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# A DRIVER OF **GREEN TRANSITION** OR A COLONIAL TAILINGS DUMP: **POLITICAL DISCOURSE** **ON THE JADAR PROJECT**

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## Introduction

Kryptonite has been found in Serbia!<sup>1</sup> This pompous piece of news from 2007 marked the start of one of the most significant debates in the modern political history of Serbia. A decade and a half later, the ore jadarite - popularly called kryptonite due to its chemical similarity to the fictional mineral from the movie "Superman" - found itself in the centre of a polarising battle between the authorities, activists, opposition, one powerful multinational corporation and a host of foreign actors. A topic whose importance goes beyond the borders of Serbia raised the public to its feet and started mass protests, the likes of which had not been seen in two decades.

The aim of this study is to analyse the political debate surrounding the Jadar Project. It will present the development of the debate, the key actors, and the dominant discourses that formulated it. The first section of the study is dedicated to understanding the wider context and importance of the project, both in Serbia and globally. In the second, we will present the three stages of the development of the discourse on the Jadar Project so far. We will then go into a detailed analysis of the actors and narratives that have guided the political debate. Finally, in the last section, we will look at the consequences of the debate on the political arena in Serbia, as well as the possible future of the discourse on this project and environmental topics in general.

## The Significance of the Jadar Project - Understanding the Wider Context

Jadarite is an ore that was named after the Jadar River valley, where it was first discovered in 2004.<sup>2</sup> It contains very high percentages of lithium and boron.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, the importance of lithium in the global market dramatically increased due to the fact that this metal is used to manufacture batteries required for the work of mobile phones, computers and electric cars.<sup>4</sup> Precisely because of this, lithium is a necessary factor of the so-called 'green transition' - a strategy of economically sustainable growth that is not based on fossil fuels.<sup>5</sup> In the current geopolitical circumstances, lithium has an even greater importance. To avoid dependence on China, which currently dominates the market of critically important minerals, including lithium, in March 2023 the European Commission adopted the Act on Critical Minerals which prioritised ensuring autonomous sources of minerals inside and outside the Union.<sup>6</sup> Considering the size and proximity of the deposit and political ties with a country that is a candidate for membership in the Union, the Jadar Project found itself high on the list of EU priorities projects related to its achieving strategic independence in the field of critical minerals.

Jadarite was discovered in 2004 by the engineers of Rio Tinto, a British-Australian corporation that is one of the largest mining companies in the world. The company was issued exploration permits for the Jadar valley that same year.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, Rio Tinto has been present in Serbia since 2001, as one of the first international companies to enter the Serbian market after the fall of Slobodan Milošević.<sup>8</sup> This company is globally known for its very troubled business history. In its almost 150 years of existence, it has been responsible for an entire series of scandals involving corruption and permanent destruction of historical sites and the environment.<sup>9</sup>

Local activists began to self-organise a decade later, when the phase of ore exploitation approached and land acquisition became a mass phenomenon. The reasons for their concern were not just the company's earlier ways of doing business or the bitter experiences that were gradually becoming known to the general public. Additional concern of the locals that the Jadar valley could be turned into a so-called 'sacrifice zone'<sup>10</sup> was fuelled by the fact that in previous years mass protests had broken out all over the world when it turned out that the exploitation of lithium was extremely degrading to the environment.<sup>11</sup> Distrust was directed not only at the company, but also at state institutions that should ensure the necessary environmental standards. The policy of the current government towards foreign investors has been to turn a blind eye to violations of environmental standards in order to attract other investors, and to protect the companies at all costs, often at the expense of the rights of their own citizens.<sup>12</sup> This was indicated by the examples of Zijin in Bor, Hesteel in Smederevo, Linglong in Zrenjanin, Lafarge in Beočin or, in the most recent example, Dundee in the mountains of Homolje. This sort of policy led to serious environmental problems throughout the country, but also to the emergence of environmental organisations and movements that, in previous years, managed to raise the importance of environmental issues in Serbia through their fight against the construction of mini-hydroelectric plants, factories and mines.<sup>13</sup>

## Phases of the Political Debate Concerning the Jadar Project

The course of the political debate regarding the Jadar mine can be divided into three phases. The first covers the period from the discovery of jadarite in 2004 until the outbreak of mass protests at the national level in November 2021. During this long period, explorations that were being conducted in the Jadar valley were completely out of the focus of the general public, followed by the gradual entry of the Jadar Project into the political discourse. In these 17 years, Rio Tinto's permit for geological exploration was extended no less than 8 times - five times by governments that were in power before the last regime change in 2012, and three times by representatives of the current one.<sup>14</sup> In July 2017, the Government of Serbia and Rio Tinto signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the implementation of the Jadar Project.<sup>15</sup> Explorations ended at the beginning of 2020, and in February of the same year the Government adopted a Decree approving the Spatial Plan of the special purpose area intended for the realisation of the project of exploitation and processing of jadarite, which envisages the exploitation of lithium in the Jadar valley.<sup>16</sup>

In parallel with the institutional steps that were taken by the company in the process of obtaining a license for exploitation, the inhabitants of the Jadar valley began to self-organise into several organisations whose aim was to prevent the opening of the mine. To draw the attention of the general public to this issue, they organised several protests at the local level and in the surrounding cities.<sup>17</sup> The topic of the lithium mine gradually gained the attention of the interested public that deals with environmental issues, receiving full affirmation at the protests that were organised by the Eco Guard, i.e. the Ecological Uprising (*Ekološki ustanak*) in January and April 2021. The first protest in Belgrade with the lithium mine as the central theme was organised by the 'Ecological Uprising' on 11 September 2021. They were joined by an entire range of environmental organisations and opposition parties. The main demand of the protest was the termination of the Jadar Project and the expulsion of Rio Tinto from Serbia.<sup>18</sup>

The protests became truly massive after two gathering that were organised by the Move-Change (*Kreni-Promeni*) movement at the end of November. The protesters requested that the entry into force of two laws – the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative and the Law on Expropriation – be prevented for fear that they would be misused to push the Jadar Project.<sup>19</sup> After the government refused to give in to the demands, the protest was radicalised: the protestors decided to block several important roads throughout the country, including the Gazelle Bridge.<sup>20</sup> The turning point was the authorities' attempt to deal with the demonstrators in a brutal fashion, either through inadequate use of the police, or through the use of thugs, as was the case in Šabac.<sup>21</sup> The first phase was characterised by the public's familiarisation with the topic itself and the actors among the environmental activists. Although in most of the first phase the government sovereignly controlled the public discourse about the project, at the end of 2021 the activists managed to alarm the general public and, after the radicalisation of the protests, to take the initiative in managing the discourse.

The second phase of the debate on the Jadar Project began with the radicalisation of protests at the end of November 2021 and lasted until the Government's decision to revoke the Spatial Plan on the special purpose area at the end of January 2022. Although it lasted only two months, this was the most intense period of the political conflict that erupted over the Jadar Project. The authorities' brutal reaction to the first road blockade caused even more massive gatherings on 4 December, new road blockades and repeated demands to repeal two controversial laws.<sup>22</sup> This time, there was no reaction from the regime. At the session held on 8 December, the Government of Serbia decided to withdraw the Law on Expropriation (which President Vučić had returned to the Serbian Parliament for reconsideration) from parliamentary procedure, and to propose amendments and supplements to the Law on Referendum in accordance with the demands of the protesters.<sup>23</sup> Savo Manojlović, who was recognised as the leader of earlier blockades, announced that his organisation 'Move-Change' was withdrawing from the head of the protest because their demands were met.<sup>24</sup>

Other organisations, led by Aleksandar Jovanović Ćuta and the 'Ecological Uprising', called for a new blockade of roads with the aim of deleting the Rio Tinto project from the Spatial Plan of Loznica and banning the exploitation of lithium in the entire territory of Serbia.<sup>25</sup> Blockades were organised several more times over the next few weeks, although they were attended by fewer people than at the height of the protests. In mid-January, 'Move-Change' once again joined the protest in support of the request to have the Spatial Plan for the Jadar Project revoked, adding a request to introduce a 20-year moratorium on the exploitation of lithium and boron.<sup>26</sup> Finally, on 20 January, Prime Minister Brnabić announced that the Government annulled all administrative acts related to Rio Tinto, including the Spatial Plan, thus ending the most intense phase of the political confrontation regarding the Jadar Project.<sup>27</sup> In the second phase, the lithium mine in the Jadar valley grew into a major political issue at the national level. The government was forced to repair the damage it suffered as a result of losing control over the narrative on the project by agreeing to withdraw in the face of protesters' demands.

The third phase involves the period from January 2021 until today. As a consequence of the accepted demands and the organisers' inconsistency concerning the goals of further protests, the demonstrators gradually dispersed. The campaign for the general elections scheduled for April 2022 and the start of the war in Ukraine pushed the Jadar Project into the background. However, the topic still remained in the focus of a certain number of actors, primarily local activists and environmental organisations who kept pointing to the fact that Rio Tinto, despite the formal end of the project, was continuing its activities in the Jadar valley unhindered.<sup>28</sup> At the beginning of April 2022, the 'Move-Change' movement and the Alliance of Environmental Organisations of Serbia submitted to the National Assembly the People's Initiative to place on the agenda the Law on Permanent Prohibition of Exploration and Mining of Boron and Lithium in the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>29</sup> Despite the MPs' obligation to declare themselves regarding the people's initiative, it has not been discussed to date.<sup>30</sup> The behaviour of the authorities in this matter, as well as the continuation of activities of the Rio Tinto company, indicate that this phase will not be the last in the political struggle surrounding the Jadar Project.

## Key Actors in the Jadar Project Debate

The key actors in the political debate on the Jadar Project can be classified into several groups based on their main interests, principled position regarding the project, dominant narratives on the project, and the role they play in the political arena. Based on the above elements, we divided the actors into six groups: government representatives, green activists and movements, pro-European opposition, right-wing national opposition, foreign actors and representatives of the Rio Tinto company. The division we have made does not necessarily reflect organised political structures, and often not even joint action of actors that are classified as belonging to the same group. There are different levels of coherence, and often even open disagreements within the groups. Still, this type of generalisation is necessary to present the key elements of the political debate about the Jadar project and its effects on the political scene as a whole. For each of the above groups, we will present the views on the project they expressed during the various stages of the political debate, the main elements of the narrative they use in public appearances, the most influential actors who created the group's narrative, and key debates within the groups themselves (if any).

### Government Representatives

The key actors who created the government's narrative about the Jadar project are the holders of the highest state positions, namely President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. Besides them, a very prominent role is also played by ministers who were in charge of the mining and energy sector in the previous period. In the early stages of the project, there was Aleksandar Antić from the Socialist Party of Serbia. He was followed by Zorana Mihajlović, who discharged this office during the mass protests, and - since the election of the last Government of Serbia - Minister Dubravka Djedović. It is important to note that in each of the phases that we will analyse, President Vučić, as the most politically influential figure, decisively influenced the establishment of the main elements of the government's narrative.

The government has unequivocally supported the Jadar Project ever since the topic became part of the wider public discourse. While that support was direct and devoid of reservations until the outbreak of mass protests, after the public uproar it became more cautious and conditional on fulfilling environmental prerequisites, with the aim of gaining public approval for the project. Once this strategy failed, the Government took steps to formally stop the implementation of the project, but the discourse did not change in any significant way. The opening of the mine is still spoken about as a wonderful but missed opportunity for the economic prosperity of the country, a chance to position Serbia as an indispensable link in the new technological revolution, and the local community as the biggest potential winner should the project continue.



Open advocacy to revive the project is currently absent, but the public is constantly being reminded of the idea of an opportunity that was missed, but still exists.

In the phase of familiarising the public with the Project prior to the outbreak of mass protests in November 2021, the government's narrative was relatively one-dimensional and in line with the general narrative about foreign direct investments,<sup>31</sup> highlighting the prosperity that this project would bring to Serbia and its citizens. In his presentation before the National Assembly in 2016, Aleksandar Vučić, then in the role of Prime Minister Designate, highlighted the project as a successful example of the policy of attracting foreign investments, from which "we expect great results. They have invested approximately USD 100,000,000 so far, but it is from 2018 and 2019 that we expect serious results".<sup>32</sup>

During the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with Rio Tinto in 2017, the Prime Minister of the next Government, Ana Brnabić, also emphasised the strategic importance of the project for the economic prosperity of the country: "Rio Tinto has so far invested USD 90 million in the Jadar Project, and the start of production is planned for 2023, which confirms the long-term character of the project and its stability. Increased investments in Serbia directly accelerate economic growth, which is a prerequisite for improving the quality of life of every citizen as the most important task of the Government of Serbia".<sup>33</sup> The then Minister of Mining and Energy, Aleksandar Antić, who signed the Memorandum of Understanding on behalf of the Government, pointed out that the Memorandum "will speed up the activities related to the process of opening the mine and the start of lithium exploitation, which will have a major impact on the development of Serbia. The progress of the Jadar Project within the predicted time frame, and its realisation, will make Serbia a key producer of two very important elements - lithium and boron - both of which are important for modern development. In this way, we will give impetus to Serbia's economic growth".<sup>34</sup>

Highlighting the local community as the biggest beneficiary of the project is a special element of the narrative on progress. Namely, considering that the local community, which is directly exposed to the activities of the Rio Tinto company, has reacted several years before the Jadar Project became a topic of national importance, special attention was paid to the messages that were addressed to the local public: "In order for our domestic economy to progress evenly, it is necessary to initiate economic development at the local level, and the Jadar Project will significantly contribute to the development of Loznica and the entire region".<sup>35</sup> To underline the strategic importance of the project, the statements of the officials were filled with strong, emotional messages. In the words of President Vučić, "The realisation of the Jadar Project will be a real 'boom' for the development of Serbia and the entire region of Podrinje, given that we have 10 percent of the world's lithium deposits there. It is one of the greatest hopes for Serbia".<sup>36</sup> The implementation of the project was presented as the local population's chance for survival: "The depopulation trend in the Jadar area has been going on for the last nine years. We want to reverse that trend. The entire area of Podrinje has only about 100,000 inhabitants. Everyone has fled to Belgrade, Novi Sad or other settlements".<sup>37</sup>

In the government representatives' statements about the economic benefits that a project of this size would bring, it is regularly emphasised that this is the best opportunity for Serbia to become an important player in the new technological revolution. In order to present the benefits of the project as realistically as possible, abstract investment amounts are followed by expectations of new factories and jobs that the mine would bring: "Given that the jadarite deposit is one of the largest in the world in terms of lithium content, I expect a full chain of added value to be established in cooperation with the state, not only for the Mačva district and the city of Loznica, but for all of Serbia. I expect that, in addition to the future mining and industrial complex Jadar, the project will also include factories for the production of batteries and products that depend on lithium, in order to create as many new jobs as possible".<sup>38</sup> The Jadar Project became an important and, after the outbreak of mass protests, key argument in the authorities' broader narrative about the Balkans' 'economic tiger' catching up with the most developed countries in the world.

Considering that in this period the eyes of the general public were still not focused on the project, the narrative largely followed the usual pattern used for large foreign direct investments. However, the increasingly alarmed interested public and the strengthening of organised resistance on the ground led to a gradual change in 2019. The discourse on economic prosperity is now regularly accompanied by concern for the project's environmental sustainability. In order to silence the increasingly loud criticism of environmental activists and reduce public concerns, the Minister of Environmental Protection Goran Trivan met with representatives of the Rio Tinto company and gave them full support "so that the Jadar Project, which is important nationally as well as internationally, could be successfully realised. The guarantor of the success of the cooperation lies precisely in the commitment of this company to apply in its operations the highest national and world environmental standards, safety at work standards, and to cooperate with local communities".<sup>39</sup>

As the fear of the consequences of opening a lithium mine on the environment gradually spread among the public, the efforts of the authorities to defend the project's image by investing their own legitimacy as a guarantee strengthened as well. In almost every address, the previously dominant narrative about prosperity was now preceded by a narrative about the government's primary concern for environmental security. In an address following the meeting with Rio Tinto representatives in June 2021, Vučić particularly stressed that the state will strictly ensure the implementation of the strictest environmental protection measures: "Any project that will be implemented in this area must meet the highest ecological and technological standards, because there is no healthy economic development without preserving a healthy environment".<sup>40</sup>

The authorities' attempts to remove the topic of environmental threat from the agenda in this way were not successful, as evidenced by the most massive environmental protests in Serbia that broke out at the end of 2021. The Jadar Project suddenly became the most important political issue that - in November and December - generated the most massive protests against the current regime to date. During this period, environmental activ-

ists and organisations managed to take control of the formation of the dominant public narrative about the potential lithium mine. This success encouraged the opposition parties in Serbia to adapt their narrative about the project so as to catch the wave of support of public opinion. The government suddenly found itself on the defensive, and it was therefore necessary to respond with a narrative that would be adequate to such a situation.

To reduce the damage both to the Jadar Project and the government's rating in the critical period before the general elections that were scheduled for April 2022, the government launched a defensive campaign based on several elements. The first objective was to delegitimise those who opposed the project. The organisers of the protest were accused of not being driven by concern for ecology, but solely by political motives: "Since the elections are approaching, they want to take the lead from the other people (within the opposition). Those who organised [the protest] are nothing but political criminals. The goal of all this is to bring me down. But you will have to do that in the elections. As an analyst, I understand that Zelenović, Manojlović and 'Let's Not Drown Belgrade' (*Ne davimo Beograd*) are fighting to take over primacy from Marinika Tepić. OK, that's fine, but don't do it at the expense of the people".<sup>41</sup> The organisers were also accused of being "paid from abroad to 'brainwash' the local population about the project".<sup>42</sup> At the conference where she announced that the Government made a decision to revoke the Spatial Plan for the area of special purpose intended for the implementation of the Jadar Project, Prime Minister Brnabić said that environmental organisations and protests were financed by foreign organisations and foundations.<sup>43</sup> The protest was further attacked with claims that the interest of another company was in fact behind everything that was happening: "The campaign in Serbia is not being conducted against lithium, but against the Rio Tinto company. The reason for this is that there are people who want another company to do this. They work for the interest of another company, we have information about that".<sup>44</sup>

Another aspect of the narrative was the delegitimation of the arguments against the project that the opponents of the mine were presenting. The then Minister of Mining and Energy, Zorana Mihajlović, claimed that warnings by activists and part of the professional public who opposed the opening of the mine were not based on facts: "It is very similar to what we are now hearing about 'Jadar' - that there will be a flood, that the Mačva district will disappear, that river Drina will dry up, that Jadar will be demolished, that everyone will be sick. These are things that have nothing to do with the truth. However, only the things that were built are going to be remembered, not those who were against them, spreading falsehoods and misconceptions to alarm the public. As always, the state will be transparent, we will provide all the information, and everything else is just politicking".<sup>45</sup> Using similar words, President Vučić rejected the arguments against the project as unfounded: "This is not liquid ore, it is all made up and everything is political propaganda".<sup>46</sup>

The third element of the government's narrative during the protest was the emphasis that the state will defend the interests of citizens at all costs: "No strategic decisions

regarding that project will be made without the people. Not because we are hiding behind it, but because I believe that whatever you do, whatever decision you make, someone can say that you made it against the interest of the people. I want people to be informed, to have all the information, and to make their own decision".<sup>47</sup> As for any criticism of the protest, representatives of the authorities clearly defended themselves by stating that they were not lightly dismissing the concerns of the protesting citizens, but only those of the politicians who were leading the protests: "I'm going there [to Gornje Nedeljice] to hear their opinion, to tell them what we can gain and what we can lose, without any solution in mind. But I'm not going to talk to politicians or tycoons, but rather to the people who live in those ten villages".<sup>48</sup> In that context, a referendum - "whether at the municipal or district level, so we can see what the people want"<sup>49</sup> - was announced as well.

Finally, to neutralise the imminent damage to the regime's rating caused by the support of such an unpopular project, the government resorted to shifting the responsibility for bringing in Rio Tinto to the previous government. At a press conference held in the midst of the most massive protests, Vučić presented 9 documents as proof that, between 2004 and 2012, the former government gave the approval to the company "Rio Sava Exploration", part of the Rio Tinto corporation, to carry out geological explorations in the area of the municipality of Loznica, adding that the Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed in 2017, during the time of the current government, was actually a non-binding document: "The only decision that affected the integrity of the land in any way was that from 2012, when representatives of the former regime were in power".<sup>50</sup> The same damage control pattern was used by Ana Brnabić when she announced the decision to take formal steps to terminate the Jadar Project: "I don't think we should have a problem with that, it wasn't us that brought them to Serbia; we didn't give them anything".<sup>51</sup>

The minority coalition partners in the current government clearly supported the official policy, but were not equally present in the public when it comes to the Jadar Project as were officials from the Serbian Progressive Party. Ministers Antić and Trivan, members of the Socialist Party of Serbia, were active proponents of the project during their mandates, but these ended before the outbreak of mass protests, which is when the project came under the public spotlight. During the mass protests, SPS president Ivica Dačić focused more on defending the position of the government than the project itself. His statements clearly denied the responsibility of the current government for the arrival of Rio Tinto, which, as he said, "came during the government of Vojislav Koštunica. In all these years, I never once heard any statement that had to do with that project, or problems related to environmental protection".<sup>52</sup> Dačić delegitimised the protests by claiming that their only goal was to gather political support for the opposition: "Leaders of the protests have nothing to do with ecology. They are politicians who want to use it in their election campaign. On the other hand, an enormous number of ordinary citizens do react to such a thing, that is completely normal, just like it is normal for someone who has been fighting for the protection of the environment all his life to support all those things as a matter of principle".<sup>53</sup>

However, despite taking the formal steps to stop the construction of the mine, in the third phase of the political debate which followed the calming of the mass protests, representatives of the authorities did not give up their explicit support for the extraction of lithium in the Jadar valley. Although in their appearances in the previous year and a half they regularly rejected the possibility of the Jadar Project being revived, each time they emphasised that the decision they made was in fact harmful to Serbia: “I can say that we turned out to be fools, we missed an excellent opportunity and caused a disaster with lithium. The intelligence agencies killed us, two foreign agencies, they caught us like catfish and we are now rejoicing over the fact that we won, to boot. They stopped the accelerated development of Serbia; we would have taken off like a rocket”.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the exploitation of jadarite is still presented as a great opportunity for development: “I think that lithium represents an enormous opportunity for Serbia, one like we’ve never had before. Before the discovery of oil, Norway was one of the poorest countries in Europe, and afterwards one of the richest. This is equivalent to their situation. I made the decision to terminate the Jadar Project because of the political attacks on President Vučić and SNS before the elections, but I still think that of it as the greatest development opportunity”.<sup>55</sup>

Such statements by the highest officials, as well as the fact that the people’s initiative to ban the mining of boron and lithium was not even discussed before the National Assembly within the deadline set forth by the Constitution, show that the government has not given up on the construction of the mine, but is rather just waiting for a more favourable political moment to bring the issue back on the agenda. This claim is supported by the words of the current Minister of Mining and Energy, Dubravka Djedović: “Mining is an important factor of economic growth. There are 30 critical raw materials on the European Union’s list of such materials, and the list is updated every three years. We are rich in some of these minerals and we should really take advantage of it. France, Germany and Italy are already preparing for electric car factories, combined with lithium processing. We will either get on that train, or remain on the platform lamenting that others have arrived at a destination that will bring them prosperity”.<sup>56</sup>

Minister Djedović is using the main elements of the discourse the government used before the protests broke out in the fall of 2021. In response to remarks about environmental damage to be caused by the potential mine, she says that it is the necessary cost of exploitation, which the state can keep under control through the strict implementation of standards and regulations: “The problem is where you get your information, how you place them, and how arbitrary they are. There is no energy source and energy production that does not affect the environment; that is impossible. The point is to make an analysis, assess the risks well, and manage them. In my opinion, the Government should very responsibly take into account all the benefits and all the drawbacks, and make the best possible decisions”.<sup>57</sup> In response to criticisms related to Rio Tinto’s business history and their globally damaged image, Djedović pointed out that “you can always find something negative about a company, every company has that, but I don’t think that’s a [valid] argument. It’s all a process where you have to work on accepting social and ecological (standards)”.<sup>58</sup> Some representatives of the opposition used such public appearances to present Minister Djedović as a Rio Tinto propagandist who was brought in to complete the work Minister Mihajlović was not able to.<sup>59</sup>

## Environmental Activists and Green Parties

Opponents of the opening of a lithium mine in the Jadar river valley, who advocate the green agenda, include an entire range of diverse actors that are highly heterogeneous when it comes to structure, goals and reach. Their approaches and interests were often different at different stages of the debate on the Jadar Project, so they frequently found themselves on opposing sides when it came to strategic dilemmas. Still, there are several aspects that unite them: they all have environmental issues as, or near the top of, their political action priorities, they are all staunch opponents of lithium exploitation, and it was precisely this topic that promoted the vast majority of them into politically significant actors. For easier analysis, we divided them into three sub-groups: local activists, environmental organisations operating at the national level, and green opposition parties and movements.

The first group includes organisations and informal groups of activists who spontaneously gathered to launch a fight against the Jadar Project at the local level. The most important movements include: 'We won't give you Jadar' (*Ne damo Jadar*), 'Get away from Drina' (*Marš sa Drine*), the association 'Let's protect Jadar and Radjevina' (*Zaštitimo Jadar i Rađevinu*), and the Podrinje Anticorruption Team PAKT. Besides them, this group also includes partner organisations from other localities that actively promoted messages and helped local organisations from the vicinity of Jadar, such as 'Get away from Kolubara' (*Marš sa Kolubare*), 'Sava Embankment' (*Savski nasip*), and so on. Finally, representatives of the professional public and other public figures who in recent years wholeheartedly supported the demands of the local community and used their influence to enable the visibility of the problem at the national level, are crucial for the success of local environmental organisations and activists. The above organisations primarily gather representatives of the local communities that will be most affected by the announced opening of the mine and who have self-organised into informal or semi-formal groups to protect their communities. The prerequisite for their success and the main goal of their actions, especially in the early stages, was to organise protests at the local level, but also to raise the topic of the Jadar Project to the national level.

To achieve this, they needed to cooperate with representatives of another sub-group, which consists of environmental organisations and activists operating at the national level. These are citizens' associations or associations of organisations that have already gained public recognition by protesting against mini-hydropower plants, air pollution and environmental problems in other parts of the country such as Smederevo and Bor. Environmental movements that have been involved in raising the issue of the Jadar mine to the national level in this capacity are: the Alliance of Environmental Organisations of Serbia SEOS and the 'Ecological Uprising' (*Ekološki ustanak*), which in the meantime has transformed into a political movement. In addition to these two organisations, which built their capacities exclusively on the issue of environmental protection, the central role in the popularisation of the topic and the subsequent organisation of the protest was played by the 'Move-Change' movement, whose portfolio includes a wider range of topics besides ecology. In addition to alarming the general public so as to stop the

Jadar Project, these organisations also have other goals. First of all, with the protests against Rio Tinto, they managed to move environmental issues from the political 'suburbs' into the focus of national politics. Also, all organisations used the protests to - more or less - build their recognition at the national level. Finally, Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta's 'Ecological Uprising' used the momentum to formally grow into a political actor, and it is quite possible that the leader of 'Move-Change', Savo Manojlović, who gained much recognition in the public as the first among the protest leaders, will do the same in the future.

Finally, the third group consists of opposition parties and movements that have the green agenda as one of the central points of their programmes. This group includes parties and organisations that participated in the general elections in 2022 as part of the 'We have to' (*Moramo*) coalition: 'Together for Serbia' (*Zajedno za Srbiju*), 'Let's not drown Begrade' and the 'Ecological uprising'. Apart from constituting the basis for the formation of a pre-election coalition that managed to enter the parliament as the first primarily green list to do so in Serbia, the actors' participation in the fight against the Jadar Project brought clear political profiling and positioning on the political spectrum. In the period after the 2022 elections, the 'We have to' coalition gradually disintegrated into the 'We have to' party led by Nebojša Zelenović and Biljana Stojković, the 'Ecological Uprising' of Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta, and 'Let's not drown Begrade', which gathered smaller local organisations and formed the Green-Left Front.

Different political aspirations and goals of the diverse actors that we classified in this group often led to conflicts and divisions among them, primarily over protest strategies, goals and methods. Despite this, the narrative they have built regarding the Jadar Project is largely homogenous. Its main element is the securitisation of the ecological threat posed by the construction of the mine in the Jadar valley. Initially, local activists presented lithium exploitation as an existential threat to their community and natural environment: "Someone wants to steal our homes, our fields, our forests and rivers. It is here that they want to build a mine that will have thousands of tonnes of sulphuric acid. Our ancestors defended this land and kept it for us. We will defend it for our children. Serbia will defend itself here, in Jadar. We don't want a mine, we want our lives!"<sup>60</sup> Effective slogans created by local activists, such as 'Rio Tinto – Get away from Drina!' and 'We know that we won't give it to you!', were of great importance for mobilising the public.

The legitimacy of their claims was strengthened by the statements made by certain representatives of the professional community, namely academics who sent a warning from the scientific conference *Jadar Project – What do We Know?* organised by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences: "The opening of mines, the formation of landfills, the exploitation of groundwater, the treatment of ore with sulphuric acid, the construction of access roads and the permanent change of the use of space will irreversibly change and degrade the existing image of the landscape and threaten biodiversity. The possible start of the exploitation of the mineral jadarite implies massive earthworks, the subsidence of the terrain on almost 850 hectares, and the filling of the upper part of the Štavica stream basin with tailings. The significant potential of an already established tourist region, with sites of cultural-historical and spiritual significance, will be irretrievably destroyed. The displacement of the population, the

permanent elimination of opportunities for advanced and profitable agricultural production and the constant risk of air, water and soil pollution will fundamentally reduce the economic and ecological perspective of Radjevina".<sup>61</sup>

The narrative of the jadarite mine as an existential threat, established by local activists, has been adopted by environmental activists at the national level. The incendiary rhetoric was intended not only to motivate the wider public to resist, but also to show the popular, supra-political character of the protest: "They will fare like Poćorek on the Drina in 1914, that's my answer. If they move with the machinery towards Loznica, we will call for a general mobilisation. They lost every euro they have invested in that project, and they will lose whatever else they invest too. Rio Tinto is the enemy that we have to drive out of the house".<sup>62</sup> The biggest mobilisation of the public was achieved by the advertisement video that the 'Move-Change' movement made in protest of the construction of the mine: "This is not news about the beginning of a war, but it is equally serious. Rio Tinto promises us prosperity and billions, but the result of their work is displaced people, destroyed world cultural heritage, and war in New Guinea. Serbia is not for sale! The future of our children is not for sale! Throughout history, we as a people have always stood up against injustice, paying the price for freedom and truth. So we raise our voices now. We will be fighting a battle for water and air, a battle for the truth".<sup>63</sup> After the movement announced, at the protest on 19 November 2021, that RTS refused to broadcast their video, the protests entered a massive phase that lasted until the Government made a decision to revoke the Spatial Plan on the area of special purpose intended for the implementation of the Jadar Project.

An important element of the success of the environmental activists' rhetoric was the anti-colonial narrative. It largely coincides with the anti-Western narrative, which is a consequence of the public support the Western representatives gave the exploitation of lithium in Serbia: "We want EU representatives to be fully aware that we consider any support for the lithium mining project unacceptable. What companies are not allowed to do in their own countries, they will not be doing in Serbia either! They should be fully aware that supporting Rio Tinto or any company that participates in this project will have consequences for the reputation of the EU. Serbia is not a colony, and Serbia is not for sale".<sup>64</sup> This narrative especially came to the fore after the support that US Ambassador Christopher Hill gave to the Rio Tinto project in an interview: "Lithium will not be mined in Jadar, no one will be digging there. Hill can deal with his own lithium, he does not have to take an interest in ours. I guess we're a free country, or does Hill think we're a colony? Maybe we have a president who has to do certain things, but the people don't; the people have the right to decide using their free will".<sup>65</sup>

Not even the green parties gathered in the 'We have to' coalition remained immune to the anti-colonial rhetoric, but they linked it to anti-Western attitudes noticeably less: "In the Jadar valley, as a result of Rio Tinto's exploratory wells, water was poisoned by enormous amounts of arsenic and boron. They polluted the land where fruit and vegetables are grown. The problem is the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia, a planning document that envisages more than 40 new mines all over our country. After this act, our fertile Serbia would become a 19<sup>th</sup> century mining colony. We have a plan to make these endangered areas healthy regions for growing food, not cancerous landfills. With the help of subsidies from the EU and our state, these regions can multiply



production and become our country's well known export brand. Will we choose that, or will we become a mining colony? The citizens will choose in the elections, on 3 April!"<sup>66</sup>

Green opposition parties and movements used the importance and recognition that the topic of lithium exploitation gained in the public to place opposition to the Jadar Project at the centre of their electoral platform for the general elections in the spring of 2022. They started the election campaign symbolically from Gornje Nedeljice, announcing that "a vote for the 'We have to' coalition is a vote against Rio Tinto and its Jadar project".<sup>67</sup> As one of the main election messages, they advocated for a decision to ban lithium and boron mining.<sup>68</sup> However, unlike other parties of the pro-Western opposition, where this topic was significantly marginalised after the election, the parties formed after the dissolution of the coalition kept the topic of the fight against lithium mining as one of their main priorities. Thus, the representative of the movement 'Let's not drown Belgrade' Radomir Lazović became the most active advocate of the people's initiative for the prohibition of lithium and boron mining, which was submitted to the National Assembly by the 'Move-Change' movement only to be unlawfully ignored by the ruling majority: "We promised that, as deputies, we would continue in the institutions the fight we have started in the streets with protests and blockades, and we believe that the parliament should make a statement regarding our proposals".<sup>69</sup>

## Pro-European Opposition

In the context of the political discussion on the Jadar Project, we defined the pro-European opposition as a group of parties that support Serbia's membership in the European Union, but for which the green agenda is not one of the central programme points. Political parties that largely base their support on environmental issues, such as the party 'We have to' or 'Let's not drown Belgrade', were included in the green parties despite the fact that they advocate Serbia's membership in the EU. The reasons for this division are the different positions and goals that these political actors had regarding the Jadar mine. According to this definition, the pro-European opposition includes the Democratic Party, the Freedom and Justice Party, the Movement of Free Citizens, the 'Movement for the Revolution' (*Pokret za preokret*), the Serbia Centre and a few smaller political actors.

The position of pro-European parties at the time when the Jadar Project grew into a major political issue in Serbia was not at all easy. Green parties and movements that rose in popularity primarily thanks to this topic threatened to take voters mostly from this political group. The environmental protests that grew into the largest anti-government demonstrations since the Serbian Progressive Party regime came to power brought new political leaders from the ranks of environmental activists to the fore. On the other hand, for the first time in a long time, Vučić's regime found itself on the political defensive in anticipation of the general elections in the spring of 2022. To take advantage of the wave of dissatisfaction with the government, and at the same time defend their

positions within the opposition electorate, pro-European parties took firm positions on the Jadar valley mine, called all actors who oppose its construction to assembly, and actively joined the protests.

This position helped the authorities in their attempt to delegitimise the protests as being in fact political in nature. The narrative that was most often used for this purpose was that key actors in the pro-European opposition were part of the previous regimes that brought in Rio Tinto and allowed exploration in the Jadar Valley. The situation got further complicated by the statement of one of the leaders of the pro-European forces, Dragan Djilas, in November 2017, in which he mentioned the exploitation of lithium as a development opportunity: “It has been confirmed that the second largest lithium deposit in the world and the largest in Europe was discovered near Loznica. Let’s talk about the concession on those mines, but let’s also have the battery factory here, because these batteries are in all mobile phones and electric cars. Isn’t that a chance for Serbia? It will employ thousands and thousands of people and turn our country into a brand. Imagine if every mobile phone or car had a part in it with a sign ‘Made in Serbia’”.<sup>70</sup> In response to accusations of political inconsistency, Djilas said that the absence of environmental preconditions was the main reason why he opposed the Jadar Project: “I still think that one day lithium will be a chance for Serbia, just as it will be a chance for Germany and for many other countries that have jadarite, when and if a method of exploitation that will not endanger the environment is perfected”.<sup>71</sup>

During the protests and the pre-election campaign, the most important representatives of the pro-European opposition placed the fight against the opening of mines at the centre of their activities. The Party of Freedom and Justice and the Democratic Party were among the signatories of the Social Agreement on the prohibition of exploration, exploitation and processing of lithium in Serbia.<sup>72</sup> The holder of the largest opposition list in the 2022 parliamentary elections, Marinika Tepić, announced that the elections will represent, among other things, a vote “for or against the opening of the Rio Tinto lithium mine. Our government will never allow the opening of a mine that would poison Serbia with dirty technology. There is no Rio Tinto, Rio Sava, secret combinations or agreements that can prevent that list and the whole of Serbia from stopping the plan to open the mine”.<sup>73</sup> They kept proving their hard stance especially with their attitude towards the pressures that was coming from Western actors: “I, too, had meetings with certain foreign ambassadors, for example the British ambassador who tried to convince me on two occasions that Rio Tinto was in fact green energy. That was really a bit humiliating. I gave her a piece of advice on that occasion: Tell them to pick their things up and leave immediately”.<sup>74</sup>

When it comes to the Jadar project, there are two elements of the narrative of the pro-European opposition that separate their position from those of other opposition actors. On the one hand, during the political debate on the Jadar Project, the main emphasis was placed on the standards of the rule of law as the only barrier to projects that pose a threat to environmental security. President of the Movement of Free Citizens, Pavle Grbović, said the following regarding the September 2021 demands of the ‘Ecological Uprising’, whose main slogan was *Rio Tinto – Get away from Drina!*: “The fact that we are

sending a message that we are trying to drive an investor from Serbia is a big problem in my opinion. We are talking about Rio Tinto, which is very suspicious and probably very prone to corruption. However, will our success in doing this lead to a healthier environment? Well, it won't, because even if we kick Rio Tinto out, someone else will come, maybe someone from Russia, China or Europe, I don't care. I have derive satisfaction from being poisoned by someone who is ideologically closer to me. The only relevant question is whether we will build a state that will have its own standards and where such dubious investors will not even be able to appear".<sup>75</sup> With this kind of narrative, the pro-European opposition tried to connect the environmental topic that was in the public spotlight with ideological topics that were for them the most important. Also, the insistence on European environmental protection standards was aimed at mitigating the growth of the anti-European sentiment in public opinion, which the Jadar Project strengthened even further.

On the other hand, their narrative is softer when it comes to future plans for lithium exploitation. Unlike other actors – be they the greens, or the right-wing opposition who explicitly completely reject the possibility of future lithium mining – some representatives of the pro-European opposition leave the possibility for exploitation in the event that the development of technology makes it possible for it to be environmentally sustainable: "I am not arguing for a ban on lithium mining, I am saying that in this situation, where there is no technology to extract lithium (in a sustainable way), we cannot do it because of the consequences. But I still believe that it is a chance for us, a very big chance for development. When we enter the EU, when we get close to them, then we will have the standards that apply there. When it becomes possible to extract lithium in Germany, it will be possible to extract it in Serbia as well".<sup>76</sup> Because of this attitude, as well as the three draft laws on the exploitation of mineral resources they submitted to the National Assembly in April 2023,<sup>77</sup> certain representatives of the pro-European opposition came under attack from activists, primarily those from the PAKT movement and Sava Manojlović, who accused them of collaborating on the future revitalisation of the Jadar Project.<sup>78</sup>

## Right-Wing National Opposition

The right-wing national opposition includes political organisations that base their support in the electorate on conservative topics and pronounced national as well as anti-Western rhetoric. The most important representatives of this group are the parliamentary parties New Democratic Party of Serbia, the Serbian Movement 'Dveri', the Serbian Party 'Zavetnici', the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia, and the non-parliamentary party 'Enough is Enough' (*Dosta je bilo*). We included the People's Party in this group as well, even though it is centrally located on the political spectrum in relation to other representatives of the right-wing opposition, and it appeared on the list with representatives of the pro-European opposition in the 2022 elections. The reason for this is the narrative that their representatives used when they criticised the Jadar Project, which was closer to that of the right-wing parties than to the pro-European opposition.

All relevant representatives of the right-wing opposition were against the Jadar Project. However, the representatives of the People's Party and 'Dveri' were the loudest in expressing their opposition in public. At the invitation of the movement 'Wake Up' (*Budjenje*), representatives of 'Dveri' were the first to sign the Social Agreement on the prohibition of exploration, exploitation and processing of lithium in Serbia, three weeks before the other 9 parties and organisations. The leader of 'Dveri', Boško Obradović, said on that occasion that "the fight against Rio Tinto is a topic that should unite all of us, regardless of our ideological and political differences".<sup>79</sup> Besides 'Dveri', the People's Party was the only from this bloc to sign the Agreement and among the first in the opposition to announce the fight against the Jadar Project as one of their most important political priorities: "The opening of the Jadar lithium mine by Rio Tinto is an environmental disaster, not an 'investment of the decade', as the government is misleading the citizens, because that mine will poison the entire country - a country that has been brought to the brink of ecological disaster by the corrupt government headed by Vučić and the Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić".<sup>80</sup>

Still, the right-wing national opposition's narrative about the Jadar Project has two specific elements that separate it from the rest of the opposition. First, it is the adaptation of the ecological theme to the national rhetoric. Just as the representatives of the pro-European opposition tried to adapt their opposition to mining exploitation to the theme of the rule of law, which is close to them, so the representatives of the national opposition are also trying to adapt the theme that at one point became a central political topic in the country to their own voters. Boško Obradović calls this approach 'Green Patriotism': "The topic of environmental protection, as a political topic, has so far been mostly associated with left-wing, green, and even anarchist political groups, while the Serbian Movement 'Dveri' is the first conservative and Christian Democratic political option in Serbia that raised this topic to a high position in terms of importance. This is quite logical, because being conservative means preserving the best values and traditions from the past, but also protecting and preserving the environment.

That is why our natural political platform is precisely environmentalism, green patriotism and conservatism. A true environmentalist is one who is rooted in his country and who is aware that he is only the custodian of the rich heritage of his ancestors, which he has the duty to enrich and preserve for future generations".<sup>81</sup> The address of MP of the People's Party Ivana Parlić in the National Assembly is an example of this kind of rhetoric: "The destruction of Serbia is at the heart of the Rio Tinto project. With the proposal for the composition of the new government, you sent a message to Rio Tinto that you are ready to continue that project. You are betraying our country and the country of our children to foreigners. The proper term for that is high treason. We are supposed to hand over the Jadar valley, rivers Drina and Sava, Mačva, Cer, Valjevo, Mionica, Kolubara, Miloševa Dobrinja, Pranjane, Suvoborska Greda... The air, land, water and the living world in 11 percent of our territory. Serbia has already had enough victims, and you have tricked the people in the area around Loznica into giving their land to Rio Tinto".<sup>82</sup>

Another specificity is the strong anti-Western narrative, which is normally part of their political discourse. The fact that Rio Tinto is a Western company that is openly supported by the representatives of the West has enabled right-wing parties to easily adapt to the newly emerging political reality and include a primarily environmental theme in their political agenda: "We will not give you Kosovo, we will not give you the cathedral of the Virgin of Ljeviš or the Patriarchate of Peć, we will not give you Serbia, and we will not give you Trepča for Rio Tinto, or altars for the Belgrade Waterfront, or Gračanica for the Mercedes factory! We will not sell Serbia for the false promises of your bosses from Brussels".<sup>83</sup> As regards criticising the Jadar Project, the position of the right-wing opposition was easier compared to that of the pro-European opposition, which the representatives of this group used to better position themselves within the opposition electorate as the only sincere fighters against lithium mines among the political actors: "The proposal of 'Dveri' and 'Wake Up' [that all political actors sign the Social Agreement on the prohibition of exploration, exploitation and processing of lithium in Serbia] is a test for all environmental movements and opposition political organisations: are they really against the opening of the mine, without any reservations and conditions, or are they willing to agree to have Rio Tinto here under the pressure of Western embassies".<sup>84</sup>

The strong support the representatives of Western countries provided the Project from the beginning had a major influence on the political discourse on the Jadar mine. Several reasons have caused the undivided support of the Western actors for the construction of the mine. The first is the importance of lithium and Serbia's position in the geopolitical race for critical minerals. A large deposit of jadarite ore in the immediate neighbourhood of the European Union, in a country that is a candidate for membership, is a potentially important link towards achieving the strategic autonomy of the EU, proclaimed as a goal in the EU Declaration on Critical Raw Materials.<sup>85</sup> Also, an easily accessible lithium deposit represents an economic opportunity and potential profit for an industry such as the automotive industry, which is highly developed in some of the EU member states, primarily Germany. Finally, Rio Tinto is a British-Australian company with a share of American capital, and is among the most powerful mining corporations in the world.

Although undivided among Western representatives, public support for the Jadar Project varied in terms of explicitness and intensity. Representatives of the United States provided the most open support. In his public appearances, Ambassador Christopher Hill repeatedly stressed the importance and potential benefits of the project: "I believe it is important for Rio Tinto that people understand that this is not just a mining project. This is not just a project where something is taken out of the ground and exported. This is a project that will have to do with the modern economy. In the end, the lithium extracted from the ground will be used to produce batteries that will be installed in electric vehicles. The US is trying to support Rio Tinto because it is partly, although not entirely, an American company".<sup>86</sup> The similarity with the government's narrative about the project does not end with arguments about economic prosperity, but also highlights the priority of ensuring environmental protection and the possibility of Serbia catching the train towards a new technological revolution: "I think it is very important that everyone involved in this the project respect the environment as rule number one. We should make an effort to point out to citizens the need for this project to connect them with the green agenda, the green economy, because that's where they belong".<sup>87</sup>

Diplomatic representatives from the United Kingdom and Australia also directly supported the project, but focused their strategy almost exclusively on meetings held behind closed-doors, rarely communicating directly to the wider public. However, embassy representatives provide explicit support for the project by attending meetings that representatives of the Government of Serbia have with those of the Rio Tinto company,<sup>88</sup> or through membership in the Government's Working Group in charge of the project implementation.<sup>89</sup> Another example of direct support is the announcement of the British government on the occasion of the signing of the agreement on partnership, trade and cooperation between Great Britain and Serbia in April 2021, which specifically stressed the importance of the investment of Rio Tinto, which is said to have invested "significant amounts in major initiatives that

will encourage further production of electric vehicles and help reduce carbon dioxide emissions in the world”.<sup>90</sup> Representatives of the company Rio Sava Exploration also point to the protection of the British government: “The investment in Jadar is the subject matter of the Bilateral Agreement between Serbia and the United Kingdom from 2002, which was ratified in 2004. That document contains internationally recognised investment protection mechanisms”.<sup>91</sup>

On the other hand, representatives of the European Union support the Jadar Project mostly implicitly. However, when speaking about the Project, the EU ambassador to Serbia Emanuel Gioffre uses a rhetoric that is similar to that of the American ambassador: “It is necessary to ensure that things are implemented properly. It [the Jadar Project] is an opportunity for economic development, but if it is to be implemented, the strictest standards must be observed. The green agenda is a priority for the EU. A number of things have already been done in Serbia, such as the adoption of a set of laws on energy and the Law on Climate Change, but we need to go even further”.<sup>92</sup> Although justified by the adoption of Constitutional reforms on the judiciary, the European Commission’s decision to open the negotiation Cluster no. 4 - “Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity” which refers to environmental protection, in December 2021, in the midst of the biggest environmental protests, added salt to the wounds of protesters and activists.<sup>93</sup>

The visit of the European Parliament representative for Kosovo, Viola von Kramon, in October 2021 was supposed to show the solidarity of the political group of the European Greens with the problems faced by the inhabitants of the Jadar valley. But her message was weak, to say the least: “We don’t want to have double standards, we want them to be the same - high legal and environmental standards. We will do everything within our responsibility and within our capabilities. I am quite sure that my colleagues in the green group will support this initiative, but I can’t tell you when we will come out with a concrete proposal”.<sup>94</sup> The meeting with her brought a string of problems to local activists and opposition leaders, who were accused by the government of lobbying for the independence of Kosovo.<sup>95</sup> However, Angela Merkel’s farewell visit, during which the then chancellor highlighted Germany’s interest in lithium from Serbia, particularly resonated with the public: “We have a large number of investments in the auto industry in Serbia, we all know how important lithium is for future mobility and for battery cells. Serbia has something that is truly valuable, but there is concern whether exploitation will be carried out in line with ecological standards. I think the EU has good standards; the member states will certainly be dealing with that because climate neutrality in Europe is a really important issue”.<sup>96</sup>

Representatives of the pro-European opposition spoke openly about the pressures of foreign actors to agree to the exploitation of lithium, especially in the period that preceded the 2022 elections. After a meeting with the US special envoy for the Western Balkans, Matthew Palmer, in June 2021, Marinika Tepić confirmed that the Jadar Project was one of the topics of the meeting, saying that she “pointed out precisely and logically to him that the Rio Tinto project, with such problematic technology and disastrous

consequences for the people, simply cannot pass”.<sup>97</sup> Dobrica Veselinović, one of the leaders of the movement ‘Let’s not drown Belgrade’, claimed something to the same effect: “As for Rio Tinto, it is true that there had been various pressures. It is a multinational company, and the interests of capital and profit are above all other interests, we have no illusions about that. I see the opening of this cluster as the last act of the outgoing German administration’s support for Vučić, whom Angela Merkel visited in her last days as chancellor”.<sup>98</sup> The support of Western representatives for the Jadar Project only caused the public’s already existing anti-Western mood to strengthen concerning this topic. As a result, anti-Western rhetoric became an important part of the narrative of mine construction opponents – be they environmental activists and or right-wing national opposition – as well as in some statements made by the pro-European opposition.

## Representatives of the Rio Tinto Company

In the period before the Jadar Project became known to the general public, representatives of the Rio Tinto company communicated mostly behind closed doors, directly with the representatives of the authorities and other important actors. In rare public appearances, they primarily stuck to the narrative about the economic prosperity that their investment would bring to the citizens of Serbia: “The Jadar Project will contribute to the creation of more than 2,000 jobs and, during operational activities, to the creation of more than 700 job positions for highly qualified staff. The development of the project represents a potential investment the amount of which will exceed one and a half billion US dollars. At the same time, it will contribute to building the profile of Serbia as an investment-friendly destination that applies the principles of green economy”.<sup>99</sup>

However, as public resistance began to grow in 2021, Rio Tinto decided to respond with crisis communication aimed at alleviating citizens’ fears. Care for environmental protection was thus put forth as one of the company’s first priorities. To strengthen the credibility of such claims, the company referred to its cooperation with representatives of the professional public: “We are cooperating with more than 100 experts in Serbia, including 40 professors from the University of Belgrade, to determine the potential impacts of the project on the environment and to find out which measures would make it possible to control and mitigate such impacts”.<sup>100</sup> Special attention in crisis communication with the public was focused on the concerns of the local population. Vesna Prodanović, Director of Rio Sava Exploration (a daughter company of Rio Tinto) pointed out that impacts on the environment do exist, but that the project will be carried out in such a way as to minimise the consequences: “There is agricultural land of the third or fourth category at the location of our future project, while land that belongs to a higher category has been contaminated by incidents that occurred in previous decades. The landowners who would have to move will receive all the help from the company, an opportunity to work in another location and to cultivate the land that has until now been uncultivated”.<sup>101</sup>



Attempts at crisis communication proved unsuccessful. The public turned against the project en masse, and the strengthening of protests in the context of the upcoming elections led the government to back down and take a decision to revoke the Spatial Plan for the special purpose area intended for the implementation of the Jadar Project in January 2022.<sup>102</sup> Regarding said decision, Rio Sava Exploration came out with a statement that they planned to suspend the Jadar Project “in order to call for a public dialogue which would familiarise the residents with all the aspects of the project. The Jadar Project is planned to be implemented within the prescribed legal framework, but no step will be taken that could additionally worry the residents. We see the upcoming period as an opportunity to clarify any disputed issues”.<sup>103</sup> In the meantime, the representatives of Rio Tinto conspicuously retreated into the background, leaving it to government representatives, foreign representatives and individual experts to publicly advocate the importance of the project on their behalf.

The subsequent moves of the company, which continued with to purchase land and carry out other preparatory activities in the field along the same, planned dynamics indicate that the suspension was only rhetorical.<sup>104</sup> In response to activists’ accusations that the company ignored the decisions of the Government of Serbia, Rio Tinto said that they were acting in accordance with the Government’s decree and applicable laws: “Since January 2022, we have been exclusively completing the process of land acquisition concerning negotiations that began before the decision of the Government of Serbia to put acts on the implementation of the Jadar Project out of force. All our current activities are a continuation of previously undertaken commitments. This includes the completion of an internal Feasibility Study. We still believe that the Jadar Project has the potential to contribute to the economic development of Loznica and Serbia, and to be the driving force behind the development of the e-mobility industry in our country. The project is planned as an underground mine and ore processing facility, and has the potential to be realised in line with the highest standards of environmental protection and social responsibility. We are aware that the public has doubts about the project. We are open to dialogue and cooperation with all interested parties, including local communities, non-governmental organisations and the academic community”.<sup>105</sup>

## The Consequences and the Future of the Political Debate on the Jadar Project

After the revocation of the Spatial Plan for special purposes, which the government presented as giving up on the Jadar Project, and the dispersal of the protests due to partial success and the disagreement of the organisers regarding the further strategy of the fight, the topic of lithium exploitation descended from the pedestal of the most important political topic in the country. This was greatly contributed to by the conflict in Ukraine, which put on the agenda issues such as Serbia's geostrategic alignment, sanctions against the Russian Federation, negotiations on the French-German proposal within the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the energy crisis, and a greatly increased inflation. Still, the consequences of the relatively short period during which the construction of the Jadar mine was the main axis of political division, are long-term.

The authorities' decision to accept a large part of the protesters' demands, including the revocation of the Spatial Plan necessary for the construction of the mine, was the regime's first major setback since it took power in 2012. Also, for the first time, the government found itself on the defensive when it comes to controlling the political narrative on a public topic which, despite the investment of maximum resources, it failed to reverse without making tangible concessions. The protests that were organised across Serbia were the largest since those of 5 October, and the highway blockade was the first successful application of civil disobedience and radicalisation of protests in the last two decades. After quite a long time, the topic of lithium exploitation managed - at least declaratively - to unite almost all opposition forces and affirm new political options and leaders. No matter how limited the success of the protest was, and how short-lived it seems, it showed that the regime of Aleksandar Vučić is still vulnerable, and that political organising is not necessarily doomed to failure.

The Jadar project is obviously not a closed page of Serbian political history. Despite the acts of the Government, Rio Tinto continues to carry out its activities in the Jadar valley and is preparing to continue with the implementation of the project. Based on the announcements and signals they are sending, the government and the interested foreign actors are not giving up on lithium exploitation either. Activists and some opposition leaders are continuing with protests and actions on the ground, in an attempt to prevent further steps by both institutional and non-institutional means. In the coming period, the Jadar Project could be the point where the key political dilemmas in Serbia will meet, from the geopolitical orientation of the country, alliances and the struggle for supremacy within the opposition, as well as - in the long term - the change of government. The only certain thing is that the debate surrounding the lithium mine has permanently affirmed ecology as one of the key political topics in Serbia. Considering global trends and numerous environmental problems that Serbia is already facing, the Jadar Project is only the first in a series of environmental topics that will dominate the political discourse in the near future.

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## Politicians

### Officials of the Ruling Coalition

**Aleksandar Vučić** – President of the Republic of Serbia, in office since 2017. He was the Prime Minister of the Government of Serbia from 2014 to 2017, and the First Deputy Prime Minister from 2012 to 2014. In the era of Slobodan Milošević, he served as Minister of Information (from 1998 to 2000). From the beginning of the 1990s until 2008, he was a member of the extreme right-wing Serbian Radical Party (SRS), while since 2008 he has been a member of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), a populist and economically neoliberal party, whose president he has been from 2012 to 2023.

**Ana Brnabić** – Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia since 2017, currently serving her third term in office. From 2016 to 2017, she was the Minister of State Administration and Local Self-Government. She was elected to the office of prime minister as a non-partisan. She joined the ruling SNS party in 2019 and has been its vice-president since 2021.

**Ivica Dačić** – Minister of Foreign Affairs and First Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Serbia from 2022. He is a member of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and has been its president since 2006. The SPS is the party of Slobodan Milošević. It was in power in the 1990s, and has been in coalition with the SNS since 2012. In the 1990s, Dačić served as the SPS's spokesman. He has held high government positions continuously since 2008, including that of prime minister, as well as several ministerial positions and the position of Speaker of the National Assembly.

**Zorana Mihajlović** – Minister of Mining and Energy from 2020 to 2022, and before that, Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure (2014-2020) and Minister of Energy, Development and Environmental Protection (2012-2014). She was a member of SNS from 2010 to 2023.

**Aleksandar Antić** – Minister of Mining and Energy from 2014 to 2020, member of the SPS.

**Dubravka Djedović** – Minister of Mining and Energy from October 2022. She was not involved in politics prior to her appointment to this position, having worked in the business sector.

**Goran Trivan** – Minister of Environmental Protection from 2017 to 2020, member of the SPS.

## Opposition Politicians

**Dragan Djilas** – President of the Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), a social democratic and pro-European party that was founded in 2019. From 2004 to 2016, he was a member of the Democratic Party (DS), i.e. the party of the assassinated Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić. He discharged several public offices, including that of mayor of Belgrade (2008-2013).

**Marinika Tepić** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and vice-president of the SSP, she is one of the most media-prominent representatives of the opposition. Prior to joining the SSP, she was a member of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina and the New Party, a liberal party belonging to the political centre.

**Nebojša Zelenović** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, president of the parliamentary group 'We Have To-Together' (*Moramo-Zajedno*) and one of the co-presidents of 'Together', a green-left party. He was the mayor of **Šabac** from 2014 to 2020.

**Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and, until September 2023, a member of the parliamentary club 'We Have To-Together'. He later moved to the newly formed parliamentary group People's Movement of Serbia-Ecological Uprising-New Face of Serbia. He is a long-time environmental activist, founder of the association 'Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina' and one of the founders of the Ecological Uprising movement.

**Radomir Lazović** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and one of the founders of the movement 'Let's Not Drown Belgrade', which was transformed into the political party Green-Left Front in July 2023.

**Pavle Grbović** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and president of the Movement of Free Citizens, a liberal and pro-European political organisation.

**Boško Obradović** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and president of the Serbian Movement 'Dveri', a right-wing nationalist and clerical political party.

**Ivana Parlić** – An MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and member of the People's Party, a conservative centre-right party.

## Environmental Organisations and Movements

**Eco Watch** - An ecological movement that operates as an informal group of citizens. Eco Watch started as a Facebook page that offered information about air quality and the consequences of long-term exposure to pollution. The movement deals with environmental pollution in the entire territory of Serbia.

**Ecological Uprising** - An environmental and protest movement that grew out of a series of environmental groups, primarily those that opposed the construction of mini-hydroelectric plants, such as the association 'Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina'. It is headed by **Aleksandar Jovanović** Ćuta. The movement participated in the 2022 parliamentary elections as part of the green-left coalition 'We Have To' and managed to win five seats in the National Assembly.

**Move-Change (*Kreni-promeni*)** – An organisation that deals with issues of environmental justice, human rights, economic fairness and democracy. It is headed by activist **Savo Manojlović**.

**'We will not give you Jadar', 'Get away from Drina', 'Let's Protect Jadar and Radjevina', 'Get away from Kolubara'** - Local environmental movements that oppose lithium mining in the Jadar river valley, other dirty technologies, and activities of the Rio Tinto company. Most of these movements are part of the Alliance of Environmental Organisations of Serbia.

**Podrinje Anticorruption Team PAKT** - An association of citizens from Loznica that is focused primarily on the fight against corruption, but which also deals with corrupt practices in the field of exploitation of natural resources.

**Sava Embankment** - An informal group of citizens from Belgrade that primarily opposes illegal construction on the left bank of the Sava River near Belgrade.

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