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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"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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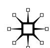
and nine children—eight girls and one boy—killed by a 13-year-old male shooter in an elementary school 'Vladislav Ribnikar' in Belgrade. The following day, in what was described as a copycat case, a 21-year-old male shooter killed eight people, most of the victims in their late teens and early twenties, 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; Sempértegui 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

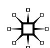
or uneventful, such scholarship pays attention to the often invisible forms of resistance that go beyond the "in-the-streets-activism" (Liboiron et al. 2018). Yet writing from the perspective of violent politics in Serbia shows that even slow disasters are resisted in diverse forms, including. Moreover, 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 Southeast 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 90 s 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 90 s 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

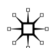


Fig. 2 A banner which reads "Why has my mom been protesting since the 90s?!" Photo courtesy of Tijana

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.[1] 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 Volčič & 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.

[1] 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,[2] 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

[2] 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:

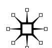
> The topic of lithium remains one of the crucial ones for the survival of the entire country and we will never give up on that, but the current priority is stopping the violence, hate and divisions that have held us hostage for more than a decade[3] (SEOS social media account, 15th May 2023).

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 uniting 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-

[3] 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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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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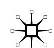

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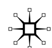

mining in Serbia at the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford. She is involved in several local and transnational collectives including the Group on Green Extractivism in the Balkans (GGEB) and the ZBOR Network.