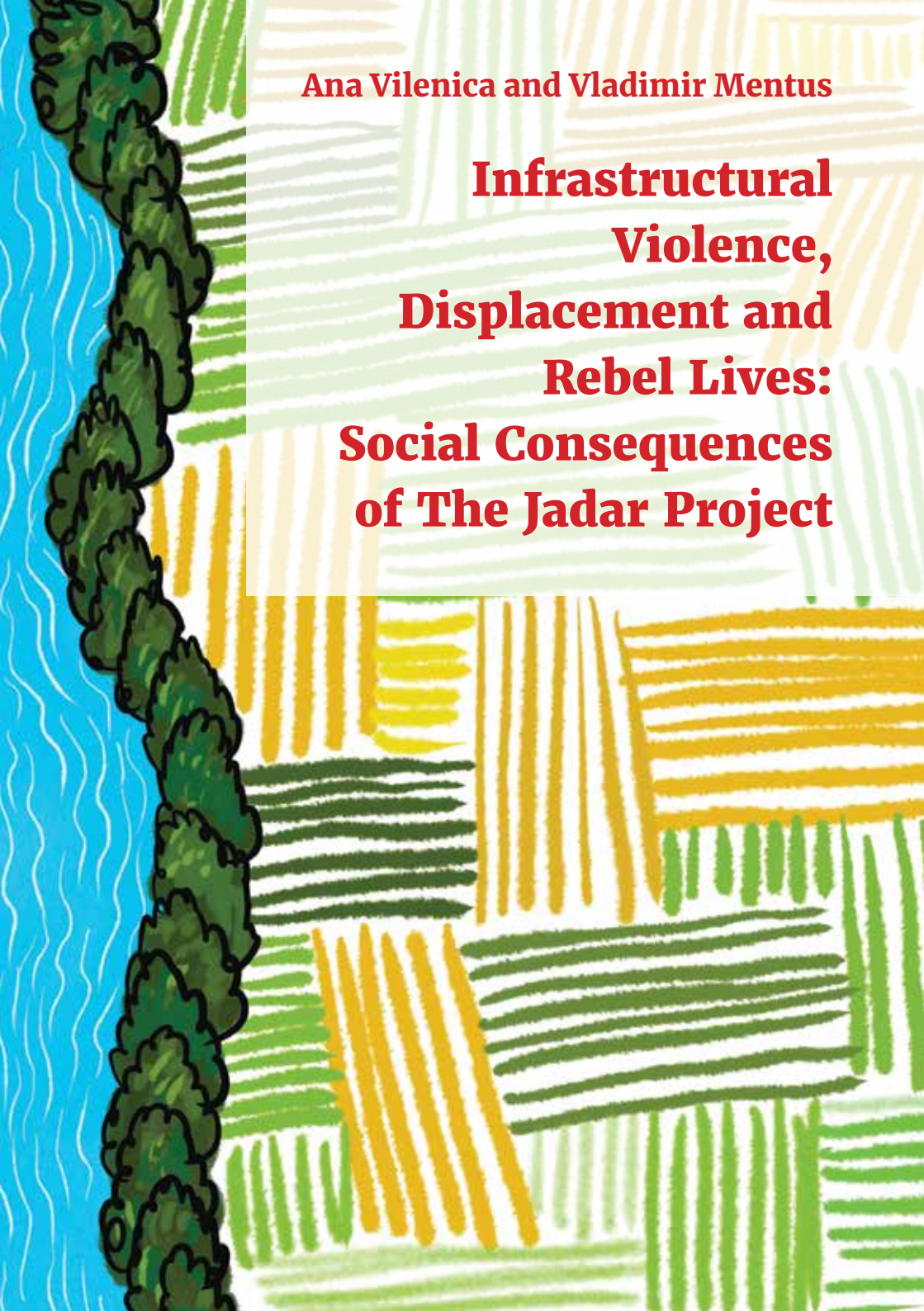




Ana Vilenica and Vladimir Mentus

**Infrastructural
Violence,
Displacement and
Rebel Lives:
Social Consequences
of The Jadar Project**

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At the beginning, no one mentioned the people. Focus was on every other aspect, but people were somehow completely neglected. I went to a few of their “consultations” just to ask: “What are you going to do with the people who remain living here?” I never got an answer.

Resident of Gornje Nedeljice

Overview

The so-called green transition, often presented as a universal good, carries with it a long shadow of resource neocolonialism. Wars and competition over strategic raw materials around the world¹ have carved out new mining frontiers at Europe's periphery. While the financial benefits of extraction flow to multinational corporations and political elites, local communities are left to shoulder the biggest risks. In the Jadar Valley, western Serbia, the British-Australian corporation Rio Tinto plans to open a lithium and boron mine, an ore processing facility, and two tailings dumps, in concert with the Serbian government and the European Union, and against the wishes of almost 60% of the Serbian population.²

The proposed Jadar Project is promoted as a green and sustainable initiative, yet its real-world consequences tell a different story: among its many serious impacts, the local population are left to bear violent social disruption,

1 The ongoing war in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is being fought over control of mineral-rich territories, with profits from the exploitation of coltan, cobalt, and other strategic minerals flowing into global supply chains (Maklink, 2025). Russia's invasion of Ukraine also has a dimension related to strategic raw materials, since Ukraine possesses significant deposits of lithium, titanium, and rare earth elements that are crucial for the defense and energy industries – making control over territory simultaneously a military, industrial, and supply-chain-related objective for Russia (Baranowski et al., 2025).

2 According to a New Serbian Political Thought survey in September 2024, 59.4% of Serbian citizens oppose the opening of Rio Tinto's proposed mine in the Jadar Valley, while 24.8% support it (Vukadinović, 2024; 2025).

environmental destruction, and involuntary displacement. Even in the exploratory phase, The Jadar Project is transforming life in Serbia and in the valley.

An ethnographic study of 45 semi-structured interviews conducted with residents living on or near the planned mining site highlights the human toll. Participants included both those who intend to stay and those who sold their properties, those that are resisting the project, and those that support it. Their stories provide a view of the experiences, pressures, divides, threats, and anxieties that the project has unleashed.

To grasp the full scope of these harms, this monographic study employs the Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method. Traditional cost-benefit analyses reduce human life, nature, and social justice to monetary values, obscuring the ethical and social dimensions of displacement. The Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method identifies situated and interrelated risks between landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, community disarticulation, loss of access to common property, and risks to the local population's health and livelihood.

Infrastructural violence in the Jadar Valley is deliberate and systemic, embedded in political, legal, and economic arrangements that extract value while shifting social and environmental costs onto population of Serbia. These arrangements also weaken regulatory safeguards through selective enforcement, suppress dissent through intimidation, and recast opposition as irrational or externally driven by foreign powers.

Even before a single mining permit has been granted to Rio Tinto, residents of the Jadar Valley face chronic

stress, deteriorating physical and mental health, threats to employment, social marginalization, food insecurity, land degradation, and a feeling of estrangement and homelessness, often described as unhomeliness.³

This research exposes a critical truth: displacement is far more than physical relocation. Even those who remain on the land endure profound transformations in the environment, the social fabric, and daily life, effectively stripping them of their ability to sustain life as they have been living it. Displacement in the Jadar Valley is structural and ongoing, a violent reordering of land, labor, and power that benefits corporations and state actors at the expense of these people at Europe's periphery.

That is why the fight for the Jadar Valley is a fight for a life in which we are all interdependent and connected in a shared ecosystem, where harm to one is harm to all. This is what has driven the people in and outside Serbia to unite in a movement for environmental justice and against land grabbing, extractivism, and neocolonialism.

3 Unhomeliness is a term used in cultural and post-colonial theory and housing studies to describe a deep sense of not belonging or feeling alienated from one's own community or environment. It is not necessarily about lacking a physical home, but about the emotional and social experience of dislocation and estrangement when familiar surroundings become unfamiliar or threatening (Bhabha, 1992; Nikolić et al., 2025).

Introduction

What is the strategy? The strategy is that we become a mining colony.

Resident of Korenita

Narratives that focus on economic development in the context of mining often overlook the extensive and long-term social consequences of these activities. In the Jadar Valley, in western Serbia, the British-Australian corporation Rio Tinto plans to open a lithium and boron mine, an ore processing facility, and two tailings dumps, in collaboration with the Serbian government and the European Union. The proposed project is aimed at establishing a new economic sector and integrated supply chains branded as “green,” promising a world without harmful carbon emissions. However, it is fundamentally grounded in extractivism (Riofrancos, 2025).

Extractivism is a development model based on the appropriation of nature, characterized by high levels of environmental destruction, the intensification of various forms of neocolonialism, and the degradation of labor conditions (Gudynas, 2021; Dunlap et al., 2024). This project reflects the spread of extractive lithium mining into Europe’s peripheral regions. The largest share of global lithium reserves is currently mined in South American countries, followed by China and Australia (Zhang, 2023). Lithium is classified as a critical raw material under the EU Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), reflecting its designated importance for the so-called green transition. It is a mineral essential

for the production of batteries used in electric vehicles and in “defense”-related technologies, sectors whose rapid expansion conflicts with the stated goals of the green transition.

Serbian collaboration with Rio Tinto was initiated under the Democratic Party–led government during the period of “transitional” neoliberalism in the early 2000s, when the first exploration permits for lithium in the Jadar Valley⁴ were issued. This cooperation continued and was significantly expanded under the authoritarian regime of the Serbian Progressive Party, which further deepened the company’s operational and political access in Serbia.

Although the project has not yet been granted any exploitation or mining permits, its impact on the daily lives of the local region’s residents has long been felt. More than half of the land required for the project has already been purchased, while those who still live in the valley face constant pressure and a sense of insecurity. What is unfolding in the Jadar Valley is not merely a story about mining; it is a story of forced displacement, the transformation of living environments, threats to livelihoods and public health, and an ongoing struggle for land, water, and autonomy on the periphery of capitalism.

The issue of displacement here cannot be viewed solely through the technical lens of land acquisition for the mine. The fear of being forced to relocate due to the mine is

4 The Spatial Plan for the Special-Purpose Area designated for the implementation of The Jadar Project (Government of Serbia, 2002), falls within the jurisdiction of two municipalities Loznica and Krupanj. In addition to the Jadar River Valley, this also includes the Rađevina River region, and for that reason, in the remainder of the text, the terms Jadar Project and Jadar Valley, in a territorial sense, also refer to the Rađevina area.

felt by all those whose homes and land are on, or near, the planned sites. This fear spreads across the entire country, which is partially nourished and supplied with food and water from this region (Ristić et al., 2021).

Early geological research conducted by Professor Jelena Obradović in the late 1990s helped identify the key stratigraphic characteristics of the Jadar basin (Obradović et al., 1999). This academic groundwork was later built upon by Rio Tinto's Serbian subsidiary, Rio Sava Exploration, established in 2001. The company's first director, Nenad Grubin, had previously served as an assistant to Obradović at Belgrade's Faculty of Mining and Geology, providing a direct institutional link between early academic research and subsequent corporate exploration.

The corporation began its exploratory operations in 2002 and announced the discovery of the mineral jadarite in 2004, a substance famously compared to kryptonite from the Superman comics.⁵ Affected by wars and the difficult post-socialist transition, the inhabitants of the Jadar Valley initially hoped that this discovery would bring prosperity. Before November 2021, residents whose properties fell within the planned mining zone organized and formed a group to negotiate better terms for the purchase of their land and homes. Since 2016, they have operated under the name, the Center for the Development of Jadar.

According to locals, widespread opposition to the project emerged once it became clear that it involved not only a mine, but also a processing facility and a tailings landfill—developments that would permanently disrupt

5 The nearly identical structure of jadarite and “kryptonite” was used by Rio Tinto for marketing purposes (Rio Tinto, 2019).

their lives. As understanding grew, so did the realization that key information had been withheld and risks systematically downplayed.

The resistance from the Jadar Valley, its surrounding areas and eventually the whole of Serbia grew into one of the most significant mass-movements in Serbia's recent history. The anti-extractivist movement that grew out of opposition to lithium mining adopted a "repertoire of contention" (Florea et al., 2024) that included road blockades, mass protests, and direct actions across Serbia and internationally beginning in 2021. These mobilizations became known for their unprecedented scope and unity in diversity, bringing together environmental groups, farmers, and ordinary citizens from different regions, as well as scientists, academics and experts (Vilenica and Mentus, 2026). Through sustained public pressure and nationwide blockades that effectively paralyzed major transport routes, the movement succeeded in forcing the Serbian government to temporarily suspend Rio Tinto's project in early 2022. This suspension remained in place until the project was officially restarted by a Constitutional Court decision in 2024.

The movement continued to organize in various ways against the project, even as the state targeted activists with criminal and misdemeanor charges, arrests, imprisonment and punitive inspections of their properties in rural areas. After the emergence of a student movement late in 2024, the main actors of the movement against lithium and boron mining recognized the students' demands as closely aligned with their own.

The collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad, which resulted in the deaths of sixteen people on November 1st 2024, was understood as reflecting broader infrastruc-

tural crimes, and a lack of regulatory oversight, rooted in corruption. Because the same state-captured institutions would be responsible for overseeing any potential mine, this recognition further united different struggles across Serbia, forming a broader front against corruption and the comprador elites who had captured public institutions and turned them into mechanisms for deregulation, concessions to foreign investors, and personal enrichment (Vilenica et al., 2021; Vilenica, 2025; Vilenica and Mentus, 2025a, 2025b; Vilenica et al., forthcoming).

On 18 July 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Belgrade establishing a strategic partnership between the European Union and Serbia over sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles, in the presence of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. At the same time, a Letter of Intent on developing the e-mobility value chain was signed by Serbia's Ministry of Economy, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and representatives of Mercedes-Benz and Rio Tinto, highlighting the alignment of political and multinational corporate interests regarding lithium and boron exploitation in the Jadar Valley.

In June 2025, the European Commission granted The Jadar Project strategic status under the Critical Raw Material Act (CRMA). This move once again confirmed and formalized the EU's support for Rio Tinto and its intentions to exploit lithium and boron in Serbia. The project is presented as crucial for the extraction of critical raw materials needed for the so-called green transition, though the two key minerals targeted for extraction are increasingly associated with the militarization of the European Union (Szlugaj and Radwanek-Bąk, 2022). These materials are now at the

center of geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, as China dominates their processing and related technologies, while global demand is expected to rise dramatically (Djukanović, 2025b).

In the post-socialist period, marked by the dismantling of socialist legacies, Serbia, like other countries in the region, has been pushed into a position of deep financial and political dependence on the European Union. Today, Serbia is increasingly treated as a source of cheap labor, bearing population loss for the benefit of wealthier EU countries, opening its economy to external financial interests, and helping safeguard the EU's external borders—thereby reinforcing Fortress Europe (Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica, 2021; Vilenica et al., 2021; Vilenica and Mentus, 2025b). At the same time, the country has become a target of resource extraction through the exploitation of natural resources and destruction of ecosystems, effectively turning it into a “sacrifice zone” in the service of the green transition, decarbonization, and renewable energy production (Juskus, 2023). It is a development logic aimed at concentrating decline in certain places so that other places can potentially be “revived.” This transformation is unfolding within the EU accession process, which, rather than mitigating structural inequalities, ends up reproducing them. Neocolonialism⁶

6 Neocolonialism, in classical theory, is understood as a de facto economic, and consequently political, dependence of a state on external powers, despite its formal independence (Nkrumah, 1966). Instead of being used for the development of impoverished regions of the world, foreign capital is utilized for exploitation, thereby widening the gap between them and the wealthier parts. According to Nkrumah (Nkrumah, p. 5), neocolonialism represents the final stage of imperialism which means power without responsibility for those who practice it, and exploitation without any possibility of justice for those who suffer under it.

in this context is inseparable from land grabbing and the granting of concessions for exploration and exploitation of mineral extraction, leading to the appropriation of natural resources and means of production. In theory, this process is known as energy neocolonialism (Hou, 2024).

In Serbia, energy neocolonialism manifests through infrastructure projects and regulatory frameworks that reproduce asymmetrical power relations, in line with the definition of capitalist domination without formal colonial rule (Addis and Zhu, 2018). These neocolonial landscapes are shaped not only by physical infrastructure, but also by “soft” regulatory mechanisms; rules and standards imposed by the EU and international institutions (Dunlap, 2023a; Curley, 2021). Neocolonialism today is not implemented solely by states, but also by multinational corporations and global governance institutions.

The European Green Deal (EGD) was presented as a major transformation for the EU (European Commission, 2021), but it follows a long history of unequal power relations and allows old imperial patterns to continue under a “green” label. As research shows (Almeida et al., 2023), this process in practice unfolds through four interrelated mechanisms:

1. the transformation of ecological crises into opportunities for capital accumulation
2. the positioning of the EU as a moral actor and global savior
3. technocratic and development-oriented progress
4. the consolidation of territorial and geopolitical control

The subject of this publication is the social impact assessment of green neocolonialism on The Jadar Project. In order

to understand all the social risks associated with The Jadar Project, we rely on the Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method developed by Filip Alexandrescu (2013), based on the initial method by Michael M. Cernea (1997, 2000) for displacement situations. This method was developed to address the limits of cost–benefit analysis, which attempts to put all values in monetary terms, often ignoring the value of human life, nature, and social justice, and overlooking ethical concerns. Cost–benefit analyses also fail to account for who gains and who loses, which can justify policies that increase inequality and injustice. The Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) method identifies eight key impoverishment risks for displaced communities:

1. Landlessness
2. Joblessness
3. Homelessness
4. Marginalization
5. Food insecurity
6. Increased morbidity and mortality
7. Loss of access to common property resources
8. Community disarticulation

The extended version of this model is used here, and contextualizes these risks within political, institutional, and social systems. It highlights that displacement operates across multiple scales and is not solely a consequence of physical relocation, but also of broader social, political, and economic processes.

Rio Tinto claims that its land acquisition and re-settlement plans follow International Finance Corporation

standards (IFC, 2012a). However, these standards rely on the IRR method to assess social risks (IFC, 2012b), which Rio Tinto does not mention in its documents. Where these risks are addressed, they are largely reduced to financial compensation, which goes against the purpose of the method.⁷

This analysis draws on Filip Alexandrescu's (2013) mediated version of the IRR method, developed in response to critiques of the method's lack of contextualization (Mugah, 2000) and informed by his analysis of the Roșia Montană gold mine in Romania. The extended framework helps us understand a broader context—how global interests and local lives come into conflict, how people navigate loss and uncertainty, and the different ways in which they resist. In this way, he introduces the perspective of mediatized risks, as opposed to standard categories of risk. Alexandrescu explores risks that emerge at higher political and institutional levels beyond the immediate process of displacement, as well as at the level of local actors, their resources, and strategies, while also examining how these levels are interconnected and how they collectively shape the displacement process.

The social risks associated with The Jadar Project were examined through an ethnographic study that includ-

7 In its handbook for local residents, *Final Version: Proposal for Property Acquisition in the Brezjak Area, Cadastral Municipalities of Gornje Nedeljice and Slatina* (Rio Tinto, 2020, p. 9), the company states that its land acquisition and resettlement strategy follows Serbian law and international standards set by the International Finance Corporation (IFC, 2012b). The IFC's *Guidance Note 5: Land Acquisition and Involuntary Resettlement* refer to Michael M. Cernea's IRR model as a way to address social risks (IFC, 2012b). However, this model is not mentioned in Rio Tinto's document, and its approach is presented in a way that focuses mainly on financial compensation, which is against the point of the method.

ed 45 semi-structured interviews with residents of the Jadar Valley. The respondents live and make a living on land designated for the mining complex and its immediate impact zone. Interviews were conducted in April, May and November 2025. Participants included residents who wished to remain on their properties and those who had already sold them. Of the ten people contacted who sold their land to Rio Tinto, four agreed to be interviewed, while the others stopped responding after initial contact. Among those interviewed were residents who opposed the project, those who considered themselves neutral, and those who viewed it positively. To preserve participants' anonymity, village locations have been altered in the quoted material.

The official Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area of The Jadar Project (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020), hereafter The Spatial Plan, covers 22 villages and over 290km² which encompass the mining complex and all infrastructure (Rio Sava Exploration, 2024). The surface area of the actual activity zone is 854.8 hectares, within which there exist about 1,422 households (ibid; see Table 4.1 and 4.2). As of 2023, a total of 89 buildings are listed in the cadastre as registered to Rio Sava, while the remaining listings consist of plots of construction and agricultural land of various classes (Latković, 2023). This report also draws on secondary sources, including publicly available data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, research by environmental protection organizations, and relevant academic literature addressing the effects of mining on the lives of local communities.

Our research has shown that the residents of the Jadar Valley are subjected to daily violence manifested in various forms, ranging from verbal manipulation, to dis-

placement, to criminal charges. This violence can be described as infrastructural violence.

Infrastructural violence refers to the ways in which infrastructures, such as mining facilities, serve to produce, maintain, or deepen social inequalities and inflict harm on specific groups of people (Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012; Otsuki, 2024; Pavoni and Tulumello, 2024; Djukanović, 2025a). Rather than being neutral or purely technical, infrastructures often reflect political decisions about whose lives and environments are sacrificed. In the context of mining, infrastructural violence manifests through the transformation of entire landscapes into zones of exploitation, displacement of people, environmental pollution, and destruction of local ways of life. The temporalities of mining infrastructure further exacerbate this injustice: while exploitation brings short-term profits to companies, inhabitants are left with the long-term consequences of ecological and social devastation. These unequal temporal dynamics illustrate how infrastructural violence ensures privileges for some, while shifting the burden of risk and harm onto others, often onto generations yet to come. Our approach in the application of the Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method lies in emphasizing that impoverishment risks cannot be understood outside the context of ongoing, everyday, and complex infrastructural violence.

In conversations with residents of the Jadar Valley, it became clear that displacement is not solely a physical act of removing people from their homes, but also a gradual process of destroying the conditions for life through the transformation of the living environment. In this context, infrastructural violence is reflected in the forced alteration of the natural, social, and economic environment, rendering

the space unbearable for living. In this way, displacement affects not only those who are directly forced to leave their homes and sell their land but also those who remain, regardless of their opinion on the mining operation. All locals are effectively excluded from the possibility of continuing life in a familiar environment. Infrastructural violence, therefore, also operates by creating a “condition of impossibility to stay,” even for those who have not been physically expelled.

The structure of this publication is as follows: We begin by defining the concept of infrastructural violence and analyzing the specific mechanisms through which it manifests in the context of The Jadar Project. We then provide an analysis of the Request for Defining the Scope and Content of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study, with the aim of identifying the potential effects on the local community from the corporation’s perspective. Using available empirical evidence, we assess the validity of such arguments. In the following section, we apply a Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method and draw upon interview data from residents of the Jadar Valley to further evaluate the social effects of the project and the appropriateness of its continuation. Our findings indicate that the depth of risks posed by The Jadar Project demands an entirely different approach to strategic planning in Serbia and the region more broadly, as well as the systemic dismantling of the EU’s neocolonial influence.

Infrastructural Violence of The Jadar Project

At their presentations they say that the impact zone ends at the fence. So, beyond the fence, there is no impact? What are we talking about here?

Resident of Stupnica

Through the construction of mines, gas pipelines, or energy facilities, physical infrastructure often becomes a tool of domination that reproduces unequal power relations while suppressing local needs and ecosystems. This form of violence can be obscured by legal frameworks and regulations, which legitimize exploitation under the guise of “development” and “modernization.” We conceptualize neocolonial infrastructure as a set of physical and “immaterial” practices through which external actors, in collaboration with comprador elites, establish control over territories and resources. The violence of such infrastructure lies in its capacity to displace, marginalize, and enclose local populations, while simultaneously presenting itself as progress or development (Dunlap, 2023b).

The neocolonial infrastructural violence of The Jadar Project is extensive. It is manifested in an extractive project imposed on the residents of Serbia without their genuine participation, alongside the systemic expropriation of

resources and territories in favor of global capital. At the same time, local authoritarianism provides the political and legal infrastructure necessary to implement such projects through repression, misinformation, the deregulation of spatial planning and environmental and mining legislation, and the criminalization of resistance (Djukanović, 2022). It is crucial to understand that this violence encompasses not only the direct construction of mining infrastructure but also preparatory actions for its development. Irina Velicu (2020) introduces the concept of “prospective ecological injustice” to explain how mining projects generate harm even before they are materially realized, emphasizing that the mere anticipation of mining in Romania and Bulgaria leads to prolonged socio-ecological damage through expropriation, marginalization, psychological pressure, and political exclusion of local communities.

Neocolonialism and Authoritarianism

The violence of The Jadar Project encompasses economic neocolonialism in conjunction with a local authoritarian regime. It is manifested through the hypertrophy of corrupt practices and corporate power mechanisms that infiltrate both local institutions and broader state structures. Despite substantial evidence of the project’s harmful environmental and health impacts, as well as the financial losses Serbia could incur (Dražković, 2025), Serbian officials continue to foreground its potential economic benefits, presenting it as a historic opportunity for national develop-

ment (Mihajlović, 2021). Independent Serbian scientists have described The Jadar Project as highly risky, with financial gains that are at best negligible, where Serbia provides all the infrastructure, Rio Tinto captures the profits, and the country assumes full financial responsibility for any associated risks (Drakulić et al., 2025). This discrepancy has led to a complete erosion of public trust in institutional mechanisms designed to protect the interests of citizens. Residents' reactions to such public politics are often marked by irony or cynicism. As one resident of the Jadar Valley observes:

This is cowboy lawlessness. They didn't accidentally come to Serbia because they like us or want to help us. They came to exploit us. They see us as good prey while they are the hunters. Now they're hunting, that's it. And they've found these, let's say, "pimps" [the current SNS regime] who literally sell everything off. It's like that in eastern Serbia, in the south in Novi Pazar, Rogozna... Wherever there's something of note, they put it up for sale. They don't care about the environment or anything else, only personal profit.

A resident of a nearby village notes that this is not an isolated practice, suggesting both familiarity with, and established connections among, locals and activists from areas near extractive projects worldwide:

From everyone we've spoken to about how the companies and corporations operate, it's the same outside Serbia too. Everywhere is the same. They infiltrate the local community, then move on to city administrations,

then enter the ministries, and eventually the government, and that's it. It's pure corruption.

Further erosion of trust in institutional and expert processes also stems from the compromised position of certain scientific institutions. Namely, the corporation secured the support of certain scientific circles, including the Faculty of Mining and Geology, through donations and funding of specific projects (University of Belgrade, 2021, in: PAKT, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c). Additionally, from 2022–2024, Rio Tinto engaged the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Novi Sad in a Program on Sustainable Development, Entrepreneurship, Agriculture, and Rural Tourism in the municipalities of Krupanj and Loznica. They also employed the faculty as part of a Livelihood Restoration Plan for owners and users of land that was acquired for the proposed Project. The contracts include provisions for reporting and sharing information about local residents and agricultural workers (University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Agriculture and Rio Tinto, 2022–2024).

Scientists who presented information critical of the project were systematically intimidated and targeted by campaigns aimed at discrediting their scientific work (Matković, 2026). However, in recent years, more researchers have publicly spoken out about the harmful consequences of the project despite facing pressure and intimidation. This became especially visible in the context of student and civic blockades that began in November 2024, involving faculty occupations, mass protests, and blockades of roads and government institutions across the country. One local activist describes the growing support for the anti-extractivist movement:

All those people who support the students are also against the mine. The Serbian Academy of Sciences supported us earlier, coming out with their position. Now we have the Academic community, 3,000 signatures and the students.

The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) organized a scientific conference in May 2021 entitled *The Jadar Project – What Is Known?* from which a collection of papers was also published (Stevanović et al., 2021). SANU issued a statement in February 2022 noting that there is insufficient insight into the proposed project's impact on the environment and public health. It emphasized that such projects must be based on broad social consensus and transparent scientific assessment.

On April 1, 2025, members of the academic community and students gathered in front of the Delegation of the European Union in Serbia and submitted a request to the European Commission to reject Rio Tinto's application for Strategic Status under the Critical Raw Material Act. The request, signed by around 3,000 members of the academic community from universities and research institutes across Serbia, expressed concern about the serious consequences the project's implementation could have on the environment and public health (Beta, 2025). An official legal challenge against the status has also been filed by German legal group Green Legal Impact and Romanian CIDRM (Centrul de Instruire în Domeniul Relațiilor de Muncă) in collaboration with Serbian team Marš sa Drine (Green Legal Impact and CIDRM, 2025a).

In addition, some locals view donations from the company to residents as suspicious. For years, people have

been receiving tractors or other forms of assistance through vouchers, but according to residents, this comes with the condition that they do not participate in protests or publicly speak out against the project. On the other hand, those who regularly accept vouchers believe that complaints against the company are exaggerated by people who are paid to stir up controversy:

Ever since Rio Tinto arrived, they've been fair and respectful. In the beginning, everyone earned good money, and now it feels as if someone has been hired specifically to stir up trouble.

More specifically, Rio Tinto's website (2025a) lists programs in the territory of the city of Loznica and the municipality of Krupanj, including support programs for entrepreneurs, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises through direct non-recoupable grants; grants for the development and empowerment of women and youth; as well as programs supporting farmers in food processing activities. The website states that the company has made a total of 2 million euros in donations to the local communities. Although the company formally classifies these as donations, locals question the legality of such conditionalities. If the motivation behind the donations is political or economic, then this practice can be understood as a form of corruption.

In this context, the responsibility of the state is crucial. Instead of taking an active and accountable role in protecting public interest and conducting independent oversight of the project, the state has mostly acted to politically legitimize it. Rather than investigating allegations of irregularities and potential abuses, its actions have been aimed

at securing political support for the project. In this way, the state has abandoned its regulatory and protective function and become an accomplice in promoting what is potentially a very harmful project (Dragojlo, 2021), which is being carried out by a company with a long history of involvement in colonial extraction of mineral resources (Stefanović et al., 2025).

Deregulation

Another important element of neocolonial infrastructural violence is the general deregulation of laws and regulations related to spatial planning, mining and environmental protection, as well as non-compliance with and circumvention of the laws and regulations (Đorđević and Đorđević, 2025; Jakovljević, 2025). Rio Tinto operates in Serbia through two affiliated companies: Rio Sava Exploration (established in 2001) and Rio Tinto Exploration Dunav (established in 2018). Through Rio Sava Exploration, Rio Tinto obtained rights to conduct geological exploration of borates at multiple locations in 2004. Since then, the country's legal system has undergone several phases of adaptation to corporate needs. Local governments once had some inspection powers, but today they are not even required to be informed when geological explorations take place within their territory. For example, in 2015, changes to Serbia's mining legislation were made in the interest of centralization and privatization. The Law on Mining and Geological Explorations (2015) removed local governments from decision-making on mining and geological exploration and

transferred all permitting powers to state-level institutions (Petovar, 2025). The same law designated lithium and boron as minerals of strategic importance and allowed land expropriation for mining projects, even when those projects were to be carried out by private companies (Law on Mining, 2015; Art. 4, 30–31).

In spring 2021, a local spatial plan for The Jadar Project was approved despite missing a feasibility study and long-term exploitation program for the project as well as not being legally aligned with higher-level planning documents (Spasić, 2020; PAKT, cited in: Spasić, 2021). The plan was annulled after residents collected 5,000 notarized signatures in seven days, but existing permits remained valid, as they were based on the SPSPA Jadar.⁸ This plan was annulled in January 2022 due to huge public opposition, and the Working Group for the project was dissolved (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2022a; 2022c; 2022d).⁹ These decisions can be considered deceptive, given that President Vučić stated he had made a mistake in cancelling the project just three days after his election victory in April 2022 (Danas, 2022). Just a month later, Simon Thompson,

8 The Spatial Plan itself, as we know it today, was introduced during the implementation of the Belgrade Waterfront project as a tool for legitimizing arbitrary political decisions and corruption. By establishing this planning document through the Planning and Construction Law at the very top of the planning system, the public interest was shifted from citizens to the state. Through the deregulation of this Law, the government gained the ability to designate any project as one of public interest, including residential and commercial complexes, industrial zones, and urban renewal initiatives (for more, see: *Nova planska praksa*, 2025).

9 It is particularly indicative that just one day after the adoption of this regulation, a meeting was held between Rio Tinto and the European Commission regarding a change in strategy related to the project (European Commission, 2022)

then Chairman of the Board of Rio Tinto, stated in an Annual General Meeting: “We very much hope that we will be able to discuss all of the options with the government of Serbia now the elections are out of the way” (Paul, 2022; Rio Tinto Limited, 2022). As one of the interviewed residents who participated in the protests explained:

I was at the meeting when we went to collect the documentation from [then Prime Minister] Brnabić. As she told us, “It’s over with Rio Tinto, with The Jadar Project. It’s done.” We were already saying back then that they only did it because of the elections. And in the end, after the elections passed, she admitted it. She publicly said in the parliament that it was threatening their election outcome.

Despite the apparent standstill, the permitting procedure for the exploitation of jadarite remains ongoing (Ministry for Mining and Energy, 2022). Meanwhile, Rio Tinto continues to submit requests for deadline extensions, even though the Ministry has not issued a response since December 2021 (Ministry for Mining and Energy and Rio Sava, 2022–2025). Rio Sava continued investing heavily in the project, spending over €600 up to the end of 2023, more than €300 million of that being after the 2022 annulment. This includes €92 million spent on feasibility studies and approximately €100 million on consultations (Association for Environmental Protection, 2024). Rio Tinto challenged the 2022 annulment in the Constitutional Court, and in July 2024 the court issued a regulation that re-legalized the spatial plan.

Repression

Infrastructural violence also takes the form of repression through fear, primarily reflected in the criminalization of resistance. Opposition to The Jadar Project is led by people from the Jadar Valley, bringing together residents concerned about forced displacement and the risk of ecocide. A key role in spreading the resistance is played by environmental, agricultural and anti-extractivist organizations and initiatives that have helped organize protests, road blockades, and media campaigns at both national and international levels. Public debates and the involvement of the scientific community play a strong role as well. Since November 2024, the resistance has been further strengthened by student groups, who, through university blockades, introduced a new energy and solidarity to the struggle. Opponents of the project are continuously targeted and criminalized, while the corporation is politically shielded.

The responsibility of the state in this case is multifaceted. Despite limited resources, local residents and organisations Ne damo Jadar (We Won't Give up Jadar) and PAKT (Po-drinje Anti-Corruption Team) along with local lawyers, have initiated legal proceedings against the company. The first is based on land pollution caused by exploratory drilling¹⁰ and

10 Article 8 on the Law of Mining and Geological research (2011; 2015) stipulates that a business, company, or other legal entity that carries out geological research or the exploitation of mineral raw materials without the required approvals is obliged to compensate the landowner for the damages caused to the land. The compensation received by locals is seen as an admittance of the company not having the proper approvals for drilling on agricultural land.

the other on dumping mining waste in local landfill without permits.¹¹

One of the activists describes the problem:

Although this was a legal matter between the corporation and the landowners, it is the state that should respond since through their [compensation] contracts [with some landowners] the company practically admitted to pollution.

Additionally, between 2015 and 2021, exploratory drilling was illegally carried out on high-ranked agricultural land. The Law on Agricultural Land (2006/2008) prohibits the use of high-ranked agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes without prior reclassification and a public procedure.¹² As a local resident explained:

At that time, we didn't even know that they carried out all those exploratory drills illegally. That's considered construction work, and it requires building permits. To get a building permit, they would have had to convert

11 The Ministry for Mining has confirmed that they did not issue permits for waste disposal (Ministry for Mining and Energy, 2023). Article 266 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia (2005) criminalizes the import, as well as the unauthorized processing, disposal, and storage of hazardous materials within Serbia. Article 121 of the Law on Mining and Geological Research of 2011 stipulates that *the disposal and management of mining waste is carried out on the basis of a waste management permit*. This also applies to Article 144 of the currently valid Law on Mining and Geological Research (2015).

12 Article 22 of the Serbian Law on Agricultural Land (2006/2008) does not allow for arable agricultural land of the first to fifth cadastral class be used for non-agricultural purposes.

that land into construction land. They didn't do that. And we didn't know about it.

Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in locally targeted pressure on activists. However, it is important to emphasize that repression is not limited to activists at the local level. There has been an alarming rise in repression directed at individuals and organizations within the activist community nationwide (Polekol, 2024). The state's strong repression has included mass arrests and legal harassment of activists, including the imprisonment. Authorities have frequently used Articles 309 and 320 of the Criminal Code which relate to charges of "violent changes to the constitutional order" to justify detention based on social media posts and public statements.

According to a report by Civic Initiatives, during the peak of protests in August 2024, several dozen people were detained under charges disproportionate to their activities, including vague accusations of disturbing public order and peace (Mustajbašić, 2025). There is also a noticeable trend of frequent SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) lawsuits, legal moves made for the purpose of intimidation. Criminal charges represent a more serious threat because there is a real possibility of imprisonment. Imprisonment of protest organizers and participants, all of whom were later released due to baseless charges or incorrect evidence, suppresses legitimate dissent (Front Line Defenders, 2024). Some local activists face accusations of assaulting police officers, while others are charged with obstructing the police in the performance of their duties. What notably bothers activists most is the unequal treatment activists encounter:

The injustice is the hardest. I have nothing against the law or institutions but let it be the same for everyone. They accepted a criminal complaint against me four days after it was filed, but for cases against the company, those stay dormant for four years.

On the other hand, public opinion and support of the wider community is, according to local residents, of great significance to people in the Jadar Valley.

Manipulation and Propaganda

The fourth element of infrastructural violence involves manipulation and propaganda that create confusion among the public. Residents claim the corporation has lied to them and been selective with the information it has shared:

There are 536 drill holes on this land. We didn't even know that. They have been lying from the start. A woman came 20 years ago, they went around all the villages bragging about how it would be like a spa, that they needed 20 hectares to open the mine. It would be a spa, healing waters, Superman¹³. People had no idea what the Project was. Until three or four years ago, no one knew.

According to locals, participation of valley residents in the project is also manipulated:

13 Superman is referenced here because the mineral jadarite was promoted by Rio Tinto as “kryptonite-like,” drawing on its association with Superman to generate public interest.

They keep writing that they are in contact with some “interested groups,” but they never explain who these people are. They are actually interest groups looking out for their own personal benefit. Most often, the meetings are organized by locals and include a picnic, food, drinks, and they get paid a daily allowance. We found out that participants receive two thousand dinars per day, and the organizer gets five thousand. Then they call it “consultations” with the local population. They take notes, make records, check boxes, and “prove” that they conducted conversations. When you look at their documents, they show that over the past 21 years, they talked to 3–4 thousand people. When you divide that over 21 years, it comes to about 200 people a year.

On the other hand, a resident of the Jadar Valley who supports the project emphasized that, through attending events organized by the company, he understood why the project could be positive. He added that he does not consider himself an expert and did not want to go into the reasons in detail.

During our field work, we gained access to the notes of an environmental protection analyst from Loznica, taken at one of the public “consultations” hosted by Rio Tinto in 2021.¹⁴ Company representatives were making inappropriate comparisons, telling those present that jadarite ore dissolves easily at temperatures below 100°C in a solution as mildly acidic as grapefruit juice. The notes also indicate that

14 The notes were taken by Aleksandra Velimanović and are used with her consent.

people sarcastically asked why grapefruit is not used in the procedure.

Media violence manifests itself in the form of a pervasive “green euphoria” (Matković, 2025b), in corporate propaganda, and cognitive manipulations, where the mine is presented as a “green project” even though it is estimated that the Jadar mining–chemical complex would contribute significantly to increased CO₂ emissions (Đorđević et al., 2024). Residents believe that if they had similar financial resources, it would greatly ease their struggle:

They buy up airtime. Every day on local media there are ads running about how green this project is. If we had the same financial resources, this fight would have been over a long time ago.

Discursive neocolonization can also be observed in the way individuals and entire communities are labeled and delegitimized through language. Locals who opposed the proposed project were frequently portrayed in public discourse as “uneducated peasants” resistant to “progress” or as “irrational people” obstructing Serbia’s economic development.

Media and political narratives strengthened this portrayal by labeling activists as “foreign agents” or members of “Western-funded NGOs” (Gajić, 2024). At the same time, they were also described as “pro-Russian saboteurs.” This framing was echoed by The Wall Street Journal, after Rio Tinto’s interpretation that opposition to The Jadar Project was driven by a Russian disinformation campaign, further undermining the legitimacy of local environmental resistance (Steinberg and Kantchev, 2024).

These narratives escalated in August 2024 following railway and highway blockades. The president described the protests as “violent,” accused demonstrators of “terrorizing the majority” and attempting to “destroy the economy,” claiming that civil society representatives were “paid by foreign interests,” and mocking citizens’ fears (N1 BiH 2024). Together, these discursive practices served to undermine opposition and create public confusion. As one local resident puts it:

All of this is carefully constructed: that we are illiterate savages, prone to violence, and that we are Russian agents. So then, when you go to Europe, they say we are Russophiles, which immediately provokes hostility. And here in the local context, they call us Western agents. Wait a minute, I can’t be both a Western and an Eastern agent. Right?

There is a continuous shifting of narratives in public discussion, where local opponents of the project and activists across the country are unjustly portrayed as enemies of scientific research. On the portal Kopaćemo¹⁵ (We will dig), established after the mass-mobilizations in 2024 to target project opponents, the biographical data of 24 individuals, including local and national activists, academics and opposition politicians, was published. They were labeled as “ecological terrorists,” illustrating how such labels can be used to stigmatise dissent and deepen social conflict and polarisation. Simultaneously, digital platforms are used to discredit individuals and groups. An additional problem

is the difficulty in identifying those responsible, since the portals are often registered in different legal jurisdictions. Propaganda films, such as “Not in My Country: Serbia’s Lithium Dilemma” and “The Lithium Paradox” by Peter Tom Jones have promoted a misleading narrative that legitimizes mining interests and marginalizes community concerns (Dunlap et al., 2025b). Although presented as a neutral documentary, the film functioned as propaganda for The Jadar Project and was promoted at a Brussels event under the patronage of the European Commission. Residents of the Jadar Valley who attended were repeatedly denied the opportunity to speak, first on the grounds of translation, and later due to lack of time, effectively silencing their voices in the international debate.

In January 2026, the mayor of Loznica, head of the administrative center of the whole region, publicly accused certain locals affiliated with the local group *Ne damo Jadar* of causing power outages in the villages of the Jadar Valley during the Christmas holidays. According to her, they were responsible because they had stopped the construction of an electric substation. However, the substation in question is part of the proposed Jadar Project’s infrastructure, and its construction is due to begin in 2028 (Marinović, 2026).

A defining feature of infrastructural violence is the cumulative nature of its impacts, which extend beyond immediate harm to produce long-term, irreversible damage to the environment and the conditions for life for future generations in the Jadar Valley. This is not limited to already assessed ecological risks (Dondur et al., 2025; Jovanović, 2021) but also includes the physical transformation of the living environment itself. One example is the creation of a “war zone” effect, as some residents have noted.

Those who sold their properties to Rio Tinto also removed roofs, windows and other elements of their houses. A resident living in the immediate vicinity believes that the corporation is responsible:

It's a very bad thing that they removed the roofs. They didn't have to do that. Those are old tiles; they can't be reused or sold. We believe the company pressured them. But we don't have proof. Psychologically, at first, it was terrifying. It's psychological warfare. As a result, you have a landowner living sandwiched between two houses that have been sold and demolished. He doesn't want to live there anymore. It's terrifying. It was pressure first on them, and then on us.

This deliberate degradation of the living environment fosters a sense of fear and isolation among those who remain, regardless of whether they support the project or not. The “war zone” effect becomes a means of psychologically motivated displacement that undermines the sense of belonging and security of the people in the Vally.



Existing and Potential Effects of The Jadar Project on the Social Community

Look at the way they have selectively sliced up the study. They claim these are independent units. What independent units? How can a mine and a tailings dump be independent? They also separated the ore processing plant. So now we can expect three separate studies for something that should have been one.

Resident of Donje Nedeljice

In June 2024, Rio Tinto voluntarily published a Draft Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for The Jadar Project, which was available upon request until February 2025. Although this seemingly allowed the public to assess potential environmental impacts and proposed mitigation measures, the draft itself is not a legitimate legal document but was used for propaganda purposes. The company explicitly refused to take responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies in the content:

No statement or guarantee is given, either express or implied, regarding the content of this draft, including, but not limited to, the accuracy, adequacy, timeliness, completeness, and/or reliability of the content presented in this draft (Rio Tinto, 2024).

Furthermore, the Faculty of Biology at the University of Belgrade publicly distanced itself from the Draft, emphasizing that their work was taken out of context and misused and that all conclusions in the draft which utilize their research represent the views of Rio Sava and the consulting firm Biodiversity Consultancy, and not the faculty (University of Belgrade, Faculty of Biology, 2024). The faculty noted that their research results showed significant negative and potentially irreversible impacts on biodiversity and recommended abandoning the project as the primary protection measure. The draft EIS is not part of the legally defined Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure under the Law on Environmental Protection (2004). That procedure includes scoping, public participation, and the granting of an exploitation license by the Ministry for Mining and Energy, and Rio Tinto does not hold such a license. Only after these steps are taken can an EIA be submitted to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and released to the public. For these reasons, the draft EIS cannot be considered a legitimate basis for serious analysis.

In its Request for Determining the Scope and Content of the EIA (hereinafter The Request), the corporation ignores existing and potential infrastructural violence of the proposed project in the section on social community impact (Rio Sava Exploration, 2024). The local population is primarily portrayed as an obstacle or challenge to project implementation rather than as an equal actor with its own rights and needs. The narrative is shaped to downplay the importance of existing social relations, the history of resistance, and local knowledge, while exaggerating potential benefits such as employment and economic prosperity. The deep conflicts that the project has already caused in com-

munities are ignored. Social fragmentation and the breakdown of institutional trust are not recognized as consequences of the project, but rather as side effects of residents being “uninformed.” This approach not only trivializes real social tensions but also reveals a profound power imbalance in the decision-making process. The Request also intentionally focuses only on the mine while ignoring the impacts of the tailings dump and ore processing plant. This is a technique called “salami slicing” and is used to reduce the overall perceived impact of the project (Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute, 2024).

A major report on the social effects of mining activities in EU countries (Mononen et al., 2022) states that its negative effects are more characteristic in countries with higher levels of corruption, while positive mining effects (almost exclusively economic) mostly apply to “developed” economies. It is also noted that even the small economic benefits of projects in peripheral countries like Serbia often disappear in practice because they are distributed unfairly. This comes at the expense of marginalized groups, who not only fail to experience the advantages of economic “prosperity” but also, as a rule, bear the highest costs of implementing these projects (Gamun et al., 2015). Rio Tinto does not take these contextual facts into account when analyzing the potential consequences of the proposed Jadar Project.

In The Request, the area affected by potential mining activities is described as a region characterized by a strong aging factor and a population decline of 9% over the previous 11 years (Rio Sava Exploration, 2024). One of the key expected benefits of the mine’s opening is claimed to be the slowing of depopulation and a demographic strengthening of the community. However, the data presented regarding

the allegedly high proportion of elderly, low proportion of youth, and rate of depopulation does not differ from general trends in Serbia when compared to available data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.¹⁶ Based on these indicators, the Jadar Valley currently has a much better standing than most areas in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

It is indicative that there is no mention of a concrete mechanism by which depopulation would be slowed down by the opening of the mine. To assess demographic impact, it is useful to examine other long-term projects, most notably the mines in Bor and Majdanpek in the east. Mining in these municipalities has been present for more than 100 years, and demographic and economic prosperity might be expected solely based on the quantities of copper, gold, and silver in this area. However, both municipalities have been undergoing demographic recession. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Majdanpek has lost over 45% of its population in the last three decades, and Bor about one third. Today, the region (Bor district) ranks among the areas with the highest proportion of elderly and the lowest proportion of young people in the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that the main reason for demographic devastation is a significantly higher mortality rate compared to the birth rate (the second worst-ranked area in Serbia), as well as one of the most negative migra-

16 More specifically, the proportion of those under the age of 15 at the national level is around 14%, and those over 65 make up about 22%, which is identical to the proportions in the municipality of Loznica. Regarding depopulation, between the two population censuses in 2011 and 2022, Loznica also recorded a decline similar to that of the rest of the country – around 7% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022).

tion balances in the country (Nikitović, 2025). It is estimated that such trends will continue in the coming decades. Specifically in the Bor region, one of the first areas in the country to undergo a demographic transition, it is projected that the entire youth population could disappear by 2100, a situation that is already true in some settlements (ibid.)

It can therefore be concluded that, although The Request outlines a possible pathway for demographic recovery in the Jadar Valley, such recovery is unlikely, and existing demographic decline would more likely be further intensified. Residents themselves confirm the possibility of such a scenario, as there is a strong fear not only of further depopulation but also of the complete disappearance of the population from the area affected by the proposed project. The residents of the Jadar Valley could be considered environmentally displaced persons (Hiraide, 2022) due to the planned exploitation of lithium and boron within the global green transition, even though international law has not yet recognized such a formal category. Their situation points to a growing trend of forced migrations caused by projects for extracting “critical” raw materials, which are legitimized through the discourse of sustainability. This case opens the need to broaden the concepts of climate mobility (Wennersten and Robbins, 2017) and environmental displacement to also include communities displaced due to the ecological consequences of so-called green development.

The Request text also highlights the currently low productivity of agricultural production due to the prevalence of fragmented plots, insufficient use of modern agricultural machinery and irrigation schemes, as well as agricultural diversification (as if that is a bad thing). As stated, agriculture is the main economic activity among the popu-

lation affected by the proposed Jadar Project. Although no one has ever consulted the residents regarding whether they have any motivation to replace agricultural activities with something else, the Request text implies that mining would likely mean a shift toward a “sustainable and efficient” economic alternative. However, based on research conducted by experts from SANU, the potential annual agricultural income in ten villages of the Jadar Valley is estimated at approximately €81.96 million, exceeding the projected annual revenue Serbia would receive from Rio Tinto’s ore rent, which, at 5% of net income, is among the lowest in the world (Ristić et al., 2021). The project’s implementation would make a focus on agriculture very difficult. This aspect is already visible based on the experience of other underground mines, for which it has been shown that mining significantly changes vegetation cover, soil moisture, and the content of nutrients in surface soil (Zhang et al. 2023).

In this sense, the key question that arises is the economic viability of these activities, not only for the local population but also for the economy of the entire country. First, according to Rio Tinto’s own projections, and as stated in the study by Drakulić and colleagues (2024), Serbia would have negligible revenues from The Jadar Project: 17.4 million euros annually over the next 40 years, i.e., 2.6 euros per capita. Moreover, Serbia would finance the entire infrastructure of the project itself, estimated at several hundred million euros. Furthermore, Serbia would not have any ownership share in the project, but in the case of an environmental disaster, it would have to cover the remediation costs. Additionally, according to the same study, the state plans to allocate 419 million euros to Slovakia-based battery manufacturer InoBat Auto for a gigafactory, codenamed

Project Lion, in Ćuprija, central Serbia. The Serbian government would facilitate that project through assistance in securing land and required construction licenses. In Serbia, the absence of clear mechanisms to regulate foreign direct investment creates space for neocolonial relationships to emerge within a formally sovereign country (Matković, 2025a).

Another important factor in the assessment of economic feasibility is the long-term global price of lithium, which is currently falling for three reasons: decreased demand for electric cars, an increasing lithium supply from South America, and reduced lithium content in batteries due to the emergence of substitutes. Furthermore, Drakulić and colleagues (2024) add that Serbia is only marginally significant in the global lithium market, with 1.3% of all reserves. Finally, the envisioned exploitation of lithium from rock is far less cost-effective and far more experimental than the alternative extraction from brine. Additionally, the future price of boron is hard to predict, but analyses suggest it could fall by about one-third over the next fifty years (Mermer and Şengül, 2020).

A unique aspect of the proposed Jadar Project, unlike anywhere else in the world, is that Rio Tinto plans to build a mine directly on land that is both populated and used for agriculture. The population in this area developed because of the huge opportunities provided by agriculture, thanks to the fertility of the land. The risk of opening a mine lies in the introduction of toxic substances into the soil, water, and air, which would make it impossible to sustain profitable production of healthy food. It is estimated that pollution would affect food production, its market placement, and

sales revenues, to the amount of 165 million euros annually (Vukosavić, 2024).

Besides agriculture, there is also potential for tourism, which is incompatible with the realization of the project, therefore another 41 million euros of losses can be added due to decreased interest in rural, sports, and spa tourism development. Thus, it is concluded that the state would lose revenue rather than profit from the project (Vukosavić, 2024). The water supply in the area has potential for long term sourcing, which is estimated to be of greater importance than oil in the future, while the value of lithium is already declining, and its exploitation typically consumes or pollutes a significant portion of water reserves. Estimates regarding the profitability of agriculture therefore additionally point to the conclusion that it would be most beneficial to completely abandon The Jadar Project. Alternatively, with relatively small investments, Serbia could multiply its agricultural revenues, while demand for food and water, unlike for lithium, will only grow in the future.

While The Request mentions alleged shortcomings of agricultural production in the area, a lot of locals consistently feel that no one asks them about the problems they have as farmers. On the contrary, they believe their work is systematically and deliberately hindered by the state, aiming for its complete destruction. The possibility of making a living and surviving from their work is especially taken away from those who oppose the construction of the mine, targeted through punitive inspections and other repressive measures (Nešić, 2024). In December 2024, for instance, the Ministry of Agriculture placed the Veljković and Kokanović farms into passive status for five years, which effectively affects their eligibility for agricultural development subsi-

dies (Poljoprivreda info, 2024). The decision was revoked after protests by farmers. Both Veljković and Kokanović are members of Ne damo Jadar, while Kokanović owns land within the planned mining zone and refuses to sell it to Rio Tinto. Additionally, farmers in the Jadar Valley are primarily dissatisfied with the state's treatment regarding the purchase price of their products. The prevailing attitude among locals is that agricultural problems are not going to be solved by blackmailing people into selling their land, or by threats that the state will expropriate it for a lower price, but rather through protection of local villagers and policies that improve domestic agricultural production.

Finally, although the Request mentions public health, it does not assess whether the mine would affect human health, what those impacts would be, or who would be exposed. Instead, it merely notes that healthcare in Serbia is regulated through the Health Insurance Fund, whose stated goal is equal access to health protection for all citizens. It also states that the public fund covers most medical services, such as specialist treatment, hospitalization and rehabilitation. This only allows for the inference that the project's estimated impact could be harmful to human health, but that the corporation would not be liable and that the costs of treatment resulting from mining activities would be shifted to the state, which supposedly treats every individual equally.

The major fears of respondents from local villages concern precisely the harmful health effects of the project. They emphasize the psychosomatic damage already caused by stress due to pressure and blackmail, as well as illnesses and health problems that have arisen as a result of mining at other sites in the country. There is also concern for the

health of the population of the entire country. Instead of indicating the potential health impact of the mining project on local (and wider) populations, through air, water, and soil pollution, as well as the stress it causes to residents, The Report exclusively refers to the alleged principle of equality of access to healthcare, which is consistently recognized as an illusion by locals who were interviewed, alongside the catastrophic state of the healthcare system in general.¹⁷

A study on the potential health impacts of The Jadar Project highlights a major concern: the large amounts of concentrated sulfuric acid and explosives used could cause accidents with unpredictable effects on the health of local residents and others (Bulat and Bulat, 2025). Regarding lithium and boron, existing evidence points to the potential danger of exposure among mine workers, in terms of reduced kidney and thyroid function, as well as increased parathyroid hormone synthesis. Jadarite also contains other heavy metals, and according to the corporation itself, its processing would generate large amounts of industrial waste containing toxic substances such as arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury, nickel, and zinc (ibid).

Arsenic, through ingestion or inhalation, can cause arrhythmias, heart muscle damage, arteriosclerosis, progressive blood vessel blockage, gangrene and skin diseases—

17 Even national-level data analysis from the 2023 and 2024 European Social Survey, clearly shows that residents of Serbia rate the health system at an average of about 4 out of 10, including in the Šumadija and Western Serbia region. Furthermore, the report on equal access to healthcare in Serbia is contradicted by the fact that about a quarter of respondents state that in the last twelve months they failed to obtain the medical treatment they needed, with an even worse situation in the Western Serbia region.

es, polyneuropathy, encephalopathy, diabetes and obesity. Boron in high concentrations can cause acute nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, dizziness, and chronic weight loss, while exposure to boron-containing dust among miners can cause irritative effects on skin and mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, mouth, throat, and their respiratory organs. Due to cadmium concentrations in some plants, humans can be exposed indirectly, leading to damage to kidneys, bones, endocrine and cardiovascular systems, and even lung cancer. Lead can be especially harmful to children and pregnant women, i.e., developing nervous systems. Toxic metals at risk of entering watercourses include lead and boron, nickel and chromium (human carcinogens), as well as mercury and zinc. Finally, according to Rio Tinto's own assessment (*ibid.*), the mining activities would lead to elevated emissions of dust particles (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), which are known to be associated with respiratory tract irritation, coughing and shortness of breath, reduced lung function, more frequent asthma attacks in people with asthma, and an increased incidence of non-fatal myocardial infarction.

Furthermore, according to the same study, the method by which jadarite would be extracted, as well as the expected amount of explosives used in the facility and during transport, would potentially result in a high level of noise pollution, which is associated with sleep disturbances leading to mood problems, fatigue, headaches, and similar issues, as well as psychophysiological effects such as elevated blood pressure. Apart from the fact that no study has been published on the direct effects of the project preparatory activities on people's physical and mental health, toxic underground water outflows and consequent land contamination have been recorded after exploratory work

(Vukosavić, 2025). By the corporation's own admission, elevated concentrations of arsenic, boron, chromium, nickel, lead, lithium, chlorine, sulfates, hydrocarbons, mercury, and thallium are already present in underground waters (Jovanović, 2021).

A decision on the scope and content of the EIA for the mining segment of the Jadar proposal was issued in November 2024 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (2024). This decision was made after Rio Sava's Scoping request, and further comments and complaints from the public were submitted. The decision requires the company to address all cumulative impacts of the project in its EIA, propose concrete mitigation measures, and establish monitoring systems, in accordance with best available practices and European environmental standards. In the meantime, the Ministry must first address over 14,000 public complaints, submitted following a large public awareness campaign (Mašina, 2024a; N1, 2024), before issuing a final decision on scoping. After this decision, the company will be required to submit the final EIA for technical review within one year. However, the company can only do this after the Ministry for Mining and Energy has granted it an exploitation license.¹⁸ Needless to say, the public complaint process has stalled the company's plans, and the Ministry for Environmental Protection is still answering complaints more than a year after their submissions.

18 In accordance with paragraph 2 of the Decision determining the scope and content of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study (Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia, 2024), the project owner is required, within one year from the date this decision becomes final, to submit a request for approval of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study. The administrative decision becomes final when no appeal may

In what follows, we will apply the Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method, enabling a critical assessment of whether a project like Jadar is structured to reduce or increase social risks. It provides a scientific and ethical basis for all dimensions of displacement, both actual and potential, to be thoroughly assessed and transparently considered. In the context of the proposed Jadar Project, this method is especially relevant because displacement does not occur only as a result of physical expropriations, but through a series of indirect practices that have much wider implications.

be lodged against the decision (because the appeal deadline has expired, the appeal has been dismissed or rejected, or all parties have waived their right to appeal, or a special law does not provide for an appeal against the decision). A decision adopted following an appeal, the second-instance decision, is always final. Such a decision will be issued only after the Ministry of Environmental Protection has responded to all 14,000 appeals. All these appeals must be decided on and responded to before the project proponent becomes obliged to submit a request for approval of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study.



Displacement as a Framework for Understanding Risks

People here don't want to move. That's one of the basic premises that must be acknowledged, because the project inevitably leads to displacement. The desire to stay and live on this land is very strong.

Resident of Brezjak

Displacement as a form of social impact is not even mentioned in The Request for Scoping and Content of the Jadar lithium and boron deposit. The Request outlines that the Spatial Plan for the project covers 22 villages and over 290km² of surface area, which encompass the mining complex and all infrastructure including roads and train lines, gas and water lines, processing facilities and tailings dumps (Rio Sava Exploration, 2024). The mining complex is centered within the Spatial Plan, and the Mining Activities Zone covers 854.8 ha.¹⁹ The Production–Industrial Zone covers 646.54 ha and includes 79.8 ha for the ore-processing and

19 This zone includes both the land needed to build and operate the mine and the surrounding land affected by mining. Within this zone, 140.24 hectares (Subzone 1A) are used for access to the mine and surface mine facilities, while 849.81 hectares (Subzone 1B) cover the underground mine area and the land above it, where ground subsidence will occur. Although this land will remain agricultural, new construction is prohibited.

chemical production plant.²⁰ The Industrial Waste Disposal Zone covers 358.57 ha.²¹

The only publicly available document that solely focuses on displacement is Rio Sava's Proposal for Property Acquisition in the Municipality of Brezjak (Rio Sava Exploration, 2020). Here, the corporation states that it requires the purchase of 251 ha of land for Subzones 1A/B, (while the scoping document states this zone covers over 800 ha). The brochure says that 87 residential houses and 335 land-owners will be affected by land acquisition while about 52 households will have to permanently relocate. According to the data, there are approximately 626 plots of land and 87 residential structures in the required area. The same document offers options for compensation and a list of required documentation.

The apparent discrepancy between the 251 ha cited in the land acquisition brochure and the 800+ ha defined in the scoping documentation reflects the difference between the land the company plans to purchase and the much larger area that will be functionally occupied or affected by mining activities, including underground works and surface impact zones. As a result, looking only at land acquisition figures can greatly underestimate both the project's actual spatial extent and the number of people and properties affected by long-term restrictions and impacts.

20 The large surface area includes a 1-km protective buffer (Subzone 2B) around the facility.

21 This zone consists of 167.12 ha (Subzone 3A) for the waste landfill, dam, and related infrastructure, plus a 500-m protective buffer (Subzone 3B) around the landfill.

In Article 10 of the document, expropriation is suggested as a final measure. Not only are the social risks of displacement absent from the mentioned documentation, but the wording of Article 10 has been interpreted as a direct threat because expropriation is not the company's jurisdiction, but the jurisdiction of the government. Expropriation of land for The Jadar Project may be lawful under Serbian law, following amendments to the Law on Mining and Geological Research in 2015 that designated lithium and boron as minerals of strategic interest and allowed expropriation for projects carried out by private companies.²² However, a company itself cannot be involved in the expropriation process.

In 2021, suggested changes to the Expropriation Law entered parliamentary procedure. They would have opened the door for any foreign company to qualify for land seizures, whether their project was of public interest or not, effectively legalizing a form of economic occupation. A controversial provision also concerned the determination of the value of expropriated property, proposing to replace

22 These legal changes may well be contradictory with other existing laws. Article 4 of the Law on Mining and Geological Research (2015) allows the expropriation of land for the needs of a business entity, whether privately or publicly owned, responsible for the exploitation of minerals of strategic importance for the Republic of Serbia. This provision conflicts with Article 8 of the Law on Expropriation (1995), which limits expropriation to cases serving the needs of the Republic of Serbia and other public interests. Article 25 of the Law on Expropriation further confirms the *ratio legis* of expropriation by stipulating that only a public entity may be the beneficiary of expropriation, without providing any procedure through which a privately owned entity may submit a request for expropriation. Accordingly, Article 4 of the Law on Mining and Geological Research (2015) runs contrary to the very purpose of expropriation as a legal institute, which restricts private property rights solely to allow a transfer from private to public ownership in the public interest, as required by Article 58(2) of The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006, as amended in 2022).

the market value of real estate with an assessed construction value, which is significantly lower, thereby substantially harming owners of expropriated properties. Attempts to pass the Expropriation Law were the fuse that lit the fire of mass blockades across the country in 2021, after which the proposed changes to the law were withdrawn.²³ Today, expropriation processes are already underway for public infrastructure necessary for The Jadar Project, as can be seen on site, a point confirmed by local residents whose land has been expropriated.

In the context of displacement processes related to the planned project, locals have been subjected to years of pressure to leave their properties, even if they were not formally forced to move. One local resident describes the persistent uncertainty:

No one was physically forced, but the pressure was constant. They kept repeating: “You’ll have to move, you’ll have to sell.” And people, how should I put it, nobody was physically forced, but when someone keeps drilling it into your head for years that you’ll have to leave, of course fear creeps in. When people recall images of other mines: huge trucks, trains, dust, filth, all that breaks them. So when a nice offer is made, and the first person sells the land, then it’s over. It triggers an avalanche.

This statement points to the use of psychological pressure and strategies to normalize future displacement through narratives of inevitability and fear. Indirect threats also

23 The blockades, for which Rio Tinto was a symbolic enemy, put the movement against lithium mining into a new, national gear, and ultimately led to the first cancellation of The Jadar Project before elections in 2022.

played a role, such as accounts of nighttime visits during which potential sellers were warned about the consequences of delaying their decisions:

They came at night and said: “Sell to us, because if you don’t, the state will take it from you for next to nothing.”

Local actors were in some cases instrumentalized in the planning process, further blurring the line between participation and the exploitation of community knowledge:

They used us in those information meetings²⁴ to give them conceptual solutions and proposals.

Information was also gathered in connection with land acquisition for the purpose of displacing and dispersing residents. These narratives suggest that displacement does not occur solely through formal mechanisms of buying and selling but also through diffuse forms of pressure that include emotional exhaustion, manipulation of information, and co-optation of local knowledge in favor of project interests.

According to findings from the 2022 study *Attitudes and Opinions of Citizens of Loznica and Krupanj Regarding Their Awareness of Local Plans* (Velimanović, 2022), only one-sixth of respondents stated they would be willing to sell their property. However, the majority indicated they would remain in the same village and relocate to another

24 There were several “information evenings” and informal community gatherings related to the project. Many meetings took place without any legal requirement, official documentation, or transparent procedure.

part of it, or move to a neighboring village. These responses suggest that a significant portion of the population was not fully aware of the potential harms of the project, given that only one-third of those willing to sell would consider permanently leaving the area.

Residents who we talked to and who did sell their property say the company treated them properly and honored the agreements. None of them sold with a light heart. Some had health issues and needed money, while others thought that there was no other way. Many still maintain relations with Rio Tinto through subsidies and land leasing. As one local who sold his home and land puts it:

I sold over six hectares of land and bought a little more than two, but I still work that land. After the sale, they paid for all our crops, and afterwards we harvested and collected them. With the difference, I bought a tractor that same year. They also gave us five percent for relocation, and there were vouchers as well.

For a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of these processes, the following risks developed within the Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction framework, are essential: 1. Landlessness, 2. Joblessness, 3. Homelessness, 4. Marginalization, 5. Food insecurity, 6. Increased morbidity and mortality, 7. Loss of access to common property resources and 8. Community disarticulation (Cernea, 1997; 2000; Alexandrescu, 2013).



1. Landlessness

We all know and have seen from the studies that this cannot be good. First, they would take our land away, and without land, here in the village, we can neither work nor stay. Land is not produced. It's not a bottle or car part that can be made. Simply put, we all have children, and I would like them to stay here. I am the fourth generation on this property, and my sons would be the fifth. Everything I do, I do for them. I would like them to stay here, in their home, on their land. But if they bring a mine here, two or three kilometers from the house, I don't even know if I will stay, let alone expect the children to stay and build a life here.

Resident of Gornje Nedeljice

Landlessness is not just an individual problem, it is a deeply social issue that affects entire communities, economic systems, and the relationship to land as public commons. In the case of the proposed Jadar Project, the loss of fertile arable land is not limited to individual landowners, but has far-reaching consequences for the entire social community in Serbia. Namely, land in the Jadar Valley represents not only the basis for the existence of farmers who live and work on it but is also a key resource for food production that feeds the population throughout the country. The proposed project opens the possibility of land-grabbing and permanent degradation of agricultural land through expropriation, soil and water pollution, and alteration of land-use. In this way, landlessness becomes generalized: it

is no longer only about those who directly lose their plots but about the broader process in which the right to land as a source of life, food, independence, and cultural heritage is taken away.

During the early years of its presence in the region, the corporation provided additional income to residents by renting their properties. As explained by the former owner of the house in the village:

In that first period many people made a profit. They rented out their houses for 70 to 100 euros per day per person to the workers who were coming here. At first, I considered renting mine as well, but people advised me not to because they said it would ruin the house and the wooden floor, you know how it is, people come straight from the work site, muddy, in their work boots, and that's what happens.

Land purchases in the Jadar Valley, conducted by Rio Tinto during 2021 and 2022, covered about 100 hectares (Đorđević and Sekulić, 2021), including arable fields, orchards, forests, and family households around the villages of Gornje Nedeljice and Slatina. According to available information, more than 50 houses were purchased. In some cases, individual households were surrounded by purchased plots, isolating them and forcing them to sell even though their land was not planned for acquisition. Although the contracts were legally “voluntary,” residents reported manipulations with land status, pressure, threats of expropriation, and a feeling of inevitability regarding the project's realisation.

The practice of land purchase, as described by locals, was carried out through deliberately planned mechanisms

of administrative abuse. One key tactic was the rezoning of land from agricultural to construction.²⁵ This move increased land value, which significantly raised annual property taxes for owners. The reclassification also meant that adjacent landowners lost their right of first refusal for land purchases.²⁶ This enabled faster purchases. But even if this had not been done, the neighboring landowners would have struggled to compete with the price Rio Tinto was able to offer. After the spatial plan was canceled in 2022, land that had undergone this change was reverted to its original use.

Based on the testimonies of residents, land purchase procedures were conducted through continuous pressure, manipulation, and unequal conditions for different sellers. The corporation offered exceptionally high amounts to break the resistance of key owners, while the poorest were initially paid minimal sums. This strategy of fragmenting local resistance was based on systematically targeting vulnerable groups and creating a sense of inevitability regarding displacement. Beside financial manipulations, there is a deeply rooted belief among the population that even if the land formally remains theirs, it will lose all practical value due to the immediate proximity of the mining facilities.

The narrative of Jadar Valley residents clearly illuminates the paradoxical and humiliating consequences resulting from land purchase for mining projects. People

25 The change to the planning document was made at the request of the City of Loznica and in accordance with Article 88(1) of the Law on Planning and Construction (2009/2019).

26 In the Law on Real Estate Transactions (2014), provisions regarding the right of first refusal under Articles 5–10 apply to agricultural land, not to construction land.

who sold their land now rent it back from Rio Tinto for a symbolic sum, practically cultivating their own former land as tenants. In this way, the company establishes a relationship of dependency, offering agricultural subsidies on land that no longer formally belongs to locals. Subsidizing agriculture functions as a strategy of co-optation, providing a temporary illusion of stability in a situation leading to agrarian disintegration. This illusion has only lately begun to fall apart, as one local put it:

I sold my house and land, but I stayed in the village. Some people moved to the city, and you know how it is there. They isolate themselves inside their apartments. You don't have a chicken or an egg. All of them used to be farming households. They were offered the chance to keep working the land, and some did, but many do not want to anymore because fuel is expensive and the costs are high, and coming from Loznica wears out the tires. Many can no longer work the land even though they could access it for free. Those who sold were mostly healthy people, young, some even younger than I am. But the costs are simply too high for them now that they live in the city.

Local experiences and scientific analysis (Vukosavić, 2025) show that exploratory drilling has already caused serious environmental consequences, primarily soil and groundwater contamination. On plots where research was conducted, soil degradation, reduced yields, and vegetation decline are visible. Chemical leaks from the drill sites have become evident through daily observations of changes in plants, while promises of controlled and safe procedures remain unful-

filled. This form of “invisible” pollution further contributes to the loss of trust in the company and state institutions, deepening local resistance to mining. As stated by a local woman the company was trying to cover up “incidents” by avoiding court cases:

During the explorations, sometimes they entered fields illegally. And they settled all that financially. They never went to court. We didn’t understand it then. They just wanted to pay, so they wouldn’t end up in court.

Prior evidence in mining areas points to further difficulties caused by displaced peoples’ inability to find suitable replacement land either due to rising local prices from increased demand (because households use compensation money to meet basic survival needs arising during relocation) or due to loss of productive land capacity caused by mining pollution, floods, or other forms of ecological damage (Downing, 2002).



2. Joblessness

We sell tomatoes. They [the State] try to squeeze us in different ways. Sometimes it pays off better not to work at all. Big companies profit, but we don't. And next we'll have the landfill. Then who will buy tomatoes from us?

Resident of Draginac

Job loss represents one of the key socio-economic threats in the context of The Jadar Project. Traditional vocations, especially those based on agriculture, which form the foundation of the local economy and identity, are seriously endangered. Despite claims about creating new jobs,²⁷ the project does not offer clear or long-term guarantees for sustainable employment. According to Velimanović (2022), the local population shows neither readiness nor desire to work in a potential mine. Residents we spoke with, both those who have sold their properties and those opposing the project, also have no intention of seeking employment in the mine. Most of those who support the project also say that, due to their age and health, they do not intend to work in the mine. Further cause for concern is that, according to locals, the corporation plans to invest in opening a mining-geology department at a high school in Loznica. Potential existence of this initiative could indicate an attempt to create a new

27 According to a marketing study by Peterhof Consulting, the project plans to employ an average of 1,169 workers per year in extraction and processing, as well as 5,120 “supported jobs” (Lončar, 2020, in: Drašković, 2025).

workforce specialized in mining, despite the project being time-limited and carrying significant risks, and despite it not having a license for operation to date.²⁸ Such a strategy can be interpreted as a form of long-term normalization of exploitation that disregards social sustainability and local interests and preferences, opening the way for the marginalization of communities unwilling to submit to extractivist logic.

The Jadar Project, instead of contributing to reducing unemployment and improving living conditions, directly threatens existing forms of economic survival for the local population. On the other hand, instead of supporting the development of local agriculture, the state applies pressure mechanisms on farmers, including frequent inspections, administrative passivation of farms, irregular or symbolic subsidies (and even their withdrawal), which local producers perceive more as “putting out fires” than strategic support. This is how one of the farmers whose property was inspected views these actions:

My neighbor and I were the first, because we are the loudest in opposing the authorities. I have participated in farmers’ protests and blockades, and I am fighting

28 A contract with the Faculty for Agriculture in Novi Sad shows how the corporation establishes a partnership that allows Rio Tinto to embed itself throughout the Faculty’s core activities, including teaching (guest lectures and new courses), research (case studies, Master’s and PhD topics), student life (workshops, internships, and employment pipelines), and graduate tracking and recommendations. Through scholarships, curriculum influence, and direct participation in student evaluation and training, the Company aligns academic output with its own business needs (University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Agriculture, 2022).

against the opening of the mine. This is the authorities' attempt to intimidate and silence us.

Economic pressures are further intensified by the need for continuous organization of resistance against the project, which directly distances local producers and craftsmen from their everyday activities and income generation. As one local put it:

My business failed. I'm a veterinary technician, but I physically can't keep up. We traveled the whole country organizing protests. Cows can't wait for me to come back from Belgrade.

People are forced to juggle multiple jobs to survive, while the mining project further threatens the little space to earn money they have left. The example of a mentioned tomato producer, who supports their child's university tuition by selling their own products, reflects the depth of personal investment and vulnerability to indirect forced displacement.

Despite promises of employing a local workforce, experiences from Loznica and other parts of Serbia indicate that such projects practically lead to bringing in labor from other parts of the country or abroad. These are also the expectations of some of the people we spoke with. "They will hire maybe a hundred laborers, some guards, doormen, but no one from the village. No one," says a local from Korenita. Others warn of the effect of "pouring water through a sieve" where the population is merely relocated from one poor region to another without real employment growth, as well as granting substantial subsidies to foreign companies to employ workers.

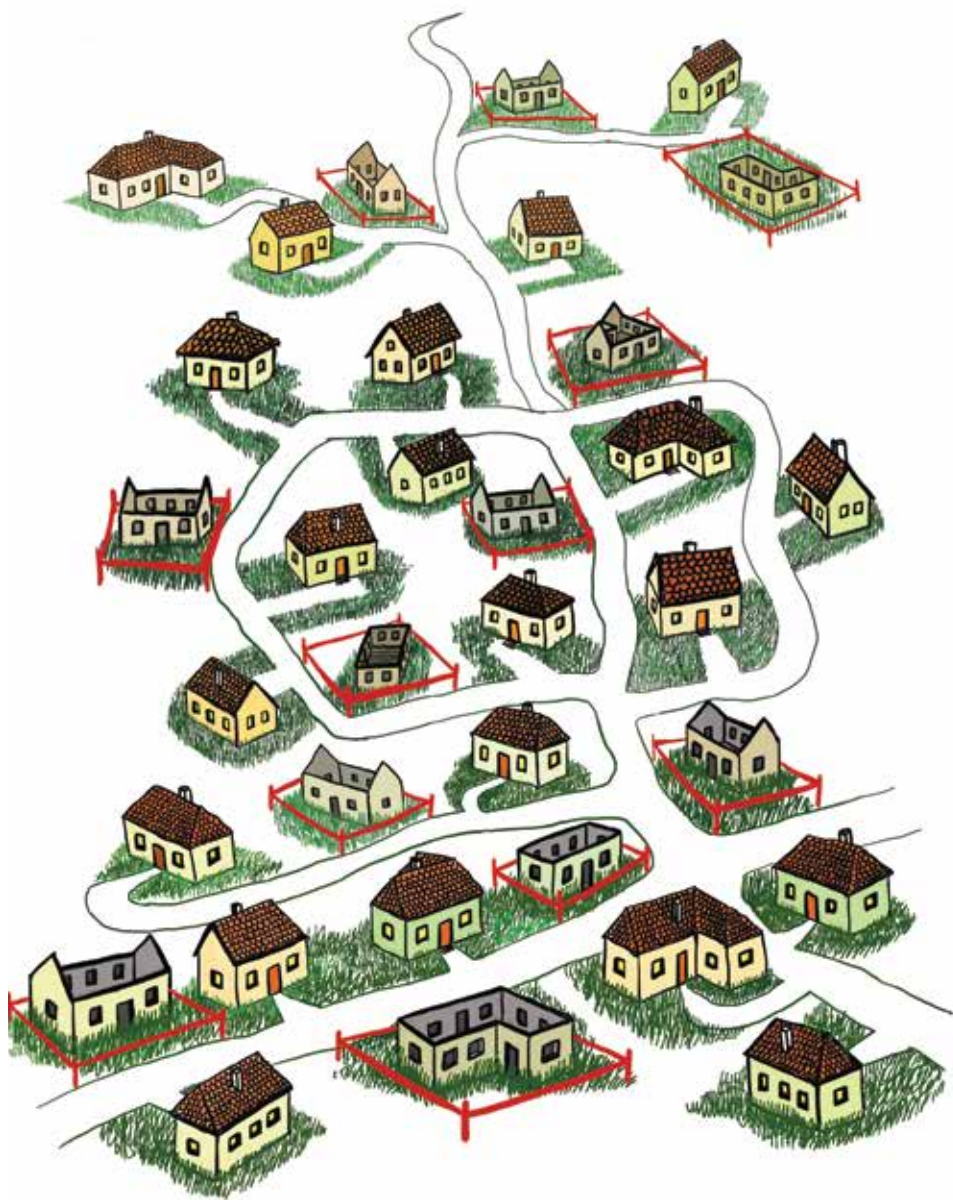
Beyond economic devastation, The Jadar Project generates and spreads a feeling of existential insecurity and political pressure, especially on those employed in the public sector. “He can’t go to protest because he still needs many years until retirement, and he’s on a temporary contract,” one respondent says about a relative.

Many locals express fear that, if the mine is built, they will go from living with dignity on their own land, to being disenfranchised workers, forced to accept low-paid, insecure jobs, often from the very people who took their land. They are aware that they would lose the basis for independence, and their only “alternative” would be employment in mining or related industries under conditions that further impoverish them and make them dependent.

So far, Rio Tinto in Serbia has employed a limited number of workers, but this employment has proven to be highly insecure and short-term. In October 2023, the company dismissed around 80% of its workforce (Lazarević, 2023), and in April 2025, further layoffs occurred due to “restructuring.” In November 2025, Rio Tinto announced another round of job cuts by promising to support surplus employees in transitioning to other jobs (Hunt, 2025). Workers serve as a temporary resource in the politically and legally unstable context of the project. On the other hand, a resident of the Jadar Valley who is favorable toward the Project told us that the corporation’s employment of individuals has made good people out of them:

They turned idiots into respectable people. We had people here exhibiting reckless, show-off behaviour — revving cars or motorbikes, being loud. Now they act polite, saying hello to grannies on the street.

In other regions of the world where similar mining projects exist, local producers are pushed into unequal market competition with cheap goods from other countries, causing local firms to fail due to lack of institutional protection. For example, in Western Australia, although local communities bear the greatest burden of mining projects, economic benefits often elude them because an increasing number of non-resident workers are engaged, diverting profits to urban centers rather than keeping them in local communities (Storey, 2001). There is also the example of Rio Tinto's Kennecott mine in Utah, where the local population simultaneously depends on and supports the company (Dunlap et al., 2025a). A large influx of new workforce can lead to rising living costs and reduced incomes. Since mining is predominantly male-oriented, these migration flows can also cause a relatively large gender imbalance locally and, consequently, the emergence of female sex work (Mancini and Sala, 2018). Additionally, miners in peripheral countries work in even worse and more dangerous conditions, earn less, have higher health risks, live in poorer conditions, and lack freedom to organize in unions.



3. Homelessness

The question is where will we move when the corporations occupy the whole of Serbia? You never know what they will open next. The problem is they will pollute everything including the water. In the end, the whole of Serbia will suffer.

Resident of Korenita

The risk of homelessness in the context of The Jadar Project cannot be understood solely as the absence of a material place of residence, but also as a profound psychosocial experience that affects people due to structural problems. Many Jadar Valley residents describe a constant feeling of fear and insecurity about the possibility of losing their homes. Understanding the risk of homelessness needs also to include the question of unhomeliness. Unhomeliness should be understood as a set of experiences of displacement, alienation, and insecurity, which are rooted in broader relations of power, violence, and (non)belonging (Bhabha, 1994; Nikolić et al., 2025).

People often say they can no longer peacefully settle in or maintain their homes because they live in a zone pre-determined for mining, where new construction is forbidden. There are examples of those who have bought land and wanted to build a house but could not get a permit.

You can't legally build a house in the mining zone. Even if you haven't sold your land to Rio Tinto, you are not allowed to build. You can build it, but it's illegal. There's

an example here, one kilometer down the road, maybe a bit more, a lady bought a plot. She wanted to build a house but couldn't get a permit.

One of the respondents reported that he wanted to build a home for his son on a family plot next to his own, but the building permit was denied due to the proximity of the planned mine.

The process of house acquisition and forced sales of property in the Jadar Valley has opened up the risk of homelessness through the growing precarity of people's lives. It implies the inability to build, invest, and have stable residence in one's own home due to constant pressure and feelings of insecurity. Besides economic coercion, there are also the sophisticated psychological pressures used to secure the sale of property:

I know some who even today keep their heads down; they didn't want to sell, but in the end, they did. They simply say: "I can't live here like this." Their houses were between others who sold on both sides, and then they finally decided to leave.

The erosion of stable housing is further intensified by the practice of demolishing sold houses to create an image of decay. This is how a woman that sold her property explains it:

They were very fair and allowed us to take everything we wanted, including bricks, parquet, roof tiles, and even the beautiful fence around the house. Naturally, I could not take the foundations. We gathered it all and either

sold it or gave it to people who needed the materials for building their own homes.

Another local landowner expressed his doubts about the aims of these practices:

Someone from our side, some kind of janissary²⁹, helped them start demolishing houses they had already bought. That was a form of pressure. Later they gave special bonuses to those who removed roofs, doors, windows. People were pleased about that because they were already moving away and thought they would need the material for sheds.

Such tactics create visual and emotional destruction of space, further strengthening the sense of futility of living in it.

Villagers are worried that once the mine opens, the market value of houses and land in its vicinity will drastically drop. Many locals already express concern that if forced to sell after the mine opens, they will only be able to do so for much less than what they could get now. They know that such low compensation won't allow them to buy anything close to what they currently own; not in land quality, housing size, nor in proximity to the community and resources that have sustained their livelihoods and way of life for generations.

29 A colloquial term for traitor. Janissaries were elite infantry units of the Ottoman Empire, originally composed of boys taken through the devşirme system (14th to the 19th century), a form of forced levy where Christian boys from the Balkans and Anatolia were forcibly taken from their families, converted to Islam, educated, and trained to serve the Sultan.

According to their neighbours, many of those who sold their homes, and some of them moved close to where they have lived before, still carry the consequences of those decisions:

We all know someone who sold and none of them are happy. Some even have houses on landslides.

These stories of failed relocations and lives stuck in a vacuum between former homes and uncertain futures reflect deep traces of unhomeliness.

A significant testimony of emotional and identity loss comes from the story of a young man who, after selling his house, cried in front of everyone at a celebration when a singer performed the song *This House is not for Sale*: “That man lay across the table and began to sob. He couldn’t hold back, broke down in front of everyone, and cried like a child,” locals told us.

Finally, a question posed by one villager highlights the key political dimension of the problem:

One hundred and fifty-seven people relocated after selling their homes. Can a hundred and fifty-seven people decide the fate of the entire region, I mean our region here, then the Loznica municipality, then all of Serbia?

This clearly expresses fear of corporate power and concern that the right to housing and livelihood of millions can be threatened by the decision of a few. Refusing to sell land and one’s household is regarded as the first line of resistance, whereas selling is viewed as an act of complicity.

Existing research shows that increased mining activity and population growth in mining communities often led to serious housing problems, including accommodation shortages and pressure on local infrastructure and services (Duncan, 2009). In many cases, in mining regions, the number of workers and residents exceeds available housing capacity (Rolfe and O'Dea, 2007). This supply-demand imbalance results in significant rises in property prices and rents, considered one of the most pronounced negative effects of mining booms, which can lead to hidden forms of homelessness (Haslam McKenzie et al., 2008; Petkova et al., 2009).



4. Marginalization

I've crossed their names out. Maybe I'm a bad person because of that, but I consider them citizens of another village. I don't know them anymore. If you sold the place where you grew up, where you were born, you sold your home's sanctity, and I don't trust you anymore.

Resident of Gornje Nedeljice

In the vicinity of the proposed Jadar Project, there is a pronounced risk of social marginalization both for those who have already been displaced and for those living in its immediate vicinity, under constant pressure and fear of possible displacement. For the displaced, the loss of home often means losing their place in the community, breaking social ties, being away from relatives, friends, neighbors, as well as from institutions and services they were accustomed to.

Those who remain in the project's area of influence, although physically still in their homes, face uncertainty, stigmatization, and psychosocial pressure. These people frequently feel threatened by both local and national authorities. This combination of institutional pressures and loss of social grounding contributes to a lasting risk of marginalization where people are no longer recognized as equal citizens but as tools or obstacles to "development" projects. The threat of expropriation and the pressures on the local population to sell houses produces specific forms of marginalization for women, because they often remain confined within the home and bear the greatest burden of everyday

maintenance under crisis conditions. While men more often participate in public protests and negotiations, women remain responsible for caring for the household, children, the elderly, and the sick. In this way their obligations and responsibilities simultaneously grow. This is how one woman explained the situation:

I work a lot and have children. One child needs a bit more care. Sometimes my child really needs my help, and now for example my younger child is sick. To go to a protest, I would have to leave them. Somehow, sometimes, I do manage to go.

Her situation clearly indicates inner conflict between family care and participation in struggle. Women are exposed to emotional and physical exhaustion, but also to social isolation because they remain (or choose to remain) outside decision-making spaces. At the same time, the threat of displacement for them means not only losing a home but also breaking networks of everyday care and mutual help that they have built over the years. In this area, a home is more than just a physical space; it's also where people work, where social networks are sustained, and where intergenerational bonds are maintained. In that way, the mining project augments deeply gender-coded forms of everyday life, with women bearing the greatest share of the invisible consequences of attempts at displacement. It is also worth mentioning that there are many women actively involved in organizing protests and gatherings, but very few participating in resistance through means of public visibility.

This ecosystem of multidimensional marginalizations also includes those who decide to sell their properties.

They become stigmatized and excluded from communal life. Selling a home is not viewed only as an economic decision, but as a betrayal of shared values and history. As a woman who sold her property explains:

Today, about 30 percent of the people who used to be my friends no longer speak to me when we meet on the street. I have become persona non grata because of this. In my opinion, it is a kind of crude behavior, because they are not interested in my reasons. It is sad that we have allowed this to turn us against each other.

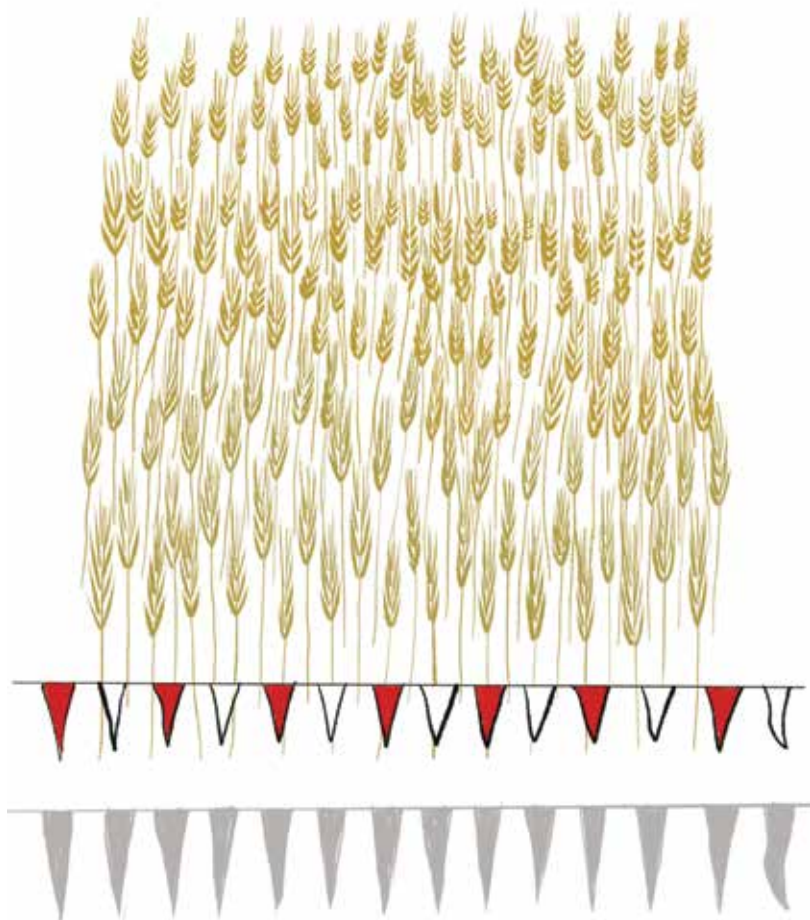
Marginalization of those who sold property or land is further intensified by feelings of betrayal and disappointment. Initially around 36 families tried to act together to negotiate the sale of their land and homes collectively. One local living near the planned tailings dump observed:

At first people started negotiating collectively. Their idea was to reach an agreement [with the corporation]. However, later disagreements and conflicts of interest arose, and today the situation is completely different. These people are now on their own.

The breakdown of solidarity further increased individual isolation. Those who sold are now often in an ambivalent position between the emotional burden of the decision, community pressure, and their own need to survive. Feelings of loss and exclusion persist even in routine interactions with long-time neighbors. Thus, the mining project does not merely dismantle the village's physical environ-

ment, but also erodes its social fabric, resulting in weakened and fragmented relations.

Exclusion of the local population from the decision-making process about mining projects, despite the direct impact on the lives and existence of the community, represents a key form of marginalization, as described by Filip Alexandrescu (2011) in the Roșia Montană case in Romania. Similar patterns can be observed in Serbia, where local communities are not recognized as actors capable of participating in key decisions, but their role is reduced to adapting to existing business plans. Although corporations often refer to formal guidelines, such as the World Bank guidelines on land acquisition and resettlement, they do not ensure substantive participation of affected people but serve as a legitimizing framework for continuing projects without real dialogue (Alexandrescu, 2011). As the case of the Antamina mine in Peru shows, companies easily bypass recommendations and standards, further deepening the disenfranchisement of the local population (Szablowski, 2002, p 267).



5. Food Insecurity

We had sanctions, we had an embargo, we were not hungry, and now if they take this away, we will be.

Resident of Stupnica

Food insecurity represents one of the most serious and underestimated risks of The Jadar project. This region of Serbia traditionally relies on local agriculture and livestock farming not only as a means of basic subsistence for many families, but as a vital component of Serbia's broader food system.

Even from a strictly economic perspective, existing analyses point to significantly greater profitability in the cultivation of grains (wheat and corn) and various fruit crops (plums, apples, pears, sour cherries, sweet cherries, hazelnuts, raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, blueberries, and grapes), compared to the potential gains from mining in this area (Pavlović, 2022). The mining project threatens to destroy fertile land and, through pollution, permanently compromise the possibility of safe agricultural production. This would further weaken domestic food production, increase dependence on imports and undermine food sovereignty.

The local population has also developed internal networks of solidarity-based food exchange that operate outside of market mechanisms. What is additionally concerning is that the state, rather than strategically supporting farmers, increasingly resorts to repressive measures

against them. It is therefore unsurprising that protests by farmers driven by low purchase prices, lack of institutional support, widespread erosion of environmental regulations, and punitive measures against anti-mine organizing have become a regular occurrence in the region.

Residents fear that, if the mine opens, their crops and products will become contaminated, and that those who choose to stay will have no one to sell to. They predict that the mine could lay the grounds for a potential national food crisis (Mašina, 2024b). Being aware that self-sustainability could be lost, residents describe the Jadar Valley as one of the rare oases in Serbia where, even during the biggest droughts in recent years, they had stable yields. One agricultural producer describes food production in the Valley:

In our area, the crops grew normally during the drought. In Mačva and in Vojvodina, everything was scorched, but here: corn, wheat, soy, everything was fine. This land has a specific structure and underground waters that allow stable agricultural production even in climatic extremes.

They are afraid that they will lose not only sources of income but also basic resources for survival.

If they build here, we will have to move out. I have been growing tomatoes for thirty years. My own food. If they come, there won't be any more healthy fruits and vegetables.

A special problem is the dependence on the market and corporations which arises from people's displacement from

rural areas. A local testified about people who have moved to cities after they sold land:

Before moving, they had cows, chickens and their own vegetables, but now they are compelled to buy everything, including wood for winter.

Dependence on company vouchers further undermines the dignity and economic independence of many (InfoLo TV, 2024a; 2024b). Those who believe that accepting vouchers amounts to collaboration with the corporation also believe that some people manipulate these vouchers:

They knock on Rio Tinto's door in Loznica, and Rio Tinto gives them 500 euros, 5000 euros, because apparently, they don't have land to sow crops.

Those who received the vouchers say that Rio Tinto took both the people and small businesses, such as agricultural supply stores, into consideration:

The first voucher provided €1,500 for up to 80 hectares per farmer, with the "Total" excluded from the voucher coverage.³⁰ They selected five agricultural supply stores that were operating at a loss because we were moving away, and an agreement was made so we could make purchases through vouchers validated by Rio Tinto. There was also a program for machinery in Loznica and Krupanj, since they planned a waste site in Krupanj and

30 "Total" is a herbicide intended for weed control during soil preparation before sowing.

wanted to satisfy the local population. Many applied. There were special provisions for young people and households owned by women. In those cases, they were a bit selective, but overall, they were fair.

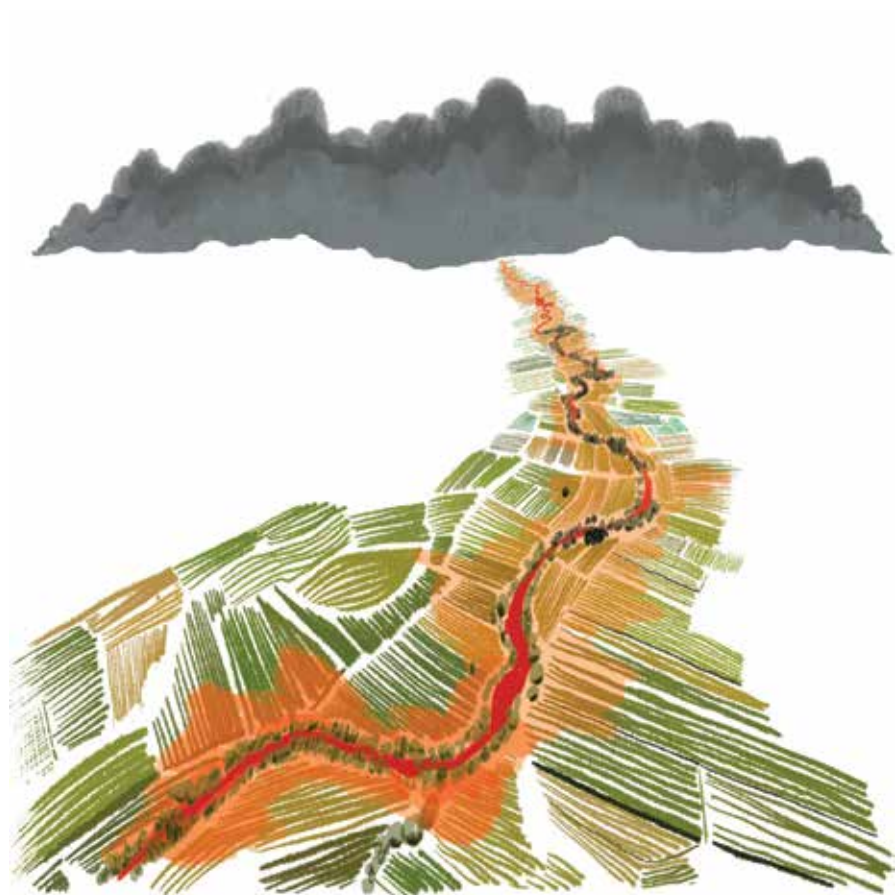
The state not only complicates farmers' lives with additional taxes, controls, and ignoring their needs, but it actively works against their self-sustainability. Farmers point out that this is a plan to demolish functional, fertile, and self-sustaining people for the profit of a corporation and a low rent for the state, all with unconvincing promises of employment.

They won't buy your milk, or tomatoes, or anything. Serbs will get tailings.

The local people clearly see food sovereignty as essential to their ability to sustain themselves in times of political and economic crisis,, recalling the sanctions and embargoes of the nineties, when they survived thanks to their own food production.

Empirical evidence from other parts of the world unequivocally indicates the connection between mining and contamination of food systems within local communities whose lands and water resources are directly threatened by activities (Blanco et al., 2023). This is already happening in other mining areas in Serbia. A study on the Copper Mining and Smelting Complex RTB Bor highlights the consequences of more than one hundred years of production on soil pollution. Results clearly showed that the most polluted zones are located in areas that hold the vital functions of the town. Because heavy metals can react with organic matter

in sediments and become more easily absorbed by living organisms, they may enter the food chain. If this happens, the consequences for human health could be serious (Nikolić et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of 403 studies mapping and examining this connection globally showed that the combined effect of mining, social inequalities, and weak environmental regulation degrades food security in local communities (Blanco et al., 2023).



6. Increased Morbidity and Mortality

What has changed for me? Everything has changed. I have aged. In these 4 years, we have aged as much as someone would in 10. Constant tension, constant nonsense. From stress and just being nervous. When I ended up in the hospital recently, they thought I had diabetes. But it wasn't diabetes. It was adrenaline. I can't sleep. It wakes me up. For example, I only sleep 3-4 hours and that's it.

Resident of Donje Nedeljice

The Jadar mining project poses a serious risk to public health, not just through potential environmental pollution, but also profound psychosocial consequences. Pollution of the air, soil, and water caused by lithium and boron mining could lead to an increase in the incidence of numerous carcinogenic and other chronic diseases. Conversations with local residents reveal these concerns clearly, manifesting as a deep fear that their everyday environment will be permanently contaminated.

A particular source of anxiety is the fact that Serbia's healthcare system is already overburdened and frequently affected by corruption, making it unlikely to adequately respond to a potential rise in diseases caused by mining activities. Residents mention three year waiting lists for MRI scans and having to pay hundreds of euros for a checkup if it is urgent. Despite this, human health has so far received minimal attention in existing relevant studies about the potential project. One resident points out:

You have an impact on animals, on water, on air, on plant life, but no one mentions people. When we were at SANU, it turns out humans are the cheapest element. Elizabet Paunović [former director of the European Centre for Environment and Health at the World Health Organization] noticed that literally one paragraph is devoted to human health. She said that they didn't actually do a study on human health impact; they will monitor it during the mine's operation. There is a possibility of high blood pressure and respiratory problems. That's all they had to say regarding human health. So, we are supposed to serve as guinea pigs to see what will happen.

Residents also face significant psychological consequences. Chronic stress stemming from uncertainty, fear of displacement, and the loss of home and livelihood leaves clear marks on their mental well-being. People live under constant pressure, with no clear vision of their future and lacking trust in the institutions that should primarily protect them.

Many locals testify that individuals who agreed to sell their land soon afterward fell ill or even died prematurely. They associate this with the trauma of losing their home, the violent disruption of their way of life, as well as feelings of humiliation and helplessness. People are also afraid of the effects of stress caused by infrastructural violence:

I'm afraid that if this goes on, people will start cracking under the pressure. Because you can't keep explaining what is true and what isn't to one fool or three fools for a hundred years, while they keep pushing you into a hole. You just won't manage. A person can only tolerate so much.

Health is also closely linked to the condition of the health-care system, which participants describe as being in a tragic state:

And the hospitals are full every day, the waiting lists are enormous. Honestly, here we do not even have an MRI scanner, and appointments are typically scheduled three years in advance. Your life may depend on that, so you have no choice but to go to a private clinic and pay €300–400 for a scan just to find out whether something is wrong or not. I am just using that as an example. But the healthcare system is a disaster. The conditions are catastrophic.

Residents recall the time before Rio Tinto's arrival in a better light:

We had more time for rest, for life, for work; everything was somehow balanced. But now we are overloaded, constantly under pressure, it's even affecting our psyche. We constantly wonder what will happen. And what will happen to these children in the future? We are already around fifty years old; our labor-intensive life is coming to its end. But what are we leaving to the children? It's hard for me. I can't accept this mining story. From the start, it all seemed like a scam. And I am one hundred percent sure we will never benefit from it.

Finally, those opposing the mine also live in constant fear for their safety:

They often make those web pages where they present us as terrorists, but we don't visit them. Then through fake profiles they spread fake information and constantly deny everything we say. Whatever we bring up, they deny. That's why I clearly said: "If anything happens to any of us, the company is responsible, the government is responsible." They are the main culprits and will be directly responsible if anything happens.

Experiences from Roşia Montană in Romania indicate serious psychological consequences of mining projects, where high levels of stress and increased mortality among displaced persons are common (Alexandrescu, 2013). Such testimonies from Romania and Serbia clearly serve as a warning for other agricultural and populated areas.



7. Loss of Access to Common Property Resources

I think what they are doing is contradictory. On one hand, they want people and families to move out. The village is emptying. On the other hand, they're announcing support for schools and kindergartens. Why help schools and kindergartens if my child can't live here?

Resident of Brezjak

The Jadar project can seriously jeopardize access to common resources such as forests, pastures, or drinking water sources, which are crucial for daily life and the sustainable livelihood of the local population. These resources are deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric of the local people. A local resident explained with irony:

Yes, yes, they wanted to build a waste deposit at the confluence of the Korenita and the Jadar rivers. It's easier for them that way — they don't have to spend fuel on trucks.

According to the SPSPA (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020), 206.5 ha of forest would be permanently destroyed for the project. Residents testify that on plots sold to the company, but also on those within the planned project area, some which are still privately owned by farmers, forests have already been cut down, disrupting the local ecosystem and further destabilizing the shared living envi-

ronment. These processes gradually exclude the population from natural resources that have provided a foundation for life for generations.

Resources crucial for people's lives include not only natural resources, in the narrowly defined commodified sense, but also shared public resources: roads, gas pipelines, the electrical grid, telecommunications. The processes of expropriation and construction of accompanying facilities, such as the gas pipeline and the electric grid, worsen the situation, with benefits reserved for future users in industrial zones, while the local population bears the ecological and economic costs. "The gas pipeline is doing us a lot of damage, and the compensation is practically non-existent. We can no longer plant here, no forests, no fruit. The future is closed," one respondent emphasizes. Essentials for reproduction of life are thus systematically transformed from a basis of collective existence into a field of private profit.

Particularly concerning is the way the corporation uses donations to co-opt local public institutions and organizations, including football clubs, hunting associations, and hospitals. This is how one resident sees it:

There's been a role reversal. What should be the responsibility of the state, financed with our money, through taxes and everything else, is now being taken over by the corporation. And instead of doing its job, the state is facilitating the interests of this private company. That's plain corruption on a state level. In a way, it's become legalized corruption.

In this way, the process of dispossessing life supporting resources turns into a broader social crisis, where the local

population is left without control over them, without guarantees for a sustainable future, and without institutional support.

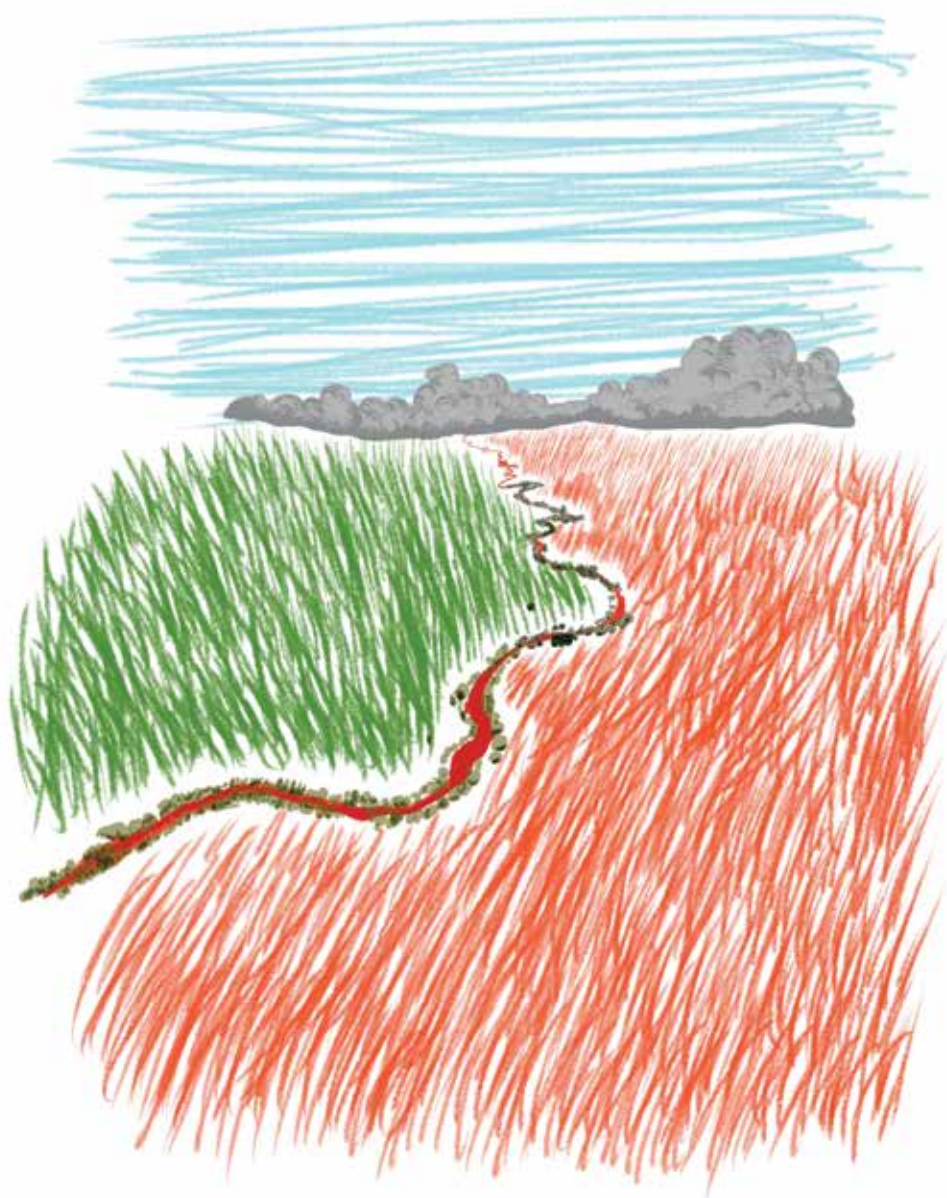
On the other hand, those who are favorable toward the project highlight the positive aspects of corporate influence: “We got roads where rabbits used to hop,” one of them says. “If it weren’t for them [the company], we’d still be in the mud.” Others, however, argue that this is not an accurate picture, pointing out that many of the roads in the villages were built through local contributions before Rio Tinto arrived, or that they were of poor quality and had to be repaired by the residents themselves.

The company’s discursive strategies portraying the mine as “green” further irritate locals, who clearly recognize the dissonance between promotional messages and on-the-ground reality, also confirmed recently in Stefanović et al. (2025). “They say they’re building a mine to protect the environment, but first they’re going to cause enormous damage. That’s just pulling the wool over our eyes,” one respondent says, while another concludes:

They want to present Rio Tinto as a socially responsible company. To show it has a “human face.” Where in the world have they built a mine that didn’t pollute the environment? Show me one such example.

In an international context, Bertinelli and Bourgain (2021) explore how a mining boom affects the perception of public transport, roads, highways, and public education in five African countries. They find that residents of mining regions often experience structural inequality in access to public services and infrastructure, and even though mining

revenues are high, the perception of these resources' quality does not improve in proportion to income growth. These findings suggest that while revenue growth can temporarily improve, it can also worsen local perceptions of access to resources in the long term, especially amid unstable mining economy cycles. A similar instability can be expected in the Jadar Valley.



8. Community Disarticulation

They've divided us in two, those who are for them and those who are against. We're entrenched in two camps. They've ruined relationships among people. They've split us into their supporters who are being bribed with gifts, tractors, and all sorts of things, and everyone else.

Resident of Slatina

Ultimately, one of the most profound and long-lasting consequences of the proposed Jadar Project is the serious threat of the disintegration of the local community. Displacement, uncertainty, and constant pressure are weakening the existing networks of mutual support, solidarity, and trust. Moreover, mining is an activity that, by its very nature, generates significant divisions and conflicts within societies, even in core countries, and these effects are disproportionately greater in peripheral nations, with projections indicating they will become even more pronounced in the future (Kivinen et al., 2020). Research has also identified the phenomenon of extractivist subjectivity, a form of subjectivity deliberately shaped by extractive industries to alter local people's sense of place in the world, with the aim of increasing their tolerance for and relative acceptance of extractivist industry operations (Dunlap et al., 2025a). The process of disarticulation of social ties has thus already begun, not only through the physical separation of people, but also through political divisions.

A particularly painful divisions is between those who sold their land and those who refuse to, as well as between people who work for the company and support the Serbian government and The Jadar Project, and those who oppose it. Although these positions have diversified over time, the division has remained clear. Among the people we spoke with were those who are members of the ruling party but oppose The Jadar Project, those who sold their land and now consider themselves neutral, as well as those who have remained consistent in their stance of support or opposition. Those who oppose the project do not recognize neutrality as a position and are suspicious of everyone who supports the regime, which actively works to promote the project and punish its opponents. Residents report that these divisions are so deep they are visible even in daily community rituals, at weddings and funerals, where people sit separately:

We're not in conflict, we just don't communicate with them. Those who sold their land have left; they're no longer here. There are 3-4 families in the village whose members work for the company. There's a man in another village who hauled sludge for them for years, and of course, he supports the company's interests. So in the village there are a few households whose children worked there or collaborated with the company; they support the mine. No one else does. And if someone does, we don't know about them because they don't express it publicly. I'd say 90% of people in our village, and the surrounding ones, are against the mine. Now there are some people who believe the president. There are many of those who supported Vučić, especially during the protests last year, but they're also against the mine.

He distinguishes between those who are for and those who are against the mine, emphasizing how even people who support the ruling regime usually do not support the mine. Some of those that sold their land feel misunderstood and mistreated.

Rifts have also formed within families, both across and within generations. One such case became public when the President of Serbia, publicly shamed a family, because a father had sold a plot of land, which angered his son (Ljutić, 2024). However, what he did not mention is that this was a one-off sale, and that the father refused to sell anything afterwards, even when he was offered more money. This is a profound case where the President of Serbia deliberately tried to damage a local man's public reputation, and a revealing example of how the ruling regime manages and controls information.

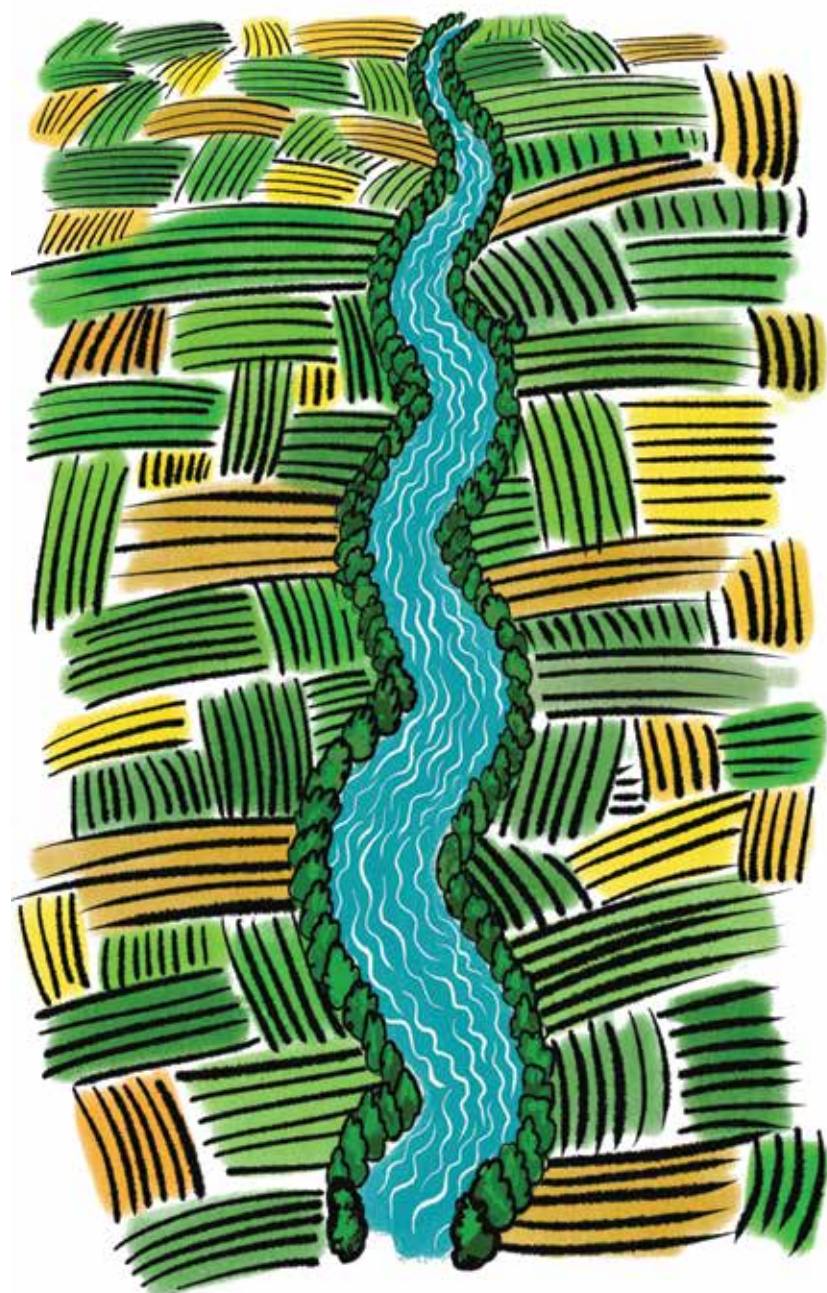
On the other hand, locals also speak of unity and strengthening bonds through resistance:

As far as relations between neighbors go, people have gotten closer because of this whole struggle around the mine. Politically, we've always been divided. Everyone has their own side, that's normal here. But when it comes to the mine, we're all united. I honestly don't believe there's over 1% of people who are looking out for their own interests. The rest are all united, because we all know what this land and life here means.

What they describe as the key to their successful resistance is rising above existing divisions:

What we've managed to do, what we've stuck to from the beginning, is to raise this issue above politics and above all types of divisions such as religious, national or any other. Simply, if what's planned comes to pass, we'll all be affected. There won't be any exceptions: it won't be Christians affected while atheists are spared, or the other way around. No differences based on gender, not women affected while men aren't, or vice versa. No difference based on wealth or poverty. We'll all be affected. We went with that message because it's the truth, and in my opinion, people recognized it. They realized this is a shared struggle for all of us, no matter our differences, because we all live here and face the same threat.

This statement encapsulates the capacity of the Jadar resistance to transcend the political, social, and identity-based fractures that have long defined post-1990s Serbian society. By framing the struggle as one that affects everyone regardless of religion, gender, wealth, or political affiliation, extractivism was framed as a threat to the fundamental conditions of life: the right to clean water, clean air, safe food, land, and autonomy of life. As such, the Jadar case shows that movements confronting neocolonial infrastructural violence can generate forms of solidarity that disrupt entrenched patterns of political and social fragmentation.



Conclusion

The European Union promotes the green transition while simultaneously intensifying the search for strategic raw materials such as lithium and boron. This is framed as a way to reduce CO₂ emissions within its own borders and creates new frontiers of exploitation and violence. In the case of The Jadar Project, the losses and suffering of local communities, displacement, environmental contamination, and harm to public health remain largely invisible or ignored by the national government and transnational capital. The unequal distribution of benefits and harms exposes a deep contradiction in the green transition: in the name of sustainability, it can reproduce patterns of neocolonial extraction and infrastructural violence.

The infrastructural violence of The Jadar Project is not limited to the construction of mining facilities. It manifests through several mechanisms: economic neocolonialism, widespread deregulation of mining and environmental laws, repression through fear, and discursive manipulation. Behind grand narratives of strategic raw materials and ecological sustainability lies the everyday life of people exposed to constant pressure, yet who, despite it all, continue to fight for both individual and collective survival.

Even in the preparatory phase, there is a noticeable intensification of negative impacts of The Jadar Project on daily life in the Valley. Residents are exposed to chronic stress, leading to deteriorating physical and mental health. There is the risk of food insecurity due to food contamination and the collapse of local production networks, while at the same time, state policy is prioritizing food imports.

Those already displaced, as well as those still living and working in affected areas, often face social marginalization and an inability to integrate into new environments. The risk of homelessness is not only tied to the physical loss of home but also to the loss of a sense of belonging and identity, as people no longer recognize the places where their families have lived for generations. There is also a constant feeling of fear and insecurity regarding the potential loss of home, along with frustration over being unable to treat their land as truly their own.

The risk of unemployment is significant, especially among those who oppose the project and face threats in their workplaces. Meanwhile, the local population shows no interest in working in the mining sector but expresses a strong desire to continue their current, primarily agricultural, activities.

Finally, equally important and pronounced is the risk of landlessness. In this case, it is not only landowners within the planned mining zone who are affected, but much broader segments of society, through the permanent degradation of a territory of strategic importance for food production.

A particularly pronounced social effect of the project, already long existing and emphasized by almost all respondents, is the disarticulation of the local community. Residents are divided between those who support the project or the current regime, those who work for the company, or who have sold their land, and those who are opponents of the project. This division, besides creating conflicts between friends and neighbors, is even present within families. Most residents in the villages of the Jadar Valley who oppose the project are well informed about its details, while those who

support the project feel less willing to discuss them. There is a group of people who trust the corporation and the regime, and who accept the mine as a given, internalizing extractivism as a legitimate and unavoidable mode of development, which confirms that an extractivist subjectivity has already developed during the preparatory phase of the project.

Our research has shown that Cernea's categories need to be understood in a broader context: homelessness should include consideration of unhomeliness, landlessness ought to be understood in terms of its wider effects on the entire social community, considerations of unemployment need to include the precarization of employment, and the loss of common resources must, in addition to natural resources, also include public infrastructure.

The risks identified according to the Mediated Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction method should not be seen as mutually exclusive from one another. Rather, they tend to overlap and mutually reinforce each other. In light of all the above, The Jadar Project should not be considered a project of public interest that brings benefits to the people of Serbia, but rather a high-risk project that endangers social life.

The most important conceptual innovation of this research is the realization that displacement is not merely a matter of physically relocating people. Rather, displacement also entails a lasting transformation of the environment in which people continue to live, to the point that life in a particular place no longer resembles the one they built. In this sense, displacement becomes a deeper and more pervasive process, one that reshapes social relations, everyday routines, and the emotional fabric of inhabited areas, even for those who have not formally moved elsewhere.

As this publication goes to press, Rio Tinto has announced that they are placing The Jadar Project into “care and maintenance” status, meaning the project is suspended while ownership is retained (Ker, 2025). The company cites ongoing permitting deadlocks and a broader cost-cutting program under its new CEO, while media reports point to sustained local opposition as a decisive factor (Hunt, 2025; Ford, 2025). In an internal memo, Rio Tinto (2025b) stated it can no longer sustain the same level of spending and resources, and all environmental, cultural heritage, and geological work on Jadar will cease. It has also stressed that its priority is now retaining legal rights to the project. Around one hundred jobs linked to the project are expected to be cut.

Organizations from Europe and Serbia have requested that the European Commission immediately remove The Jadar Project from the EU list of Strategic Projects under the EU Critical Raw Materials Act, arguing that the project has been mothballed and no longer exists in any operational sense. They maintain that continuing to recognize a dormant, non-operational project as “strategic” is legally indefensible under EU law (Green Legal Impact and CIPDRM 2025b).

Despite the mothballing, relevant administrative procedures are ongoing. Rio Tinto’s application for an exploitation license remains active, despite the absence of any substantive administrative decisions since 2021. Roadworks, gas pipelines, water infrastructure, and related developments continue to be implemented in accordance with the project’s spatial plan, with these costs borne by Serbian taxpayers. While some view the suspension as evidence of the efficacy of sustained public pressure by organized groups

on the one hand, local residents remain cautious. For those affected, and for members of the broader movement, security will come only with a permanent legal ban on lithium and boron mining in the Republic of Serbia and the lasting remediation of damage already caused by exploration activities.

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