar Project. The question of timing and temporality is fundamental in the case of Serbia. Adopting a multi-temporal approach to the geographies of extractivism invites us to look closely at the temporalities of resistance as emergent, embodied and affective. In the next chapter, I describe the methodological details of this thesis, and I continue to theorise extractivism that can stretch as a logic not only in mining projects but also in knowledge production.

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<sup>37</sup> I describe this experience in detail in Article 3.

## **4 | Methodology: Ethnography of Extractivism and Resistance in Serbia**

### **4.1 Introduction, background and ethics**

This chapter is concerned with the research methods and the methodology of the thesis, including the ethics, commitments and positions that have guided the research. I start by describing the evolution of this research project and of my commitment to the local communities impacted by the prospect of lithium mining. I outline the rationale for the employment of ethnography as the methodology accompanied with a set of mixed qualitative methods including interviews. Second, I expand on the issues involved in the processes of negotiating ethnography while researching extractivism. What emerges is a double sense of extractivism – as my research participants themselves are resisting lithium mining in Serbia, and myself alongside them, this work also requires a commitment to practices that move away from reproducing the extractivist logics of research. Third, I expand on my own position between an insider and outsider, researcher and activist, outlining how this position can be understood in relation to what I refer to as “diasporic ethnographies.” Diasporic ethnographies allow for the multiple identities and positions between distance and embeddedness to sit next to each other while influencing my research conduct, ethics and commitments. Finally, I offer some reflections on the issues and limitations of researching both extractivism and resistance.

I decided to fully focus on lithium mining for my master’s thesis and arrived in Belgrade in early January 2022 for my master’s fieldwork of two months. I attended one blockade of the Belgrade highway following which the Serbian government officially cancelled the Jadar Project on 20th January. On the day I read the news, I thought for a moment that my research was over. Yet the locals and activists continued to organise protests almost immediately after the cancellation,

strongly arguing that it is a mere pre-election stunt of the governing party. I returned to Serbia again in April 2022 for the national elections and some protests that surrounded them, and I submitted my 30,000-word MPhil thesis in September 2022. Following that, I transitioned to two-years DPhil as part of the 2+2 programme. From November 2022 to May 2023, I moved to Serbia for seven months of DPhil fieldwork. It was during this period that I developed a much stronger relationship with the locals, particularly the members of SEOS that brings together local organisations from six different locations across Serbia – Gornje Nedeljice, Dobrinja, Pranjani, Kosjerić, Rekovac and Jagodina, each of which has dozens of members. Additionally, Valjevo has its own organisation against lithium mining that is however not a member of SEOS<sup>38</sup>. I frequently visited all of these towns and villages across Serbia, being invited and hosted by my research participants while I myself was based in Belgrade. All the large-scale protests have been happening in Belgrade, many of the activists from allied organisations live there, as do some of my extended family members<sup>39</sup>.

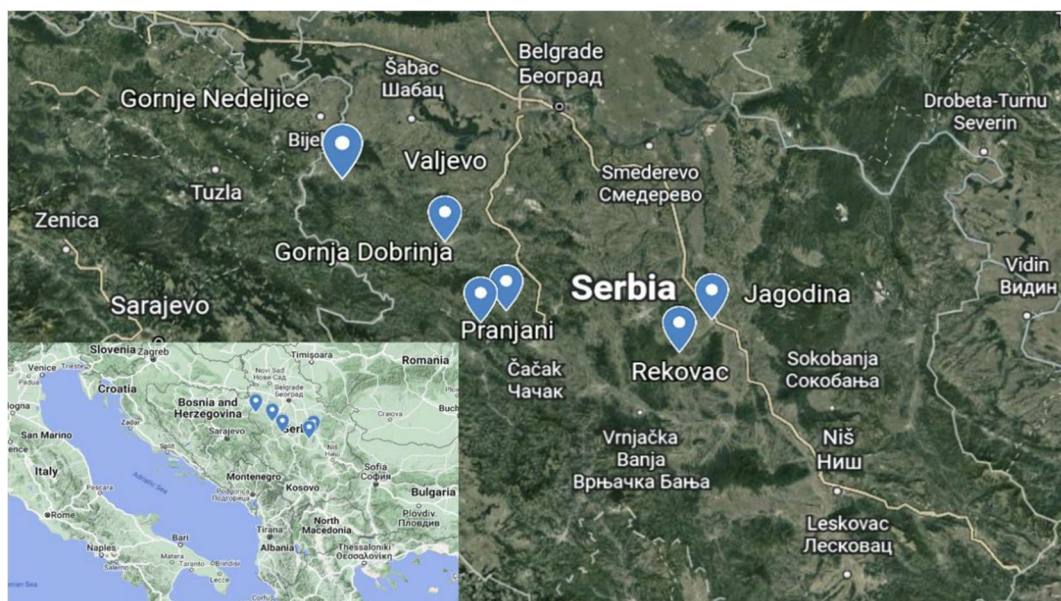


Figure 20: Areas in Serbia affected by lithium exploration and mining efforts and some of the field sites of my research. Source: Google Earth, map my own.

<sup>38</sup> See the Background chapter for more details about SEOS.

<sup>39</sup> I expand on my positionality in the section titled “Diasporic ethnographies.”

From September 2023 onward, the line between “fieldwork” and “life” became even more blurry. Since then, I have been living on and off in Belgrade, spending as much time there as I could. In total, I conducted at least 18 months of fieldwork between January 2022 and December 2024. However, since I started my research, some of my research participants and the wider activist community became close friends and it was no longer possible to distinguish between research, activism and friendships. In terms of my involvement, I have taken part in dozens of protests either organised or attended by my research participants, including protests not necessarily related to lithium mining<sup>40</sup>. I attended other events such as lectures, workshops and panel discussions on the issues of lithium mining delivered by allied university professors and scientists, press conferences, organisational meetings and many others. I took part in ways that ranged from handing out leaflets at the protests to making coffee at meetings and translating between English, Serbian and Spanish, most notably at a panel discussion in February 2024 with the activists from Portugal, Peru, Ecuador and the US which was attended by hundreds of people and livestreamed by the N1 daily media. In April 2024, I attended the Rio Tinto AGM, yet crucially not as an observer but as someone who was tasked with confronting the company representatives during the Q&A session. The video of Sofija Stefanović’s and mine intervention with the Serbian subtitles was viewed over 100,000 times on YouTube<sup>41</sup>. I was asked on many other occasions by SEOS to deliver presentations in English on their behalf, and attending conferences, speaking at webinars or giving talks about the issues of lithium mining in Serbia became a central aspect of my involvement with the movement. In this chapter, I describe the methodology through which I navigated the scholar-activist hyphen, as well as the many other hyphens.

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<sup>40</sup> I explore the “cross-pollination” between different movements and protests for various causes in Article 2.

<sup>41</sup> I further reflect on this experience in Article 3.

## 4.2 Research methods

### 4.2.1 Ethnography

Over the course of my research, as the boundary between a scholar and an activist, and between research participants and friends became increasingly blurred, I came to understand ethnography not only as a method but rather as an orientation towards the world, informed by the work of critical, feminist, decolonial or abolitionist social scientists (see for instance Chennault & Sbicca, 2024; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2020). What also became blurred was the boundary between theory, methodology and practice in the field, where the relationship between them emerged as deeply intertwined and relational, rather than moving linearly from one to another. More than 20 years ago, Comaroff and Comaroff powerfully argued for “a radical expansion of the horizons of ethnographic methodology” in the context of postcolonial critique in the social sciences – “ethnography-as-practice” (2003, p. 147). As they put it, such ethnography “takes off not from theory or from a meta-narrative, but from the situated effects of seeing and listening” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2003, p. 164). My understanding of ethnography moves beyond *the situated effects of seeing and listening* to also encompass situated *affects* and emotions of being, living and doing (see Stodulka et al., 2018, 2019 on affective ethnography).

Ethnography speaks to a range of disciplines, from anthropology to international relations (Vrasti, 2008), politics (Schatz, 2013), even economics (Appel, 2017) and other social sciences, including ethnography as a form of art, used particularly in theatre and playwriting (Jenkins, 2010). In the past decades, ethnography has been extensively used within geographical inquiry (Hart, 2004; Herbert, 2000; Megoran, 2006; Novoa, 2015), within which this thesis is also grounded. Scholl and colleagues strongly argue that ethnography might be the most useful methodology for grappling with the issues of space by paying attention not only to what is *present* but also to what is *absent* (2014). Geography itself is a broad discipline where ethnography has been employed across political geography and critical geopolitics (Kuus, 2013; Nicley, 2009; Nwankwo, 2020;

Tuathail, 2010), human geography (see Hitchings & Latham, 2020 for a review), to explicitly being bridged with assemblage and non-representational theory (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020; Scholl et al., 2014; Vannini, 2015). Feminist and decolonial geographies have particularly contributed to rethinking of the “field” (Browne, 2003; Dewsbury & Naylor, 2002), closely engaging with the questions and issues of representation and voice, even if not necessarily writing about ethnography as such (Coddington, 2017).

Thematically, scholars have been grappling with the question of the gap between a researcher and an activist (Hale, 2019; Shah, 2017; Willow & Yotebieng, 2020), particularly when studying social movements and resistance (Urla & Helepololei, 2014), stressing the need to more explicitly align the research with social justice. These efforts have taken a range of forms, from militant anthropology (Scheper-Hughes, 1995), militant ethnography (Apoifis, 2017; Juris, 2008), activist ethnography (Reedy & King, 2019) to critical ethnography (Hansen, 2021; Jackson, 2020; Miled, 2019) which “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain” (Madison, 2005, p. 5; in Chari & Donner, 2010, p. 76). Ethnographies of the anarchist, anti-capitalist or anti-authoritarian movements have theorised militant, activist and direct-action ethnographies when working not with but *from* the movements (Graeber, 2009), insisting on the “explicit rejection of the divide between observer and practitioner” (Juris, 2008, p. 64). Feminist (activist) ethnographers have reflected on intimacy, relationality and empathy that arise through the research while remaining constrained by the neoliberal context of universities (Bell, 2015; Craven & Davis, 2013; Davis, 2014).

When it comes to studies of environmental movements, Guha and Martínez-Alier (2013) note that these have historically tended to be skewed towards the North Atlantic worlds as environmental concerns used to be associated with affluence (see also Martínez-Alier, 2002). At the same time, environmental justice literature and particularly research on mining and extractivism has been dominated by quantitative studies, legal analyses or qualitative research based on interviews, rather than paying attention to more ethnographic modes of inquiry. Onís and Pezzullo suggest

that ethnography plays a fundamental role in foregrounding the lived experience of the affected communities (2017). Gutierrez et al (2021) in their review highlight ethnographies focused on the experience of communities living with pollution across the world (Auyero & Swistun, 2008; Checker, 2005; Fortun, 2000; Lora-Wainwright, 2017; Petryna, 2013). More recently, chemicals and toxicity have been a focus of novel ethnographic entanglements (Shapiro & Kirksey, 2017; Bond, 2021; see also Barry, 2017 on chemical geography). Rasch and van Drunen (2017) describe the particularities of ethnography of natural resource conflict, arguing that engaged ethnography can be a form of solidarity (see also Babidge, 2021; Jenkins et al., 2015; Willow, 2018)<sup>42</sup>.

In an article titled “What is ethnography? Can it survive? Should it?” Hammersley (2018) argues that understanding of ethnography increasingly varies across disciplines, posing major challenges to research as such (see also Ingold, 2014). Three decades ago, Ortner described how ethnography has been criticised for those same reasons, yet one minimal definition she proposes is that ethnography “has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing” (1995, p. 173). Indeed, “ethnography involves the whole person; this is its distinguishing feature as a research method” (Jordan, 2001, p. 41) while “the space of fieldwork is inseparable from those doing it” (Dewsbury & Naylor, 2002, p. 256). Through my engagement in the “field,” I began to understand ethnography as a “sensibility,” as “attention to the conditions and experiences of life as actually lived” (McGranahan, 2018, p. 7), “rather than a toolkit method” (Gutierrez et al., 2021, p. 67). Here ethnography becomes a mode of living, operating and relating to one another – rather than a method, it is a “methodology” in the most expansive sense of the word (Scholl et al., 2014).

The empirical material generated through ethnographic fieldwork included the extensive personal notes, photos, videos, formal and informal discussions. But as I want to suggest, it also includes the memories, feelings and affects – the smell of a Turkish coffee in a pot for twenty people, the

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<sup>42</sup> I expand on some of the issues and critiques of researching communities in general and particularly in relation to extractivism in the section of this chapter titled “Ethnography of Extractivism, Ethnography as Extractivism.”

taste of honey melting on my tongue on an early morning in the Jadar Valley, the sweaty palms at the Rio Tinto AGM, the adrenaline rush at a protest, and countless others – that together form the experience of ethnography as a mode of relating, affecting and being affected (Stodulka et al., 2018, 2019). These experiences, generated through slow and long-term involvement with my research participants, generated an extensive amount of “data” which is not reducible to interviews, direct quotes or fieldwork notes. What emerges is a profound sense of proximity and commitment, that is however not centred around autoethnography. As Hromadžić puts it: “there is an ethnographic proximity and relationality that is not reducible to auto-ethnography, “going native,” nor to the politics of representation” (2023, p. 2). Similarly, Coddington reflects on the issue of “giving voice” from an anticolonial perspective, noting the increasing scholarly retreat to autoethnography, yet insists that “issues of representation occur even when representing oneself” (2017, p. 6)<sup>43</sup>. Thus while my personal *self* appears throughout my work, rather than autoethnographically “examin[ing] self-experience in relation to life events” (Edwards, 2021, p. 1; see also Hayano, 1979; Dauphinee, 2010), I see these as inseparable from the overall understanding of ethnography as a sensibility (McGranahan, 2018). On the following pages, I describe the particularities of conducting interviews and analysing secondary data sources while highlighting these as supplementary methods to the overall ethnography of being *with* the struggle.

## 4.2.2 Interviews

In such an understanding of ethnography, interviews are used as a method that seeks to create the space where research participants can express themselves in their own words – what Auyero (see

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<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Gani and Khan see autoethnography as a methodology which does not necessarily have the same colonial implications as other qualitative methods, writing that “[a]utoethnography is a methodology that draws primarily from the self and their experience as the main site of observation and learning; this largely precludes it from charges of extractivism” (2024, p. 8). I do not share this view, but I further reflect on Gani and Khan’s assertion of positionality as a “function of coloniality” in chapter 5 *Intermezzo: The Positionality of Border Crossing*.

Murrey, 2016) refers to as an “ethnographic interview”. I conducted 28 in-depth interviews, 10 during the MPhil fieldwork and 18 during the DPhil fieldwork. The interviewees were identified as the most active members of the anti-lithium movement, particularly locals from rural areas across Serbia, the villages affected by lithium exploration and members of SEOS. Apart from the members of SEOS, I conducted interviews with members of allied activist organisations as well as scientists who were openly against the mining project, even delivering speeches at the protests. I also interviewed two opposition politicians who are active members of the anti-lithium movement. The company and its representatives figure throughout the thesis as I cite their statements and reports, and perhaps most notably the experience of attending the Rio Tinto AGM in April 2024 in London, yet from an evident positionality of being *a part of* the resistance.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews that typically lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The interviewees were contacted through personal networks and snowballing techniques, meaning that most of the interviewees had either known me or had heard of me prior to the interview. Moreover, the insights I had through ethnographic engagement allowed me to ask the most relevant questions. For instance, the interviews with the two of the most visible members of the anti-lithium movement from the Jadar Valley took place more than a year after we had met, ensuring in that case that the trust has been established as we have spoken many times informally before I asked them to be interviewed. Interview sites included a protest camp, a café or a restaurant, an office of the interviewee, a home of the interviewee, my home, a car of the interviewee, and one interview was conducted over the phone. Oral consent was obtained prior to the beginning of the interview, and all interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, with the exception of two interviews, which were not recorded but during which I took extensive notes.

All of the interviews were conducted in Serbian. I transcribed the interviews manually, without using a software tool or transcription assistance. The interviews were then systematically analysed using the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo) for coding, conducting

a qualitative analysis of key themes and subthemes across the interviews. The analysis itself has been greatly informed by the knowledge and experience gained through ethnography and the involvement within the movement. I translated the relevant excerpts and quotes used in the thesis to English. I discuss some of the issues and challenges of the interviews in the final section of this chapter.

### 4.2.3 Secondary data sources

Additional methods included an analysis of policy documents such as mining, energy or environmental reports, policy papers and policy briefs, particularly from international organisations, NGOs, CSOs and think-tanks. These provided an important background not only for the predictions about the future demand of lithium, but also for understanding the dominant narratives around the green transition based on mining of critical raw materials, technological solutions, and continuous economic growth. Especially notable are the demand models of the International Energy Agency (IEA) which I include in Chapter 2: Background and Context to illustrate the massive scale at which mining of lithium and other CRMs is expected to rise even under the most conservative predictions.

I also conducted media monitoring of articles related to resistance to lithium mining in Serbia between 2021 and 2024. These were mostly centred around two media outlets in Serbian – N1 and Nova S – which have typically been the only daily media not to report pro-governmental messages, and which hence provided the space for the locals and activists to voice their concerns. My research participants frequently gave interviews for these two media outlets, and they have been both cited in the newspaper articles and invited to the TV programmes. These media, unlike the government-influenced ones, also covered the protests and were hence a valuable additional resource for recording the protest speeches that I was later able to analyse. They also reported on the statements by the supporters of the Jadar Project ranging from President Vučić and other Serbian politicians to the international actors and ambassadors which proved a valuable additional

resource. Some examples of international media coverage were analysed for the dominant narratives around the Jadar Project, particularly in relation to the Balkans in Article 1.

Social media has also been monitored extensively, as many of my research participants are active and public users of the platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X (Twitter) that are used for sharing information, related photos, videos and livestreaming protests both from personal and organisational accounts. Some quotes from public social media posts appear in Article 2. Monitoring involved closely following social media accounts of the main organisations and figures as well as the daily reporting of N1 and Nova S for key developments, statements or commentaries. This was particularly useful for creating the section 2.6 *Timeline of the key events* thanks to the list of articles and statements I collected since 2021.

#### 4.2.4 Ethical considerations and anonymisation

The risk assessment and the ethical assessment of the project were approved by Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). The CUREC reference number was SOGE1A2021-002 for the MPhil research and it was later amended to account for the DPhil research under the reference number SOGE C1A\_22\_257. As I argue throughout the thesis, the ethical commitments of my work go far beyond the institutional requirements (see Bell & Wynn, 2023; Boden et al., 2009; Herzfeld, 2023), and the following sections about my positioning between research and activism, research participants and friends, or the field and home, as well as about the issues and limitations of the research, are also ethical considerations.

A crucial ethical consideration was that of pseudonymisation and anonymisation of my research participants. In my MPhil thesis, submitted in September 2022, I decided to pseudonymise all of my research participants, choosing different names for them. I did that despite some of my research participants saying at the start of our interview that they would like to be named. After careful consideration, I decided that the responsibility was be ultimately mine, and I saw

pseudonymisation as a standard academic practice, especially in a highly sensitive environment of a resistance movement. Yet after I shared my MPhil thesis with my research participants, many of them were disappointed that I changed their names. I promised them that I would include their real names in my DPhil thesis, if that was something they would still like.

Collecting data through the 28 interviews and ethnographic research involving dozens of other people was essential for developing my analysis and arguments. Yet the quotes and ethnographic examples used in this thesis likely come from less than ten research participants. They are typically, although not always, the most visible faces of the anti-lithium movement in Serbia, frequently giving statements and interviews to journalists, both Serbian and international, as well as being targeted by the government and other supporters of the project for their activities. A few weeks before submitting the thesis, I asked those figuring in this thesis again about pseudonymisation, giving some examples of their quotes or experiences which involved them that I use in the thesis. Some have specifically asked to appear in the thesis under their real name and I respect their wish. Two participants asked to be pseudonymised and the changed names, yet I do not indicate at any point which names were changed, and which were not (see Murrey, 2016).

In what follows, I describe what I mean by extractivism in methodology, ethnography and academia more broadly. I believe that a part of the shift away from extractivist research is respecting the wish of one's research participants to be named, believing that they understand the risks involved, and letting them speak in their own words rather than extracting knowledge and meaning from anonymised or pseudonymised quotes. Before I outline ethnography based on ethics of care, relationality and reciprocity, I offer a statement on the use of AI in this research.

#### 4.2.5 AI Statement

A crucial ethical consideration must be included in relation to the usage of AI in research and writing. This is particularly the case as the rise of extractivism is directly connected to the massive

expansion of AI which requires an unprecedented amount of resources and energy, further fuelling the race for CRMs (Kalantzakos, 2020). I have made substantial efforts to limit my usage of AI when possible. At the same time, the presence of AI has proliferated across all aspects of life, making any efforts to fully avoid it virtually impossible, with the AI now being fully integrated in Google Search or WhatsApp. I also used Grammarly for spell-checking my writing and Google Translate to aid my translation from Serbian to English.

I have at no point used AI tools for writing or rewriting sentences, for summarising texts, whether my own or scholarly articles, for generating ideas or for asking conceptual or theoretical questions. Every single sentence of this thesis, including the three empirical articles, was written by a human being.



*Figure 21: Beehives in the wider Jadar Valley, May 2023. Picture my own.*

### 4.3 Ethnography of Extractivism, Ethnography as Extractivism

*How to conduct research on extractivism without reproducing the extractivist logic of academia?*

This question emerged as the fundamental ethical and political consideration surrounding my research. While the communities across Serbia are trying to resist extractivism of lithium, I think about not only the ways in which I can contribute to that resistance, but also how can I resist extractivism in research. What emerges throughout the thesis are the multiple forms of extractivism not only as a physical process but also as a logic and thus also closely related to the question of academic research. Ethnography as a method emerges from a fundamentally colonial relationship based on the Western<sup>44</sup> gaze towards the “Other” that the still predominant understanding of objectivity and scientific inquiry is based upon (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). Despite scholarly efforts to decolonise research methods, the issue of extractivism in research remains. In this section, I outline the fundamental critique of extractivist research practices and how I commit myself to ethnography that orients itself away from them, yet without ever being able to disentangle itself fully.

In his article titled “Are Anthropologists Monsters?” Burman (2018) contends the similarities between a *kharisiri*, a monster from the Bolivian Andes, and an anthropologist – or an ethnographer: “[T]he decree within academia to ‘publish or perish’ [...] hampers the creation of even ordinary uncommodified, noninstrumentalized social relations between anthropologists and the people with and among whom we work” (2018, p. 54). Burman goes on to define “extractivist ethnography” as “a cost-benefit-oriented methodology for extracting knowledge and information and an instrumentalist approach toward the people among whom we work” (2018, p. 56). Such ethnography commodifies knowledge into books, papers, and lectures within the institutional

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<sup>44</sup> I purposefully avoid the term “Eurocentric” as it fails to encompass the complexity of “Europe” as a category. After all, Serbia is geographically located in Europe and the first paper describes in depth some of the tensions that emerge around this position. While the same could be critiqued about the term “Western,” I find it to be more helpful as it is less geographically bound. “Western” denotes a power relation rather than a precise location. This is particularly relevant in the academic context, with long and colonial histories of Western universities and the dominance of the English language.

environment that reinforces the cost-effective and extractivist research. Still, Burman defends the “Otherness” of the ethnographer, considering the notions of distance and difference central to knowledge production and argues that it is rather the increasingly neoliberal academic conditions and publishing pressure that cause extractivist ethnographies (see Fleming, 2021; Hall, 2020 on the issues of neoliberalisation of universities). Similarly, citing the work of Hoover (2017) on knowledge production in health research among Native American communities, Gutierrez et al also warn against research extractivism, “institutional neglect, academic extractivism, and/or research abuse” (2021, pp. 75–76). They note “the rising pushback against some forms of case studies” from the communities themselves and offer community-based, participatory action research (CBPR/PAR) as a part of the solution (*ibid.*).

Some decolonial scholars have gone further than that, noting the extractivist logic as inherently embedded in academic research rather than being a byproduct of neoliberal conditions, with initiatives such as the CBPR also having fundamental issues (see Sylvestre et al., 2018). “Social science knowledge is settler colonial knowledge,” write Tuck and Yung (2014, p. 245). Scholarly works on engaged and activist research, including many of the examples cited in the earlier sections of this chapter, commonly posit that social scientists are in a position of having a positive impact on the researched communities. Yet Tuck and Yang contend that this precisely is the issue: “The hidden theory of change in the metanarrative of social science research is that research itself leads to change. This is the hidden curriculum of social science: that the researched need change and that social science will compel it” (2014, p. 236). Indeed, Tuck (2009) powerfully describes the issue of rendering some communities as damaged and in need of changing, calling for suspending “damage-centred” research. Checker highlights that it is often researchers themselves who create unsustainable expectations about their own ability to enact societal change, proving dishonest to their research participants (and perhaps also to themselves) while missing out on opportunities for meaningful solidarity (2014, p. 416; see also Checker et al., 2014). Change certainly does not come from the academic saviour complex that ends up reproducing colonial

and extractivist logics rather than challenging them. Rather, it can happen from a long-term commitment to the particular struggle and collective work that extends far beyond research.

Grosfoguel (2019) reflects on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's notion of "cognitive extractivism" where Indigenous knowledge in North America is viewed as a resource that can be extracted (Klein & Simpson, 2013). Grosfoguel writes about "epistemic extractivism" in the context of Latin America where too often Indigenous worldviews are commodified both for economic and symbolic capital (see also Marchais et al., 2020 on academic research in eastern DRC). Simpson calls for developing "fair and meaningful and authentic relationships" where "the alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity" (in Grosfoguel, 2019, pp. 211–212; Klein & Simpson, 2013). "Reciprocity entails a profound revolution in ways of life," writes Grosfoguel (ibid.). My ethnographic orientation subscribes to reciprocity as the alternative to extractivism, but I must also reflect on moments when reciprocity was not possible as I had nothing to give in return. Throughout my research, there were situations where I was shown extraordinary kindness and generosity from my research participants. I remain indebted to them, yet for me, the alternative to extractivism also moves beyond the belief that the debt can ever be repaid. In a telling example, one of my research participants – a friend – said jokingly to the group of us at an activist meeting that "if nothing else comes out of this struggle, at least Nina will get her PhD." And so I wonder that perhaps rather than a debt, it could also be seen as a gift. To me, another dimension to the alternatives to extractivism is gratitude – and not as a moment but as a process.

What also emerges out of this are profound friendships that explicitly extend the relationality beyond the boundaries of research (see Browne, 2003; Kirsch, 2005; Murphy, 2019). Boer Cueva and colleagues have sought to "conceptualize fieldwork not as an *extractive* process of mining data and information for the research output, but as a process of creating community with research interlocutors or consultants, of which knowledge production is only one dimension" (2023, p. 3 emphasis added). It is this process of building friendships and the community, and rooting myself within it that has constituted by far the most significant part of my work, from physical to

emotional and mental labour, yet it remains largely invisible and undervalued within academia. “Research is just one form of knowing, but in the Western academy, it eclipses all others,” write Tuck and Yung as they argue for “refusing research”<sup>45</sup> (2014, p. 237), and I extend it as also eclipsing all other forms of relating. Causevic writes from the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina that “knowledge is a process, not a product” (2020, p. 10). Ethnography that orients itself away from extractivism will always be an imperfect process rather than a product, one that is centred around care, commitment, reciprocity and gratitude, and one that is affective as well as affected. Such ethnography also extends beyond the temporalities of academic research and publishing as these processes of relationship building require time. As Murrey puts, it “slow scholarship enables us to make meaningful relationships with the people in the communities where we research [...]—relationships that begin the important work of decolonizing the uneven power dynamics in research processes” (2016, p. 244). Writing in the context of decolonial and anti-racist African geographies, Daley and Murrey argue that “through active unlearning and rethinking, we can root our project in the lands and communities where we work” (2022, p. 172). I want to suggest that the first step in moving away from ethnography *as* extractivism is refusing the academic distance and instead firmly rooting not only the project but indeed oneself in the communities with which we work. In the next section, I reflect on my own position, the process of rooting myself in the struggle against lithium mining in Serbia, out of which knowledge and commitment as process emerge, while recognising that such processes are always inherently imperfect and incomplete.

#### 4.4 Diasporic ethnographies

The questions of Otherness, distance, being an insider or an outsider, have been fundamental in ethnographic research (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). While critical and decolonial approaches have sought to challenge the distance as a Western and colonial mode of knowledge production, it

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<sup>45</sup> I expand on the notion of refusal in Article 3.

remains dominant even in works that recognise extractivism of research, utilising “disembeddedness for methodological purposes” (Burman, 2018, p. 54). Ethnographies that orient themselves away from extractivism, however, precisely require deep embeddedness, rootedness and community building. “We are writing from the sites of struggle rather than about the sites of struggle,” write Causevic and colleagues (2020, p. 7). More practically, this can mean committing oneself to researching sites or communities where we are from, we are familiar with, whose language we speak, or where we are able to engage in long-term commitment that far exceeds the temporalities of fieldwork and academic publishing. There has been an increase of doing research at “home,” with its proponents pointing to the simplifying – and colonial – understanding of knowledge production as requiring both affective and geographical distance (Anderson, 2021). Munthali (2001) stresses that Third World scholars have commonly conducted fieldwork at home. The understanding of fieldwork as requiring distance is a profoundly Western idea: “while western anthropologists have been busy doing research in Third World countries, anthropologists from the Third World countries have all along been doing research in their own societies and in some cases in their own culture” (Munthali, 2001, p. 118). Yet the imaginative and emotional geographies of home are complex as well as often uncomfortable, bringing their own set of challenges. Crucially, ethnography “in the familiar” (Simpson, 2007) does not warrant an insider status. Rather, one’s positionality is constantly shifting and evolving, far beyond the simplified binary of the insider-outsider.

Here I theorise diasporic ethnographies as capturing some of those tensions that come with the questions of “home” or “familiarity” in relation to my personal positionality. Diaspora as a category or an analytical tool can stretch in surprising directions, grounded in a specific place, culture and memory (Agnew, 2005; Baronian et al., 2006), as well as a collective sense of nostalgia, longing, estrangement or uncertainty which can result in profound intimacy<sup>46</sup>. Such attunements can exist for generations, even if, such as in the case of Yugoslavia, the country no

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<sup>46</sup> With thanks to Daniel Voskoboynik for the encouragement to privilege memory over history and to expand my understanding of diaspora.

longer exists (see Ilić & Lazičić, 2024; Kojanić, 2015; Mitrović, 2014; Petrović, 2010 on Yugoslavia and nostalgia). Diaspora can also refer to a sense of the dispersal of the particular cultural identity, an affective experience of being in-between an insider and outsider, a member of a certain community and a foreigner, belonging and not. While the scope of this thesis does not allow for a deeper exploration of the rich scholarly work of diaspora (see for example Boym, 1998; Diawara, 2011), I use the term in relation to my own positionality to suggest that these affective experiences are a productive way of thinking through the tensions between rootedness, embeddedness, distance and estrangement in the context of extractivist ethnographies. Diasporic ethnographies capture the methodological and positional connections to the “field” that move away from distance and from ethnographies *as* extractivism. I suggest that a sense of familiarity with the language, culture and collective memory is imperative as part of broader efforts to decolonise methodologies. At the same time, the long-term commitment based on reciprocal and relational ethics means that such a place can become one of many “homes” that the researcher returns to – themselves becoming diasporic.

My diasporic identity has been defined by my parents’ decision to leave ex-Yugoslavia in the early 90s at the start of the wars, just as hundreds of thousands of fellow Yugoslavs did over the course of the decade, and just as people continue to leave to this day for political and economic reasons. I was born and grew up in Prague and after 18 years of my life there, I received the Czech passport and with it the privileges of being an EU citizen. As a child, I travelled to ex-Yugoslavia every summer with my mom, visiting my grandparents and other relatives. I felt very close to the place and the culture, but I have always been aware that my identity is contested, never considered fully Serbian nor Czech. Strangers in Serbia would often comment on how lucky I should feel that I grew up elsewhere, and that my parents did well. When I moved (back?) to Belgrade for the longest continuous part of my fieldwork, people struggled to understand why anyone would ever return. Even some of my research participants tried to discourage me as I talked with them about my plans to move there for a longer period of time. I *lived* in Serbia for the first time for my research and I experienced both the familiarity of knowing the place and the language, and the

strangeness of the daily life that is nothing like visiting as a child for the entire summer holidays. When it comes to the language itself, I am a native speaker, but what gives away my diasporic upbringing is a slightly different accent. Serbia and the wider ex-Yugoslavia is rich in different accents and even within Serbia, native speakers would typically be able to say from which city or a region someone is just based on their accent. My accent that cannot be placed anywhere within Serbia invites curiosity, but also reveals why I am not necessarily considered a “native” despite being a “native” speaker.

In the post-Yugoslav context, the question of diasporic ethnographies takes on a specific dimension. Reflecting on his Yugoslav heritage, Grubačić writes: “Although I moved to the United States in 2005, I was already a foreigner well before that moment. I became a foreigner in the early 1990s, when the political ideas of inter-ethnic cooperation and mutual aid as we had known them in Yugoslavia were destroyed by the combined madness of ethno-nationalist hysteria and humanitarian imperialism” (2012, p. 440). This resonates strongly with my personal heritage, thinking about my parents who left as their country – Yugoslavia – was falling apart, refusing to take part in the ethno-nationalist madness. As I shared with some of my friends that I feel like a foreigner in Serbia, many of them insisted that they feel the same despite the fact that they were born and raised and lived their entire lives there, and we found ourselves related by the shared estrangement and non-belonging. Perhaps some of those living in Serbia and other ex-Yugoslav countries are also diasporic – belonging diasporically to Yugoslavia, even though they have never necessarily moved geographically, even though they might have been born after that country was destroyed. Importantly however, I do not intend to argue that these sentiments are necessarily dominant within Serbia nor within my research participants, many of whom hold different political positions. I merely reflect on my personal positionality that is informed by the intergenerational trauma of leaving and nostalgia for the country, or a world, that was and could have been otherwise.

Still, writing *from* the post-Yugoslav region rather than *about* it brings with itself a set of methodological challenges within the Western academia. Stavrevska and colleagues write about “rendering of the region and those seen as related to it as unable to produce knowledge that, in mainstream discussions, is seen as valuable and ‘objective,’” a particular challenge of the postwar and post-conflict studies that require a “harder” sense of objectivity (2023, p. 1). The collective shares that “by having been born, lived, or been displaced from the region, we all noticed that at some point during our academic careers, we were repeatedly requested to declare our positionalities in relation to it” (2023, pp. 2–3). Yet the form of reflexivity these scholars have been asked to perform, they argue, have often been “merely a ritualistic self-legitimation of the disciplinary assumptions” (ibid.; see also Gani & Khan, 2024 on positionality statements as a function of coloniality). Hromadžić (2023) writes powerfully on the experience of conducting ethnography in Bosnia and Herzegovina as someone who is “being too close to it.” Hromadžić discusses a range of patronising or outright offensive comments she received as a Bosniak researcher studying her “own people.” Yet she insists, building on a range of other feminist and decolonial researchers, that “caring for—being in sync and proximate and being moved and marked by others—is [...] a profoundly ethical, social, anthropological, and political act” (2023, p. 8). Thus, in these cases, proximity and immersion are both not a choice due to the researcher’s positionality in relation to the region, yet still *a* choice to embed, root and politically and ethically align ourselves with the communities we research.

At the same time, just as much of the critical literature I draw upon ultimately emerges from Western universities, so too is this thesis no exception. Written as part of the DPhil at the University of Oxford, this research project also inevitably stems from the Anglo-American geographical tradition within which I have been educated and formed as a researcher, while seeking to operate across disciplinary boundaries and to speak to many critical and decolonial voices. Such a formation is both a privilege and a position to reflect on. In the context of the political economy of the neoliberalisation of – people often forget to say *Western* here – universities that I discuss in the earlier parts of this chapter, one more aspect of my positionality

is relevant here. Since September 2023, my research has been largely self-funded which included having to cover not only my research expenses such as accommodation and travel, but also to pay the tuition fees of 19,970.00 GBP for the final year of my DPhil. The experience of unexpectedly losing my funding from a private donor has been traumatic, but it also provided fundamental insights that have informed my methodology and the thesis as a whole. Firstly, having to work not only part-time but at times full-time to sustain myself and my research, I was brought closer to my research participants who too have been working full-time while being committed to the taxing labour of organising. Secondly, once I accepted that I am indeed *paying the university to conduct this research*, I felt that I was finally able to free myself from the institutional and neoliberal constraints of what research should look like, moving towards more radical approaches based on commitment, relationality, reciprocity and gratitude.

Diasporic ethnographies allow me to recognise the multiplicity of my identity as a researcher while resisting the extractivist logics of research and academia. Diasporic ethnographies embrace the dispersed, complex and uncomfortable (up)rootedness that comes from the common estrangement of research. Both belonging and not, both being an insider and not, resisting research extractivism also means embracing both the preexisting connections and those that have formed as a result of research. Centred around reciprocity, such ethnographies focus on the relationality of offerings, gifts and unpayable debts. At the same time, diasporic being and doing offers a stretched sense of being local, where diasporic also means a return, a coming back, or a promise of coming back. Diasporic ethnographies are then an invitation to take seriously one's capacity for commitment and multi-territorial belonging, and an invitation to dissolve the insider-outside binary and instead embrace the multiplicity of being. While I have stressed that I am not a member of the local communities impacted by the prospect of lithium mining, I sense that diasporic ethnographies offer an expansion of possibilities for engaged scholarship and for a lifelong

commitment to resisting extractivism<sup>47</sup>. In the final section, I discuss some of the issues and limitations that are an inevitable and inherent part of the research.

## 4.5 Issues, limitations

Even though I have tried my best to resist the pervasive colonial and extractivist logic of academic research, this is not to say I am immune to these issues. I have made many mistakes and dealt with periods of profound mistrust from the local community or the wider movement, some of which I reflect on in this final section. Munthali (2001), writing from the context of northern Malawi, suggests that since Third World<sup>48</sup> ethnographers have been consistently criticised for a lack of objectivity and distance in their research, they have been more hesitant to discuss their experiences and issues of ethnography and conducting research at “home.” Reflections on failure in fieldwork are relevant here as they highlight the ways in which failure can be considered a generative process (see Davies et al., 2021; Kušić & Záhora, 2020). While failure is not my word of choice, having discussed the issue of reproducing the extractivist logic through research, here I turn to some issues of researching resistance.

Firstly, it is important to note that this research is not participatory (see Chilvers, 2009). It is not particularly concerned with “giving back,” and it is not focused on generating the kind of knowledge that might be the most “useful” to the researched community, as some scholars on engaged research highlight as crucial (see for instance Hale, 2019). I consider my other engagements with the local community and their allies to be much more “useful” than any academic text I might produce. I understand my commitment as a lifelong engagement stemming from my genuine connection with the people I have met and spoken to, rather than an imperative

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<sup>47</sup> With thanks to Daniel Voskoboynik for highlighting these points.

<sup>48</sup> At one particular point in history, Yugoslavia was a proud member of the Third World through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that was denoting a union between socialist and postcolonial countries that which explicitly refusing the Cold War binary between the First World of the Western capitalism and the Second World of USSR.

dictated by the university ethics board to disseminate my findings. Throughout this chapter, I have argued for ethics centred around gratitude that let go of the imperative to settle the debt that cannot be settled.

I am mostly concerned with ensuring that my research cannot, in any way, shape or form, be “useful” to the company. Social scientists have often, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, provided information that was fundamental to the colonial project (Lewis, 1973, p. 582; in Munthali, 2001, p. 115). However, the exploitation of social sciences at the expense of the communities that are being researched has not ended with the proclaimed end of colonialism. A key moment in my research was when I found out from the locals of the Jadar Valley that I have anthropological counterparts – researchers employed by the company in order to understand the local attitudes, or to understand how those could be changed in favour of the mining project, to put it better. I never met them, but I was told that by my research participants about them and about their efforts to speak with the local community – who refused<sup>49</sup>. Far from being neutral, but even further from being powerless as critics of ethnography often claim, ethnographic knowledge is an important tool that remains under the threat of co-option. Most of the information on the local community in this thesis has also been publicly stated in their numerous interviews with the journalists or elsewhere. No questions of internal logic, strategy or organisation of the movement are discussed in this thesis. My most important work is a lifelong commitment to supporting the local community based on the politics of friendship and comradeship rather than extractive research practices.

Another important limitation to be discussed is that of trust, or rather a lack of it. As I later learned from some of the members of the movement, there were also those who mistrusted my personal role and position, even thinking that I might be working for the company. While they would tell me that they are busy for an interview, they were in fact distrustful and looking for excuses. In perhaps the most curious example, one of my research participants told me several months after

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<sup>49</sup> I elaborate on this in Article 3 on refusal.

our interview that he did not trust me at the time when I interviewed him, and he was greatly limiting himself as to what he was going to disclose during our interview. The fact that in the end he told me this demonstrated the development of our mutual trust, but also the limitations of the interviews that can raise suspicion in the highly sensitive environment of a social movement. Instead, it is through ethnography as a way of relating and as an orientation away from extractivism and towards commitment that mutual trust is established. It is these limitations discussed here that highlight the agency of my participants to refuse to share certain information when they did not trust me, and my own refusal not to share certain information even when they did trust me.

At the same time, as this example illustrates the position of the researcher is never fixed, but in a constant flux. While the power relations within research always exist, these are complex and often unpredictable (see for instance Faria & Mollett, 2016 on race and whiteness in the field). In this case, my research participants do not need to gain a voice and agency through this research project, and they certainly do not need to be saved. Rather, my own work is part of a much larger collective commitment to resistance against lithium mining. Coleman reflects on the difficulty of scholar-activists of navigating the tensions between commitment and critique, guided not only by the political commitment to the community but also by the academic requirements of interrogating the “politics of truth” (2015, p. 264). I refuse to offer a critique of the movement and the communities themselves, the strategies it used, the mistakes it committed, or to disclose any further information that could be coopted. Such critique is reserved for internal discussions where it can be used as a starting point for thinking through alternatives and the next steps, rather than sharing it in this thesis as knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Yet I insist that only because I *refuse* to describe certain aspects, the relationship to the truth is not compromised. “Refusal is not just a ‘no,’ but a redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned. Unlike a settler colonial configuration of knowledge that is petulantly exasperated and resentful of limits, a methodology of refusal regards limits on knowledge as productive, as indeed a good thing,” write

Tuck and Yung (2014, p. 239) drawing on Simpson (2007). Truth can have many different forms, and being true to oneself can also mean refusal, as powerfully argued by decolonial scholars.

## 4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that orienting oneself away from extractive research practices is imperative in all academic situations, yet the cases of researching extractivism require deeper interrogation of extractivist logics and dynamics, including those that can be reproduced by the research itself. The methodological reflections shared in this chapter are inherently incomplete, written at a point in time where the struggle against lithium mining is evidently far from over. The work on this thesis marks just a beginning of a lifelong commitment to environmental struggles in the Balkans and beyond, specifically against mining and other forms of extractivism. While my diasporic identity and relationship to my “own people” is always contested and complicated, inherently occupying more than one home – or none at all – here I proposed a vision of ethnography that is an orientation away from extractivism. Such ethnography is committed to emotional as well as moral proximity rather than distance, care and reciprocity over knowledge production, and friendship, comradeship and gratitude instead of “research participation.” In a conversation focused on radical feminism in Africa with Patricia McFadden, T.D. Harper-Shipman asks, “What is the difference between writing for freedom and writing for professional advancement?” In her response, McFadden stresses that “we have to bring freedom and writing together because it is at the interface of freedom and writing that we find joy” (2024). It is with joy that I invite you to move onto an intermezzo through which I expand on my positionality, before delving into the three empirical articles.



*Figure 22: Honeycombs from the Jadar Valley, May 2023. Picture my own.*

## 5 | *Intermezzo: The Positionality of Border Crossing*

In this vignette, I elaborate on some aspects of my positionality in the field, particularly in relation to border crossing. I place this vignette between the framing document that ends with the methodology section and before I present the empirical findings in the three journal articles. I intend for it to serve as a bridge, a break or indeed an intermezzo.

My lived experience becomes intimately intertwined with ethnographic evidence as heritage of war, politics of displacement, relationship to the land, decisions around leaving or staying, and the privilege of being able to come and go whenever I want emerge as fundamental aspects of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia. I took out my old notebook from my MPhil fieldwork back in January 2022 and saw that the very first note was from the Hungarian-Serbian border as I crossed it by bus from Prague to Belgrade. I noted down a conversation between our two Serbian bus drivers that I overheard from my seat:

- “*Jebem ti carinu da ti jebem.*” Loosely translated as “fuck the fucking border.”
- “If it’s not the Hungarians who are fucking us, it’s the Serbs.”
- “Now we are going to wait for hours while they collect the cash. *Ovo bre nigde nema, ovo nema ni u Kolombiji.* This is not happening anywhere else in the world, not even in Colombia.”

I could clearly see from my window a faded poster on the border booth in front of us with an EU flag in the corner, exclaiming in upper case:

DON’T GIVE A BRIBE

DON’T TAKE A BRIBE

To me, none of this was new or surprising as I have crossed this border many times, every summer growing up when my mom would take my brother and I to visit our grandpa, aunts, cousins and the numerous other relatives. The bus journey between Prague and Belgrade would take around 12 hours and we'd often take an overnight bus. Crossing the border was always the most painful part of the journey as it involved at least between 1 to 3 hours of waiting for the passport check. As I wrote down the conversation between the bus drivers, I recalled in my notes a situation from six months before that, when in summer 2021 I crossed the border alone with my younger brother on our way back to Prague, returning from the holidays in Serbia.

It was middle of August, and it was Sunday which I later realised made it a big mistake from the beginning. In Belgrade, we got on the night bus to Vienna as the one to Prague was already sold out. We were supposed to arrive at 6 AM and I made plans to take my brother for a nice breakfast once we arrived in Vienna before catching a train to Prague. I fell asleep as we were approaching the border shortly before midnight and was surprised to be woken up by the rising sun early in the morning. I didn't remember crossing the border. It took a glance outside of the window to see that we were still surrounded by hundreds of cars, buses and trucks in at least ten different lines as we were still on the Serbian side of the border. At that point we stood at the border for around six hours while I slept through most of it. Around 9 AM, the heat of the summer day began to reach inside of the bus that has barely moved in those three hours. I stepped outside the bus to look around, warm air hitting me in my face, combined with the smell of fuel as motors of hundreds of cars were humming in the background, trying to cool down their passengers.

I knew that we were not getting out of here anytime soon. After the Serbian side, there was still a stretch of a no man's land followed by the Hungarian border control that was replicating the same ritual as the Serbian one – everyone on the bus needs to step out, go through the checkpoint, show their passports, and wait while the border police checks the bus, luggage and other personal belonging. I went to look for some water as we only had a bit of water and some snacks, expecting to sleep through most of the journey and arrive early in the morning. I was surrounded by a sea

of cars and people who were smoking, stretching, cursing or talking to one another, bonding over the shared horrific experience. There are no shops on the border or any other amenities, but I found another bus that was selling overpriced half-a-litre water bottles. I bought four and returned in ten minutes with an intention to buy another two, but by that time all the water was sold out.

By 11 PM we finally crossed the Serbian side after almost 12 hours of waiting, only to enter the no man's land and realise that the tailback simply continued behind it. The temperature was getting higher and while the bus had the air condition on the entire time, it barely made a difference under the august sun and while standing. Because this was 12 hours and because this was the Balkans, by that time everyone on the bus knew each other. There was an elderly woman who was going to see her grandchildren in Austria, and I was worried about her as the temperature was getting dangerously high. It was difficult to tell whether it was more bearable to stay on the bus or come outside where occasional breeze provided at least a temporary relief. I set on a dusty ground by the side of the road. I found an empty spot under a shadow of a tree. All the other trees were occupied by others, many of whom were young men from all over the Balkans, the workforce of the European Union who went home to see their families during the summer and were now trying to return to the Empire that desperately needed them but still wouldn't let them in so easily. I tried to read a book in the shade, but I couldn't focus, my head was ringing from the sound of the hundreds of cars and voices, the heat and the waiting and I felt overwhelmed by the rage and humiliation. Every minute felt more unbearable as I watched the buses in our lane barely move until they finally reached the checkpoint. From the distance, I observed the officers as they would occasionally decide to open everything up, throwing luggage and stuff on the ground. Checking every bus took at least 20-30 minutes and there were still about ten buses in front of ours. We would be there for hours.

By 1 PM, as the sun was right above us, I made a radical decision. My brother who was only 16 at the time, was hungry and we only had a bit of water left. I decided that we were going to cross the border by foot with our EU IDs. I knew there was a gas station after the crossing. I checked

on the map and realised that it wasn't as close as I remembered it, especially not by foot, but it would be around a 15-minute walk. Still, I was determined. I knew that once we crossed the border, we wouldn't be able to come back. I went to speak to the bus driver to tell him my plan and to ask him to pick us up at the gas station once the bus finally crossed the border. He would surely stop there anyway for people to refresh. He promised he wouldn't leave without us and that we can leave all of our stuff on the bus. We exchanged phone numbers so that he could call me in case anything went wrong. As I was saving his number, I wondered for a second whether this was really happening. We only took the essentials, the documents and the little water we had and left. My brother didn't love the idea, he was timid and would rather stay on the bus, but a promise of food, water and a normal bathroom convinced him. We walked past the ten buses, sweaty from the heat of the summer and the exhaust fumes until we reached the crossing.

I held my brother's hand as I led him by the checkpoint. A group of five officers in green uniforms and Hungarian and EU flags on them immediately stopped us. "Where do you think you're going?" one of them asked. My brother gripped my hand more tightly. I felt their stares at my twenty-four-year-old self. "We are crossing by foot," I answered as calmly as I could. They looked at each other disapprovingly, about to send us back. "We are citizens of the European Union, and we have the right to cross," I said quickly. They stayed quiet for a moment before the oldest one of them said "Documents." We took out our ID cards and handed them to him. He glanced over them and only needed a few seconds to say, "You can go." A sense of victory swept over me, in front of us nothing but an empty highway that was glittering under the heat and a few cars that drifted past us every now and then as they finally crossed the border too. We walked to the gas station by the guardrails that were radiating with heat. There, I recognised the exhausted looks on the faces of people who were quietly sipping their coffee and staring into the ground. I realised we were not the only ones with the idea and others from different buses but also our own crossed by foot – those with the privilege of living long enough in "Europe" to get the papers necessary for this almost impossible act, to simply walk ahead of yourself.

We ended up waiting another four hours for the bus to cross the border. At 4 PM, after 16 hours of waiting, we were finally leaving the border. Because we spent hours together on the bus, and because these are the Balkans, we became friends with most of the people on the bus who were sharing stories with each other about reasons for travel, the difficulty of working in Germany and Austria, and the injustice of the border. And so when one woman got a phone call from her employer, the entire bus stood silent. She was fired over the phone because she didn't turn up to work on time. She couldn't because she was stuck at the border. Yes, the entire bus stood silent as she cried on the phone, only repeating "bitte" in German, but it was no use. She cried quietly for much longer even after the phone call was over. When we finally got to Vienna around 10 PM, after approximately a total of 28 hours of the journey, another woman hurried to get ready for her 12-hour shift at a care home that was starting at midnight.

I told my brother to never forget the injustice and the privilege of border crossing – of mobility – and to always remember how we arrived to that privilege. Almost 30 years before this, at the end of 1992, my parents as a young married couple decided to cross that same border in the same direction – towards "Europe" – and to start a new life elsewhere. Both my brother and I know the story by heart. They left out of conviction, because they refused to participate in the war. They crossed the border along with thousands of others who were leaving the country that was falling apart. They had a sport bag each, stuffed with a few pieces of clothes and cash that was hopefully going to be enough before they find a job. They had little idea where they were heading when they crossed the border, and they settled in Prague more or less by accident. After 23 years of living there, they finally got the Czech citizenship. I was 18 when I became an EU citizen. It was only thanks to that that I was able to then pursue my bachelor's degree in the UK at the home fees rate as the last generation of the year of Brexit.

All of that was playing out in my head as I set on the bus and crossed the border in January 2022 for my fieldwork. I wrote in my notes: "I stand on the same spot where I stood half a year ago.

Then it was 40 degrees outside and we all almost fainted. Now I'm looking at snowflakes falling on my window. But I still feel sick whenever I cross the border.”

I add these reflections here to illustrate my embodied, affective, heated and infuriating position and privilege between different nation-states and homes, between an insider and an outsider, a native and a diaspora. Yet Gani and Khan in their reflections on positionality as a “function of coloniality” describe in detail how “asserting ‘privilege’ [...] serves as a power move” (2024, p. 11). I see the *intermezzo* as an intention to think about positionality in a more expansive way, reflecting on a particular experience of a day spent at the border. I use it as an extension of some of the methodological discussions on complication – or dissolving – the insider-outsider binary. In this sense, the event of border crossing becomes another example a particularly diasporic experience, both in a sense of holding multiple passports, and more broadly in a sense of a *return*. I was only able to come “back” to Serbia as a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford because my parents left – even though the country they left was not called “Serbia.” The memory of my parents’ crossing of the border as they were leaving in the diasporic and migratory hope of building a better life elsewhere is passed down to me as if it were my own. Multi-temporal experiences and memories, both my own and someone else’s, fold into each other at the same site of the border between Serbia and Hungary, as I think about my parent’s crossing, mine and my brother’s in the heat of the summer, and my own as I travel for the first time for “fieldwork.”

Apart from my positionality, the focus on a border is also illustrative of many dynamics that I discuss in this thesis. From the concrete, physical and violent borders described in the *intermezzo*, to several conceptual borders in this thesis, my work contributes to the broader efforts to problematise them. From insider/outsider, scholar/activist, Global North/Global South, EU/non-EU, to material/immaterial toxicity and violence, disciplinary boundaries and theoretical binaries are more malleable and vulnerable than it might seem. Another border this thesis also seeks to challenge is that between academic writing and freer forms of expression. Here the *intermezzo* than serves as a push against the standard format of a thesis where these profoundly personal

reflections, stories and memories would not find their place and would not be considered a part of the research project, even though they shaped me and hence also this thesis. In the empirical part that follows, divided into three articles, I describe what I witnessed, experienced but also co-created myself after I crossed the border to start my fieldwork in January 2022 – one of the largest protest movements since the anti-war protests of the 1990s that my parents also attended before leaving the country. After this intermezzo, I *return* to resistance to lithium mining in Serbia.

# Article 1 | Between Peripheries and Solidarities: Resisting Green Extractivism in Serbia

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*Figure 23: Monument to executed victims in Draginac. Photo: Spomenik Database.*



*Figure 24: Río Tinto, Red River, Spain, October 2022. Photo my own.*



# Between Peripheries and Solidarities:

## Resisting Green Extractivism in Serbia

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This article is concerned with the multiple forms of attachments that emerge in the wake of lithium mining efforts in Serbia and expanding green extractivism in the Balkans more broadly. The Jadar Project was set to become one of the first and the biggest lithium mines in Europe, a metallic element widely understood as crucial to the so-called green transition. However, the mining plans attracted widespread resistance, led by the local community of the Jadar Valley, many of whom are farmers and agricultural workers. The government was ultimately forced to cancel the project in January 2022 following months of protests, yet the cancellation was nullified two and a half years later. Based on a close ethnographic engagement with the affected communities and their allies, I describe the local relationships with the soil, land, history, and memory and their reverberation and remobilization. What emerges is a particular sense of peripheralization and Balkanization, of being designated a colony or a sacrifice zone, a forgotten corner of Europe where lithium mining is to take place. Crucially, however, as this article shows, what also becomes possible is the formation of solidarities across the Global North and the Global South based on common struggles and shared experiences of attachment to the land. This article thus focuses on the forms of attachments that lay behind mass resistance, becoming a fundamental challenge to the logic of green extractivism.

**Keywords:** *extractivism; sacrifice zone; colonialism; periphery; attachment; Balkans*

### Introduction

This article is concerned with the multiple forms of affects and attachments that reverberate in the wake of the emergence of lithium exploration projects in Serbia. The construction of what would become Europe's largest lithium mine and one of the biggest lithium greenfield mines in the world was set to begin in the rural western part of Serbia in early 2022.<sup>1</sup> The Jadar Project, named after the local river Jadar, was presented both by the mining company Rio Tinto and the government as a significant opportunity for the economic development of the country, while the

European Union (EU) and the U.S. officials in particular openly stressed the importance of the lithium mine not only for the green transition but also for Europe's competitiveness in relation to China. Still, the project attracted widespread resistance, resulting in environmental protests of an unprecedented scale for the Balkan region. Led by the local community in the Jadar Valley, who are mostly farmers and agriculture workers, the protests grew considerably between November 2021 and January 2022, spreading to Belgrade and other cities and attracting tens of thousands of people across Serbia as well as internationally. By blocking key roads, bridges, and highways across the country for several consecutive weeks, the protesters ultimately forced the government to cancel the project in January 2022.<sup>2</sup> Despite the nullification of the cancellation in July 2024, after which the government swiftly signed a Memorandum of Understanding on value chains for raw materials, batteries, and electric vehicles with the EU, as well as the ongoing efforts of the Serbian government and Rio Tinto to move forward with the project, it presents a rare case of at least partially—or temporarily—successful resistance to the extractivist logic that permeates the green transition.

In this article, I focus on the ways in which the resistance at such a scale has been animated through both historical and shifting geopolitical relations between people and places within the context of the expanding logic of green extractivism. Based on a close ethnographic engagement with the local community and their allies, I trace the emergence of a particular sense of being designated a colony or a sacrifice zone. I suggest that the ongoing resistance, emerging before any physical extraction could have taken place, needs to be understood in relation to the heritage, history, and memories of the region, situated in relations between places, people, and other inhabitants of those spaces. While long histories of extractivism mark a divide between the Global South, where mining takes place, and the Global North, where the materials are enjoyed, the urgency of the green transition reveals core/periphery relations as shifting towards new extractivist projects closer to the geopolitical centers. Focusing on the case of resistance in Serbia, I argue, offers an opportunity to investigate the unique temporality of anticipation before extraction, as well as the particular spatiality of the Balkans as being in Europe but outside the EU. In doing so, this ethnographic investigation contributes to the understanding of attachments that mobilize amidst the shifting geopolitical implications of the green transition.<sup>3</sup>

Lithium is an essential component for batteries needed for the electrification of transport and energy systems with technologies such as electric vehicles. The war in Ukraine brought to light the energy dependency of the EU, accelerating the new quest for material sovereignty. Considering China's dominant market share of the global lithium-ion battery (LIB) production,<sup>4</sup> the EU's adoption of the Critical Raw Materials Act<sup>5</sup> in 2024 seeks to expand the extraction of critical materials from the Global South to geographically more proximate locations. Such processes of onshoring and nearshoring are characteristic of the ongoing rush to control the supply chains of low-carbon technologies.<sup>6</sup> In September 2021, then-Chancellor Angela

Merkel (in)famously announced that Germany and the EU had an interest in lithium during her visit to Serbia, just a few days after a protest against the project attracted thousands of people.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Serbian opposition leaders claimed that U.S. Special Envoy Matthew Palmer encouraged them not to criticize the government and the Jadar Project during his visit in June 2021.<sup>8</sup> In March 2023, more than one year after the Jadar Project was officially cancelled, then-U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill stated that it is “not just a mining project” but “a project that will be related to the modern economy” and declared the U.S. support for it.<sup>9</sup> The Western leaders’ open advocacy illustrates the geoeconomic significance of this mining project and helps to understand resistance to it.

This ethnographic investigation explores how the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia is enacted through multiple forms of attachment, which emerge through local relationships with the soil, land, history, and memory and their reverberation and remobilization. The research is based on the close ethnographic engagement bordering research and activism with the local community and their allies resisting lithium mining in Serbia for more than three years between 2022 and 2025. The ethnography employed subscribes to the critical, feminist, and decolonial traditions that highlight ethics of care, reciprocity, and relationality, as a mode of relating and as a *methodology* rather than a toolkit method.<sup>10</sup> The research draws on ethnographies of activism, social movements, and resistance more broadly, emphasizing solidarity which extends beyond academia.<sup>11</sup> My personal position reflects post-Yugoslav legacies that continue to influence field work as someone who holds a Serbian passport and family heritage but was born and raised elsewhere, and as my own personal histories become intertwined with the questions of leaving and staying.<sup>12</sup> The ethnographic investigation was centered around supporting the local communities who are organizing against lithium mining in Serbia, in the Jadar Valley and beyond, particularly with the umbrella association Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije (Association of Ecological Organizations of Serbia, SEOS), which brings together six organizations from locations affected by lithium explorations. The methodology included conducting 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the local communities and their allies, ranging from Belgrade-based non-governmental organizations, civil society, journalists, artists, scientists, opposition politicians, and others. It is also a methodological choice to include numerous quotes from the interviews with my research participants, creating a space for them to speak in their own words. Crucially, as some of my research participants expressed a request for interview quotes to be included under their real names, I uphold their “right to be known.”<sup>13</sup> Some names have been changed as per my research participants’ wish, but I do not indicate when that is the case.<sup>14</sup>

Through close ethnographic engagement, this article highlights the affective dimensions of the shifting geopolitical relations and the expansion of green extractivism. First, I frame the analysis around the concept of green extractivism, describing the rush to secure the so-called critical raw materials. Drawing on the rich scholarship that addresses the unique position of the Balkans as liminal between the

West and the Rest, I suggest that the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia is only graspable through the specific context of the affective and material attachments to land, heritage, and community. Second, I focus on the sentiments that arise in relation to the EU, capturing the (semi)peripheral and uncomfortable position within Europe as being destined to become a sacrifice zone for lithium mining. Third, I describe the historical specificities, tracing the connections between the surfacing of concerns about lithium mining and the reverberations of experiences, from memories of wars to the connection to more-than-human inhabitants of the Jadar Valley. Finally, I show how these attachments can result in bridging the boundary of the Global North and the Global South, building international solidarity networks against lithium mining that stretch from Serbia, Chile, Portugal, Spain, the United States, and beyond. I conclude by reiterating the contributions of the article by highlighting the core/periphery relations as shifting, with unexpected geographies and spaces in between, such as the Balkans emerging as some of the key sites of contestation of green extractivism.

### **Green Extractivism in (Semi)Peripheries**

Extracting national resources has become the primary model for national development, where environmental destruction is accepted as the “inevitable cost” of achieving prosperity.<sup>15</sup> Scholarship on extractivism has interrogated long histories of colonial exploitation of raw materials, notably in Latin America.<sup>16</sup> Extractivism as a concept has expanded both geographically and theoretically to encompass a wide range of processes, being employed as an organising concept for the all-encompassing capitalist logic.<sup>17</sup> Yet more recently, green extractivism has emerged as a novel dynamic where mining and exploitation are no longer presented as in opposition to sustainability but as being at its very heart. This is particularly the case because of the growing importance of the so-called transition minerals or critical raw materials, which Voskoboynik and Andreucci describe as being “at the forefront of future extractive landscapes” and as yet another manifestation of green grabbing.<sup>18</sup> Green extractivism is thus underpinned by “the fantasy of [. . .] an ultimate technological and ecological fix capable of fueling local and national development while saving global capital from its own ecological contradictions.”<sup>19</sup> Scholars note how green extractivism marks a continuation and “greening” of an imperial mode of living<sup>20</sup> where “those with little role in inducing global warming are also the ones burdened by green extractivism.”<sup>21</sup> The mass resistance that has arisen in Serbia then becomes a fundamental challenge to the “fantasy” of green extractivism.

The extractivist division has been dominantly understood alongside the Global North/Global South binary under the logic of “eco-coloniality” and “neo-colonial patterns of uneven development and the creation of sacrifice zones of mineral extraction in the global South.”<sup>22</sup> However, the shifting geopolitics of green transition

reveal extractivism as a complex and dynamic set of spatial and temporal relations, in which the core/periphery and Global North/Global South divides are not static. Rather, green extractivism is also emerging across the EU and the rest of Europe. Riofrancos notes how Global North onshoring and nearshoring “has shifted the front lines of lithium extraction.”<sup>23</sup> This is despite much of the shift remaining imaginative, at least for now, as there is no significant operating lithium mine in Europe *yet*. The front lines of lithium mining are expanding across Europe, with deposits having been identified in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Ireland, Finland, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, and others.<sup>24</sup> Paying attention to the planned projects in Europe and to the for-now-resisted project in Serbia offers an opportunity to engage with different temporalities and forms of attachments that emerge in the wake of the anticipation of extraction.

While green extractivism expands across increasingly diverse geographies, the projects in Europe and the Global North have not received sufficient academic attention, as Riofrancos points out.<sup>25</sup> Yet I suggest that focusing on extractivism in Europe has also led to a theoretical deadlock, with the question arising whether the concepts which are profoundly embedded in the geographical and historical specificities of the South should also be applied to the North. This is particularly the case with the concept of colonialism. For instance, Argenti and Knight describe the conflict between solar and wind renewable projects and the local communities in Greece, highlighting how the locals understand the projects as a form of colonialism.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the lithium mining projects in Extremadura, Spain, or Barroso, Portugal, have been discussed in terms of peripherality, green sacrifice zones, and colonialism.<sup>27</sup> Yet, taking issue with Dunlap’s concept of “infrastructural colonization” discussed in the context of France and Spain,<sup>28</sup> Alkhalili and colleagues argue that “a sharp and a careful distinction needs to be made with green neoliberalism being pursued in the European countryside” on one hand, and “communities seeking self-determination on their colonized lands” on the other.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as Bringel and Svampa point out, “none of this [in the Global North] compares with the impact and scale of such processes in the globalized periphery.”<sup>30</sup> It is critical that this broader perspective is maintained.

Yet when Alkhalili and colleagues write that “the colonial legacy that persists in both the [occupied Syrian Golan Heights and in occupied Western Sahara] is not at all the case for the European context, which hasn’t been and is not colonized,”<sup>31</sup> they are contributing to the erasure of those histories and memories that have indeed been colonized, particularly in the context of Central and Eastern Europe and the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, or the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> The rush to secure critical raw materials is the highest time to problematize the category of “Europe,” as the EU and “Europe” continue to be conflated, rendering invisible those geographies and territories that occupy the liminal space in between the Global North and the Global South, core and periphery. Analyzing the case of resistance to green extractivism in Serbia offers an important contribution to these debates, following a rich literature on the relationship between the Balkans and the rest of Europe. Serbia, ex-Yugoslavia, the “Western Balkans,” or

South-East Europe present a case of geographical space that is European, but not as European; white, but not as white; developed, but not as developed.

Todorova famously highlighted the role of the Balkans in serving as “a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the ‘European’ and the ‘West’ has been constructed.”<sup>33</sup> Yet while the term “Balkanism” needs to be read in relation to Said’s Orientalism, unlike in the case of the imaginary Orient, the Balkans is distinctly located between the West and the East, “left in Europe’s thrall, anticivilization, alter ego, the dark side within.”<sup>34</sup> This “dark side” manifests through numerous wars and massacres that have marked the history of the region, constructed in the Western imagination as a result of eternal hatred between different ethnic groups, and hence impossible to avoid, while conveniently masking the West’s own role and interests.<sup>35</sup> Yet while the historical tropes of Balkanism echo, extend, and resonate across times and spaces, of which the case of lithium mining becomes one such example as I expand on later in the article, they are also more complex than merely reproducing the binary between the colonizer and the colonized, or a periphery and the core.

Critical here is the work of scholars who further complicate the concept of Balkanism and point to the ways in which these representations of the Balkans are also “internalized, morphed and deployed to redefine the relations within the region itself.”<sup>36</sup> This is especially so in relation to race, ethnicity, and religion, and notably towards the internal racialized others such as Roma.<sup>37</sup> The Balkans or South-East Europe has been theorized as a distinctly (semi)peripheral region.<sup>38</sup> In this liminal positionality, “Europe” is both a form of oppression and a privilege, while this position is never fixed but constantly in process. Important contributions have focused on bringing together post-socialism, postcolonialism, and decolonialization from South-East Europe or the post-Yugoslav region.<sup>39</sup> The rich insights from this region, where many nation-states were at some point in their history both a colony and a colonizer and are orienting themselves between the core and the periphery, complicate these binaries, as well as the binary between the Global North and the Global South. This is particularly relevant in the context of rapidly expanding extractivism and shifting geopolitical relations. The article contributes to the critical post-Yugoslav scholarship by highlighting how Balkanist tropes become yet again mobilized in the wake of the mining plans, but also explicitly challenged by my research participants. In the empirical section that follows, I expand on the ways in which the specific positions of Serbia and the Jadar Project result in a distinct sense of peripheralization in relation to “Europe.”

### **Mining in a Forgotten Corner of Europe**

Extractivist projects are frequently presented as bringing about development and progress,<sup>40</sup> yet I argue that what is distinct about the Jadar Project is that it also portrayed as bringing Europeanisation to Serbia in concrete terms. Lindstrom reminds us

through her analysis of Slovenia and Croatia that some countries are more “European” than others, and those in the Balkans are “particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the changing social and political map of Europe,” as the “European status is never ontologically secure.”<sup>41</sup> “Accession fatigue” or being stuck in the “EU’s waiting room” are terms that capture the decades-long process of the “Western Balkan” countries trying to join the EU, while the EU’s accession process has also been described as “European new colonialism.”<sup>42</sup> Many of my research participants expressed a belief the Jadar mine is one of silent conditions for joining the EU. The resistance to the mining project then also becomes a rejection of this form of a conditional Europeanisation. As Marica from Rekovac, a municipality in central Serbia impacted by lithium explorations, puts it: “I suppose we are convenient because we are close to Europe, but we are *not in Europe*” (February 2022). Miroslav from an NGO operating in the wider Jadar region similarly describes how “it is very convenient for Serbia to become both a lithium mine and a landfill. Great, they have clean hands, they have clean technology. And about the Balkans, who gives a f\*ck” (January 2022).

When asked whether she personally feels like a part of Europe, Marica replied that she feels like a “citizen of the world”:

It is absolutely not the case that because I live in a small village, I feel like a small person in my local environment. On the contrary. [. . .]. But then you feel a bit discouraged when you see that maybe Europe doesn’t really want the best for you. [. . .]. As in, they obviously do not want you in the EU if they support the mining projects here. Then, some of the things that are respected in Europe would also need to be respected here (February 2022).

Through such statements, locals and activists are reflecting on the ways in which being a part of the EU includes privileges such as the rule of law and higher environmental standards, which are inaccessible to the citizens of Serbia. While supporting anti-mining struggles everywhere, as I expand on in the final section, the locals in Serbia make evident the structural differences between countries. Ana, local from the broader Jadar Valley, succinctly reflects on the Global North/Global South divide in relation to Serbia and the mining project:

I consider Serbia to be part of Europe geographically—and culturally, of course. [. . .]. But the fact is that within the global order, we are just another country of the Global South. [. . .]. And to all those quote-unquote investors, we are just another mine (February 2022).

Rio Tinto itself described its Jadar Project as sitting at the “doorsteps of Europe,” or in other words, outside of it, despite being geographically located *in* Europe. At the same time, however, the company promised to “position Serbia as the European hub for green energy” and hence *central* to the green transition.<sup>43</sup> The non-existent mine is thus located simultaneously outside of Europe and in its center, ultimately

constructed as an “extractable” space. In 2019, Bloomberg published an article titled “There May Be a Fortune Buried in a Forgotten Corner of Europe,” describing rural Serbia as “dying” or a “dead end.”<sup>44</sup> Another article in *The Times* from 2021, titled “Serbian Farmers Sitting on a Fortune in Rare Lithium Deposits,” represented the local population as uneducated farmers unaware of the riches underneath their soil.<sup>45</sup> Such portrayals continue in the vein of framing the local populations as ignorant, uninformed, or misinformed—an image with a long, colonial, and often racialized history across the Global South.<sup>46</sup> Within the local context, the articles are symptomatic of the Balkanist representation of the region and its population as poor, undeveloped, and backwards and, at the same time, a front critical for Europe’s own growth. “Corner of Europe” then refers to spatial power dynamics, while “forgotten” refers to temporal, or being outside of modernity.

Yet the liminality can also lead to contradictory identity construction of one’s Europeaness. Being a (semi)periphery means not wanting to become a periphery, colony, or sacrifice zone. Anlauf describes the Indigenous communities at the lithium mining sites in Argentina as “[h]istorically marginalized, not accustomed to Western knowledge system,” and hence largely excluded from the decision-making process.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the status of the local community in Serbia as European, but not European enough, presents a case of exploitation within—or at the borders of—the Western knowledge system. “Serbia is not a colony” and “Serbia is not for sale” became some of the most widely used protest slogans. Elena, who is not from villages affected by lithium mining but is one of the most prominent activists, explains protest that emerged in cities as a defense of the rural, calling lithium mining a “colonization of a village.” For her, “neocolonialism and neoliberalism” are the cause of the problem, but they pretend to be the solutions to, and the emphasis on lithium as an element required for the green transition is “greenwashing and colonization 101” (February 2022). Similarly, Blic, one of the biggest Serbian tabloids, published an article in November 2021, a few days before the escalation of the mass blockades, titled “The EU Has Designated the Jadar Region as a ‘Sacrifice Zone!’”<sup>48</sup> In this specifically (semi)peripheral position, the solidarity with other impacted communities in the Global South is then accompanied by a distinctive feeling of outrage that something like that is *also* possible in Europe and perpetuated by “Europe.” In the next section, I describe the attachments which reverberate under the prospect of green extractivism and are crucial to understanding the mass resistance.

## Memory, Heritage, and Attachment

I travelled to the Jadar Valley for the first time in February 2022, after the mass protests swept across Serbia and led to the initial cancellation of the Rio Tinto’s mining project, but at the time when the local community continued to organize itself, recognizing that the cancellation was by no means the end of it. I drove there with

Ivan, an activist who has supported the locals resisting the mining for years. “Even though I am by no means a nationalist, I feel something when I drive through this part of the country, and it means something to me,” he said as we drove across the hilly landscape (February 2022). The region is not only rich in lithium deposits underground but also with deep histories, memories, and attachments that stretch across different temporalities and reverberate in the struggle against the mine. These sentiments reverberate not only through the landscape but also in the tens of thousands of bodies that have mobilized against it. The mass resistance thus needs to be understood in relation to the specificities of the local histories, memories, and attachments, many of which became apparent only through long-term ethnographic engagement.

With the proposed mining complex potentially running through several villages in the Jadar Valley, Rio Tinto sought to buy out the houses and land from the local residents, particularly since 2019. Yet a part of the local community refused to sell and instead decided to organize against the mining project. Most of the locals resisting the mining project work as farmers in agriculture and livestock, and they cited their deep connections to the land and a strong sense of attachment as one of the main reasons for resisting. Local teacher Marijana became one of the most visible figures in the resistance against the Jadar Project. When she said during our interview that “there have always been wars for the Jadar Valley” (February 2022), she made explicit how her fight against the mining project is the continuation of the long history of defending their land against foreign invaders—or investors.<sup>49</sup> These attachments also carry an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial sentiment, with many of the historical examples including resistance against the Ottoman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The spatial, temporal, and material entanglements of land, memories, heritage, and artefacts underline the resistance to the lithium mining efforts in Serbia. As Rio Tinto drilled over 500 exploration drills to determine the content of lithium in the soil, they also drilled through sediments of different temporalities that mix in the Jadar Valley. As Marijana put it:

There is not a single family here that did not lose someone in the wars, the Battle of Cer, World War I, World War II. Our soil is soaked with blood. Even now, when they plough, they still find a skeleton, a gun, a knife. We were fighting here. [. . .]. And that is why the people have a completely different relationship with this land. (February 2022)<sup>50</sup>

Through reverberating entanglements, the memories of wars resurface and reinforce the local relationship with the land. In November 2022, during one of the protests that the local community continued to organize despite the later revoked cancellation, Marijana delivered a speech in front of the seat of Government in Belgrade. Surrounded by several hundred protesters, she held a clod of earth, which she said she took that morning before leaving for Belgrade from a memorial on the Cer Mountain as a symbol and a reminder of what they are defending. The soil,

which possibly witnessed some historical battles, travelled from western Serbia to the capital of Belgrade as material evidence of the reverberations of violence.

During one of my many visits to the Jadar Valley, the local beekeeper Vladan took me to the mass grave and monument to the victims executed by the Nazi soldiers in Draginac, a village just a few kilometers from the proposed mine. He explained that he brought there all the international journalists who came to report on the local struggle against lithium mining. The monument commemorates the civilian victims who were executed during World War II. In response to a series of communist-led Partisan resistance attacks, the Nazi commander Franz Böhme ordered that for every wounded German soldier, 50 Serbian civilians were to be executed, and 100 civilians for every dead German soldier. Most executions took place in October 1941, when around 3,000 people were killed in the course of five days, out of which 305 were children under 10.<sup>51</sup> Vladan told me that people died on this land defending it, and foreign forces have always wanted to seize this fertile part of Serbia. Indeed, several of my research participants noted that Rio Tinto supplied Nazi Germany with steel during World War II.<sup>52</sup> The company is thus seen as indirectly responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians from the past—the ancestors of those who are resisting lithium mining now. Evren traces similar dynamics in an ethnography of a hydro-power project in Çoruh Valley, Turkey, noting how “earlier episodes of murder, displacement, and dispossession are explicitly invoked, and their victims are remembered to place the suffering of the past in juxtaposition with grievances in the present.”<sup>53</sup>

The attachment to the land is not only national and patriotic but also deeply personal, affective, and emotional as “the dead of the past” that reappear in the fight against lithium mining are not only nameless heroes but also close relatives.<sup>54</sup> Marijana described as one of the worst moments the realization that the mine would be in proximity to the local church and cemetery: “I don’t know what I would do if they told us to move our dead somewhere else. [ . . . ]. We cannot fight just for the living, now we also have to fight for the dead” (February 2022). The ancestral heritage of generations living in the Jadar Valley results in a strong moral imperative not to sell one’s house and land to the company. At one of the protests I attended in February 2022, a local resident from the Jadar Valley asked me rhetorically: “How much is the Pantheon worth? And the Pyramids? Would anyone sell those? My father and my grandfather built everything with their bare hands. Who am I to sell that to anyone?” Yet Marijana also highlighted that this attachment to land is viewed as something that only those who experience it can understand:

The foreigners do not understand what it means to be attached. I remember one of my neighbors said a few years ago to an English journalist who came to the Valley to talk to us: “I did not earn that, that was my great grandfather, then grandfather, then father, then me and then my son, and tomorrow it will be my grandson. If I sell all of that to you, I have nothing. I am nothing. I have no roots.” The foreigners don’t understand that (February 2022).

In its (semi)peripheral position in relation to the West, the local resistance is inconsistent with the extractivist imperative of progress and development. “Foreigners” then refer not only to citizens of other countries but also to Serbian Rio Tinto employees and other supporters of the project as being “foreign” to the sense of attachment to land. Yet rather than resulting in a sense of Balkanist marginalization and victimhood, there is instead a strong agency and pride of those resisting lithium mining. This becomes further evident through the connection to farming and agriculture.

“How can someone ride a car if they are hungry and thirsty? First, they have to eat and drink,” Marijana questioned the benefits of lithium mining over food production (February 2022). Similarly, Vladan, who moved to the Jadar Valley to get away from the city, invoked this through his connection with the bees: “Bees are part of human survival. Every second bite is connected to a bee. It is not connected to lithium” (February 2022). The impact of lithium mining transcends the human and includes animals, plants, soil, and other non-humans, as some members of the local community stressed the agency of the non-human inhabitants of the Jadar Valley. Vladan’s bees *want* to stay where they are: “Our family bees have been here in this village for fifty years. That is also why I bought the land here twenty years ago . . . why, well because it suits them [the bees]. They told me, quote-unquote.” (February 2022). For Marijana, it is also the soil itself that has an agency: “They [the supporters of the mining project] want money, progress, and industry. And the earth doesn’t want that. It wants hands and care. It wants love, not money!” (February 2022).

In this understanding, the earth has agency and *wants* to be cultivated, it does not want to be drilled and mined. The soil, plants, animals, and insects become recognized by some locals of the Jadar Valley as fellow inhabitants who wish to remain where they are, just like the humans. The prospect of the mining project then also reveals how their lives and homes are enmeshed and entangled. While many agricultural practices in the Jadar Valley are not organic and bring with them their own sets of environmental challenges, the prospect of lithium mining mobilizes a situated understanding of ecological attachments to the soil, alongside the historical ones.<sup>55</sup> Locals here are thus not defending “nature” or “environment” in pure and abstract terms, but the co-produced specific, local, historical, and economic relations, imperfect as they are. The attachments then stretch across the land that is valued for its historical significance, for the economic value of farming, for the personal value of home and community, and everything in between. In the next section, I describe some forms of solidarity that emerged with communities across different scales based on the shared sense of attachment.

## **Towards Decolonial Solidarity Across the North and South**

In February 2025, Zlatko and Nebojša, two members of the local community from the group We Don’t Give Jadar (Ne Damo Jadar), which is also part of SEOS, travelled to Brussels to protest. The reason was a screening in the European

Parliament of a self-proclaimed documentary film titled “Not in My Country,” which has been criticized for perpetuating Balkanist tropes in portraying the local community, reducing their struggle to the Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) trope.<sup>56</sup> In Brussels, Zlatko and Nebojša were not given the floor to address the members of the European Parliament and others in the audience. Still, a protest was organized in front of the European Parliament by the Serbian diaspora and allied groups. In a statement, We Don’t Give Jadar rejected the NIMBY narrative and expressed solidarity with struggles elsewhere:

[The film] portrays us as people who support lithium mining in Western Europe, only not in [Serbia], which is not true. We are fighting together with all of the activists, not only in Europe, but across the world, who are resisting dirty mining, destruction of the environment and of human lives.<sup>57</sup>

Networks of solidarity have been building for years, yet this statement is noteworthy because it draws connection with activists from across the world and Europe, despite the sentiments of being geographically excluded and temporarily forgotten, as described in the previous sections.

Foreign commentaries on the protests against lithium mining in Serbia have commonly interpreted them as a result of Serbian animosity towards the West and the country’s increasing cooperation with Russia and China.<sup>58</sup> In summer 2024, at the height of another wave of protests, German and U.S. representatives claimed that “Russia is likely playing a major role in stoking opposition to the project” by spreading disinformation.<sup>59</sup> It has also been asserted that a Russian, Chinese, or Serbian project would not face such resistance. A frequently cited example is the copper mining complex in Bor and Majdanpek, eastern Serbia, owned by the Chinese mining company Zijin, which has not seen mobilization on the scale of the anti-lithium protests despite being one of the most polluted places in Europe.<sup>60</sup> Such claims are strongly disputed by my research participants, who stress that a lithium mine in the Jadar Valley would be resisted regardless of where the company is from. Such simplified views on the geopolitical relations disregard the local specificities, with the farming region in the west of the country being in a largely different position than the historic mining towns in the east.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, it invisibilizes the growing solidarities *within* Serbia between different communities affected by the mining and other extractivist projects and disregards the many protests against Zijin, which even halted its mining production on several occasions, as described in the Introduction of this special issue.<sup>62</sup> In what many of my research participants cited as a transformative experience, they travelled from Western Serbia to Eastern Serbia in March 2022 to meet the residents of Bor and Majdanpek, when their anticipation of devastation became more palpable. For some of them, that became a decisive moment to continue to resist the Jadar Project, seeing the pollution and devastation that they believe could also befall them, while supporting those that have already been impacted by the mining projects.

Solidarities thus spread on different scales and among various axes, with one of them also being the history of Rio Tinto. For Miroslav, his resistance to the mining project started when he first heard of Papua New Guinea, Madagascar, Mongolia, Uganda, and other places where Rio Tinto has operated. Both contemporary and historical struggles of other communities across the globe against Rio Tinto became publicly known and discussed in Serbia. These included examples from the blowing up of the sacred 46,000-year-old Aboriginal site in Australia in 2020 and the involvement of Rio Tinto in the civil war in Papua New Guinea between 1988 and 1998.<sup>63</sup> A banner frequently seen at the protests stated that “Rio Tinto means a red river. We don’t want any rivers turning red.” Indeed, Rio Tinto is named after a river in southern Spain where the company was born in the second half of the nineteenth century as a British investment. The Tinto River has its characteristic red color due to mining activities and is considered extremely toxic.<sup>64</sup> The locals and activists in Serbia are thus aligning their struggle both with struggles that stretch both temporarily and spatially, across different histories and geographies. Reflecting on the sense of attachment to the land in the Jadar Valley and the historical narratives that inform it, Rajković strongly argues that “[w]e should not take nativism for straightforward nationalism here. [ . . . ] What here sounds as a classical blood-and-soil argument, I argue, in fact opens new gestures of solidarity with both the world’s oppressed *and* one’s own predecessors.”<sup>65</sup>

Crucially, the resistance is explicitly against *green* extractivism. The relationship with the land resonates with other movements elsewhere, as the local community in the Jadar Valley and its allies dispute that extractivism can ever be green. As Marijana put it: “There is no such thing as green mining. What is green are fields and leaves because of chlorophyll, that is green” (February 2022). Similarly, Ana reflects on the notions of justice and sustainability in the green transition:

Sustainability is only possible when it is just. When it is just for all members of the community, then it is sustainable. And that includes the plant and animal world, all living beings. As long as someone has to suffer, it cannot be called sustainability. [ . . . ] Mining is the most destructive activity on the planet Earth. And the whole story with the green agenda, green economy, green growth, whatever green, is a pure lie, just another color of capitalism and nothing else (February 2022).

Such positions become explicitly articulated as solidarity with other communities. In July 2022, Serbian activists facilitated a visit of organizations fighting lithium mining from Chile, Spain, Portugal, and Germany, which led to the signing of the Jadar Declaration. The Declaration states:

[S]o that no single country or people should be made to bear the consequences of another one’s unjust energy transition, and so that no single individual should be exempt from exercising their universal human right to live free from environmental degradation or left undefended when faced with ecocide, we find that a solidary

international network of organizations is ultimately necessary due to the deficiencies of current institutions and relations among states.<sup>66</sup>

Activists from across the world gathered in the Jadar Valley on many more occasions, including in February 2024 with members of communities from Indigenous Ecuador, Native America, Peru, Portugal, Greece, and many other countries arriving to share experiences with resisting extractivism.<sup>67</sup> Such networks of solidarity demonstrate that opening lithium mines in Europe will not mean the closing of mines elsewhere, as the extractivist logic means opening new mines *wherever possible*, as well as expanding the existing ones. In other words, solidarity with communities across the North and South, West and the Rest, is not only possible but also necessary for the broader rejection of green extractivism.

The resistance to lithium mining in Serbia can be understood as anachronistic, temporarily inconsistent with the imperative of extractivism. Marijana explained that during the height of the protests, international journalists would knock on her door every day to report on this village that refuses to allow a lithium mine to be constructed. She described during our interview in detail how the journalists were astonished to discover a part of Europe where people *still* feel so strongly attached to the land (February 2022). Thus, while resistance against large-scale mining projects is often interpreted in simplified and often patronizing discourses around NIMBYism, it in fact reveals profound attachments through which solidarities can be established. Initially, the dominant narratives might have been centered around the sense of being a colony or a sacrifice zone, but they were also tempered with a sense of pride and agency, as I highlighted in the previous sections. Yet crucially, these sentiments have been shifting as awareness about other struggles across the world, including within the EU, rose. By attending to mass resistance and to forming global solidarities, I call for a reformulation of an emergent, emancipatory response that recognizes the particularities of individual struggles, the critical differences between the Global North and the Global South, while still problematizing simplifying binaries.

## Conclusion

By examining the sentiments, attachments, and experiences that arise in the wake of the prospect of lithium mining, what emerges is how the anticipated extraction reverberates histories and memories related to national identity, past forms of violence, and present impulses to protect life, both human and more-than-human. The relationship to the land and soil emerges as deeply affective and profoundly emotional, stretching beyond economic benefits. Yet I also suggest that it goes beyond the nationalist narratives, instead acting as a transformative experience based on which solidarities with other affected communities begin to form. The close ethnographic engagement between research and activism also reveals that attachments run

much deeper than NIMBYism would suggest. The struggle against lithium mining mobilizes and reverberates multiple forms of attachment across various scales, which become a key challenge to the dominant understanding of the green transition based on continuous economic growth and extractivism.

The long histories of othering can be remobilized and rearticulated, constructing the mine in Serbia as occupying a liminal position of being both conveniently inside and outside Europe proper. At the same time, these projects and investments are not simply “foreign” but demonstrate the pervasiveness of the extractivist logic from within, as the national government supports them for the sake of economic advancement. While the promise of progress and development through extractivist projects follows the common patterns that are frequently seen across the Global South, the case of lithium projects in Serbia also carries the promise of Europeanisation that is specific to its (semi)peripheral position. These promises are nevertheless rejected and resisted on a mass scale, while building solidarity with similar cases elsewhere. Crucially, seeking to understand the motives behind the mass movement that emerged in Serbia, as well as the reasons behind its—at least partial or temporal—success, requires an appreciation for resistance as a complex set of varying motives where multiple forms of attachment and resistance come to be.

Insufficient attention has been paid to the changing material and geopolitical relations under the urgency of the climate crisis and the state of exception invoked by the green transition which has led to renewed pressure on mining and the expansion of extractivist logic across the globe, including within Europe. I argue for the understanding of green extractivist logic as shifting and expanding, revealing the relations between the core and the periphery, or the Global North and the Global South, not as fixed but as relational. Building on the rich body of scholarship on Balkanism and related concepts from South-East European and post-Yugoslav scholars, this article unveils both the echoes of Balkanist tropes and some of the privileges that (semi)peripherality in Europe carries with itself.

The contexts of the struggles in the EU, its immediate outside, the Global South, and elsewhere remain vastly different. A focus on the resisting communities requires a profound engagement with their specificities, histories, and memories that cannot necessarily be abstracted in a more general sense. At the same time, however, the growing scholarship on green extractivism in Europe risks losing the broader perspective of both the historical and present context in the Global South. While such work highlights the important experience of individual communities, as well as the structural, systematic, and historical inequalities within Europe, it risks becoming a scholarly race to the bottom in determining which parts of Europe are more peripheral, colonized, or sacrificed. Instead, more attention must be paid to the broader picture, which necessarily has to include the Global South, and to the growing solidarity across different geographies in resisting the rapidly expanding green extractivism. Such networks have begun the work of bridging different geographies, demonstrating that the divisions between the Global North and the Global South are

not binary nor static. As many of the communities impacted by the wave of green extractivist projects experience a sense of peripheralization, including in Europe and within the EU, it is through the realization that their case is not unique that networks of solidarity can be built.

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# *Poem I | I Feel Sorry for the Ant by Ljiljana*

*Bralović*

Translated by Jevdjenije Julijan Dimitrijević.

ЖАО МИ МРАВА

Za Draganu Djordjević

Жао ми мрава.

Вреди ли неверном причати о вери,

злом да зло прети,

може ли забораван да се сети,

непаметан да се опамети?

Мени само жао трава и мрава,

буба и лептира, жао ми пчела!

Свега недужног што под овим сводом

дише и уздише

јер зна какво зло кидише.

Због њих се борим и горим,

I FEEL SORRY FOR THE ANT

For Dragana Djordjević

I feel sorry for the ant.

Is it worth preaching to the unfaithful about the faith,

or to the evil one, that the evil is threatening?

Can the forgetful one ever recall,

or the foolish one gain any wisdom at all?

Oh I do feel sorry for the grass and the ants,

for the beetles and the butterflies;

I feel sorry for the bees!

For everything innocent that breathes, and sighs under

this canopy, for it knows what kind of evil lurks

nearby.

I am fighting and burning for them, creating verses,

стихове творим,  
да за неброј векова  
чују нека наша деца у свету  
да су овде некада живела нека бића  
која су подсећала на људе.

Када нас прокуну и осуде  
да знају да је понекоме било жао  
и смиља и каравиља,  
скакаваца и попаца,  
лептира и бубамара,  
свега што живот ствара  
и да никада нису баш сви исти:  
блудници и они нечисти  
што за шаку сребрњака  
продају школу и ђака,  
Цркву и веру, ма и самог Бога.

Зарад тога пишем песме,  
жао ми мрава, жао ми крава,  
жао ми пчела, танковитих јела,  
плакала бих за брезом и јасиком,  
ђурђевком, јагорчевином и чемериком.

Свега ми недужног жао,  
само није човека

so that in countless centuries, some of our children in  
the world may hear, that once upon a time, some  
beings have lived here, that have resembled humans.

So when they curse us and judge us, they still should  
know that at least someone once felt sorry, for the  
immortelle and the wild thyme, for the grasshoppers  
and the grigs, for the butterflies and the ladybugs so  
fine, for everything that life creates, for all that lives,  
and that not everyone is quite the same in sin: with the  
fornicators and the unclean who, for a handful of  
silver, do not disdain to sell the schools and students,  
and all that has been gained, the Church and the faith,  
even God Himself.

For that, I write poems,  
I feel sorry for the ants, I feel sorry for the cows,  
I feel sorry for the bees and also for fragile firs,  
I would mourn for the birch and the aspen, for the lily  
of the valley, for the primrose, and for false  
hellebore...I would mourn forevermore...

I feel sorry for everything innocent and pure, save for  
the man, so shamefully unsure, who sits and waits to

који седи и чека  
да га као последњу лешину  
отерају на неку туђу ледину  
а његову дедовину претворе у гробље  
цврчака, попаца и мрава...

be driven away like a last carcass upon some foreign  
wasteland while his ancestral home becomes a  
graveyard, of crickets, grigs, and ants...

**Ljiljana Bralović** is a poet and a writer from the village of Pranjani, having published numerous books and poetry collections. She is a dairy producer and a proud ‘peasant woman’ in her own words. Ljiljana is also a member of the local association Suvoborska greda which also forms part of SEOS, and she is one of the most prominent figures in the struggle against lithium mining in Serbia.



*Figure 25: Aerial view of the Jadar Valley. Photo: Ivan Nikolić.*

# Article 2 | “We Live the Violence, We Resist the Violence:” Violent and Toxic Politics Between a School Shooting and Lithium Mining in Serbia

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Figure 26: Evening protest on a highway in Belgrade, July 2023. Picture my own.



# “We live the violence, we resist the violence:” violent politics between a school shooting and lithium mining in Serbia

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## Abstract

This article explores the unexpected connections that emerge between lithium mining plans in Serbia and two mass shootings on the 3rd and 4th of May 2023. The 3rd of May event was the first school shooting in the history of the wider region, becoming for many Serbians a manifestation of systemic issues rather than an isolated event, and resulting in the formation of a massive protest movement. The Jadar Project was set to become the biggest lithium mine in Europe, yet it has attracted widespread resistance across the country, resulting in its cancellation in January 2022, which was, however, nullified two and a half years later. Drawing on ethnographic and activist engagement with communities affected by lithium exploration in Serbia, this article explores how the two protest movements intersected around the question of violence. I theorise ‘violent politics’ as encompassing multiple and shifting forms of violence that arise between lithium extractivism and the shootings and beyond, arguing for the need to conceptually connect various forms of violence. Moving beyond understanding violence through isolated events then problematises the binary thinking between chronic and acute violence, or material and immaterial toxicity, instead revealing it as fluid and porous—yet still being resisted.

**Keywords** Violent politics · Toxicity · Social movements · School shooting · Lithium · Extractivism · Serbia

## Introduction

This article brings together in a deliberate yet unexpected way the case of lithium mining projects in Serbia with two mass shootings of 3rd and 4th May 2023. The shooting of May 3rd was the first school shooting in Serbian history, with one adult

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and nine children—eight girls and one boy—killed by a 13-year-old male shooter in an elementary school ‘Vladislav Ribnikar’ in Belgrade. The following day, in what was described as a copycat case, a 21-year-old male shooter killed eight people, most of the victims in their late teens and early twenties, in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje (Maksimović, 2023). In the aftermath of the two shootings, massive protests erupted, attracting tens of thousands of people and taking place almost every week between May and November 2023, amounting to a total of 27 protests in Belgrade and around 150 across the country under the banner of ‘Serbia Against Violence’ (N1, 2024). While the movement culminated in the formation of an oppositional political coalition prior to the snap elections which took place in December 2023, but which were ultimately lost, the scale and the size of the protests led some commentators to consider 2023 as “the year of the protests” (ibid.) and the movement as one of the biggest “in Serbia’s recent history” (Petrović, 2023). Yet Serbia has seen numerous mass protest movements in recent years. A year and a half before the two shootings, protests escalated against the Jadar lithium mining project led by Rio Tinto, one of the largest mining corporations in the world. With the anti-lithium protesters blocking highways, roads and bridges across Serbia on a weekly basis between November 2021 and January 2022, the government was ultimately forced to cancel the project, although the cancellation was nullified in July 2024, and the struggle is ongoing.

It is in 2025, the time of final editing of this article, that it feels like this year should be considered the year of protests, as the student movement erupted in by far the largest protests in Serbian history, attracting hundreds of thousands of people in response to the collapse of a concrete canopy of a newly renovated train station in Novi Sad which killed 16 people. How to make sense of these continuously emerging mass protest movements? How do they relate to each other over time and across different issues? Between lithium mining projects and the mass shootings, what forms does the relationship of violence and politics take? In this paper, I argue for the need to conceptually connect different forms of violence that the various protest movements respond to. Using the examples of the anti-lithium movement and the Serbia Against Violence protests, I propose the concept of *violent politics* to this end. I theorise violent politics as a form of a political situation (Barry 2012) where ongoing events cannot be separated from others, whether past or future, and where shifting and multiple forms of violence can sit (un)comfortably next to each other. The concept of violent politics then allows us to account for the multiple forms of violence as they emerge across various events, offering a deeper appreciation for the fluidity of the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity, between a political situation and an event.

The Serbia Against Violence movement that emerged in the aftermath of the two shootings explicitly interpreted the events as a result of broader, systemic issues with violence in Serbia rather than as individual acts of killing. Compared to the responses to the mass shootings in the US, where such violence, while no less traumatic, has become routine (DeGette 1999), the case of Serbia offers unique insights into the redefinition and re-articulation of what is understood as violence through a protest movement. At the same time, for the anti-lithium activists in Serbia, the two shootings also became a manifestation of systemic violence that those resisting



lithium mining are facing too, describing the toxic uncertainty surrounding the Jadar Project. Violent politics, however, are not a mere reflection of a political regime in a country, although it plays a major role. Instead, violent politics should be understood as accounting for a collage of oppressive forces that range from the historical context, party politics, foreign investments, corporate power, criminal structures, silencing and censorship, everyday patriarchy, conflict within the communities and many others. Crucially, then, violent politics also attends to the equally shifting and multiple forms of resistance, blurring the boundary between slow and mass resistance, as the two movements illustrate how eventful forms of protest can respond both to acute and slow violence.

This research is based on more than three years of ethnographic engagements with the local communities and their allies resisting lithium exploration projects across Serbia, between 2022 and 2025 and ongoing. The countless informal conversations are supplemented by 28 recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews, which serve to express the views of my research participants in their own words. The work operates at the intersection of research and activism based on critical, decolonial and feminist methodologies that place the commitment to research participants at its centre (see Onís & Pezzullo 2017; Gani & Khan 2024 for some examples of works that have informed the methodology). Such a commitment extends beyond the boundaries of research and towards orientations of solidarity, relationality and reciprocity. In practical terms, this also means respecting the strong wish of some of my research participants to be included under their real names and upholding their “right to be known” (Murrey 2015, p. 17; see Tuck & Yang 2014). Some names have been changed to preserve anonymity, but there is no indication of when that is the case (see Murrey 2015). With some of my research participants becoming my friends, such extensions beyond academic boundaries are particularly relevant in the context of my own positionality as I navigate the hyphens between the insider–outsider (Anderson 2021; Munthali 2001) and scholar-activist (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). While I speak Serbian and have extended family members in Serbia as well as many friends, I was born and raised elsewhere following my parents’ decision to leave the country at the start of the 90 s wars. Just as my own position shows the fluidity of the boundary between an insider and an outsider, a researcher and an activist, this article is concerned with collapsing multiple theoretical boundaries through the concept of violent politics.

Since the focus of my research is resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, how did I find myself writing about mass shootings? As the article is based on the research practice that extends beyond the boundaries of the field and the fieldwork, it also responds to the unexpected, rupturing and tragic events of the two shootings. A school shooting is one of the events that is impossible to make sense of. It escapes explanations and interpretations, it completely disrupts, breaks, ruptures the worlds of all those affected, when a school, as a place and space for education, becomes a site of dying. It is the kind of event that shakes a society and a community to the bone. It is also an uncomfortable event that people struggle to talk—or write—about as no words seem appropriate (see Fig. 1 for a visual aspect). While I did not personally know any of the victims or their families, the collective practice of grieving has deeply impacted my fieldwork and the research itself, while radically altering





**Fig. 1** Candles lit in Belgrade in memory of the victims of the school shooting, 11th May 2023. Photo my own

the understanding of violence on a societal level. Moreover, as part of communal grieving for the lost lives of young people, I wanted to include them in this article. The article thus brings together the experience of grieving through the shootings and attending the anti-violence protests in my personal capacity with the ethnographic research on resistance to lithium mining. Crucially, however, I am not bringing the two cases together only for the sake of methodological justice, but also to argue that they must be understood in relation to each other in order to account for the ways in which multiple forms of violence are connected within the situation of violent politics.

First, I bring together the existing scholarship on the violence of green extractivism with literature on toxicity and pollution. I build on Andrew Barry's (2012) concept of the political situation to introduce 'violent politics' as a political situation which accounts for violence in its multiplicity, ranging from chemical pollution of lithium exploration drill, a school shooting, and the atmospheres of fear, anticipation, uncertainty, silencing, stagnation, corruption and (semi)authoritarian rule. Second, I theorise violent politics from Serbia and its post-Yugoslav and post-war context, describing the political situation from which the vastly different forms of violence arise. Third, I outline the extractivist violence in Serbia based on my ethnographic fieldwork with the local communities affected by the prospect of lithium mining, describing multiple toxicities which emerge in the wake of the mining project. In doing so, I demonstrate how toxicity comes not only in chemical but also in affective and anticipatory manifestations, complicating what is understood as 'material' toxicity. Finally, I describe the connections that emerge between the anti-lithium movement and the protests in response to the shootings, arguing that the lines separating different movements, protests, crises, or controversies are never sovereign but instead leaky and porous in ways that are in fact embraced by the protesters. I



conclude by reiterating how violent politics allows us to bring together the vastly different forms of violence that arise between lithium extractivism and the shootings and beyond. Crucially, despite the apparent totality of violent politics, possibilities of resistance continue to arise through the cracks of the broken world, as various protest movements *demonstrate*.

## Conceptualising violent politics

“[E]xtractivism is central to the destruction of all forms of life”, writes Grosfoguel (2019, p. 205). As extractivist frontiers are rapidly expanding across the world in the race for the so-called critical raw materials, and increasingly so in the Balkans, understanding the relationship between violence and extractivism is of particular importance. Extractivism “require[s] land and bodies as sacrifice zones” (Liboiron et al. 2018, p. 332), with violence being its core logic (Glaab & Stuvøy, 2021; Shapiro & McNeish 2021). This article attends to the violence of green extractivism (Voskoboynik & Andreucci 2022), where mining is presented as a solution to climate change, yet results in pollution, toxicity, and harm. Liboiron et al., in their seminal work on toxic politics, describe how “[t]oxicity both disrupts existing orders and ways of life at some scales, while simultaneously enabling and maintaining ways of life at other scales” (2018, p. 331; Shapiro 2015). While enabling life on one scale, the green transition based on extractivism disrupts life at other scales and geographies. In *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), Liboiron asserts that toxicity stems from bracketing particular geographies and people as disposable. In the context of green extractivism, the assumption that access to land must be granted to the mining companies because of the urgency of climate change is similarly reproduced, particularly affecting Indigenous people and peasant communities across the Global North and the Global South (Chagnon et al. 2022; Dunlap & Riquito 2023; Semperregui 2021). As Liboiron et al. (2018) contend that we live in a “permanently polluted world”, it then comes as no surprise that even strategies meant to tackle climate change are a continuation of the logic of pollution for the sake of economic growth.

Writing about the politics of violence in extractivism, Glaab and Stuvøy highlight how it encompasses both symbolic and structural forms of violence (2021). Building on Nixon’s conception of slow violence (2011), McNeish and J. Shapiro argue that “[e]xtractive violence is shown not only to be a spectacular event, but an extended dynamic that can be silent, invisible and gradual, a process of long dyings” (2021, p. 2). Liboiron et al. write about the permanently polluted world as “characterised by chronic slow disasters” and suggest that slow activism is perhaps the most “complementary form of politics” (2018, p. 340). Similarly, scholars investigating geographies of resistance in the context of slow violence (Davies 2018, 2022; Nixon 2011) or structural violence (Murrey 2016) have described forms of slow activism (Fung & Lamb 2023), slow dissent (Murrey 2016), slow resistance (Babidge 2021 on the case of lithium mining in Chile) or activism that could be considered resigned (Lora-Wainwright 2017). Highlighting how violence, environmental injustices, toxicity and pollution commonly manifest in ways that are mundane, non-spectacular



or uneventful, such scholarship pays attention to the often invisible forms of resistance that go beyond the "in-the-streets-activism" (Liboiron et al. 2018). Yet writing from the perspective of violent politics in Serbia shows that even slow disasters are resisted in diverse forms, including. Moreover, I suggest that 'eventful' or acute forms of violence, such as the school shooting, are also embedded in situations of violent politics, as became explicitly formulated by the Serbia Against Violence movement.

In order to attend to these nuances, I argue for the need to conceptually expand our understanding of violence through the notion of violent politics. Yet, scholars have cautioned against a continuous expansion of concepts, warning that "there is a danger of stretching the metaphorical elasticity of the term to breaking point, rendering everything—and therefore nothing—the status of 'violence'" (Davies 2022, p. 412). As the unique example of Serbia shows, however, it was in fact the expansion of understanding of violence that enabled the mobilisation of tens of thousands of people. Similarly, violent politics should not be understood as everything being and always having been a form of violence or toxicity. On the contrary, it is the notion of a "permanently polluted world" (Liboiron et al. 2018) that rarely accounts for the situations of uncertainty and anticipation, and how they relate to the materiality and temporality of toxicity. Rather than blankly painting everything as violence, what the concept of violent politics is doing, then, is attending to the connections across different forms of violence and toxicity which are lost within the binary thinking. What the debate so far is missing, then, is a more fluid appreciation of how the materiality of toxicity has an immaterial shadow: anticipations of toxicity that presage its material consequences.

When does the material toxicity begin? Once, if ever, the lithium mine is opened in the Jadar Valley, and the water and soil become polluted? Or when the first exploration drills were drilled in the early 2000s, leading to the discovery of the lithium deposits? Or perhaps once those houses that were sold to Rio Tinto began to fall apart some years ago, suspended between demolition by the mining company and efforts to preserve them by the local community? As I discuss in the empirical sections that follow, the case of resistance to lithium mining in Serbia highlights the importance of asking such questions since the liminal position that the Jadar Project occupies, first as officially cancelled, later as reinstated, constantly both suspended and anticipated, means already living through toxicity. Velicu (2020) proposes the concept of prospective environmental (in)justice to account for such cases of anticipation and uncertainty. Halted projects are not free from violence—rather, attending to temporalities of toxicity beyond the chemical or physical pollution and contamination opens up new ways of reconceptualising toxic politics and theorising violent politics. As Velicu puts it:

[O]ne could argue that toxicity is not merely some material, visible substance: [...] it may flow in the air also as the everyday noise and scandal of a conflict that, lasting for more than a decade of stress, pressures, and intimidation, is a kind of invisible toxicity that degrades everyday life (2020, p. 424).

Researching the case of local resistance to an opencast gold mine in Romania, Velicu demonstrates how collective injustices of psychological pain, marginalisation



of the local population and dismissal of alternative futures “could be seen as constitutive moments of *systemic* violence” (2020, p. 414, emphasis added). Focussing on dispossession and land grabbing, Kušić describes cases of slow violence in South-east Europe (2024). Murrey focuses on the structural violence where the project of the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline is “not perceived as an exceptional case of state-sponsored and corporate-backed land and resource theft under the guise of development. Instead, the pipeline is narrated as *one* project in a long line of *similarly experienced* and *similarly understood* projects” (2016, p. 225, emphasis in the original).

I bring these accounts of violence in struggles against extractivism with Barry’s concept of the political situation (2012). Researching the politics of the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline in Georgia, Barry sought to “move beyond any understanding of knowledge controversies merely as isolated events” (2012, p. 330) and to theorise such struggles as never self-contained, but rather as extending spatially and temporally. I suggest that the political situation offers a productive way of thinking not only about the politics of knowledge production, as in Barry’s case, but also about violence. Just as political situations extend spatially and temporarily, so too environmental struggles contain “multiple (slow, discursive, symbolic, agentic, psychological, spatial, temporal, material) layers of violence associated with economic growth” (Velicu 2020, p. 421; see also Barca 2014, on environmental violence). Writing about the “the persistence and continuity of violence” in the struggle against small-scale hydroelectric power plants in Turkey, Evren similarly stresses “the necessity to adopt an analytical gaze that does not limit itself to the here and now of resource extraction projects” (2021, p. 237). Here, I offer the concept of violent politics as an expansive gaze that attends to the multiplicity and interconnectedness of extending situations.

Based on my ethnographic research, I theorise *violent politics* as understanding violence as multiple in terms of temporalities, spatialities and materialities, moving beyond the binary divisions between material and immaterial toxicity, situations and events. While for Velicu, prospective environmental (in)justice serves to “make sense of [...] injustices even before the development projects become a *material* reality” (2020, p. 414, emphasis added), I want to suggest that what constitutes material or indeed toxic reality must be seriously reconsidered. Affective, political, psychological and other forms of toxicity that are usually understood as ‘invisible’ or ‘immaterial’ are here considered alongside the material effects under violent politics. Yet what are the political implications of collapsing the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity? Indeed, scholars like Bond insist on the need to bring “toxicity into sharper moral legibility and political accountability”, highlighting the role of ethnography in doing so (2021, p. 399). As Gutierrez et al. put it, “[e]thnography moves past the ‘eventfulness’ of toxicity to analyze injustice as a process” (2021, p. 72; see also Vorbrugg 2022, on ethnographies of slow violence). Violent politics seeks to account *both* for the eventfulness of violence and toxicity and for the situation as a process. The resistance movements in Serbia are explicitly drawing out the parallels between multiple types of violence, resisting *all* of them, whether ‘material’ or not. It is in this assemblage within violent politics in Serbia that lithium extractivism and the two shootings sit (un)comfortably next to each other, as I describe in the following sections.



## Resisting violent politics in Serbia

*"I don't think that anything around us is healthy. I don't mean just the air; I don't think that the situation in the society is healthy either."* (N1, 2021).

These are the words of an unnamed man who was attending a protest against air pollution in January 2021 when he was approached by a TV crew and interviewed about why he was there. It is in these two sentences of someone who was randomly asked a simple question that the collapse of the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity is verbalised. I choose these words as a starting point to theorise violent politics in Serbia—and the resistance to it. While the interview dates years before the two mass shootings, similar sentiments have been expressed as the shootings became widely interpreted as a result of decades of an 'unhealthy' situation in society. The mass protests of tens of thousands of people over several months that materialised in response to the shootings were thus not only a result of collective grief and anger over the loss of young lives but also of long-term dissatisfaction with the situation in the country.

Protest movements in the post-Yugoslav and post-war context, while remaining largely under-researched, are characterised by their interconnectedness (see Štiks 2020). "Why has my mom been protesting since the 90s?!" read a banner that Tijana held at some of the early Serbia Against Violence protests in May and June 2023 (Fig. 2). Tijana is a young activist in the anti-lithium movement and one of my research participants who also became a good friend. We went to many anti-lithium protests together, and later also to the Serbia Against Violence protests, where I saw strangers approach her to share how they related to the banner. Referring to a large anti-war movement of the 90s that included hundreds of thousands of people united in their effort to first prevent and later stop the Yugoslav wars, the banner captured the sentiment of frustration that has continued long after the wars ended. Marina from a Belgrade-based civil society organisation similarly shared during our interview on resistance against lithium mining in February 2022 the difficulty of never-ending protests: "I went to the first grade in 1990, so I have been protesting since the first grade of my elementary school. And I mean, I'm sick of it". Such empirical accounts demonstrate the lived, intergenerational connections across various protest movements. Understanding and analysing them as separate events risks missing out on these relationalities that the lens of violent politics focuses on.

In the post-Yugoslav context, "a period of violence, conflict or general instability and economic hardship has been followed by a seemingly endless transition to liberal democracy and a neoliberal economy" (Štiks & Horvat 2014, p. 83). Thus, the violence of the 90s wars has been transformed into the violence of the 'post-war' transition marked by neoliberalisation and privatisation, and most recently into the so-called green transition, which, through the imperative of green extractivism, translates into devastating mining and low-carbon projects on the ground. The various protests are then connected also through personal and intergenerational memories. What emerges is the particular violence of being *lost in transition*, which too traffics between material and immaterial toxicity. Following the two shootings, the government announced a two-month amnesty for citizens to hand over illegal





**Fig. 2** A banner which reads “Why has my mom been protesting since the 90s?!” Photo courtesy of Tijana

weapons they had kept from the wars. People handed in 80,000 firearms, 26,000 explosive devices and 4 million rounds of ammunition (Kljajić, 2024), a significant portion of which was held legally, but citizens decided to give up nonetheless (The Associated Press, 2023). The material artefacts of the violence of the 90 s thus remain connected with the violence of the present.

While violent politics should not be understood merely as reflective of the political regime in the country, the context of the “neoliberal authoritarianism” (Piletić, 2022) of President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*) is fundamental here, characterised by the diminishing democracy, rule of law (Bogojević, 2019), freedom of the press, increasing ethno-nationalism (Maksić, 2020), and a culture of corruption and an atmosphere of fear and surveillance, none of which started with the regime of Vučić but have been greatly exacerbated since. Between 1998 and 2000, Vučić served as the Minister of Information during the era of Slobodan Milošević, described as “the architect of Europe’s most restrictive media law by the end of the twentieth century” (Jovanović, 2019, p. 63). In 2017, he was elected for his first term as president, leading to a wave of mass protests against his presidency (Bjeloš, 2017; Fridman & Hercigonja 2017). He was re-elected for his second term in April 2022, three months after the cancellation of the Jadar Project in what was largely interpreted as a concession to the protesters in the pre-election period. The rule of Vučić and the SNS party is still marked by



the control of the media. In April 2023, less than a month before the mass shootings, Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, stated in a press conference following her visit to Serbia that she is "alarmed by the *toxic* public discourse, from politicians or public officials and amplified by tabloids, scapegoating the media, human rights defenders, ethnic minorities, LGBTI and those critical of the government" (UN Serbia 2023, emphasis added). Similarly, my research participants stressed "the media blockade" (Ana) and the "information war" (Marijana) that they face as the pro-governmental media openly support the Jadar Project and are not reporting on any protests.

It is through such metaphors that the tools of political violence acquire quasi-material characteristics of a blockade or a war, showing how the line between material and immaterial toxicity is blurred in multiple and shifting directions.<sup>1</sup> Some of the first mass protests against lithium mining in autumn 2021 took place in front of the Radio Television Serbia (RTS) building, Serbia's public broadcaster. The RTS building and a private media house 'Pink' that serves as one of the main vessels of "commercial and sexualised nationalism" through its reality TV shows (see Volčić & Erjavec 2013) were also the sites of the Serbia Against Violence protests that explicitly verbalised the connections between violence promoted in the media and the violence of the shootings, as well as highlighting the toxicity of being silenced. Some of the demands of this movement included the change of leadership of RTS and reporting about the protests, removal of the national TV channel frequencies of 'Pink' and 'Happy' media, and the cancellation of the reality TV shows and tabloids that promote violence, none of which were fulfilled by the government. The toxicity is then not only present in chemical molecules but in also the public discourse, and violence traffics between the TV screens and the shootings.

The notion of violent politics pays attention to the ways in which various protests are connected—temporarily at least since the 90 s, geographically by frequently occupying the same sites, affectively through personal or intergenerational memories of attending other protests, and thematically based on a general sense of dissatisfaction with the conditions in the country despite the promises of the post-war, the neoliberal or the green transitions. Following Barry (2012), ongoing controversies and events cannot be separated from others, both past and future. My research participants were always present at numerous protests, not only those against lithium mining. I attended all the protests in which they took part, from protests against air pollution, protests by farmers against unfair advantages of agriculture corporations, protests in support of two public prosecutors who were removed from their cases after uncovering a major corruption scandal, or indeed protests against violence. From the toxicity of the media to the toxicity of the never-ending political struggles themselves, toxicity is both deeply embedded in the power relations and still resisted. In the following section, I describe how these multiple forms of violence and toxicity arise in relation to the Jadar Project and lithium exploration in Serbia.

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Raffaele Ippolito for this point.



## Multiple toxicities of lithium exploration

In early 2022, the construction of the Jadar mining project led by Rio Tinto was set to commence, potentially resulting in Europe's biggest lithium mine (Rio Tinto 2022). Multiple rationales of resistance converged in a series of mass protests with tens of thousands of people blocking roads, highways and bridges across Serbia, most notably between November 2021 and January 2022, ultimately leading to the cancellation of the Jadar Project on 20th January 2022. The protests have continued despite the cancellation, which the locals and activists interpreted as a mere strategy to pacify the unrest. Their concerns proved more than justified when, in July 2024, the government nullified the cancellation, swiftly signing the Memorandum of Understanding with the EU on the lithium supply chain (European Commission, 2024) and demonstrating its willingness to push forward with the project despite local resistance, resulting in another wave of protests. In August 2024, the political oppression entered a new stage as the police violently responded to the protests, with activists facing police brutality, arrests, detention, death threats, and having their flats raided and phones and laptops searched. It was later revealed that Serbia's security agency has been using Israeli technology to unlock activists' phones and install spyware (Tešić, 2024).

The violent logic of green extractivism takes many different forms, ranging from affective, physical and chemical toxicity that overlap and fold into each other. *Affective* toxicity demonstrates how those resisting lithium mining have been impacted by the project long before and after the cancellation through the temporality of uncertainty. Personal relationships in the Jadar Valley have been profoundly altered by the arrival of Rio Tinto and the discovery of the mineral, as locals told me about numerous cases of family and neighbour disputes due to the question of whether to sell their houses to the company or not. Many of my research participants are also facing legal action by the company or the state for their activism and they are being targeted through smear campaigns by the pro-governmental media. Living in the time of suspension, Vladan, who is a local beekeeper in the wider Jadar region, described what the local community has been going through as a "psychological war" or "psychological violence" intended to tire them out and break their spirit. In our interview from February 2022, Tijana suggested that what the local community in the Jadar Valley has been subjected to could be understood similarly to domestic violence:

Not in the same way, but like, someone is abusing you in your own house, constantly, 24/7 without a break, and you have no peace, you can't close your eyes, you can't rest.

In other words, the anticipation of pollution and displacement in the future brings the experience of violence and toxicity into the present. B. Anderson powerfully cautioned against the dangers of reproducing assumptions about linear temporality, "specifically, that the future is a blank separate from the present or that the future is a telos towards which the present is heading" (2010, p. 778). As these examples show, the anticipation of the future already makes it *present*. Yet even more importantly, such "presence of the future" (*ibid.*) is not only abstract, but also material.



In a case of existing *material* toxicity, albeit not necessarily chemical, the sold houses in the Jadar Valley have begun to fall apart, exposing skeletons of what were once neighbours' homes, bare brick walls and wooden roof rafters. As the houses were intended to be demolished by the company, some people took everything with them, including the doors, windows and roofs,<sup>2</sup> speeding up the process of their decay. Yet for those who decided to stay and fight against the mining project, themselves risking expropriation in the future, the ruined houses have become a constant reminder of the possible toxic futures and at the same time a symbol of the past toxicity—of what is seen as a betrayal of their neighbours and sometimes even family members. Ruins are manifestations of the interplay between the material, spatial and temporal processes, and the disintegration of the usual order as the past casts itself over the present (DeSilvey & Edensor 2013). Moreover, ruined houses evoke a specific kind of trauma related not only to the recent wars. Roofs have a symbolic significance in Serbian culture, and to this day, it is celebrated when a new building is covered by a roof, even in the case of urban developments. Jevdjenije, a young writer and poet who is also an activist against lithium mining, but who is not from the Jadar Valley, described to me in our interview from February 2023 the experience of seeing for the first time the houses without the roofs in the Jadar Valley: "it was tragic, like a ghost town [...]. To me, that was my idea of hell. It's a great sorrow to see a house without a roof. Just as it is a great joy to witness a newly built house that is crowned with a roof". Stories began to circulate about those who sold their houses. Someone allegedly died shortly after selling the house to the company, another became critically ill, and someone else lost their daughter. Many of the locals dismissed these as mere stories, but some gave them significance. In one of the versions, it was only to those who took down the roofs that something bad happened, but not to those who just sold the house and left the roof intact.

Yet toxicity is also potentially *chemical*. There have been at least 528 exploration drills drilled across the Jadar Valley and the surrounding areas by Rio Tinto as the means of establishing the presence of lithium in the ground. The drills themselves have become sites of knowledge controversy as the local farmers claim that they are leaking, polluting the soil and causing crops around the drill sites to dry out (Fig. 3). Marijana, a local from the Jadar Valley, insisted already during our interview in February 2022 that "nothing grows where they drilled", showing me a photo she took during the summer when corn was growing tall and the contrast between the drills and the rest of the field was the most visible. Crucially, the toxic uncertainty of a knowledge controversy does not disappear with the involvement of 'science'. A recent peer-reviewed study by Djordjević et al. who worked closely with the local community to collect samples demonstrates that "the concentrations of arsenic, boron, and lithium in the water of the Jadar River downstream [...] were significantly higher compared to the upstream levels (9, 17 and 3 times higher, respectively, at 25 km downstream compared to 2 km upstream from the potential mine site in Jadar Valley)" (2024, p. 5). The study was published in Scientific Reports

<sup>2</sup> Rio Tinto allegedly offered more money for those who removed the roofs, as then the houses can be torn down more easily, but this information could not be verified.





**Fig. 3** One of the exploration drills in the Jadar Valley. Photo my own

(Nature Portfolio), yet Rio Tinto formally requested a retraction of the article of Djordjević et al. (2024), accusing it of “manipulation of references”, “factual inaccuracies” and “unsound methodology” (Rio Tinto 2024). The toxic uncertainty thus refers both to the affective uncertainties about the future and the chemical uncertainties of the pollution.

Just as violent politics attend to the multitude of toxicities that emerge in the Jadar Valley, so too is that the case for the multiple forms of resistance, ranging from mass protests to slow resistance. Vladan from the wider Jadar region has been attending almost every protest. Yet in our interview, he also described as his form of resistance simply the way he continues his daily life, investing in their family home: “I continue to work. In 2018 I started a big investment into a building on my land, not knowing about the mine. And that building is finished now, the carpentry is finished, and there is only a bit of work left in one part of the building. I continue to work. I’m not bothered. They do their job, I do my job. They are buying land and destroying carpentry, I am building carpentry. And that is my answer to them”. In that sense, to resist the toxic uncertainty is to continue to live as usual, investing in the house rather than thinking about selling it. Even though this is an impossible position to maintain as the day-to-day has been inevitably altered, it signals a range of forms of resistance that blur the boundary between the eventful and mundane. In the next section, I describe how this boundary is further complicated at the intersection of protests against lithium mining and Serbia Against Violence protests, as well as other future events that emerge.



## Violence between lithium exploration, the shootings and beyond

Multiple toxicities emerge in the Jadar Valley as a form of violence, complicating both their materiality and temporality, collapsing the boundaries between the affective, political, physical and chemical. Yet the acute and brutal violence of the shootings became a new way for activists against lithium mining to verbalise their experience. The shootings emerged as yet another manifestation of systemic violence in Serbia. The connections between different forms of violence became apparent in a social media post by Marijana from the Jadar Valley. On 13th May 2023, she shared an invitation to join a Serbia Against Violence protest and wrote in the name of the local community: “We live the violence, we resist the violence”. In doing so, she made explicit the links between their personal experience and the shootings. The Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia (*Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije, SEOS*), which brings together local organisations against lithium mining, cancelled its planned protest that was to take place on 18th May 2023 in response to the shootings:

The topic of lithium remains one of the crucial ones for the survival of the entire country and we will never give up on that, but the current priority is stopping the violence, hate and divisions that have held us hostage for more than a decade<sup>3</sup> (SEOS social media account, 15th May 2023).

All of the anti-lithium mining groups were attending the protests against violence, inviting their followers to join. “The river of people. I am glad I was a drop in this river”, wrote one of my research participants on her Facebook profile as she shared a video from the protest.

Indeed, at one of the protests organised by SEOS in November 2022, which only a few hundred people attended, I was talking to Marijana about the lack of people at the protest. The protest was happening ten months after the official cancellation, when mobilising people was difficult, and the issue of lithium mining seemed to be forgotten. “We need a protest against everything and for everything”, she then said. The shootings became a unifying factor, resonating through tens of thousands of bodies on the streets as they protested the violence in all of its oppressive forms. The unity of the movements became an intensification of all the previous protest waves, finally verbalised. This was made explicit as around fifty environmental groups, including those against lithium mining, published on 26th May 2023 a joint declaration in support of the Serbia Against Violence movement:

We are coming to the protests because, for a long time, we have had enough of injustice and violence against people and nature in our country. Any destruction and pollution of the environment is the result of someone’s power; behind every poisonous air, cut down forest, stolen land, or polluted water hides sys-

<sup>3</sup> The decade refers to the SNS party coming to power, with Vučić becoming a Deputy Prime Minister in 2012.



temic, institutional and even brutal physical violence. We know very well how the system violently stifles those of us who speak about it.

[...]

While TV programs lack information about the pollution of nature, our soul is being polluted. In recent tragedies, we have all lost too much for anything to remain the same, for us to remain the same, for anyone to remain alone. To imagine and build a better and more sustainable society together, this Saturday, everything, absolutely everything, must stop!

Thus, the connections between the shootings and lithium mining, as well as other environmental and anti-extractivist struggles, were expressed. The protests in response to the shootings continued for 27 consecutive weeks, until early November (N1, 2024) when they transformed into a political campaign and the creation of the opposition coalition Serbia Against the Violence, united against the SNS party. Despite losing the December 2023 elections, which were marked by a series of irregularities and unjust conditions (European Parliament 2024), the anti-violence movement marked some of the largest protests in history of Serbia (Fig. 4). At least that was the case until the most recent movement emerged.

As Barry highlights, as political situations are always ongoing, future events can become a part of them (2012). One such event occurred on the 1st of November 2024 when a part of an outdoor concrete roof of a newly reconstructed main train station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people (Bogdanović, 2024). The renovated train station had its grand opening in July of the same year, just a few months before the collapse (*ibid.*). A wave of university blockades emerged, with “corruption kills” being one of the main slogans. Again, rather than interpreting the collapse of the concrete canopy as a tragic accident, it has been seen as manslaughter by negligence



**Fig. 4** The blockade of the Gazela highway in Belgrade on Friday 12th May, with people turning on the torches on their phones. Photo: FONET/Ana Paunković



and a result of violent politics of neoliberalisation and corruption that also manifest in construction developments that are often of poor quality, echoing what Evren referred to as "bulldozer capitalism" (2021). While the student protests are ongoing at the time of writing of this article, extending beyond its scope, they have already become by far the largest protest movement in Serbian history and the wider region, with some considering it the largest student movement in Europe at least since 1968 (Gercama 2025). The notion of violent politics then makes visible the fluidity between various forms of violence but also the interconnectedness of the protest movements that resist it.

## Conclusion

*On 10th June 2023, Tijana posted on her social media a picture of the banner she was holding at the protests and wrote: "The answer to the question 'Why has my mom been protesting since the 90s?!' would be 'She is protesting for a better society and country'".*

This article proposed the concept of violent politics as a form of a political situation (Barry 2012) that encompasses the shifting and multiple forms of violence and toxicity, but also the equally shifting and multiple forms of resistance. As the different movements are making explicit allegiances around a diffused sense of violence, I argued for the need to focus on these connections. Violent politics offers a space for a conceptual expansion through which boundaries between material and immaterial toxicities can be appreciated for their fluidity, from chemical and material toxicity to the toxicity of uncertainty and anticipation. Through such an understanding, the anti-lithium movement becomes inseparable from other protests and struggles in the country, and notably in relation to the Serbia Against Violence movement, which emerged in response to the two mass shootings. It then also demonstrates how the expansions of concepts such as violence or questioning the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity can still result in mass and 'eventful' forms of resistance. In other words, mass protests still matter even in the face of slow disasters.

The anticipation of lithium mining causes toxicity even if the mine is not (yet) present. Importantly, the mere presence of lithium underground, or rather the knowledge of its presence, condemns the locals to a life of uncertainty. Under the imperative of green extractivism, some possibility of mining will always remain and, so the anticipation of toxicity continues, creating itself chronically toxic and violent living conditions. Yet in the case of lithium mining in Serbia, at least temporarily or to some extent, toxicity *has been resisted*. While there might be certain levels of pollution and toxicity always already present in bodies, both human and more-than-human, these should not undermine the political efforts to fight for a *less* toxic world. Connecting the case of lithium exploration with the two shootings also reveals how the blurring of conceptual boundaries can still result in 'eventful' and mass forms of resistance. Indeed, it is precisely through the understanding of the two shootings as connected to the wider situation of violent politics that a mass protest movement can emerge, rather than viewing them as isolated events. In the cases described in this article, it is the movements themselves rather than academics that explicitly collapse



these boundaries and reconfigure the concept of violence under what I termed violent politics in Serbia. It is only such a reconfiguration that allows for the decades of continuous violence of transitions from post-war, neoliberal to green to become collectively understood as something that a *protest against everything* can respond to.

What this paper also highlights is the need to expand not only the concepts themselves but also the academic focus on regions that have largely remained ignored beyond the simplified understanding of ethnic violence and wars. While I focussed on conceptualising violent politics in relation to Serbia, I do not intend for this to be yet another article that reduces the ‘Balkans’ to its violent histories and the present. Rather, violent politics can be relevant to a range of different contexts, from colonial relations to neoliberal subjugation, allowing for toxicity and violence to be understood in their material and temporal multiplicity, accounting for a wider context that extends between an event and a situation. Crucially, while anthropological and ethnographic research on toxicity has proliferated, the political rejection of it has not been as clear-cut (see Bond 2021). Through the notion of violent politics, I also insist on the multiplicity of diverse forms of resistance, which the researchers and academics ought to commit to.

An important aspect of Barry’s use of the concept of a political situation is his recognition that any attempt to interpret, analyse or comment on the political situation will inevitably become part of the situation itself (2012). So too this writing is not detached from the events that I describe but unfolds from the position of living through them, alongside my research participants and tens of thousands of other fellow protesters. This article emerges from my personal experience of the two shootings that took place at the very end of my longest fieldwork period in Serbia. The events ruptured and affected the political situation in unexpected ways, but also the daily lives of my research participants and of myself. Using the notion of violent politics, this article sought to focus on the forms of relations, affects and attachments, including my own, that emerge from the sensorial experience of protests as sites of collective mourning. If the world is permanently toxic, it calls for more resistance, not less. Right now, the students in Serbia are leading the way.

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**Data availability** Data sharing is not applicable.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The manuscript is composed of original material that is not under review elsewhere, and the study on which the research is based has been subject to appropriate ethical review. The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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## *Poem II | We are Walking by Ljiljana Bralović*

Translated by Jevdjenije Julijan Dimitrijević.

МИ ХОДАМО

Упорно вребају тамничари,  
лове нам мисли и снове,  
птице окрећу у лету,  
протрчавају мимо нас,  
залазе нам за леђа,  
стављају засторе да помраче сунце,  
откидају бројке у календару,  
крију у дубоке трапове  
још топле и мирисне успомене.

А ми смо сакрили снове у осмехе  
и читав век идемо озарени вером  
и пророчанством петлова  
да ће кроз олујно стадо невоља,  
низ хиљаде кровова рођена  
напокон осванути ведрија зора.

WE ARE WALKING

The jailers are hunting persistently.  
They hunt our thoughts and dreams,  
turning the birds mid-flight,  
running past us,  
creeping up behind,  
pulling the curtains to eclipse the sun,  
tearing the days off the calendar.  
They hide in deep pits  
the still-warm and fragrant memories.

But we have hidden dreams within smiles  
and we are walking, through the whole of our  
lives,  
aglow with faith and the prophecy of roosters—  
that through the stormy flock of misfortunes,  
born across thousands of rooftops,  
a brighter dawn will finally break.

Упорно нас гледају тамничари  
броје уједе невеселих ноћи,  
засипају земљом и песком надања,  
нагоне бесне коње кроз цветне  
вртове,  
благодарне реке везују у чвор  
и пуштају кише да нас поплаве  
валовима очаја и валовима досаде.

The jailers are watching us persistently,  
counting the bites of joyless nights,  
shoveling earth and sand upon our hopes,  
driving mad horses through blooming gardens,  
tying noble rivers into knots  
and letting the rains flood us  
with waves of despair and waves of boredom.

А ми ходамо низ хиљаду  
и хиљаду пута хиљаду дана,  
са деценијама ћутања у грлу  
измишљамо осмехе  
и у њих кријемо стварне животе.

But we are walking through a thousand and a  
thousand times multiplied by a thousand days,  
with decades of silence in our throats. We are  
making up smiles, within them hiding our true  
lives.



*Figure 27: A protest camp in front of the President's Residency, February 2022. Picture my own.*

# **Article 3 | Refusal of lithium mining in Serbia: exploring post-green extractivism**

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*Figure 28: A banner against lithium mining during a protest in Belgrade, November 2022. Photo my own.*

# Refusal of lithium mining in Serbia: exploring post-green extractivism

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## ABSTRACT

The Jadar Project in Serbia, led by the mining corporation Rio Tinto, was set to become one of Europe's biggest lithium mines – an element widely understood as crucial for the green transition. Yet the project was met with widespread resistance, with tens of thousands of people protesting against it. This article is concerned with the politics of refusal of lithium mining in Serbia, arguing that refusal must be understood as multidimensional rather than merely passive or negative. Through ethnographic investigation bordering research and activism, the article brings together three empirical examples of the refusal's emancipatory and affirmative potential. The article theorizes post-green extractivism as a refusal of the mono-green future based on growth, mining and climate technofixes, which seeks to foreclose spaces of resistance. The politics of refusal then represent an unmasking of green extractivism, revealing its underlying greyness, while opening up the possibilities for alternative green futures to be envisioned.

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## Introduction

This article explores the refusal of what was intended to become one of Europe's biggest lithium mines. Rio Tinto, among the world's largest mining companies, planned to construct a lithium mine in the Jadar Valley, located in a rural western part of Serbia. If opened, the mine would supply Europe with the key material for energy storage and electrification, as well as digitalization and growing militarization. Yet the project has attracted widespread and ongoing opposition, led by the members of the local community who refused to sell their land to the company. Some families have lived and farmed in the Jadar Valley for generations. Resistance against the Jadar project culminated in mass protests in the autumn and winter of 2021. Tens of thousands of protesters repeatedly formed blockades across the country for several months, ultimately forcing the government to cancel the Jadar Project in January 2022. Diverse reasons have motivated the protestors, spanning from preserving landscapes and protecting agriculture, to resisting becoming the EU's mining colony or a sacrifice zone (Djukanović, 2025; see also Tornel, 2024; Zografos & Robbins, 2020). In July 2024, however, the government nullified the previous cancellation and, shortly after that, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the EU to develop value chains for raw materials, batteries and EVs (Government of Serbia, 2024). Despite strong political pressure to open the mine

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from national and international interest groups alike, the resistance against one of the flagship green extractivist projects in Europe has continued, with the refusal of the Jadar Project revealing its *greyness*.

By centring the politics of refusal in the analysis, this article contributes to the theorization of grey extractivism (Ayeh & Rutjes, 2025; Dunlap et al., 2025 in this special issue) and to the growing body of literature on resistance to green extractivism of the so-called critical raw materials (Anlauf, 2016; Dunlap et al., 2024; Dunlap & Riquito, 2023; Noever Castelos, 2023). Some of the locals of the Jadar Valley, who would either have to sell their land or live next to a mine, have been organizing protests for years, supported by numerous activist organizations, environmental groups, researchers and academics, students, journalists, artists, actors, as well as opposition parties and many others. The right of the local community to have a say in the Jadar Project and in envisioning their future has been blatantly disregarded while the government has escalated repression, including police and parapolice brutality, arrests, detentions, death threats and other forms of violence. It is in this context that I turn to investigate the refusal of lithium mining in Serbia. Refusal has been theorized as closely related to resistance, but escaping the ‘resistance trap’ where the state or corporate powers are setting the terms under which they can be resisted (Weiss, 2016, p. 355; see also McGranahan, 2016; Simpson, 2016). The massive scale of refusal of lithium mining in Serbia thus presents a direct challenge to growth-based climate policies, which are fundamentally reliant on mining and extractivism. Grey extractivism as a concept serves to underline how there has never been anything green about green extractivism.

The devastating impact of mining on local communities, human and more-than-human, is well established (Bebbington & Humphreys Bebbington, 2018; Carvalho, 2017; Özkaynak & Rodríguez-Labajos, 2012). Yet mining projects are rapidly expanding across the world through the *monolithisation* of the green transition, with corporations and states alike using the climate crisis as an opportunity for profit, economic growth, and increasingly so militarization (Andreucci et al., 2023; Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020; Post & Le Billon, 2025). I refer to this process as producing a *mono-green future* where extractivism and technology are presented as the only viable options for tackling the climate crisis, while alternative imaginaries of green futures are foreclosed. In other words, what is understood as green has been co-opted by hegemonic political and financial forces, as grey extractivism highlights. It is then of fundamental importance to move away from the reductive and dismissive understanding of land-based struggles in the context of the green transition as a mere ‘Not in My Backyard’ (NIMBY) opposition (see Scott & Smith, 2017) and towards their recognition as radical openings for more just and sustainable futures. In this article, I theorize refusal as (1) unmasking green extractivism as ‘grey’, and (2) generating an emancipatory opening for futures, which reject the imperative of green extractivism through post-green extractivism.

This work is based on more than three years of ethnographic engagements, between 2022 and 2025 and ongoing, with the local communities and their allies who are resisting lithium mining projects and explorations in the Jadar Valley and other parts of Serbia. The locals of the Jadar Valley united with other communities across the country, which are impacted by lithium explorations, together creating the Association of Ecological Organizations of Serbia (*Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije*, SEOS). This research is centred on engagement with SEOS as well as other supporting organizations and individuals. The work takes place at the intersection of research and activism, privileging the commitment to the research participants through methodologies that are grounded in decolonial, feminist and critical theories (see Apofis, 2017; Bell, 2015; Checker, 2014; Gani & Khan, 2024; Onís & Pezzullo, 2017). The ethnographic investigation is supplemented by 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews that serve to express the views of the research participants

in their own words. Many research participants expressed a strong wish to be included under their real names. Following Murrey (2015), I do not indicate which names have been changed and which have not. As this research is concerned with refusal, I feel that refusing the standard academic practice of blanket anonymisation also refuses the knowledge extractivism of ‘mining’ for quotes and information from the research participants and instead upholds their ‘right to be known’ (Murrey, 2015, p. 17; see Tuck & Yang, 2014a). The research is also deeply tied to my position as someone with post-Yugoslav heritage and a Serbian passport, language, personal and family connections, who was, however, born and raised elsewhere. My positions bordering insider and outsider, researcher and activist, and the relationship with my research participants bordering informants and friends, guide this research through ethics of care and relationality in refusing green extractivism.

The article starts by discussing the literature on post-extractivism, which moves beyond the imperative of growth and exploitation (Acosta, 2017; Gudynas, 2012; Riofrancos, 2020) in the context of related bodies of work on environmental justice, degrowth or postdevelopmentalism (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). By extension, I ask how post-*green* extractivism can be envisioned. Drawing on a diverse scholarship on refusal, I suggest that refusal provides an insightful lens through which to explore the opposition to the new wave of ‘green’ mining projects, exposing the underlying greyness in the process. I then turn to an empirical part of the article, offering three examples of refusal that emerge in the context of lithium exploration in Serbia. First, I describe how the refusal by some locals to sell their land and houses to Rio Tinto and hence also to profit from the mining project becomes a crucial challenge to the growth-based vision of development and the green transition. Second, I describe an example of a local community in Rekovac, central Serbia, physically blocking exploration drills as refusing any possibility of mining in the future. Finally, I offer ethnographic reflections on my personal experience of attending the Rio Tinto AGM in London in April 2024 and refusing to engage with the company representatives, as instructed by my research participants from the local communities in Serbia. I conclude by reiterating the emancipatory potential of refusal in moving beyond and after green extractivism, arguing that the very act of refusal is already opening and hence also enacting futures that can be ‘otherwise’ (Olufemi, 2021). In doing so, this article seeks to contribute to the theorization of grey extractivism and to the broader literature on extractivism, environmental justice, political ecology of the green transition, and resistance and refusal studies.

### Geographies of post-green extractivism

The history of resistance to extractivism is at least as long as the history of extractivism itself. While anti-extractivist struggles have been commonly framed by dominant capitalist interests as hindering progress and development, a rich body of practice as well as literature, notably from Latin America, offers radical proposals of anti-extractivism and post-extractivism (Acosta, 2016, 2017; Gudynas, 2012, 2013; Riofrancos, 2020). The pathways towards post-extractivism have been developed in great detail and are closely related to postdevelopmentalism, where the very idea of development in a globalized, unequal and unjust sense is dismissed (Svampa, 2015). At the heart of post-extractivism is the rejection of resource over-extraction, the insistence on reducing material consumption, and the need to transition to a post-extractivist society and economy (Riofrancos, 2020), highlighting what it means to live well – *buen vivir* – beyond the destructive logic of extractivism (Andreucci & Radhuber, 2017; Gudynas, 2013; Kothari et al., 2014). The challenges to extractivism, coloniality, profit, modernity, and development are well established, with visible connections across environmental justice (Martínez-Alier, 2012; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019),

degrowth (Hickel, 2021), post-extractivism and postdevelopmentalism (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025). The proposed trajectories to move away from the exploitative relationship with nature are often articulated in close conversations with Indigenous, peasant and movement-based knowledges (Kothari et al., 2014). With extractivism expanding across increasingly diverse geographies and modalities of operation, paying attention to resistance and alternatives in their multifaceted forms is of fundamental importance.

Yet while Acosta (2017, p. 78) writes of the need for “De-Growth” in the North and Post-Extractivism in the South’ (see also Brand et al., 2017; Escobar, 2015), I suggest that these dynamics are now rapidly shifting. Green extractivism has emerged as a dominant modality of climate change strategies (Andreucci et al., 2023; Bruna, 2022, 2023; Dunlap & Riquito, 2023; Núñez et al., 2022; Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022), expanding towards geopolitical centres through policies such as the EU’s Critical Raw Materials Act (European Commission, 2024). The imperative of green extractivism is based on ‘the mobilization of claims of ecological sustainability, “carbon neutrality” and combating climate change in order to legitimize and rationalize extraction’ (Dunlap et al., 2024, pp. 447–448), where such mobilization traffics across geographies. Del Marmol and Vaccaro (2020) point to the renewed expansion of mining in European rural areas, urging scholars to engage with this dramatic change in land use. While Europe remains heavily dependent on lithium mining in the Global South, Riofrancos (2023, p. 36) similarly notes how the dramatic onshoring and nearshoring efforts in the Global North ‘[have] shifted the front lines of lithium extraction’. While many of these front lines have not (yet) materialized in a sense of physical extraction, just as in the case of Serbia, I argue that there is a growing need to explore post-extractivism in the North – just as scholars have highlighted the importance of paying attention to degrowth in the South (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019).

It is crucial to critically engage with the concepts of the ‘South’, the ‘North’ or ‘Europe’, recognizing them as denoting power relations rather than concrete geographical spaces or nation-states (see Grosfoguel, 2019, p. 205). The example of Serbia is particularly useful in interrogating ‘Europe’ as a category. Serbia occupies a liminal position of being geographically located in Europe, but outside of the EU, even being classified as a Global South country according to some metrics (but not others), where those lists are inherently arbitrary.<sup>1</sup> It is in this in-betweenness where one of the largest movements against lithium mining emerges. Paying attention to the EU’s (semi)peripheries is crucial in understanding their material role as resource frontiers in the growth-based green transition, as well as in taking seriously postdevelopment from the Balkans through the mass resistance. Analysing other Balkan countries, Velicu (2019, p. 273) focused on two anti-gold mining movements in Romania and Bulgaria through an environmental justice and degrowth lens, noting how ‘the pressure to “develop” is imposing a mono-industrial (mining) future on whole mountain areas of Eastern Europe’. Similarly, the imperative of green extractivism to mine critical raw materials such as lithium is imposing what I refer to as a *mono-green future*. I theorize the mono-green future as denoting the dominant, monolithic and globalizing narratives of the neoliberal green transition, which is based on technofixes, private profit and economic growth above anything else. The mono-green future is the opposite of pluriversal, multiple and diverse futures that are at the heart of decolonial and post-extractivist worldviews, instead seeking to foreclose any alternative visions of the green transition. Here I am exploring post-extractivism not only in Europe – as an always contested category – but also in response to the mono-green future, asking how we could envision post-*green* extractivism.

Yet there is a danger that employing the concept of green extractivism further contributes to the co-optation of what is understood as ‘green’. To that end, grey extractivism seeks to highlight how

green extractivism is sustained and underpinned by an entire apparatus of ‘grey’ practices, technologies, infrastructures, operations and industries across the supply chains, which are oriented toward growth and heavily reliant on fossil fuels (Dunlap et al., 2025). How, then, is the growing emergence of green / grey extractivist projects affecting forms of resistance? I suggest that the state of emergency of the climate crisis (see Osborne and Carlson, 2023), and the resulting hegemonic green transition based on extractivism, narrow down the spaces of resistance, making it ever more difficult – without implying that the resistance is any smaller or less frequent (see also Dunlap, 2023). Based on my ethnographic research of the anti-lithium movement in Serbia, I explore what emerges in the wake of a mass mobilization that was at least partially or temporarily successful. The cracks that this resistance has been causing to the mono-green future might not amount to concrete or established proposals for alternative futures. Yet here I turn to the concept of refusal to consider how the act of refusing lithium mining is already opening up the possibilities for envisioning post-green extractivism.

The concept of refusal has been employed across a range of academic disciplines, theorized in critical social sciences as linked to resistance, but being distinct from it. McGranahan (2016, p. 321) in her introduction to the special collection on *Theorizing Refusal* writes: ‘If resistance involves consciously defying or opposing superiors, [...] then refusal rejects this hierarchical relationship, repositing the relationship as one configured altogether differently’ (see also Danewid, 2024; Honig, 2021; Olufemi, 2021; Seitz, 2022; Seymour, 2006). Weiss (2016) focuses on Israelis who refused to serve in the army for conscientious reasons. She highlights how silent refusal or abstention, unlike public declarations of refusal, avoids the ‘resistance trap’ where the open confrontation with the state powers can lead to co-optation and appropriation of resistance. Analysing the politics of refusal in the context of the Aboriginal opposition to a pipeline project in British Columbia, Burke Wood and Rossiter (2017, p. 168) suggest that through refusal, ‘different worlds stand apart or collide, rather than merge or compromise’. In other words, refusal is about no longer accepting that the hegemonic powers, whether state, corporate, or other, will be setting the terms under which they can be resisted – or as Audra Simpson (2016, p. 328) put it, ‘consent’s revenge’ where Indigenous people ‘refuse to consent to the apparatuses of the state’. In this sense, refusal has been strongly theorized in the context of settler colonialism in North America, highlighting the limitations of resistance scholarships to account for the diverse forms of *refusing* the settler state by the Indigenous groups (Simpson, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, communities have been refusing to be researched, even when such research is presented as participatory or community-based (Sylvestre et al., 2018). What then also emerges is ethnography’s unique position to engage with refusal (McGranahan, 2016), as well as to *refuse itself*. For a research method to refuse itself means to refuse to reproduce the colonial gaze of Western academia (Chennault & Sbicca, 2025; Tuck & Yang, 2014a), to refuse to share certain information despite the imperative to *research*, or to refuse to betray one’s research participants (Simpson, 2007).<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic writing of this article is then both describing the refusal of green extractivism in Serbia, and refusing the extractivist imperative of academia.

‘Is refusal negative?’ asks McGranahan (2016, p. 320). While she does not provide a definite answer, the question is a gesture towards a challenge of the understanding of refusal as merely a passive negation (see also Prasse-Freeman, 2022). The special collection as a whole argues strongly for taking seriously refusal in the contemporary political terrain, theorizing it as generative, social, affiliative, hopeful and wilful (McGranahan, 2016, pp. 322–323). Similarly, Gross and colleagues (2023, p. 154) view refusal as ‘a generative process that redirects the attention to ideas otherwise unacknowledged, thus making space for relationality, reciprocity, solidarity, community, and

care'. I approach refusal as an emancipatory and affirmative force that opens up the space for 'relating otherwise' (Spathopoulou & Meier, 2023). Seitz (2022, p. 11), building on the work of Olufemi (2021) and Honig (2021), describes affirmative refusal as 'need[ing] imagination to go beyond the suspensive gesture of preferring-not-to'. In doing so, it opens the space for seeing differently, imagining otherwise 'in a time of seemingly vanishing alternatives' (Seitz, 2022, p. 2). Crucially, however, I understand affirmation as one of the many dimensions of refusal, recognizing the importance of making space 'for that which is besides affirmationism or simply "unaffirmable"' such as violence and suffering that cannot be met with the affirmative generosity for life (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021, p. 318; see also Dawney & Jellis, 2024).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, affirmation itself must be understood as multidimensional since 'any affirmation always contains a disavowal' (Harrison, 2015, p. 285). I move beyond the positive (or affirmative) / negative binary to investigate the potential of refusal in envisioning alternative futures that move beyond, and after, green extractivism.

A significant part of the academic post-extractivist literature, despite bringing into focus Indigenous and alternative worldviews, cosmologies and imaginaries, remains firmly set within the Western knowledge systems of economics, geopolitics and global governance (see Acosta, 2017; Gudynas, 2013). Such work presents post-extractivism as a rational choice, stressing issues such as human rights violations or environmental degradation due to extractivism, and even making economic arguments about the potential profit from other types of activities, typically agriculture or (eco)tourism (Riofrancos, 2019). Despite this, extractivism is on the rise, and green / grey extractivism more so than ever before. Centring the politics of refusal within the analysis, this article is informed by committed ethnographic engagements with the anti-lithium movement in Serbia, which refuses the mono-green future of profit and extraction. I argue that, through refusal, many different temporalities, futures and 'posts' which are not only rational but also profoundly emotional, affective and embodied, can emerge. In the following empirical sections, I describe three examples of refusal, appreciating it as multidimensional and recognizing its affirmative aspects, which open up the space for post-green extractivist futures to be envisioned.

## Refusing to leave the land

One of the critical moments, which marked the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, was the refusal of a part of the local community in the Jadar Valley to sell their land and houses to Rio Tinto. As the company moved forward with the project, it began the process of land acquisition, with the zone of the planned mine running through the villages of the Jadar Valley. Most of the buyouts took place between 2020 and 2021, but notably continued even after the official cancellation of the mining project in 2022 (Dragojlo, 2023). According to the company data, within the radius of the planned mine, there were 52 permanently occupied households, out of which Rio Tinto bought 50, and 23 residential buildings with non-permanent residents, out of which Rio Tinto bought 18 (Rio Tinto, 2025a). The company states that it holds 162 hectares, 'which is equivalent to 63% of the proposed project footprint and 92% of the affected households' (Rio Tinto, 2025b). This research focuses on the members of the local community who resist the mining plans, and who also dispute the company data, stressing that they still hold a significant part of the required land, most of which consists of agricultural fields. Some of them had found their land and houses within the radius of the planned mine, and refused to sell, while those outside of the radius have been refusing the prospect of living next to a mine. It was then the decision of a few individuals not to sell and instead to organize against the mining project, which presented a major setback for Rio Tinto and the beginning of the mass mobilization.

My research participants maintained that most of those who sold the houses did not understand at the time the consequences of their decision, with the local community feeling largely misinformed about the impact and the extent of the project. As Marijana, my research participant from the Jadar Valley, put it: ‘Had we known what we know now, I believe that not a single house would have been sold and not a single exploration drill would have been drilled’.<sup>4</sup> The buyout divided the local community not only psychologically, often creating divisions between neighbours, friends and even within families (see Djukanović, 2025), but also spatially as the sold houses are mostly concentrated in one area. Such divisions are a common feature of social engineering of extractivism (Dunlap & Arce, 2022; Verweijen & Dunlap, 2021). Many of the houses have had their windows, doors and roofs stripped down as the families were leaving them. With the project in limbo, the sold homes have since begun to fall apart (see Figure 1), leading to what the locals who stayed refer to as ‘psychological war’. The ruins of the abandoned houses cast the village to look like ‘after a war’ – an eerie reminder of nationalist violence of the 1990s and the displacement of tens of thousands of people on all sides of the conflict. The ruins have become sites of haunting, a daily reminder for those who stayed in the Valley of the events of the Jadar Project. Yet those who refused to sell their houses despite the relatively large sums offered by the company, and instead decided to organize against lithium mining, have become known on a national level as symbols of resistance, with thousands mobilizing in their support. Indeed, one of the tipping points leading to the mass blockades, which erupted in November 2021, was the government’s effort to pass amendments to



**Figure 1.** Abandoned houses in the Jadar Valley. Author’s photo.

the Law on Expropriation, which were largely interpreted as being designed for Rio Tinto and other investors. The blockades not only prevented the adoption of the amendments but ultimately forced the government to cancel the project in January 2022.

While many of those who sold their houses in the Jadar Valley reportedly bought flats in nearby cities or in Belgrade, the refusal to sell is then also the refusal to give up a certain way of life that is connected to rurality, the strong relationship with land and nature, agriculture and farming, as well as family history and heritage. My research participant Ljiljana is one of the most prominent voices against lithium mining in Serbia, a poet and dairy producer, living in central Serbia in a village which has also been impacted by lithium explorations, some 120 kilometres from the Jadar Valley. Ljiljana is also a member of SEOS, and she explained why she would never sell her house and land if she were ever to face the same decision as those within the project radius in the Jadar Valley:

I have everything I need in life. Actually, I need a few more grandchildren, but other than that, I have everything. I can't drive two cars, I can't sleep in two houses, I can't wear two pairs of shoes. I have an ocean of friends and more books than I could ever read. That is how I measure wealth.<sup>5</sup>

Ljiljana continued to highlight the shock that she believes Rio Tinto's representatives must have experienced as they were unable to buy out some of the houses and land from the people in the Jadar Valley:

For [Rio Tinto], the people are resources. [...]. The fact that a poor nation doesn't want the money, doesn't want big money, doesn't want any money, that they cannot understand. Do you believe me that if Rio Tinto came to me right now with a truck full of dollars [...], I would say: devils get out of my house. That money is, first of all, blood money, and I know it's bloody because they are destroying people. And I don't need that money.<sup>6</sup>

This refusal of blood money refers to a widespread awareness within the anti-lithium movement in Serbia of Rio Tinto's violent history and present. Many of my research participants frequently cited the examples of the civil war in Papua New Guinea, the ongoing destruction in Mongolia and Madagascar, or the blasting of the 46,000-year-old sacred Aboriginal cave in Australia in 2020. The refusal of the bloody profit, both as a personal gain and as a logic driving extractivism, highlights a different relationship with the land, which is largely seen as invaluable.

The refusal to leave the land is central to the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia, whether by refusing to sell the property or by refusing to be displaced. Anti-lithium activists across the country see the need to stop Rio Tinto as a question of survival, since the potential environmental destruction and the resulting loss of livelihood would have a devastating impact far wider than the radius of the project. Such a refusal presents a direct challenge to the ideas of progress, development and modernity, which depend on the extractivist destruction of life. Marijana speaks at length of the local attachment to the land, but stresses that these values have been largely forgotten:

What globalisation took away is that connection to nature, to earth, to what it means to live healthily, to drink from a stream, to be able to eat a plant from a field [...], to know which roots can feed you. To create something out of nothing. They [the supporters of the mining project] don't know this because I feel like their senses have been literally turned off. A man became a machine, we're no longer human. No emotions, just profit, just money.<sup>7</sup>

Yet despite expressing her strong connection to the land, Marijana does not depend on it materially as her family are not farmers, but they feel attached to the Jadar Valley through their personal heritage and family histories. On the other hand, Vladan, who is a beekeeper living in a nearby village, moved there only later in life with his family as they struggled with finding meaningful jobs in a

city. The refusal to accept the lithium mining project and leave the Jadar Valley thus shows a diversity of motivations and personal convictions. They are not necessarily stemming from economic or livelihood dependency in a way that land-based struggles have often been theorized as environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Rather, the case of refusing lithium mining in Serbia becomes a much broader yet explicit rejection of the developmentalist, extractivist and profit-oriented logic, grounded in various forms of attachment that range from historic to personal and emotional (Djukanović, 2025).

I suggest that this refusal is not only post-extractivist, but explicitly post-green extractivist. Marijana insists that '[t]here is no such thing as green mining. What is green are fields and leaves because of chlorophyll, that is green. What they want to do here cannot ever be green'.<sup>8</sup> Ana, an activist from the wider Jadar Valley region, went even further, explicitly refusing the logic of extractivism:

We are in this problem of climate change and global warming precisely because of extractivism. Extractivism of everything, mineral resources, people, nature, in any shape or form. And now they [the supporters of the mining project] think we will get out of this problem through even more extractivism. That is absurd.<sup>9</sup>

Ana stressed that the number of people in the world who can afford an electric car is significantly lower than those with access to clean water, food, and healthcare who can live a 'dignified life'. 'And all of that under the excuse of civilisation and progress. But only for the elite. Not for the whole world', she said.<sup>10</sup> For Ana, the only possible solution is 'degrowth':

The Western civilisation is suffering from the constant economic growth, which is inherently unsustainable. The constant economic growth depends on constant extractivism, but all the resources that are being extracted are finite.<sup>11</sup>

While Ana was the only one of my research participants to verbalize the critique of extractivism and infinite economic growth in such explicit terms, her analysis demonstrates the connections which emerge between refusing lithium mining and proposing concrete alternatives. Taking seriously the emancipatory potential of refusal reveals two things. First, the acts of refusing to sell a house or to leave the land are already enacting ways of being and relating otherwise, charting openings for post-green extractivism and alternative futures. Second, in doing so, the politics of refusal unmask the greenwashing of extractivism, revealing the greyness, which has always been lying underneath. In the following section, I outline an example of refusing to allow exploration drilling as refusing any possibility of lithium mining, whether at present or in the future.

### Refusing to 'gamble with the future'

The anti-lithium struggle of the Jadar Valley against the Rio Tinto project has echoed across other locations in Serbia where lithium is present in the ground. Rural areas across the country have been impacted by mining explorations aimed at establishing the presence of minerals in the soil, led by exploration companies and investors. In October 2021, the creation of SEOS brought together six local associations against lithium mining (Gornje Nedeljice and other villages in the Jadar Valley, Valjevo, Pranjani, Jagodina, Rekovac and Dobrinja), allowing for information sharing as well as mutual support. The experience of the local community in the Jadar Valley galvanized others to refuse any possibility of lithium mining in their own regions. One of the most notable examples is the municipality of Rekovac, located approximately two hundred kilometres from the Jadar Valley. In Rekovac, two exploration drills were conducted in 2020, allegedly without any knowledge of

the local community, taking place during the COVID-19 lockdown. Learning about the experience in the Jadar Valley, where more than 500 exploration drills have been drilled, the local community in Rekovac later began to physically prevent any further geological investigations from taking place (Nikić, 2021). When in September 2022 they heard that an exploration company was planning to drill another drill, they blocked access to the designated plot of land (see Figure 2). Within hours, other associations arrived in support, including locals from the Jadar Valley. For the first few days of the blockade, they slept under an open sky as it was still a warm late summer, but as the days got colder, they constructed a makeshift hut. Resembling an old shipping container, it served as a shelter with two single beds, a small table, some chairs, and most importantly, a basic stove for heat. The members of the local community organized themselves into eight-hour shifts to guard the plot of land. Whenever the company tried to make a move, they would quickly inform others, who would again gather to physically prevent the drilling. In the end, the blockade lasted for four months, from September to December 2022, after which the exploration licence expired.

I visited the locals in the blockade in December 2022, at times as many as ten of us in the tiny hut. What came up during our evening conversations was the importance of preventing the drills from happening at all costs. Exploration companies, as well as the government, justify the drills as merely producing scientific knowledge about the geological content of the soil, highlighting that a few exploration drills will not necessarily lead to the construction of a mine. Marica, from the local



**Figure 2.** A tractor was parked for several months in front of the plot of land in Rekovac where the exploration drill was to be drilled. Author's photo.

anti-lithium association in Rekovac, explained this dynamic during our interview back in February 2022, emphasizing why the anti-mining resistance must start with refusing the explorations:

The Law on Mining is allowing for various corporations to be awarded exploratory rights without any plan or strategy, and without the local population being informed or asked whether they want to develop in that direction. The authorities are justifying that by saying that it is just exploratory work, and it doesn't have to mean anything, that just a small percentage of the exploratory areas ends up being exploited. [...]. But we cannot gamble with our fate and our lives, in the sense that if they find satisfactory resources, they will open a mine. We refuse that possibility.<sup>12</sup>

Marica's statement indicates a direct refusal of any kind of possibility of lithium mining, refusing to allow for the presence of the element in the ground to be determined, and in doing so, resisting the Western universalizing imperative to produce knowledge, data and information. In other words, the local community in Rekovac is refusing to *know* how much lithium there is in the ground, well aware that this kind of knowledge could jeopardize the future of their community. Indeed, *jadarite*, the unique mineral discovered in the Jadar Valley and named after the local river, was (in)famously found already in the second drill hole (Rio Tinto, 2019). Refusing to 'gamble with the future', as Marica put it, then means refusing any possibility of the future of mining, regardless of how tentative that possibility might be. I suggest that such a position presents a refusal of the mono-green future based on growth, development and extractivism, instead opening up the space for alternative visions of post-green extractivism to emerge, to be envisioned and enacted. What emerges from the refusal of lithium mining across rural Serbia is the focus on farming and agriculture based on a close relationship with the land.

This is emphasized both by Marijana from the Jadar Valley and Marica from Rekovac, who stress the value of healthy and nutritious food, and of clean air, water and soil, which even became a protest slogan. The importance of the fertile land, particularly in the Jadar Valley, which is well-known for its agricultural production, became central to the resistance against lithium mining. 'You cannot eat lithium' became another protest slogan, echoing similar ones that land-defending and anti-mining movements have been using across the world, such as 'You cannot drink copper' against the Rio Tinto's Resolution Copper mine proposal in Arizona, USA (LMN, 2024). At a press conference organized in February 2023 by SEOS in front of the Parliament in Belgrade, Dragan, a young farmer from central Serbia, about one hundred kilometres from the Jadar Valley, delivered a speech about the issue. We were talking before the start of the press conference, and he offered me some fresh milk from his cows, which he brought in a small plastic bottle with no label but in the recognizable shape of a Coca-Cola bottle. I hesitated, struggling to remember the last time I drank plain cow milk. I held the warm bottle, milked just a few hours ago, and took a sip of the white liquid. A warm, sweet and sticky taste circulated in my mouth as I realized that I had never tasted fresh milk, what Dragan referred to as the *real* milk. Dragan sincerely laughed at my facial expression, my eyes wide open as I understood for the first time, through the experience of taste, what he had been talking about this whole time when he spoke about his farm and the cows that he sincerely loves. Dragan took back the bottle that he prepared as a prompt for his speech and stood in front of the neoclassic Parliament building in central Belgrade, surrounded by microphones, cameras and people who gathered to listen to him. Holding the bottle of milk and a piece of bread in one hand, and a lithium battery in another, he asked whether one could eat and drink lithium.

The importance of food production and farming emerges as central in the refusal of lithium mining. The strong relationship with the land, soil, nature, as well as personal and historical heritage, has resonated with the supporters of the anti-mining struggle across the urban and rural spaces. At the same time, some farmers protesting lithium mining have also spoken up about

the fact that their agricultural practices are far from organic, largely dependent on artificial fertilizers. One of the farmers I spoke to in the Jadar Valley used the word ‘extractive’ to describe his agricultural production, well aware of the issues the practice is causing, despite how strongly he feels about protecting the land and the environment from lithium mining. Nebojša, one of the key local figures from the Jadar Valley, told me during one of our many walks that he himself and others in the local community have only begun to understand the value of nature and biodiversity, the interconnectedness of ecosystems, and particularly the role of insects, through their struggle. Crucially, then, the visions of alternative futures do not emerge as concrete policy proposals nor as romanticized ideas about farming. Rather, it is through the refusal of any possibility of extractivism – whether green or grey – that other futures begin to open up, moving towards visions of justice and sustainability both for the human and for the more-than-human communities. In other words, by refusing lithium mining, the locals are beginning to imagine alternatives, which also require changing their own existing practices and collectively building futures that move towards post-green extractivism. Such practices also include refusing to engage with the representatives of mining companies, as I describe in the final example.

### Refusing to engage with the company

The third and final example of refusal includes a personal experience of attending the Rio Tinto AGM in London on 4th April 2024. Annual general meetings, or AGMs, bring together a company’s directors, executives, board members, and interested shareholders, and are typically closed to the public. The London Mining Network, an organization that supports communities impacted by London-based mining companies, has for years been securing proxies through sympathetic or activist shareholders, allowing community members or representatives of civil society from impacted areas to attend the AGMs in person. In 2023, Nebojša from the Jadar Valley attended the Rio Tinto AGM, yet his questions were largely dismissed or lost in translation. In 2024, I was asked to attend the AGM alongside Sofija Stefanović, an organizer and a PhD researcher at the University of Cambridge. Together we discussed our positions as activists, organizers and early-career researchers entering a space such as the Rio Tinto AGM. We agreed to use our positions as researchers at Cambridge and Oxford to our advantage, well aware of the ways in which such corporate spaces privilege certain kinds of voices over others.

At the beginning of the AGM, the audience was first addressed by a series of Rio Tinto’s directors, all highlighting one key thing – the fundamental role of the mining industry in the green transition. Rio Tinto’s Chair, Dominic Barton, argued that the mining industry is *needed* more than ever, despite not being *wanted*. ‘At a global level, we know we need mining to help avert a climate disaster, but this reality is sometimes challenged at a local level. Even where governments are supportive, one of the biggest challenges isn’t the mining operation itself, but the permitting process’, Barton said (Rio Tinto, 2024b). The mining industry has thus positioned itself as essential for the green transition, while local communities, who are typically the least responsible for the climate crisis and are among the strongest defenders of the environment, are now being portrayed as hinderers of climate action. Sofija and I addressed the company’s greenwashing narratives during the Q&A while delivering comments from the local community in the Jadar Valley, which were drafted collectively through a wide coalition of activists.

Yet, for the purposes of this article, the most significant moment came after the AGM officially ended. As we were preparing to leave, we found ourselves surrounded by company representatives. But rather than being confrontational, they approached us with smiles on their faces, saying that

they were grateful that we came to express our views and that they would be keen to continue the dialogue. However, the members of the local community resisting lithium mining stressed to us that they have been refusing to engage with the company for the past several years. This is because they realized that any form of engagement has been used against them, with Rio Tinto presenting it as a ‘dialogue’ with the local community. Sofija and I replied that everything had already been said, and we would not be engaging in any further discussions, stressing that the local community and tens of thousands of protesters alongside them have clearly expressed their views on the Jadar Project. We asserted that the company’s continual insistence on the dialogue is based on colonial logics where the possibility of manufacturing consent is assumed. In a telling example, Marijanti Babić (Rio Tinto, 2024d), Country Head Serbia at Rio Tinto, stated in an interview with *CORD* magazine in December 2024 that ‘truth will open the lithium mine’. These dynamics are well documented across struggles against green extractivism, with corporate dialogue described as a ‘weapon’ used in a Nordic-Saami green colonial context (Fjellheim, 2023). In such cases, a ‘dialogue’ serves to set the terms under which any opposition can be expressed, limiting the space for meaningful resistance to occur (see also Dunlap, 2018). It is then through this context that an emancipatory potential of refusal becomes apparent.

Similarly, Barry (2013, pp. 4–5) describes at length ‘how the production and publication of information appears to offer capital a new, responsible and ethical way of managing the unruliness of persons and things’. Detailing the case of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, where an ‘unprecedented quantity of information was made public’ (ibid.), Barry shows how transparency can be used as a corporate strategy. Indeed, in response to our intervention at the AGM, Sinead Kaufman (Rio Tinto, 2024a), the company’s Chief Executive, Minerals, answered that:

We’ve really been doing two things [since the cancellation of the project]. We’ve been really working to engage [...] with as many people as will speak to us in all walks of life in Serbia, to really understand and listen to their concerns, and also to provide them with information on the project. The second thing we’ve been doing is publishing as much information as we can [...].

In June 2024, two months after the AGM, Rio Tinto released a 2,000-page ‘draft’ environmental impact assessment (EIA) study – referred to as a draft since it cannot be considered a part of the formal EIA review process under the Serbian law as the project licences remained revoked at the time of the publishing of the draft EIA (Rio Tinto, 2024c). In July 2024, only a month later, the Serbian government nullified the cancellation of the project and swiftly signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the EU. In response, one of the biggest anti-lithium protests to date took place in August 2024, again attracting tens of thousands of people. The example of refusing to engage with the company then brings to the fore the issue of resistance in situations of highly unequal power relations, such as when faced with the ever-stronger imperative of green extractivism alongside state and corporate power. Whether the refusal takes the form of refusing to speak to the representatives at the AGM in London or in the Jadar Valley, it marks a refusal to engage in a conversation where a ‘dialogue’ is only used to legitimise extractivism. While the future of the project remains uncertain, what emerges here is the emancipatory, affirmative and affective potential of refusing the terms set by the hegemonic powers under which resistance can take place.

## Conclusion

The greenwashing narratives of extractivism are being skilfully employed by the mining industry, governments across the world and other interest groups, and the spaces of resistance are being

narrowed down through the state of emergency of the climate crisis. More critical inquiry is needed into the operating logics of green / grey extractivism, and the ways in which they affect and limit resistance to the extractivist projects. I argue that with the imperative to mine the critical raw materials under the pretext of the climate crisis becoming ever stronger, it is crucial to pay attention to the emancipatory and affirmative potential of refusal. I focused on the politics of refusal of lithium mining in Serbia, arguing, firstly, that the acts of refusal described in this article are already opening up the futures that the imperative of green extractivism seeks to foreclose. By refusing the mono-green future, which is based on extractivism, economic growth and techno-fixes, and is largely imposed by the state and corporate powers with devastating impacts on the environment and the local communities, post-*green* extractivism begins to be envisioned and enacted. Secondly, the politics of refusal represent an unmasking of green extractivism, revealing how there has never been anything green about green extractivism. The politics of refusal then seek to respond to the grey area of extractivism as usual.

Mining companies such as Rio Tinto portray the resisting local communities not only as hinderers of progress and development, but increasingly also as a significant obstacle to the green transition, systematically representing them as misinformed, uneducated, backwards or selfish. What is then remarkable about the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia is the scale of the refusal of such narratives, with the mass blockades attracting tens of thousands of people across the country as well as internationally over the past five years. The refusal of some of the locals of the Jadar Valley to leave their land has resonated across Serbia in the context of the mounting dissatisfaction with the extractivist approach to progress and development more broadly. Notably, it also signalled solidarity across the rural and urban areas, with the largest protests taking place in cities, bringing together movements from all over the country and across a range of different issues. The physical blockades of the exploration drills then mark a refusal of any knowledge on the mineral content in the soil to be produced, hence refusing any possibility of the future of mining. Finally, refusing to engage in what Rio Tinto refers to as a ‘dialogue’ marks a recognition – and a rejection – of the company’s efforts to pacify resistance and manufacture consent.

As put by my research participant Marica from Rekovac: ‘We don’t want to be called hinderers of progress. All we want is an alternative that is not going to jeopardize human lives and natural riches which are truly exceptional’.<sup>13</sup> For the locals who refused to sell their houses to Rio Tinto, to allow the exploration drilling, or to engage with the company in a ‘dialogue’, the idea of sustainability based on lithium mining is simply inconceivable and profoundly unjust. It is through the politics of refusal that other visions of sustainable or green futures based on the close relationship with the land can emerge. Without necessarily implying that post-green extractivism is already here or that it amounts to concrete proposals, I argue that by understanding refusal as affirmative and emancipatory, the very act of refusal always already enacts alternative futures. These findings have important implications for scholars of resistance studies, environmental justice or political ecology more broadly. With the ongoing dramatic expansion of extractivism, paying attention to the many different forms that post-green extractivism can take through refusal is of vital importance. At the same time, I suggest that scholars must remain vigilant of the extractive logics of academia and to themselves enact the emancipatory politics of refusal by *refusing research* when producing knowledge could mean betraying the communities that they work with.

Refusal articulates – or rather avoids the imperative to articulate – the complex and intertwined scales between the local and the global, complicating the binary that is being set by mining companies in order to portray the local groups as acting against the interests of the global climate action. Crucially, refusal needs to be understood as multidimensional rather than merely as passive or

negative, with affirmation and emancipation being one of its many aspects. The appreciation for the affirmative dimension of refusal must also come with a tempered understanding of it. While some forms of refusal contained explicit articulation of degrowth values, other forms included nationalist narratives of defending the land against a foreign invader, or suggestions that lithium should simply be mined elsewhere. These nuances speak of the anti-lithium movement in Serbia as a broad coalition across the political spectrum, from left to right, EU or Russia supporters, Orthodox Christians or atheists, and everything in between and beyond, which has yet managed to mobilize tens of thousands of people. Appreciating its diversity is essential in order to avoid the romanticization of the movement as well as the alternatives that emerge from it. The three examples discussed in this article contain affirmative visions while being just some of the many dimensions that the refusal of lithium mining in Serbia takes. Still, it is the radical refusal of any kind of future that is based on green / grey extractivism that allows for opening up the space for alternative futures to be imagined and fought for. Although futures are always uncertain, refusing the mono-green future that is lined up ahead of us is the first step towards post-green extractivism.

## Notes

1. See for example the list by NORRAG (2023) that classifies the countries of the Western Balkans as the Global South, including Serbia. On the other hand, the list of the United Nations' Finance Center for South-South Cooperation from 2022 includes only Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Western Balkans region as a Global South country (World Population Review, 2024).
2. Yet see Ortner (1995) on some of the dangers of refusing representation.
3. For Dekeyser and Jellis (2021, p. 323), it is precisely refusal – ‘as a reluctance or hesitation to settle, to resolve, to integrate; instead staying with the tension’ – that allows both for affirmationism and ‘negative geographies’ to exist besides one another. Bringing that with Burke Wood and Rossiter’s (2017, p. 168) suggestion that through refusal, ‘the different worlds stand apart or collide, rather than merge or compromise,’ Dekeyser and Jellis’s understanding would focus on ‘standing apart’ and remaining with the tension. While recognising the power of refusal to stand apart or refuse the affirmationist imperative of generosity, this paper focuses on the case of collision, where green extractivism collides with alternative visions of sustainable futures.
4. Interview, February 2022.
5. Interview, February 2022.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview, February 2022.
8. Ibid.
9. Interview, February 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview, February 2022.
13. Interview, February 2022.

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## Notes on contributor

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## *Poem III | Versatile Agents by Jevdjenije*

### *Julijan Dimitrijević*

#### SVESTRANI AGENTI

#### VERSATILE AGENTS

- Анти - екстрактивистичка  
песмица за браћу и сестре у свету -

An anti-extractivist song for brothers and sisters  
worldwide -

Руси су нам јашта браћа, сестра је  
Европа,  
али цаба свако свраћа: ко хоће да  
копа!

Russians are our brothers, Europe is our sister,  
your arrival here is fruitless: you won't dig it, miss  
or mister!

И Немци су наша браћа, ма нема да  
клима,  
ал' литијум да копају? Не дамо ни  
њима!

Germans are our brothers too, that can be correct,  
but lithium's NOT for mining, with all due  
respect!

Кинези су нама браћа, Кинескиње -  
сестре,  
ал' кад треба да се копа - седите ту где  
сте!

Chinese are our brothers too, and our sisters dear,  
but we have to tell you something: you won't dig  
it here!

Литијум нек спи у земљи, оштри су  
нам зуби.

И Авељ је брат Каину. Па га Каин  
уби...

Let lithium be at peace, sleeping underground,  
Abel being Cain's brother: bitter end did found.

Испод Сунца и Месеца, Србијом се  
песма чује:

НЕ'Ш КОПАТИ КО СИ ДА СИ! То  
ти Народ поручује.

In Serbia, there's a tune, and we like to sing it:  
underneath the Sun and Moon, YOU SHALL  
NEVER DIG IT!

**Jevdjenije Julijan Dimitrijević** is a poet, a healer and an activist from the city of Čačak, a member of SEOS and an environmental rights defender. He is also one of the most visible members of the anti-lithium movement in Serbia. Jevdjenije translated all the poems included in this thesis.



*Figure 29: Jadar Valley. Photo: Ivan Nikolić.*

## 6 | Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I foreground the main contributions of the thesis and highlight the connections which emerge across the individual chapters. Despite the articles in this thesis being written to be read independently, together with the rest of the thesis, they support a central narrative about resisting green extractivism, and violence and toxicity more broadly.

The significance of the Jadar Project could not be overstated, starting with the discovery of a new mineral in 2004 which was found to be exceptionally rich in lithium (Kesler et al., 2012) as well as to contain borates (Stanley et al., 2007). Out of the discovery of *jadarite* grew the Jadar Project with the intention of constructing a lithium mine in the rural part of western Serbia. As the demand for lithium increased over the years, the Jadar Project emerged as central to the EU's efforts to decarbonise its economy with lithium batteries, especially in EVs. With rapidly shifting geopolitical relations, the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing implications of the war in Ukraine, and the growing security and trade tensions, economic competitiveness and control over the supply chains of CRMs emerged as central concerns for the EU and the Global North more broadly (Müller et al., 2024; Riofrancos, 2023). These dependencies became pronounced in the context of China largely dominating the supply chain of critical raw materials, including the production of lithium-ion batteries (IEA, 2023b). The EU has openly supported the Jadar Project in Serbia, a candidate country, signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery production chains and EVs (Government of Serbia, 2024) in July 2024. Yet climate strategies based on extractivism are both profoundly unsustainable and deeply unjust, as the large-scale resistance to the Jadar Project in Serbia vocally demonstrates, and as I focused on in this thesis.

I have argued that the anti-lithium movement in Serbia fundamentally challenges the logic of green extractivism, with diverse forms of resistance arising before the construction of the mine could have begun. Building on the growing literature on green extractivism (Bruna, 2023b;

Dunlap et al., 2025; Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022), I have argued that what is distinct about green extractivism is the constructed moral imperative to extract, emboldened by the sense of climate emergency, which frames projects ranging from solar panels to lithium mines as essential for “saving the planet.” In other words, while continuing in the same vein as colonial narratives around progress and development that extractivism has been employing for centuries, the moral dressing of green extractivism presents a novel challenge for resisting the projects. The discursive power of green extractivism seeks to foreclose alternative visions about the green transition and the future in general, making resistance more difficult, while no less frequent. With the government first forced to officially cancel the Jadar Project in 2024 following the mass blockades which lasted for weeks and attracted tens of thousands of people, and with the resistance continuing even after the signing of the MoU, the resistance to lithium mining in Serbia presents a case of at least partially or temporarily successful mobilisation against green extractivism.

In arguing that resistance to lithium mining in Serbia is not only against the localised act of extraction and potential pollution but also becomes a challenge to the very logic of green extractivism, I forwarded an expansive understanding of the concept of extractivism. The thesis contributes to the ongoing theoretical refinement and interrogation of extractivism as a concept encompassing both the physical extraction of resources *and* different logics and ontologies, such as for instance behind knowledge extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2019). Based on ethnographic engagement with the local communities and their allies resisting lithium mining in Serbia – where no lithium mine has yet been constructed – I have highlighted the need to pay attention to the cases of resistance where extraction is only anticipated and still uncertain. My research shows that anticipation of extraction has *material* effects even before any extraction takes place – and even if no mining ever ends up taking place. The regions affected by the prospect of lithium mining in Serbia are already transformed by the mere proposals to become sites of extraction, and so too are transformed the communities living there. The material, temporal and spatial effects of anticipating extraction range from abandoned houses and polluted land because of exploration drills, to psychological harm on individuals or communities, as well as reverberations of different

local histories and memories. Within the shifting geopolitical relations of green extractivism and the ongoing mining rush, more and more communities are going to find themselves in a similar situation to my research participants, which Velicu calls “prospective environmental injustice” (2020). These cases need to be understood within the broader political situation and “in relation to a shifting and contested field of other controversies and events that have occurred elsewhere and at other times” (Barry, 2012, p. 324). More attention needs to be paid to the anticipation of these projects and the effects of that anticipation – many of which constitute a form of toxicity and violence, intended to foreclose any alternative visions of the future to be imagined.

In this expansive understanding, extractivism then emerges not only as a process of material extraction but also as a logic that stretches from mining explorations to academic methodologies. The theoretical contribution of this thesis is closely related to its methodological contribution. I have interrogated the connections between extractivism and knowledge production by asking *how to conduct research on extractivism without reproducing the extractivist logic of academia?* I built on the rich scholarship of “refusing research” (Tuck & Yang, 2014) and relating differently to one’s research participants (Grosfoguel, 2019; Murrey, 2016), also when conducting research in the context of post-Yugoslavia (Hromadžić, 2023; Stavrevska et al., 2023). I suggested that moving away from ethnography as extractivism entails refusing academic distance that remains prevalent within the dominant ideas about knowledge production and instead rooting ourselves within the places and communities with which we work. My ethnographic orientation has subscribed to reciprocity as the alternative to extractivism, while recognising that reciprocity is not always possible and some debts cannot be repaid. Yet these debts can also be seen as gifts, and gratitude, not as a moment but as a process and a commitment, emerges as another crucial aspect of my approach. Thus, I foregrounded methodological approaches based on relationality, reciprocity and gratitude, highlighting the relationship with my research participants that extends beyond the confines of academia and beyond the timelines of a PhD thesis. Instead, this work has marked the beginning of a lifelong commitment to anti-extractivist and environmental struggles in the Balkans and beyond. Privileging proximity over distance, reciprocity over knowledge

production, and comradeship over “research participation,” I highlighted the importance of ethnography that orients itself away from extractivism and towards reciprocity as well as solidarity.

I highlighted my diasporic identity as capturing some of the tensions between an insider and an outsider, and “home” and the “field,” arguing that it is through diasporic ethnographies that these binaries can be further complicated. Describing my personal position as coming “originally” from Serbia but being born and raised elsewhere, I suggested that the notion of a diaspora offers a way to think through some of the tensions between rootedness, embeddedness, distance and estrangement in research. While strongly arguing that a researcher’s familiarity with the language, culture and collective memory is essential as part of the efforts to decolonise methodologies and ethnographies, I also suggested that researchers can become “diasporic” through the long-term commitment based on reciprocity and relationality. A “field” can thus also become one of many “homes.” I expanded on my personal position in the Intermezzo as I described a particular example of crossing the border between Hungary and Serbia, or between the EU and the non-EU. Crossing the border as being diasporic carries with itself privileges such as a stronger passport as well as the tensions which that entails. Complicating the insider-outsider binary, I described how being diasporic in my personal case offers opportunities to reflect on what it means to *return*. Returning to Serbia for my fieldwork as a PhD researcher at the University of Oxford was only possible thanks to my parents’ decision to leave the country before I was born. The intermezzo also set the stage for complicating theoretical and disciplinary binaries, ranging from insider/outsider, scholar/activist, Global North/Global South, EU/non-EU, to material/immaterial toxicity and violence, as I focused on in my empirical articles.

The first article of this thesis responds to the calls to critically examine the geographies of extractivism in the Global North, in the context of onshoring and nearshoring of critical raw materials supply chains (del Marmol & Vaccaro, 2020; Riofrancos, 2023). Focusing on the (semi)peripheral position of Serbia as a European but not an EU country offers important

interrogations both of the Global North/Global South binary and of the notion of “Europe” as geographical categories that frame the spaces of extractivism. I highlighted the forms of attachment that emerge in the wake of the plans to mine lithium, with the relationship to the land being profoundly emotional, going well beyond nationalist narratives or the simplified and often offensive accusations of NIMBYism. Instead, these attachments reverberate across sentiments and memories related to peripheralisation and Europeanisation, to Serbian identity, past forms of violence, and present impulses to protect life, both human and more-than-human. The complexities of these attachments underline the shared experience across impacted communities. The work of creating networks of solidarity across the Global North and the Global South has already begun, as the examples of the Jadar Declaration and other international meetings in the Jadar Valley show. At the same time, the context of the struggles within the EU, non-EU Europe, or the Global South, while already creating networks of solidarity, remains vastly different. Investigating geographies of extractivism requires a profound engagement with the specificities, histories, memories and attachments of each of the community which cannot entirely be abstracted.

In the second article, I highlighted the importance of how multiple protest movements overlap spatially as well as temporally, amplifying one another within the broader political situation (Barry, 2012). In this article, I brought together two protest movements, the anti-lithium movement and the Protests Against Violence which emerged in response to two mass shootings in May 2023. In response to the numerous connections between the two movements, despite being fuelled by seemingly different causes, I proposed the concept of violent politics as a form of political situation which accounts for events "that have occurred in the past and that might occur in the future" (Barry, 2012, p. 330). Violent politics encompasses the multiple and shifting forms of violence and toxicity, stretching spatially, temporally, thematically and personally. The anticipation of lithium causes both violence and toxicity, even if there is no mine (yet) present. Both the acute forms of violence, such as a school shooting, and slow forms of violence, such as the anticipation of lithium mining, are embedded in violent politics. Crucially, paying attention to

violent politics as a broader situation blurs the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity, between a situation and an event and between slow and mass resistance. The two protest waves, against lithium mining and against violence, converge around the shared understanding that both of the struggles are caused by the underlying systemic issues. Violent politics as a concept then allows for accounting for these multiple forms of violence and toxicity as well as the resistance to it.

In the third article, I centred my analysis on the refusal of green extractivism by local communities. As I argued in this thesis that green extractivism makes resistance more difficult due to the urgency of the climate emergency, and I turned to the concept of refusal. I argued that understanding refusal as multidimensional, rather than merely as passive or negative but also as potentially emancipatory, points to the possibilities of envisioning what I termed post-green extractivism. I also proposed the concept of the mono-green future to account for the single and monolithic vision of the green transition based on technofixes, extractivism and continuous economic growth rather than on systemic changes. Offering three empirical examples of refusing to sell the houses in the Jadar Valley, refusing to allow exploration drills in Rekovac, and refusing to engage with the Rio Tinto representatives, I argued that refusal is already creating cracks in the mono-green future. With the imperative of green extractivism only becoming stronger, it is important to explore the potential of refusal in avoiding the “resistance trap” (Weiss, 2016), where the hegemonic powers set the terms under which they can be resisted. Thinking about the futures in a plural way and exploring the alternatives that are already emerging from the communities resisting green extractivism is vital for opening up the space for post-green extractivism.

The contributions of the thesis have broader implications both for researching and resisting green extractivism while highlighting areas where more attention needs to be paid. With the ever more urgent climate state of emergency, the imperative of green extractivism will only strengthen, creating new or renewed pressures on local communities. At the same time, the geopolitical context is rapidly shifting, with militarisation, AI, and violent conflicts and genocides emerging

as the main frontlines that will drive the expansion of extractivism. As extractivism spreads towards European rural areas and the Global North more broadly, it is also essential to pay attention to the liminal areas of in-betweenness such as the Balkans as well as to the international networks of solidarity that emerge. With this ongoing shift towards nearshoring and onshoring of mining of critical raw materials, now is the time to pay attention to the temporalities of anticipation, seeing that the boundary between material and immaterial toxicity and violence is blurry. Finally, more attention is needed on alternatives to green extractivism and on cases across the world where the concrete proposals of post-green extractivism might already be emerging.

One final aspect is the sheer scale of the protest movements which emerged in Serbia in the past few years. Throughout the past several years of working on this thesis and its multiple drafts, I had to change how I framed resistance to lithium mining in Serbia several times. First, I described the mass protests against lithium which spread across the country in autumn and winter 2021/2022 as the biggest protests in Serbia since 2001 when the regime of Milošević was overthrown. Then, in May 2023, following the two tragic shootings, the Protests Against Violence emerged, attracting tens of thousands of people over the course of several months. I changed all my descriptions of the anti-lithium protests from being *the* biggest since 2001 to being *one of the* biggest. Finally, in November 2024, student protests swept across the country following the collapse of a part of the roof of the Novi Sad railway station which killed 16 people. Since then, in the final weeks and months of writing this thesis, the student movement has emerged as by far the largest ever, attracting hundreds of thousands of people and marking the biggest protests in the history of Serbia and the wider region. It is now being referred to as likely the biggest student movement in Europe since 1968 (Gercama, 2025).

This vividly illustrates the unexpectedness and unpredictability of protest movements, something that is crucial to take into account for scholars and activists alike. At the same time, all three of the movements are closely intertwined, building on each other and sharing many of their demands which are aimed towards a more just society. The protests against lithium mining emerged not

only because of potential environmental destruction, but also as a push against multinational companies and international imperatives to extract, and in solidarity with the victims of extractivism, both past and present, across the world. The protests against violence erupted not because of an individual act of a school shooting, but in response to what has been seen as decades of systemic violence that produces conditions under which all forms of violence can thrive. The protests that broke out following the collapse of the concrete canopy have been similarly pointing to the broader systemic issues of corruption and the erosion of the rule of law which materialised in the incompetent reconstruction of the railway station. Understanding how sites and sources of protest overlap reveals the complexity of geographies of resistance, and in the case of this thesis also of geographies of green extractivism. What the experience of closely researching a protest movement over the past three and a half years shows is that as long as the future is uncertain, it is also open.

## 7 | *Afterword: Collective writing, thinking and being – through the genocide and beyond*

This work has not been done in isolation. Yet the format of the academic thesis rarely allows to account for the multitude of different involvements and influences that have shaped it. In this section, I provide some context behind writing this thesis. First of all, I want to recognise how my research extended beyond this thesis over the course of my DPhil, also morphing into collective explorations of what collaboration otherwise can look like. With Sofija Stefanović and Mirko Nikolić, we formed an informal collective which we called the Group on Green Extractivism in the Balkans (GGEB) with the aim of thinking, writing, creating and organising together. Our work as GGEB included organising a people’s school on resisting green extractivism from the Balkans in Vienna and co-founding the international collective ZBOR (Združeni Balkanski otpor i rad; *United Balkan Resistance and Work*). ZBOR brought together people from across the Balkans and countries such as Germany or the UK to organise the first explicitly anti-extractivist climate camp in the Homolje Mountains in eastern Serbia in September 2024. Importantly, such work expanded for me what can be understood as a doctorate far beyond the narrow academic boundaries of fieldwork and thesis writing. It includes not only the activist commitment to the research participants and their struggle, as I describe in the methodology chapter, but also my personal involvement across different collectives.

The fact that this work, like no work, cannot be done in isolation, also requires a recognition of the external events that shaped it. A large part of this thesis has been written during the ongoing genocide in Palestine. I wrote in my notes on 28th October 2023, sitting in my flat in Belgrade during fieldwork:

“I feel desperate. All I can do is read and watch about Palestine. I can’t think about anything else. It’s so horrible that it’s hard to imagine. There’s no point talking about

anything else. Children. So many little children. Half of all the dead are children. The children of Gaza are either dead, mutilated or orphaned, there is nothing in between. The only two things I can think about are extractivism and Palestine. Ecocide and genocide.”

Lacking the words to describe the brutality of the genocide, I borrow them from Pankaj Mishra’s piece in the *London Review of Books* (2024):

“Never before have so many witnessed an industrial-scale slaughter in real time. Yet the prevailing callousness, timidity and censorship disallows, even mocks, our shock and grief. Many of us who have seen some of the images and videos coming out of Gaza – those visions from hell of corpses twisted together and buried in mass graves, the smaller corpses held by grieving parents, or laid on the ground in neat rows – have been quietly going mad over the last few months. Every day is poisoned by the awareness that while we go about our lives hundreds of ordinary people like ourselves are being murdered, or being forced to witness the murder of their children” (Mishra, 2024).

Just as every day is poisoned by that awareness, so too this thesis carries within itself these sentiments. Since the start of the genocide in Gaza, I have had the opportunity to present my work at two academic conferences, both of which felt brutally out of place. Each time I started my presentation by insisting that there is no conference as usual during genocide, and I read aloud a short quote from Nabil Echchaibi’s *A Scream for Gaza* (2024) that I share at length here:

These words are meant to land in your ears as piercing sounds to accompany the wrenching horrors crowding our screens. Do not be fooled by the silence of print. This writing clamors to be screamed.

[...]

How do you write anger when horror in words and images is mere fuel for our callous discord? What sounds should letters make when your fingers feel like stones on the keyboard? I write today with the fear that our words and emotions about Gaza, about the

folly of war, have calcified. Worse yet, I write and scream because we are all binge-watching genocide.

[...]

As the poet Daniel Borzutzky quips in *The Performance of Becoming Human*, ‘They chopped up two dozen bodies last night and today I have to pick up my dry cleaning’. What is the point of hearing and seeing carnage? Scrolling has turned our thumb into a monstrous muscle. We bounce from tragedy to tragedy and get distracted by the ‘joyful’ absurd in between. We are zombies auditioning for humanity.

If words wept, this screen would be leaking.

[...]

Please tell me if there is a threshold for horror so I don’t waste my breath.

This is not an eloquent speech. Like Frantz Fanon, the poet of the wretched of the earth, I do not want my words to be beautiful. I want my language to be harsh. Amid so much destruction and dehumanizing hate, eloquence feels like a cruel distraction in a world where attention is a fetish of endless communication without deliberation.

This thesis still continues to follow the academic standards of eloquence, yet just as there is no conference-as-usual at the time of genocide, there cannot be a thesis-as-usual. There arguably cannot be any academia-as-usual either.

Within the context of the neoliberalisation of academia, some academics have suggested that the university has become something that is ready to “die” (Fleming, 2021), a “hopeless space, unable *both* to fulfil the desires of those who labour within it for a good life *and* to contribute solutions to socio-economic and socio-environmental ruptures” (Hall, 2020, p. 830, italics in the original). It might feel that the inability of academia to respond to “livestreamed genocide” (UNGA Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, 2024) is precisely something that reinforces the idea of the hopeless space. Still, I find that such analyses commonly fail to account for the myriads of student movements which have been born out of universities as spaces and places for organising, with political struggles that stretch both across centuries and across different

countries. Student encampments for Palestine erupted across universities all over the world, often met with brutal police interventions such as in the US (see Columbia College Student Council, 2024). These have included actions and encampments led by the Oxford Action for Palestine.

Understanding citations as works of gratitude (Liboiron, 2021), but also solidarity, I give this space in my thesis to cite the scholars who spoke against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Through the solidary politics of citation, academics also cease to be mere surnames with no identity other than their articles. Annelise Orleck, Dartmouth College Professor, and former Chair of Jewish Studies, was body-slammed to the ground and arrested on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024 during the encampment for Gaza (Patel, 2024). Almost twenty years before this, she wrote a book on motherhood and activism with a chapter on environmental activism: “The environmental justice movement was galvanized by mothers – mostly poor and mostly women of colour – who were horrified at the effects that toxic waste dumping, pesticide runoff and deforestation were having on their children and families” (Orleck, 1997). On 25<sup>th</sup> April 2024, Noëlle McAfee, a Chair of the Philosophy Department of the Emory University was arrested and later charged as she stood with her students (Neath, 2024). In her article on “neo-liberalism and other political imaginaries,” she shared a telling personal story:

“When I was a child, my family was given a prize-winning Afghan Hound that was being retired from competition. The former owner noted that the dog had the power to jump the 8-foot-tall fence that surrounded our back yard. But don’t worry, she said, the dog doesn’t know she can jump that fence. So there was no danger that she would ever try. That Afghan Hound, with her potential but unrealized power, has remained with me as an apt metaphor for a public that fails to realize its own democratic power. Politics’ members, trapped by an imaginary of their own powerlessness with respect to the social and political, do not even try to jump the fence” (2017, p. 912).

The question of failing to realise its own democratic power, while rejecting the binary thinking between a failure and a success, also runs through this thesis that follows the resistance movement

that was born out of the efforts to mine lithium. In this spatial and temporal enmeshment, academic reflections on the people's power from years ago, the students' encampments for Palestine and resistance to lithium mining emerge as inherently connected.

Crucially, the examples of Orleck and McAfee are completely random, and not intended to romanticise individual actions or to idealise the two of them as persons. They are merely two events among thousands of similar ones that someone took videos of, and which cut through the media noise. The stories impacted me profoundly as I heard about them in spring 2024 when I started writing some of these reflections. Since then, the oppression of students and faculty has only escalated, particularly in the US, with countless being kicked out from their universities, prevented from completing their degrees, forced to sacrifice their academic careers, and even detained and deported. Those who spoke up in solidarity with Palestine became the most potent example of ethical academic conduct that stretches beyond theory. As I submit and defend this thesis, I remember all those who were not able to do so this year, whether because they spoke up against the genocide in Gaza, or because they were killed in that genocide. As I complete my doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford, I remember that there is no university left in Gaza.

Crucially, the question of genocide is not at all forced into the conversation with extractivism in relation to this thesis. Rather, these connections are of fundamental importance, and it is with regret that the format of the thesis does not allow for their further exploration beyond this short text. Most notably, the so-called critical raw materials that include lithium are increasingly used in the aerospace and military industries (Pavel & Tzimas, 2016; Wischer, 2024). Multinationals Observatory documented extensively the role of the aerospace and defence industry in promoting the opening of new mines, with the EU arms lobby heavily influencing the decisions about which minerals to add to the CRM list while greenwashing mining as essential for the green transition (2023). As the report by the London Mining Network emphasises, “extractivism is a militarised process” and “militarism is an extractive process” (Selwyn, 2020, p. 2). The genocide in Gaza is also connected to the pursuit of resources (Energy Embargo for Palestine, 2024), while Abdelnour

describes Israel's "military-innovation ecosystem" to demonstrate how "the development and monetization of military technologies is deeply tied to violence it enacts upon a captive, subjugated native population, the Palestinians" (2023, p. 334). The role of minerals is essential in the military technologies and infrastructures while their greenwashing obscures the complicity of the military-defence apparatus in causing the climate crisis (Buxton, 2021).

Apart from the material links between extractivism and genocide, at least two immediate and personal connections need to be mentioned here. In September 2024, the GGEB organised a three-day workshop on green extractivism in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond as part of a cultural festival in Vienna, for which our project received funding from the festival which is in turn largely funded from public resources. An hour before our programme was about to start, the director of the festival came to inform us as organisers about some specificities of working in Vienna. Namely, they told us that in the case of the genocide in Palestine being mentioned during our public panel, they would be forced to stop the programme and read out the festival's code of conduct – which was just a generic disclaimer that the festival stands against all forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism and so on. After our initial shock, we assured the director that while we had not intended to talk about these issues on the panel about green extractivism in the Balkans, we will now be making sure that the ongoing genocide in Palestine is mentioned. During the 90 minutes of our panel talk made of six Serbian researchers, activists and artists which included the three of us, the director had to come up on stage twice to interrupt the programme and read out the code of conduct. There was no incident involving the audience or anyone else. Becker similarly traces the self-policing and self-censorship across the German civil society including the self-proclaimed radical leftists, while arguing strongly that the "German support for Israel and Zionism, in the end, advances a nationalist antisemitic project designed to quell internal dissent and political rights" (2024, p. 3).

The second connection speaks more broadly to the ethnographic methodology and on the positionality between being a scholar and an activist, and the issues that arise from this position

when working in increasingly authoritarian contexts. Yet I stress that by those contexts I do not mean only Serbia but indeed much of the Global North, as the example from Vienna illustrates. The connection relates to the personal and affective experience in relation to the increasingly authoritarian oppression of the anti-lithium protests that escalated in the summer of 2024. After one of the biggest protests which took place in Belgrade on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2024 and resulted in an overnight blockade of two train stations, three activists were arrested while at least sixty were detained and questioned over the following weeks. This created an unprecedented sense of fear and intimidation that I myself experienced despite being well-aware that that is precisely the strategy of the state to pacify the protests. This period involved the following of the activists, their detention on the borders as they were going on holidays, searching their phones and laptops or raiding their homes. Moreover, as an investigation led by BIRN and Amnesty International later showed, it also included installing Israeli spyware technology on the phones of activists (Tešić, 2024, 2025).

Many activists have also been questioned by the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA, Bezbednosno informativna agencija), with the questioning typically lasting for several hours. While I was not personally detained or questioned, I know of at least one of my research participants who was asked, among many other things, about *my* personal involvement and role within the movement. One of the questions they were asked was whether they knew what my position about the genocide was. Of course, the BIA officer who was asking the questions did not mean the ongoing genocide in Palestine, but the disputed event of the Srebrenica massacre. My research participant had no idea about my personal position related to Srebrenica, utterly confused about what that had to do with the protests against lithium mining. But I knew immediately what that question was about. It was a reference to my publicly available master's thesis on which this thesis builds, published in September 2022. There I wrote on pages 56-57:

“For Elena<sup>50</sup>, an activist from a non-local group formed in response to the Jadar Project, if you kill the earth, poison air and water and sell a nation’s natural resources, you are killing the people living on that land – “ecocide is genocide,” she says. For her, genocide and ecocide are intimately connected, having the same root cause - patriarchal domination over a nation, women, animals, nature. Genocide is a loaded term in the Balkans and especially in Serbia, where the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica of more than 8,000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys who were killed by the Bosnian Serb armed forces, less than 60 kilometres from the Jadar Valley, but on the other side of the border, is still denied as genocide by many (Memorijalni centar Srebrenica 2022). The collective trauma and guilt of the 1990s wars on all sides, albeit rejected by many, linger over the Balkans. Crucially, the lithium vein extends to BiH, and deposits have also been identified around Srebrenica (Katić 2021).”

My research participant who was being questioned had not read my master’s thesis and did not know what I wrote. But someone working for BIA has. Somewhere in my file of the Serbian secret service, it says that I recognise the massacre in Srebrenica as genocide. This is a formal request for them to include that I also recognise the ongoing genocide in Gaza as such.

In the US, Mahmoud Khalil, a student activist of the Columbia encampment, became the first political prisoner under President Donald Trump, having his student visa revoked with the intention to deport him. In a letter which he dictated from a detention facility in Louisiana, he said:

“Columbia targeted me for my activism, creating a new authoritarian disciplinary office to bypass due process and silence students criticizing Israel. Columbia surrendered to federal pressure by disclosing student records to Congress and yielding to the Trump administration’s latest threats. My arrest, the expulsion or suspension of at least 22 Columbia students – some stripped of their BA degrees just weeks before graduation –

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<sup>50</sup> The name has been changed.

and the expulsion of SWC [Student Workers of Columbia] President Grant Miner on the eve of contract negotiations, are clear examples.

If anything, my detention is a testament to the strength of the student movement in shifting public opinion toward Palestinian liberation. Students have long been at the forefront of change – leading the charge against the Vietnam war, standing on the frontlines of the civil rights movement, and driving the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Today, too, even if the public has yet to fully grasp it, it is students who steer us toward truth and justice” (2025).

While receiving barely any attention outside of Serbia, the student protests which have erupted since November 2024 are at the forefront of the fight for justice in the country and the wider region, being referred to as the largest student movement in Europe since 1968 (Gercama, 2025). Four days before Khalil’s letter became available, the student movement in Serbia organised a protest which attracted several hundreds of thousands of people, if not a million (Nova, 2025). During 16 minutes of silence which were being held at the protest for the victims of various tragedies across the Balkans, the protestors were targeted with what was described as a sound canon, a sonic weapon used to disperse crowds (Kassam, 2025). What emerges is how intertwined violence and extractivism are, from genocide and ecocide, Israeli bombs in Gaza to Israeli spyware in Serbia, from the sound cannon used against Serbian protestors, to detentions and deportations of the activists in the US.

Yet they are still being resisted.

Going back to the example of the Afghan Hound who does not know that it can jump over the fence that McAfee (2017) uses as a metaphor for the unrealised power of the people, I want to suggest that in reality, people continue to jump over the fence every single day, no matter how high it is. Witnessing different movements that arose only in Serbia in just the past few years, either as a researcher or as an activist or as both, I have no doubt that one day we will tear down all the fences.



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## 9 | Appendix: List of interviews

<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Interview date</b>
Interview 1	Loznica	Podrinjski Anti-korupcijski Tim (PAKT)	28/01/2022
Interview 2	Belgrade	Kreni Promeni	31/01/2022
Interview 3	Belgrade	Heinrich Boell Stiftung	01/02/2022
Interview 4	Belgrade	Marš sa Drine	09/02/2022
Interview 5	Jadar Valley	Ne damo Jadar (SEOS)	11/02/2022
Interview 6	Rekovac	Neko brine za Levač (SEOS)	11/02/2022
Interview 7	Belgrade	Rio Tinto	12/02/2022
Interview 8	Jadar Valley	Ne damo Jadar (SEOS)	13/02/2022
Interview 9	Pranjani	Suvoborska greda (SEOS)	14/02/2022
Interview 10	Jadar Valley	Ne damo Jadar (SEOS)	18/02/2022
Interview 11	Belgrade	Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (SEOS)	25/01/2023
Interview 12	Belgrade	Marš sa Drine	04/02/2023
Interview 13	Čačak	Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (SEOS)	06/02/2023
Interview 14	Belgrade	Suvoborska greda (SEOS)	25/02/2023
Interview 15	Belgrade	Marš sa Drine/XR Srbija	01/03/2023
Interview 16	Belgrade	Moramo	17/03/2023
Interview 17	Belgrade	Academia	24/03/2023
Interview 18	Belgrade	Moramo	07/04/2023
Interview 19	Belgrade	Academia	11/04/2023
Interview 20	Dobrinja	Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (SEOS)	11/04/2023

Interview 21	Belgrade	Academia/Jadarska Deklaracija	13/04/2023
Interview 22	Jadar Valley	Ne damo Jadar (SEOS)	14/04/2023
Interview 23	Jadar Valley	Ne damo Jadar (SEOS)	14/04/2023
Interview 24	Belgrade	Marš sa Drine	17/04/2023
Interview 25	Belgrade	Earth Thrive	26/04/2023
Interview 26	Dobrinja	Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (SEOS)	02/05/2023
Interview 27	Valjevo	Marš s Kolubare	02/05/2023
Interview 28	Jagodina	Zaštitimo Dobrinju i okolinu (SEOS)/ Eko Brigada Jagodina (SEOS)	22/09/2023