

Ecology is Serbia's Democratic Hope

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In Serbia, the war in Ukraine, the rekindled conflict in Kosovo, and the government's culture of violence seem to have left little room in political debate for environmental issues. But a conversation with political anthropologist and Belgrade city councillor Jelena Vasiljević suggests that the country's democratic and ecological struggles are inseparable – and can only be solved by reclaiming its political institutions.

In 2004, geologists working for Anglo-Australian multinational mining and metallurgy behemoth Rio Tinto discovered a sizeable deposit of a new mineral in the Jadar valley in western Serbia. Named "jadarite", this mineral is composed of both lithium, which is needed to manufacture electronic and electrical equipment including EV batteries, and boron, used in wind turbines and solar panels.

Notorious for scandals in [Papua New Guinea](#), [Madagascar](#) and [Australia](#), Rio Tinto is now looking to invest over two billion dollars in the construction of a jadarite mine near the town of Loznica, some 150 kilometres west of the capital, Belgrade. The region is estimated to contain almost 10 per cent of the world's lithium reserves. By extracting 2.3 million tonnes of lithium carbonate over forty years, the multinational aims to produce enough for one million electric cars a year.

The EU, which estimates that its lithium requirements will increase up to 18-fold by 2030 in the context of efforts to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement, supports the project, as does the US. While significant untapped lithium deposits can be found within the EU, many of these are [unconventional and low-grade](#). It is also apparent that the EU prefers essential industries with troubling environmental and social impacts, such as mining, to be located beyond its territory.

Extracting and processing jadarite ore is a case in point. Massive quantities of water and electricity are required, and significant pollution is generated, in particular via the use of large amounts of explosives and concentrated sulphuric acid. The discharge of 25,000 cubic metres of wastewater into the Jadar every day – in addition to the storage of almost 57 million tonnes of waste produced by the mine – over its planned 40-year lifespan therefore poses a serious risk of long-term contamination in this flood-prone area. As Serbia is not part of the EU, European environmental regulations would not apply, meaning that the consequences of this project would be even more dramatic for the region, which encompasses 293 square kilometres of fertile land, 22 villages, and 19,000 local inhabitants.

Despite the clear ecological concerns linked to the Jadar valley mining project, the government approved the final plan for the project in 2020 – without first conducting an assessment of the environmental impact of the project – and Rio Tinto immediately began purchasing land in the area. The only bulwark against this mega-mining project, which was due to come online in 2022, was the large-scale mobilisation of both rural and urban dwellers. A [petition](#) was launched by [Marš sa Drine](#), a network of organisations, independent experts, and local residents that includes the Ne damo Jadar ("We're Not Giving Away Jadar") movement. It has now been signed by over 200,000 people. There were also numerous acts of civil disobedience and nationwide demonstrations.

To silence the protests and speed up the launch of the project, the authoritarian government of President Aleksandar Vučić, a fervently neoliberal nationalist who has been in power since 2017, used a variety of repressive tools.

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After declaring the Jadar project to be in the national interest, Vučić passed two laws to facilitate the establishment of heavy-polluting foreign industries in Serbia. The first allowed the expropriation of property within five days if it is judged to be in the national interest. The second, developed in the context of a promised referendum on the Jadar mine project, removed the turnout threshold for referendums and legislated for a rerun in the event of an unsatisfactory result.

The authorities also resorted to violent means. At the end of November 2021, a weekend of demonstrations that attracted thousands of people was marked by numerous incidences of police violence, as well as an attack carried out by hooded men belonging to a private militia. This outpouring of violence, and the profound attack on democracy it represented, led to a new wave of near-daily demonstrations in December 2021, which spread to some fifty cities.

The planned Rio Tinto mine is not the Serbian government's first mining project. However, it came to represent the corruption scandals and clientelism that have become intolerable for the Serbian population. The fact that this coincided with growing public awareness of environmental issues, bringing together democratic and ecological concerns, explains the sizeable scale of the protests.

In January 2022, faced with massive public resistance and in the lead-up to presidential and parliamentary elections, President Vučić promised to abandon the Jadar project, withdraw the law on expropriation, and introduce legislation on impact assessments. But this was short-lived. After his re-election in April 2022, Vučić relaunched cooperation with Rio Tinto. While this about-face was met with renewed demonstrations, these quickly ran out of steam in the context of the war in Ukraine and the threat it posed to national and energy security in Serbia, with its 89 per cent dependence on Russian gas.

Jelena Vasiljević, a political anthropologist and Belgrade city councillor, suggests that "The invasion of Ukraine changed everything, literally overnight. It was a shock; people were scared, and nobody talked about Rio Tinto anymore. We were still in the middle of the campaign, and Vučić changed his rhetoric to talk about peace, stability, and energy security. Before that, Rio Tinto was the main concern of opposition voters."

According to Vasiljević, there is no doubt that the Jadar project will go ahead, particularly given the pressure exerted on the government by the EU and the US at a time when energy security is increasingly important.

That said, the question of EU membership has never been so divisive in Serbia, with fewer Serbs in favour of membership (35 per cent) than opposed (44 per cent) for the first time in twenty years. Attitudes towards the US are also hardening, with the war in Ukraine and renewed tensions over

Kosovo's independence resurrecting strong resentment towards NATO.

“EU statements on Rio Tinto leave us in no doubt that they will force this deal through because it [would be] one of the bigger mines in Europe. They're not just going to let that go. They can't have all these electric cars without lithium. Ironically, this is all for the sake of clean energy,” said Vasiljević.

Ne davim o Beograd: the defence of urban commons

In late September 2015, the Serbian government launched the [Belgrade Waterfront project](#). Planned for the arts and nightlife district of Savamala and developed behind closed doors by state-owned construction company Beograd Na Vodi D.O.O. and Abu Dhabi-based private developer Eagle Hills, the megaproject will feature office buildings and luxury apartments, as well as the region's largest shopping mall and its tallest building.

Declaring the Belgrade Waterfront project to be of national interest, the Serbian government passed various laws to speed up construction, contravening Belgrade's urban development plan. Infrastructural interventions needed to free up land for the project included the relocation of the main train and bus stations serving the city centre.

As early as 2014, a range of actors from the academic, artistic, and architectural spheres mobilised against the proposed project. Beyond its environmental and social impacts, the protestors were incensed by national government interference in Belgrade's politics and the opacity of decision-making on the project.

Like other environmental and social struggles in Serbia, the fight against the Belgrade Waterfront development took place in a particularly complex and hostile context. But this did not prevent the initial single-issue protests from developing into a social movement with a broader agenda.

Organisations working to defend Belgrade's urban commons against privatisation since the 2000s also joined the resistance movement, organising a number of demonstrations under the slogan “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” (“Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own”), which coalesced into a social movement of the same name.

When construction accelerated after the illegal demolition of several buildings in Savamala by thirty masked men with bulldozers on the night of 24 April 2016, one of the men guarding the buildings died as a result of his injuries, but to date the investigation remains open. Only the police officer responsible for the area was prosecuted for failing to transfer the emergency calls made by local people, preventing the intervention of law enforcement. He later publicly acknowledged that he had “done someone a favour”, explains Vasiljević. This episode is strongly reminiscent of the attack that took place at the end of November 2021 and shares many of its characteristics: non-compliance with the law, graft, corruption, and other criminal practices.

“[In Serbia], it's not just a deficient democracy or a hybrid regime, or even an illiberal democracy like Hungary. This is something much more serious, with the state heavily involved in crime,” says Vasiljević.

Like other environmental and social struggles in Serbia, the fight against the Belgrade Waterfront development took place in a particularly complex and hostile context. But this did not prevent the initial single-issue protests from developing into a social movement with a broader agenda. Its next step was to develop into a municipal-level political player.

From pavement to parliament

In the run-up to the 2018 local elections in Belgrade, Ne davimo Beograd (NDB) formed a list with the aim of carrying forward its municipalist project in the city, putting an end to corruption, and building environmental and social policies. In doing so, it hoped to follow in the footsteps of Croatian municipalist green-left party Zagreb je NAŠ (“Zagreb Is OURS!”), with which many NDB activists have close ties. Born in 2008 out of the struggle for another urban common, Zagreb je NAŠ has been in power in its home city since 2020 as part of the Možemo! (“We Can!”) coalition and holds four seats in the Croatian parliament.

While the NDB list failed to cross the 5 per cent threshold, the 2018 elections marked a turning point for the movement. Two years later, eight NDB candidates finally entered the city assembly, joining the opposition. “Many of us became politicians without initially wanting to”, explains Vasiljević.

While political and economic power in highly centralised Serbia is concentrated in Belgrade, the city is also home to the main opposition to the Srpska Napredna Stranka (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS), the country’s ruling party.

Although the opposition came close to winning half the seats in the city assembly at the last local elections, SNS still enjoys a majority and pursues a policy of obstruction. Opposition amendments or proposals are automatically rejected, and debate in the chamber seems impossible. The violence of the exchanges reflects the broader approach of the government, which was heavily criticised during the “Serbia against violence” mass demonstrations organised in May and June 2023 following two fatal mass shootings that killed 18 people.

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Vasiljević acknowledges that sitting in the assembly under these conditions is very challenging, and the opposition’s impact on public policy extremely limited. But being present is a necessity. In a centralised state where the media is controlled by the government, municipal councils and national parliaments are crucial political spaces for making corruption visible and for telling a different story, hence NDB’s decision to take part in the 2022 parliamentary elections. The initiative allied itself with green-left party Zajedno za Srbiju (Together for Serbia) and protest movement Ekološki ustanak (Ecological Uprising). The latter, formed in 2021, grew out of the fight against the construction of some 50 mini hydroelectric power stations in one of Serbia’s largest nature reserves, and was also heavily involved in actions against the Rio Tinto mine. The resulting electoral alliance, known as Moramo (We Must), was the first green-left union to make it into both the Belgrade city assembly – winning 13 out of 110 seats – and the national parliament, with 13 out of 250 seats.

After the 2022 elections, Ekološki ustanak and Zajedno za Srbiju merged to form a new party: Zajedno

(Together, which recently faced a major internal crisis), while NDB allied with other local initiatives to create the Zeleno-levi front (Green-Left Front) party in July 2023. “[NDB] started as a protest movement, then kind of became a social movement, then an electoral actor. And now it’s becoming a proper national party,” says Vasiljević.

A pioneer of municipalism in Serbia and the first to include the issue of urban commons in its political programme, NDB, originally firmly rooted in Belgrade, has sought to incorporate its radical approach to ecology and democracy into a more global project that also extends to rural areas. Various struggles, including the one against Rio Tinto’s mining project in the Jadar valley, have created and strengthened connections with organisations mobilised in the countryside in defence of the commons and the environment, as well as against nationalism. Indeed, all of Serbia’s rural municipalities are run by the ruling SNS, which has even greater control over the population in these landlocked regions, using threats and blackmail as well as media propaganda.

Fighting for the commons and ecology in Serbia therefore cannot be dissociated from the struggle for democracy and against the regime. For Jelena Vasiljević, it is crucial to reclaim the country’s institutions; fighting outside them for ecological and democratic ideals is not an option: “The question is not to do politics differently outside the institutions [...] The only alternative politics is to fight for the institutions.”



In a gap year in the middle of her Master’s degree in ecology “Societies and Biodiversity”, Cléa is involved in social and ecological issues. She is active in LUPA at Sorbonne University and participated in the People’s Summit for Climate Justice in Glasgow during the COP26. She also contributes to the citizen project “La Route en Communes” which focuses on the municipal level.



After studying geology, Hugo did a master’s degree in economics with a specialization in renewable energies. He has been involved in a student representative association, working on the integration of climate issues in academic programs before joining the CliMates research team as a research coordinator.



As a student in ecology, she started getting involved politically within her university, before becoming interested in the local level by interviewing mayors on issues of democracy and ecology. In 2021, she attended the COP26 to learn about international negotiations. She was also part of the Relais Jeunes.

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