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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.[1] 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.[2] 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.[3]

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,[4] the EU's adoption of the Critical Raw Materials Act[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] The research draws on ethnographies of activism, social movements, and resistance more broadly, emphasizing solidarity which extends beyond academia.[11] 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.[12] 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."[13] Some names have been changed as per my research participants' wish, but I do not indicate when that is the case.[14]

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.[15] Scholarship on extractivism has interrogated long histories of colonial exploitation of raw materials, notably in Latin America.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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."[19] Scholars note how green extractivism marks a continuation and "greening" of an imperial mode of living[20] where "those with little role in inducing global warming are also the ones burdened by green extractivism."[21] 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."[22] 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."[23] 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.[24] 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.[25] Yet I suggest that focusing on extractivism in Europe has also led to a theoretical dreadlock, 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.[26] Similarly, the lithium mining projects in Extremadura, Spain, or Barroso, Portugal, have been discussed in terms of peripherality, green sacrifice zones, and colonialism.[27] Yet, taking issue with Dunlap's concept of "infrastructural colonization" discussed in the context of France and Spain,[28] 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.[29] 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."[30] 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,"[31] 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.[32] 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."[33] 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."[34] 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.[35] 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."[36] This is especially so in relation to race, ethnicity, and religion, and notably towards the internal racialized others such as Roma.[37] The Balkans or South-East Europe has been theorized as a distinctly (semi)peripheral region.[38] 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.[39] 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,[40] 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."[41] "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."[42] 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.[43] 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."[44] 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.[45] 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.[46] 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 Europeanness. 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.[47] 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'!"[48] 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.[49] 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)[50]

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.[51] 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.[52] 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 hydropower 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."[53]

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.[54] 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.[55] 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.[56] 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.[57]

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.[58] 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.[59] 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.[60] 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.[61] 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.[62] 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.[63] 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.[64] 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."[65]

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.[66]

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.[67] 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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