



# GreenPaths

EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE HUB ON  
JUST TRANSITION PATHWAYS

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# Introduction

## Abstract

This case study explores the Jadar lithium mining project in Serbia to examine how EU decarbonisation and energy transition policies are shaping national strategies, political narratives, and institutional responses in a semi-peripheral context. Addressing a gap in the literature on green transition impacts beyond the EU core, the research asks how such policies influence governance practices and provoke local resistance. Using discourse analysis and the Loss and Damage framework, the study investigates environmental, social, cultural, and economic dimensions at the project, sectoral, and national levels. Key findings reveal that decarbonisation goals, while framed as sustainable, may justify extractive practices and marginalize communities. The case contributes to broader literature on green extractivism, environmental justice, and post-socialist development, demonstrating how EU-aligned climate policies can reproduce inequality and sacrifice local interests for global green agendas.

## Keywords

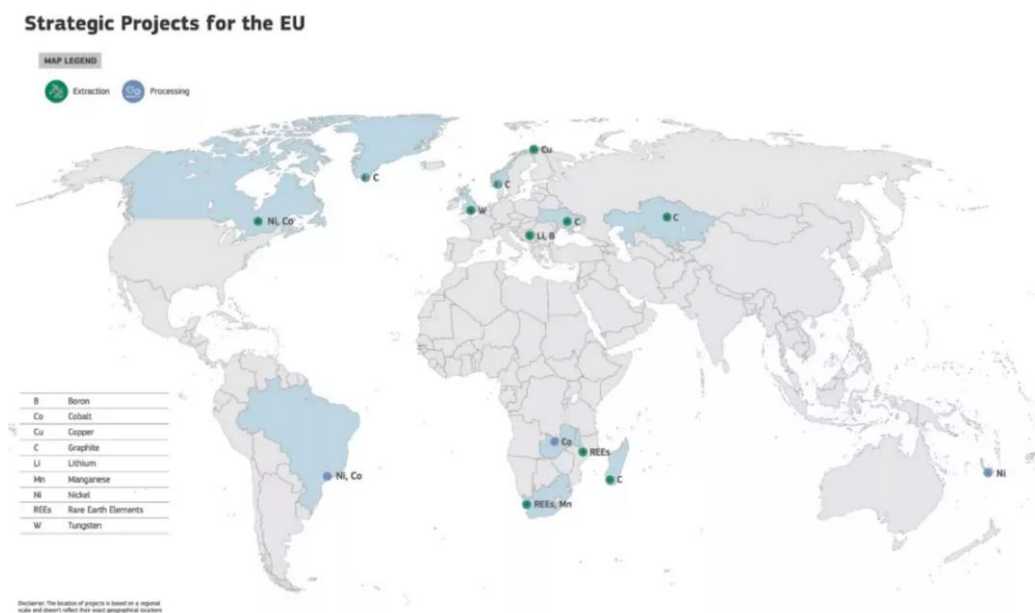
New extractivism; critical raw materials; mining; just transition

# 1 Overview

The Jadar case study offers a comprehensive exploration of one of the most polarising development projects in Serbia today, shedding light on how top-down green transition agendas intersect with local realities. Conducted as part of the GreenPaths project, the research aims to illustrate the complexity of transition processes that claim to be “just,” but are often experienced quite differently by affected communities. By focusing on the proposed lithium mine in the Jadar Valley, the study examines the multidimensional impacts of the project, encompassing environmental, social, economic, political, across both local and national levels.

While the project is named as one of the Strategic Project in third countries under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) by the European Commission (EC, 2025) and it is framed as a strategic opportunity to increase European lithium production and reduce carbon emissions aligned with the EU’s Green Deal Fit for 55 targets and Batteries Regulation 2023/1542, the research reveals significant tensions surrounding its legitimacy, purpose, and long-term value for Serbia. With 34.8% of land in the City of Loznica classified as agricultural (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013) and 38.2% of its residents at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the stakes are particularly high. Despite being a non-EU country, Serbia has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the EU to cooperate on critical raw materials, lithium foremost among them, raising its geopolitical importance while also exposing it to extractive pressures. However, the domestic share of renewable energy in transport remains just 0.6% (Eurostat, 2023), which has led to public scepticism about whether lithium extraction serves local transition needs or simply fulfils external (EU) demands.

**Figure 1. Global map selected strategic projects under CRMA, critical raw material projects located in third countries and in overseas countries or territories as Strategic Projects under Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of the European Parliament and of the Council**



Source: EU Commission 2025

The study applies discourse analysis to understand how competing narratives, including government, corporate, civil society, but also EU, frame the project and how these frames shape public perception, policy decisions, and protest mobilisations. Our analysis engages the concept of Loss and Damage (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], n.d.) to examine harms that are difficult to quantify yet are deeply felt: cultural loss, social fragmentation, destruction of landscapes, and erosion of democratic processes. While economic risks have been widely debated (Šoškić et al, 2024; Stručnjaci GOVORE, 2024), this research foregrounds non-economic losses such as the transformation of land-based livelihoods, severing of intergenerational ties to farming, and the irreversible alteration of local ecosystems, including areas where 145 protected species have been recorded (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2022), as well as heritage sites like the Paulje necropolis, one of the biggest central Balkans cemeteries from the bronze age that is potentially at risk, as company is planning mining waste site close to this location (Marš sa Drine, 2025).

The Jadar case demonstrates how the opening of a mine not only threatens biodiversity and farmland, but can also trigger social rifts and political demobilisation. The case study highlights how communities are divided between those who resist and those who yield, often under pressure. The fear of becoming “collaborators” among neighbours, or being left without options for relocation, deepens social fractures. Nationally, the project has galvanised some of the largest environmental protests in Serbia’s recent history. However, should the project be revived, it could set a precedent that discourages future activism and undermines local conservation victories, such as the successful resistance to small hydropower plants in the region of Old Mountain (Energetski portal, 2020).

Although the scholarly literature on the Jadar project and lithium extraction in Serbia is still emerging, several important contributions already outline its environmental, political, and governance dimensions. Đukanović (2022) documents local experiences of uncertainty, mistrust, and community fragmentation, foregrounding the social dynamics of extractivism; Šoškić et al. (2024) offer a macroeconomic critique that challenges state and corporate claims of national benefit; while Ivanović et al. (2023) and Ristić et al. (2024) analyse technical, hydrological, and ecological risks associated with proposed mining technologies and waste disposal. Additional work by Krizmanic et al. (2024) highlights biodiversity vulnerability and the limitations of official assessments, whereas Šterić (2023) provides a discourse-focused account of how competing political actors frame the project. Many of these scientific analyses have been brought together in a comprehensive publication of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), which dedicated a special volume to the Jadar project, consolidating expert findings (Stevanović, Šolaja, Radmilović, 2024). Together, these studies identify important environmental justice and governance concerns, yet they offer only partial insight into the non-economic, anticipatory, and socially embedded harms generated by the project. What remains underdeveloped are analyses that conceptualise these harms through a Loss and Damage framework (UNFCCC, n.d.), and that situate Serbia’s lithium politics within its semi-peripheral position, EU accession dynamics, and the geopolitical pressures of the green transition. This case study directly addresses this gap by integrating discourse analysis with Loss and Damage to capture intangible impacts that existing studies acknowledge but do not systematically examine.

In this context, the Jadar case becomes emblematic of a deeper dilemma facing semi-peripheral countries: how to engage with global green agendas without becoming sacrifice zones for distant goals. It contributes to the GreenPaths project by documenting not just the discourses of transition, but also its lived consequences, reminding us that justice in transition is not a given, but a terrain of struggle.

## 2 Research questions

Case Study Research Question:

- How are decarbonisation and energy transition EU policies impacting policies, narratives and discourses, around Jadar lithium project in Serbia?

Empirical questions:

- What is the estimated environmental, social, cultural and economic impact of the Jadar lithium project in Serbia?
- What is the response from the local communities regarding this project - current and historic overview?
- How are the discourses on decarbonisation and energy transition stemming from EU policies shaping positions of main institutional stakeholders?
- How do political discourses by the EU, Serbian government, and opposition parties around the Jadar lithium project reflect the tensions between decarbonisation goals and new extractivism in the context of Serbia's EU integration?

The research is grounded in the theoretical framework of Loss and Damage (UNFCCC, n.d.), allowing for a multidimensional understanding of both material and non-material harms, such as environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, forced displacement, cultural erosion, and the erosion of democratic processes, that may result from green transition projects in semi-peripheral regions.

## 3 Methods

This case study applies a qualitative methodology combining discourse analysis with a review of diverse secondary sources to explore how EU decarbonisation and energy transition policies influence political, institutional, and social narratives surrounding the Jadar lithium project in Serbia.

Given that the Jadar project has not yet been implemented, many of its environmental and social consequences remain in the domain of projections; the analysis relies on publicly available documents and narratives. These include policy documents, media statements, investigative journalism, reports from civil society organisations, and corporate communications, covering the period from September 2021 to October 10th,

2024, a timeframe selected due to key developments such as the first mass protests in autumn 2021, the authorities' declarative revocation of the project, the signing of the Serbia–EU lithium mining agreement, and the largest protest held in August 2024. Special emphasis was placed on recent news articles and in-depth journalistic features, which proved essential in capturing the evolving socio-political climate around the project, local resistance, and public sentiment. This approach helps fill the gap left by the limited number of peer-reviewed academic studies on this topic, though this body of work is steadily growing and already spans diverse themes, including environmental justice, political ecology, governance, and strategic resource extraction.

Discourse analysis was used to examine how key actors construct and contest meaning around the Jadar project. We analyzed statements by European Union representatives, Serbian government officials, the Rio Tinto company, as well as civil society groups, local activists, and members of the affected communities. This follows and expands on similar previous work by authors such as Šterić (2023), providing continuity in examining the discursive field around the project.

Rather than limiting the analysis to formal political actors, the study also incorporates broader societal narratives, especially those voiced by citizens through protests, petitions, and public forums. These narratives often invoke non-economic dimensions of harm, which are typically marginalized in official risk assessments. By analysing these narratives through the lens of Loss and Damage, the research brings attention to the lived realities and anticipatory fears of local populations.

The analysis follows key thematic concepts aligned with the GreenPaths project, focusing on how decarbonisation and energy transition policies generate specific local, sectoral, and systemic dynamics. At the project level, the study traces the effects of the Jadar mine on local communities and ecosystems, emphasising lived experiences, social cohesion, and environmental concerns, as expressed in the aforementioned sources. At the sectoral level, it explores how Serbia's lithium resources are framed within global renewable energy and battery supply chains, revealing dynamics of resource dependency and integration into low-carbon markets. At the case level, it is situated within broader geopolitical and economic trends of new extractivism and green industrialisation on the semi-periphery, particularly in the context of Serbia's EU accession process. This layered lens allows for a nuanced exploration of the distributive, procedural, and recognitional dimensions of environmental justice that underpin the GreenPaths research agenda.

## 4 Findings and results

### Findings and Results

This case study examines the controversial Jadar lithium mining project in Western Serbia, led by the multinational corporation Rio Tinto. Defined as a critical raw material, necessary for the EU's green transition process, lithium extraction in Serbia has become a flashpoint for debates over environmental justice, national sovereignty, and the EU's approach to sustainability.

Following the political and economic post-socialist collapse of the 1990s, Serbia entered a period of privatisation and economic development based on foreign direct investment. During this time, Rio Tinto began exploring mineral deposits, aided by Serbian geological data gathered during the era of public ownership. In 2004, a lithium-boron mineral called Jadarite was discovered near Loznica. “At the time it made global news for a very different reason, it was concluded that it has a chemical composition which is almost identical to the fictional kryptonite from the Superman franchise, but its real usage became evident many years later” (Djukanovic, 2025). The International Mineralogical Association officially recognised it in 2006 (Gautneb et al. 2019).

Rio Tinto claims to have invested over \$450 million in research (Paul, Tan, and Menon, 2022), planning to extract lithium carbonate, boric acid, and sodium sulfate from the site. These materials are critical for the green and digital transition, and lithium is listed as a strategic and critical raw material in the CRMA (2024) important for battery production (EC, 2023). However, the planned project has been mired in controversy since its announcement.

From 2019 onward, the Jadar project faced growing opposition from scientists, experts, local communities, and civil society groups (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024). Critics raised concerns about environmental degradation, groundwater contamination, and violations of legal procedures during the exploration phase. The local movement “Ne damo Jadar” (We are not giving Jadar) and the national Alliance of Environmental Organisations (SEOS) became the symbol of resistance, emphasising the rights of communities over extractivist development.

By early 2022, mass protests had spread across Serbia, including highway blockades and widespread civil disobedience. The public backlash forced the Serbian government to revoke Rio Tinto’s licenses and formally halt the project. In early April 2022, the Alliance of Environmental Organisations of Serbia and the Kreni-Promeni movement submitted a People’s Initiative to the National Assembly, which proposed the Law on Permanent Prohibition of Exploration of Mining of Boron and Lithium in the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia, containing more than 38000 signatures (Vujasin, 2022). It took more than two years for this initiative to be discussed in the Parliament, where it was rejected by the ruling majority (Todorović, 2024). Over 300,000 people had signed a petition against the mine, about 5% of Serbia’s population (KreniPromeni, n.d.).

It became clear that the lithium exploitation project was back in full force in July 2024 when the Constitutional Court overturned the Serbian government’s decision to halt the Jadar project, stating that it was “not by the Constitution and the law” (Reuters, 2024). Days after that, a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Serbia and the EU ( EC, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2023) to forge closer cooperation in the areas of sustainable raw materials, battery production chains, and electric vehicles (EVs). Reacting to these change of decisions, and signing of the MoU, a local activist organisation organised a big protest in Belgrade, which gathered more than 50,000 people, making it one of the biggest protests in last few decades in Belgrade, which ended with blockades of the highway and main railway stations (DW, 2024).

One of the reasons for public opposition to this project lies in various uncertainties surrounding it. Citizens and academics and experts opposing the project frequently emphasise that it is unclear how the project will be implemented and that both the

company and authorities often make claims that cannot be verified through available documentation (Stevanović, Šolaja, and Radmilović, 2024). Moreover, Rio Tinto lacks experience with the technologies and methods planned for the extraction and processing of lithium from jadarite ore, which further increases distrust in the process (Ivanović et al., 2023). Additionally, drawing from the example of environmental devastation around Zijin's copper mines in eastern Serbia near the cities of Bor and Majdanpek, where authorities appear to be doing little to protect local residents from foreign interests, people in the Jadar region fear they may become yet another sacrifice zone (Đukanović, 2022). To provide context for the conditions in which this project is being proposed, it is important to note that Serbia is one of the countries with the highest levels of income inequality (Eurostat 2022), corruption (Trading Economic 2022), and the lowest levels of political and media freedom in Europe (Freedom House 2025).

The potential social, economic, and environmental impacts of lithium mining in Serbia are causing significant divisions within society. On one side are Rio Tinto and pro-lithium mining representatives of the national and local governments, who claim the project will substantially contribute to the economic development of western Serbia and improve the quality of life for local communities (Todorović, 2024). On the other side are primarily the local residents, who view the project with deep concern, as well as a broader public who fear that the area around the city of Loznica will become a sacrifice zone, leading only to environmental destruction and displacement of local people (Đukanović, 2022).

In 2020, a Spatial Plan for a Special Purpose Area (Ministarstvo građevinarstva, saobraćaja i infrastrukture, 2020) was published for the implementation of the Jadar jadarite mineral exploitation and processing project. The plan was prepared by the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, at the request of "Rio Sava Exploration d.o.o. Belgrade." The spatial plan area covers 293.91 km<sup>2</sup>, including 22 statistical settlements within the territory of the city of Loznica and the municipality of Krupanj in western Serbia. It covers 34.2% of the territory of city of Loznica, and 32.0% of the planned area consists of agricultural land. The agricultural income of 10 villages in and around the Jadar valley is estimated at around 82 million euros per year (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020), a benefit much higher than the potential profit from the ore rent, which is estimated to be less than 40 million euros per year (Šoškić, Popović, Mijatović, and Drakulić, 2024).

According to the 2011 Census, 19,697 people live in the 22 settlements covered by the Spatial Plan (Ministarstvo građevinarstva, saobraćaja i infrastrukture, 2020). The Plan also states that the economic structure of this area is characterised by a dominance of agricultural activity and industry, along with relatively developed sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and trade.

Since the area where the mine is planned is rich in fertile land and many people engage in agriculture, the primary concern of the local population is the risk of pollution and destruction of farmland. Moreover, both locally and nationally, citizens and experts opposing the lithium mining project often argue that fertile land must not be sacrificed for mining. As they say, "fertile land can be turned into a mine, but a mine can never be turned back into farmland" (Đukanović, 2022). This concern is also fueled by the fact that during the exploration phase in the Jadar River region, toxic substances were leaked from exploratory drill holes, leading to the destruction of nearby crops and the death of

animals (Đorđević et al., 2024). In the research which focuses on the effects of the project on the local population, it is evident that citizens interviewed expressed deep concern for the future of the Jadar region and their own livelihoods (Đukanović, 2022). They also felt deceived, as prior to the publication of the Spatial Plan, local residents had been assured by the company that the scope of the project would be significantly smaller.

As one of the locals from the Jadar valley stated: “ *They [locals of the Jadar Valley] had no idea what was to come. They were slowly cooked like a frog, they [the Rio Tinto employees] infiltrated the society, donated to schools, came into their houses to visit, for Slavas<sup>9</sup> and so on. They were convincing locals that it is a very small area in question, and they presented the project in a completely different way.*” (Đukanović, 2022).

Moreover, it was noted that company employees had spent years developing friendly and close relationships with the local population, which only deepened the distrust once the full extent of the project was revealed. Further distrust stemmed from the company’s purchase of properties in the Jadar valley, within the area where the mine is planned, and reports of intense pressure placed on those who refused to sell their land. After purchasing the properties, Rio Tinto reportedly began dismantling houses, removing roofs and destroying other household elements, which was seen as an indirect tactic to intimidate and discourage those still resisting the sale of their land (Latković, 2023).

In contrast to the concerns of local residents, Rio Tinto and government officials maintain that the project will bring economic and social development to the region. For years, Rio Tinto has been running financial support programs (Rio Tinto Serbia, n.d.), offering donations to various cultural, sports, agricultural, and community organisations and events. Government representatives and public institutions have also emphasised the economic benefits of the project, portraying it as Serbia’s greatest development opportunity by linking lithium to the oil discovery that transformed Norway’s economy (Politika, 2024). Key political figures, including the President, the former Prime Minister (now Speaker of Parliament), and the Minister of Mining and Energy, have promoted the project as a once-in-a-lifetime chance for Serbia and especially for the Jadar region.

According to the only available economic study on the project, published by the Rio Tinto (Ergo Strategy Group, 2023), the Jadar mine is expected to create over 1,300 permanent jobs throughout its operational period, for which is still uncertain when the operation would start, but it is predicted to last for around 40 years (Rio Tinto Srbija, n.d.), along with 3,500 temporary jobs during the construction of the processing plant. It is claimed that the city of Loznica will receive €25 million annually from taxes, and that Serbia would earn €696 million in total over the mine’s 40-year lifespan.

However, in a critical analysis published by economists and professors from the University of Belgrade (Šoškić et al, 2024), it is argued that Serbia’s projected income - €696 million over 40 years, or just €17.4 million annually - is overstated, especially when considering that it does not account for the state’s infrastructure costs to enable the project. Notably, the Jadar project is reportedly the only Rio Tinto project in the world where the host country is responsible for covering all road, railway, and supporting infrastructure expenses. In addition, Serbia would not hold any ownership stake in the project, meaning it relinquishes full control over its mineral resources. Meanwhile, in the event of environmental disasters, such as flooding, Serbia would bear the cost of damage mitigation (Šoškić, et al, 2024). The government also plans to issue large

subsidies for the construction of an electric battery factory by a company that, notably, lacks experience in mass production of such technologies. Altogether, these circumstances suggest that the project could cost Serbia more than it delivers in benefits. Experts concluded that the planned activities, especially the disposal of industrial waste, would cause significant harm to biodiversity in the entire area of operation.

Environmental damage is among the public's greatest concerns regarding the Rio Tinto project and lithium mining in Serbia. The environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not made available to the public until mid-2024, when the company released a draft version (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024). While company representatives and government officials claim the mining will be done in line with the highest environmental standards, local residents and members of the scientific community remain sceptical.

Numerous academics expressed concern around the project which culminated in a special conference with the findings presented and later published (Stevanović et al., 2024). For example, (Ristić et al. 2024) noted that constructing a waste disposal site in the Štavica stream basin could disrupt the area's hydrological and sediment regimes and degrade its biological diversity. Furthermore, implementing this aspect of the project would require the removal of 2,600 cubic meters of forest biomass. Professors and researchers from the Faculty of Biology at the University of Belgrade, who were responsible for biodiversity studies in the Jadar valley, concluded that over 30% of registered habitat types in the area fall into priority conservation categories (Krizmanić et al., 2024). They warned that if the jadarite exploitation project proceeds, it will result in numerous negative impacts, many of which will be irreversible or only partially reversible for the area's ecosystems. The final recommendation of the above-mentioned conference was clear: the only effective measure to prevent the destruction of biodiversity is to abandon the planned exploitation and processing of jadarite.

Additional field research done by Đorđević et al. (2024), confirmed that during the exploratory phase, toxic water leaked from drill holes. Traces of arsenic, boron, and lithium were detected in groundwater, surrounding soil, and in the Jadar River's flow up to 20 km downstream from the test sites. Given that the planned mine is located in a region heavily reliant on agriculture, these findings have heightened concern, especially in light of the Serbian government's recent legal changes that increased permissible levels of arsenic and boron in soil (Đorđević et al., 2024).

In statements addressed to the Ministry of Mining and Infrastructure and the Ministry of Environmental Protection, representatives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts concluded, after reviewing presentations and available documents, that the Jadar Project lacks sufficient transparency and clarity (Stevanović, Šolaja, and Radmilović, 2024). They emphasised that there is not enough information available to determine either the profitability of the project or its ultimate environmental impact.

## Discourse analysis on Jadar Project: EU, Government and Opposition

We have undertaken discourse analysis of public statements from official political actors: EU officials, representatives of the ruling coalition in Serbia, and opposition party representatives. Discourse analysis treats public statements as social products; therefore, it focuses on which strategic goals are being pursued in the discourse and

ways the abovementioned actors position themselves in alliance or in contrast based on the relevant audiences they are addressing.

The time frame analysed spans from September 2021 until October 10th, 2024. This period is taken due to major events starting with first massive protests in the autumn of 2021, declarative revocation of the project by authorities, Serbia and the EU signing lithium mining agreement and the most visited protest in August 2024, sparked by the public launching of the Rio Tinto project by the government after they convincingly won the repeated Belgrade, and regular municipal elections in June 2024, while first Belgrade elections and parliamentary elections were held in December 2023. On October 10th, the Serbian Parliament rejected the bill submitted by 86 MPs to the Law on Mining and Geological Explorations that would ban exploration, mining, and processing of lithium and boron.

## **EU officials**

EU officials consider three target groups while positioning themselves on the Jadar Project: EU member states and institutions, the Serbian government and its citizens, and Environmental groups.

The EU Ambassador to Serbia, Emanuel Giuffre's stance from 2021 that *if* the project is to be realised, strict environmental standards need to be imposed (Beta, 2021). On the contrary, a succinct message was sent when the EC opened negotiation cluster no. 4 "Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity" at the peak of the anti-lithium mining protests in December 2021 (Government of Serbia, 2021):

Officials are direct when it comes to linking the dependency of Serbia's EU candidacy status and lithium mining while putting economic prosperity of Serbia in the spotlight: Sefcovic, EU commission Vice President in charge of the "EGD": *EU candidate Serbia could be the first European country to command the whole chain needed to manufacture EVs, which starts with lithium mining* (Reuters, 2019). Further, he explicitly added that EC wants Serbia in the EU as soon as possible and that the Jadar project will only speed up the process (N1 Beograd, 2024), thereby directly linking Serbia's EU accession with its implementation of the Jadar Project.

While the Serbian government attempts to assure its citizens of highest world ecology standards by referring to EU regulations or just the "Germans", the EC clearly addresses it is the responsibility of institutions in Serbia (Vreme, 2024), with the sole responsibility of the "project organisers" to submit a report on the status of the project every two years, framing the Jadar project in the same terms as any other potentially strategic operation that can be stopped even if declared strategic by the EC. On the other hand, the German chancellor supported president Aleksandar Vucic when jointly signing the MoU (EU and Serbia, 2024), noting that the project can only work if there is *"compliance with the highest standards of environmental protection, and Germany will help in this"* (Radio Free Europe, 2024) stretching further to present his effort and determination when presenting that he has talked to the head of Rio Tinto (Reuters, 2024).

EU officials are trying to adapt to widespread discontent and demonstrate awareness of public sentiment regarding the Project. For example, Franziska Bratner, member of the ruling Greens and State Secretary at the German Ministry of the Economy (Spasić,

2024), claims that the EU not only acknowledges resistance, it recognises that the resistance was justified and the EU has shown its democratic virtue and patron role by reacting to it and “calling for a change in concept”. This statement obliterates all previous ignorance of mass protests, as officials were sensing the magnitude of the project’s opposition. Therefore, this narrative appeared 3 days after the protest in Belgrade with c.50.000 people, rating it among the 10 most populous public assemblies in Serbia (Arhiv javnih skupova, 2024). Along with evaluating protests as legitimate, Branter directs recommendations that could be understood as threats: *“It’s not a question of ‘whether the project will happen’, but ‘whether Rio Tinto’s project will be carried out with European partners or the Chinese’. I don’t believe a Chinese-Serbian partnership would be better for democracy, the environment, and the local population”*(Spasić, 2024), implying Serbia’s dependency on foreign direct investments and probably referring to existing mines operated by Chinese companies.

This way, the EU is positioning itself primarily as a benevolent supervisor of Serbia’s economic progress and EU candidacy. As if to say, ‘we will intervene when you drift away from the desired path, but you are alone on that path, and remember it is surely the best one for you’.

A critical voice strongly standing out among EU officials is that of Thomas Waitz, a member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the European Greens. *“Let’s not repeat the mistakes of the past, when the hunt for key resources for energy led to pollution and the undermining of societies”*, positioning the project within the wider issue of mining companies exploiting countries with weaker environmental regulations (European Greens, 2024).

To conclude, besides a few dissonant voices, the EU appears unified in its narrative and actions (e.g. visiting delegations) regarding the Jadar project. Framing it as part of the EGD and efforts to decarbonise the continent, the EU insists on greater progress for Serbia’s economy and its path towards EU membership (Živanović, 2021). While Serbia’s responsibility for the course of the project is presented autonomous and critical for national sovereignty, Europe simultaneously presents itself as a guarantor of ecological standards and fair working conditions (EBA250, 2021). When asked to more precisely formulate its jurisdictions on the course of the project, the EU suddenly becomes an expert consultant that monitors the situation and provides assistance while control of the project is in “protege’s” hands.

## **Government of Serbia**

Government representatives have homogeneously stood in favour of the Jadar Project (Government of Serbia, 2020) and its overarching potential: *“I expect that a full chain of added value will be established in cooperation with the state, not only for the Mačva district and the city of Loznica but for the whole of Serbia”*(Office of the President of the Republic of Serbia, 2021), until it was declaratively revoked in January 2022 (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024; Government of Serbia, 2022). Before the creation of a general negative stance, the project was part of the narrative of successful attractions of foreign direct investments (FDI), which is implicitly represented as the best and only economic development model for Serbia (Ralev, 2022). With the explosion of protests,

this just transformed into a more cautious support that emphasised care for the highest environmental standards (Serbia Business, 2021) to be implemented, whilst the overriding economic benefit for the country necessitated the Project as a big developmental opportunity in the global competition of energy transition. After the formal revocation of the project, the government, led by President Vucic, demonstrated continued support for the project in the form of grief for a huge, missed opportunity (Tatalović, 2024). In line with the need for economic development, the project was presented as important for the population's survival, as the Prime Minister argued that an even economic development in Serbia was a prerequisite for reversing the trend of depopulation (Jelovac, 2021). The Jadar project was presented not only as a promising mine, but a chance that would potentially enable Serbia to control (part) the value chain of the production (B92, 2021), implicitly contrasting it with other FDIs where final products are assembled in the investor's country of origin, where most of the profits are reaped.

With the outbreak of local and national resistance, officials became aware that they are not trusted at all, and subsequently made attempts to draw legitimacy from insisting on the highest global and EU standards, while national laws tagged along with them as a necessary garnish (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

In the period before the parliamentary elections of 2022, officials had several strategies to position themselves as the protectors of the national interest in contrast to the opposition, presenting them as "grabbers" who were politically benefiting from the resisting the Project on the backs of the people (Kurir, 2021). Along with accusing the opposition of "scavenging" on the topic for its increased public profile, another form of delegitimising their request included characterising them as "*paid from abroad to brainwash the local population about the project*" (Danas, 2021). Another narrative was that the resistance is organised by a competitor company that would take over the project (Radio Free Europe, 2021). These narratives are placed so they can work individually, but are broad and fluid enough that they do not necessarily contradict each other and therefore, can also work together in the form of sketches for various conspiracy theories.

As the protectors of the national interest with democracy as one of the core values, officials insisted on the government's transparency and the need for citizens to have all the information before making a decision. This represented an introduction to the topic of a referendum, "*whether at the municipal or district level*", which was one of the alternative plans to legitimately confront the resistance (Radio Free Europe, 2021).

Another strategy aimed to present the government as responsible implementers of contracts made by the previous governments with the current government painting themselves as victims that are fighting to repair the economic damage and criminality left by the former governments (Radio Free Europe, 2021; RTV, 2022).

After the revocation of the spatial plan in January 2022, official statements seemed largely focused on missed opportunities, mistakes and regrets (Danas, 2022) for bowing to the pressure of the protests, led by foreign political actors (Politika, 2023): "*The ringleaders received the money and destroyed the country together with us who were stupid and naive to accept this impudence and this 'force' that thought it could do anything and I bitterly regret it*" (N1, 2022). The new Minister of Mining and Energy emphasised that Serbia is rich in some minerals on the EU critical raw materials list and

noted that economies such as France, Germany, and Italy are preparing for decarbonisation through new industries (Politika, 2023). According to the Minister, certain environmental damage of the mine is the necessary cost of exploitation (Insajder TV, 2023), which represents a shift in the discourse since the government felt their position was strengthened; previously, environmental damage was never discussed without sugarcoating it with promises of significant economic development.

As noted above, the next crucial event was the overruling of the project stoppage by the Constitutional Court (Reuters, 2024) and the signing of the MoU between Serbia and the EU. Addressing environmental concerns in light of explicit support from the EU partners, Vučić (2024) insisted that the project will not commence without guarantees from European partners: *“Until the Germans guarantee us that we will have clean rivers and mountains, that we will also have the disposal for the landfill done in accordance with all European standards, we will not even try to start.”* (Vreme, 2024). Finally the president also invited the scientific community to participate in discussions about the project, emphasising transparency and the importance of scientific input in decision-making, albeit it a much later stage in the project’s discussion (Government of Serbia, 2024).

The rare examples of a critical tone coming from the ruling regime appeared in relation to the delay of the project, referring to allegations of Rio Tinto’s arrogance as reflected in the lack of public communication with the media and local community (Politika, 2024). This was an attempt to appease some government supporters and appearing as powerful in relation to the investor, whilst simultaneously distracting from concrete environmental concerns, a lack of transparency, and reported pressure on local citizens (Balkan Insight, 2022). This shift in rhetoric came just before the 2024 mass protest in Belgrade, after which the President suddenly declares a new, negative stance on Rio Tinto, claiming that he will personally remain most suspicious in the case the government decides to approve the project (Danas, 2024). Again, we have a demonstration of centralised power by presenting the institutions as a one man band, combined with brief skepticism about the project meant to prevent potential rebellion among the “swing” public in the critical period.

When considering key audiences of state officials, we can divide them into: citizens of Serbia that are either supporting the mine or are “neutral” regarding to it. Secondly, the project has majoritarian support coming from EU institutions, therefore the current government must create an image of a stable, consistent actor able to realise Strategic Projects for the EU. The inconsistencies in the government’s narrative regarding partners from the West and the future of the project (N1 Belgrade, 2024) seem to be allowed without major reactions from the EU (RFE/RL, 2024). These inconsistencies serve the purpose of the government in portraying itself as democratic with (temporary) stoppage of the project and as a sovereign protector by defending its citizens from foreign interest. The possibility of the dialogue in his discourse is terminated, as opponents to the project become enemies by default. When addressing opponents as traitors and actors financed by outside interest groups (KoSSev, 2024), the state is addressing the rest of the population. Along with continuous portrayal of the project as a crucial development chance that will advance Serbia, Vucic positions himself as a sincere protector of national interest, resisting internal and external attacks (Danas, 2024). This fits into a wider narrative that is applied generally, where Vucic identifies

himself as David while all the opposing actors can –interchangeably or together– embody Goliath (Vasovic, 2021).

## **Opposition parties**

Opposition parties were somewhat united in their stances regarding lithium mining, and with Rio Tinto project as its main representative, they were opposed to it, with views ranging on a spectrum of introducing a moratorium on lithium mining for 20 years in the Jadar Valley (Balkan Insight, 2024), which was primarily introduced by local ecological organizations formed by agricultural workers (Reuters, 2022), to the stances where lithium exploitation is not something that should be denied *prima facie* (Insajder, 2024). This anticipates some of the following preconditions to be met before any project could be considered: an unbiased ecological assessment study; technology for the excavation and processing of the lithium is globally improved; and the rule of law that guarantees high environmental standards are imposed in Serbia (Euronews, 2023; Danas, 2023).

The pro-European representatives have been talking about the pressure of (Western) foreign actors when it comes to lithium mining, in the period before the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2022 (Nova.rs 2021; Novosti, 2021): *“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”*(N1, 2021). These pressures have consolidated Anti-western narratives among the public, the right-wing opposition, and even in some pro-European parties. Despite the abovementioned pressures, all of the pro-European coalitions have positioned themselves firmly against Rio Tinto in 2022. Elections (Danas, 2022). The parliamentary elections in 2023 had one big, dominantly Pro-Western coalition and a few right-wing coalitions. Several of the right-wing parties merged with the ruling coalition after the elections, which was expected due to their ties and narratives; therefore, focus will be on the biggest pro-EU coalition. The main slogan of one big opposition list was “Serbia against Violence” (Serbia Elects, 2024) due to the mass shootings and the government’s reaction from May 2023 that sparked protests against widespread violence (Al Jazeera, 2023). These protests have evolved into resistance against the general state of affairs and the ruling coalition, which resulted in the aforementioned elections, where the Jadar project was marginalised. The opposition lost in the elections, which the EU Parliament evaluated as unjust, calling for an independent investigation (European Parliament, 2024).

This is one of the more important exemplars of the opposition’s necessity to balance its critiques towards the EU and its institutions. Most of the opposition has a platform aligned to the pathway towards Serbia accession to the EU, which situates the EU as its strategic partners and, attempts to get external support (N1 Belgrade, 2024), as Serbian institutions and media space are biased and lack democratic progress (European Commission, 2025). On the other hand, other EU institutions are turning a blind eye to the very same institutional violations when their interests are in question: as evidenced by the overruling of revocation of the Spatial Plan designed for Jadar (Balkan Insight, 2024) project and the visit of EU officials to sign the MoU right after (Government of Serbia, 2024).

In addition to this, with regard to the Jadar project, opposition finds itself in particularly complicated position. When it comes to internal audiences, it addresses its supporters, trying simultaneously to gain sympathies from passive voters and disenchanted ruling majority voters, reversed by continuous government's support for the Jadar project. Simultaneously, they are addressing the EU institutions regarding the misuses, law violations and pressures imposed by the government, state institutions and Rio Tinto (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024). With the growing anti-western sentiment and disenchantment with the EU (Ivković, 2024), the paradoxical balancing of the critical voices towards proponents of Jadar Project while maintaining the vision of European future with virtues of democracy, social justice and environmental standards became complicated. While European institutions represent the main source of international support for the opposition, majoritarian support for the Jadar project from the EU is a risk for the opposition to lose an already declining support.

## 5 Main results

Based on the case study of the Jadar project in Western Serbia, the main findings reveal that the pursuit of a green transition, when mediated by a specific socio-political and geographical context of Serbia, can generate severe environmental and social costs that critically undermine its sustainability and perceived benefits and create social division. The Jadar case acts as a cautionary tale, illustrating how the global demand for critical raw materials can exacerbate local injustices and create potential for creation of new sacrifice zones in the name of a greener future.

The purported benefits of the project are predominantly macroeconomic: Rio Tinto and the Serbian government promote the Jadar mine as a catalyst for regional development, promising over 1,300 permanent jobs and significant state revenue totalling €696 million over 40 years (Rio Tinto Srbija, n.d.). Furthermore, the project is observed as Serbia's contribution to the European Union's green and digital transition, supplying essential lithium for electric vehicle batteries (EU Batteries Regulation 2023/1542). This alignment with the EU's strategic interests was partially formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding in 2023, positioning Serbia within a broader European battery value chain.

However, these benefits are heavily contested when weighed against the profound environmental and social costs identified in the case study. Environmentally, the project threatens irreversible damage to a fertile agricultural region. Expert analyses, including from the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Biology, conclude that the exploitation would destroy biodiverse habitats, over 30% of which are priority conservation areas (Krizmanić et al., 2024). The planned disposal of mining waste in the Štavica stream basin risks disrupting hydrological systems (Ristić et al. 2024), and previous exploratory drilling has already led to toxic leaks of arsenic, boron, and lithium, contaminating groundwater and soil up to 20km downstream (Đorđević et al., 2024).

Socially, the costs are manifested as community disintegration, a deep erosion of trust, and a sense of injustice. The local population, who mostly work in agricultural, faces the direct threat of displacement and the destruction of their livelihoods. There are several

tactics of purchasing and dismantling properties, creating intense pressure and intimidation for holdouts. This has fostered a pervasive sense of betrayal, exacerbated by the company's initial concealment of the project's full scale and the government's failure to ensure transparency. Public distrust is amplified by Serbia's context of high corruption and low media freedom, and by the vivid precedent of environmental devastation from around the Zijin copper mines, which has cemented the fear of the Jadar region becoming another "sacrifice zone."

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

The turbulent 1990s in Yugoslavia deeply affected the mining sector. UN sanctions led to oil scarcity, a lack of spare parts, and redirected fuel and explosives to war efforts. Skilled workers left, and state-led geological surveys were halted as capitalism was reintroduced and socially owned capital dismantled. The role and rights of the state to manage public mineral resources declined in favour of private investors' interests. This corresponds to Rio Tinto's expression of interest into Serbian boron reserves in the 90s which led to their discovery of the mineral jadarite, all building upon the explorations and maps created in the period of systemic public management of geological resources. This trend can also be traced in the changes to the mining and geological survey legislation.

The law of 1995. (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 1995) provides the rights of a private entity to be the bearer of both exploration and exploitation rights . But, the exploitation permit was granted only after a public auction. The legal changes of 2006, which was a period marked by neoliberal reforms, resulted in the public bidding process being dropped from the law (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2006). The law of 2011 (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2011) kept the same approach recognizing the possibility of "the research permit holder, that is, the user of the certificate of resources and reserves of mineral raw materials and geothermal resources" to be the exploitation permit.

The biggest changes, however, were introduced in 2015. These changes established the right of the holder of the reserve certificate to automatically obtain the right to exploitation (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2015). The last changes brought a very big difference which is especially important when it comes to investment-state disputes (ISDS).

The changes introduced to the Serbian Mining Law in 2015 that guarantee to the holder of the reserve certificate to automatically obtain the right to exploitation grants them the 'legitimate expectation of profit'. This is important bearing in mind that Serbia has concluded a Bilateral Treaty on Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments that entered into effect in 2007 and is applicable when it comes to Project Jadar as Rio Tinto the mining company is considered as a British entity. These changes basically guarantee the right to exploit in the case in which reserves are found gives the Investor an advantage in the dispute.

In recent years, the EU has shifted its focus toward adopting legal frameworks aimed at reducing its dependency on China and increasing security in light of growing tensions caused by wars on the periphery of Europe. In an effort to overcome resource dependency on China and to achieve the goals set by the Green Deal, the EU adopted the CRMA in 2024, which defines the critical raw materials necessary for implementing the digital and green transitions (EC, 2024a). Among these materials is lithium, discovered in Serbia in the early 2000s.

In addition to the CRMA, the EU Battery Regulation also emphasizes the importance of lithium for the production of batteries essential for these transitions (European Parliament & Council, 2023). The adoption of this regulation led to the signing of the MoU, which between the EU and the Republic of Serbia. This memorandum defined the strengthening of strategic partnerships between the two parties regarding critical raw materials, batteries, and electric vehicles (EVs) (European Commission, 2024b). The document states that this cooperation should lead to improved political relations, economic growth in both Serbia and the EU, and also assist in Serbia's EU accession process. The significance of critical raw materials in Serbia's accession process is underscored by the fact that among the "Main EU legislative proposals or policies targeted" listed in the EU Transparency Register for the company Rio Tinto, "Serbian EU accession" is included (EU Transparency Register, 2024).

This case study raises the question of how all this affects investigates how these policies impact the local Jadar community but also and the country Serbia as a whole, raising the key question: Does this transition bring local benefits, or is it in fact a sacrificial process during what is called a just transition? Lithium is a mineral primarily intended for use in the automotive industry and electric vehicle production. However, the share of electric vehicles in Serbia is just 0.5996%, a figure achieved largely thanks to significant subsidies the government provides for EV purchases (Eurostat, 2023), which often leads the public to conclude that this mineral will not be used to meet local needs.

As this project has not yet been launched, primarily due to strong public opposition, its potential impacts on the community and environment remain unclear and are mostly reduced to predictions based on Rio Tinto company documents, which have been revised multiple times. In our case study, we aim to show the impacts of the green transition on Serbia, a country in the EU accession process, i.e., a semi-peripheral country, through discourse analysis of various political actors as a continuation of some previous analysis done by others (e.g. Šterić, 2023). We begin with a discourse analysis of EU officials, then representatives of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, and finally opposition actors. We chose to expand the final section beyond just opposition politicians to include frequent arguments from the broader public, highlighting the social impact of the project, especially through the presentation of non-economic losses within the "Loss and Damage" framework (UNFCCC, n.d.).

## Non-economic losses

Aside from the economic risks discussed above, we summarise other potential risks and less tangible consequences the project would likely cause. These impacts correspond directly to intangible Loss and Damage, as defined under the Warsaw International

Mechanism for Loss and Damage (UNFCCC, n.d.), which emphasises harms that cannot be quantified or restored through financial compensation—such as cultural loss, disruption of social cohesion, and the degradation of ecosystems that underpin community identity and wellbeing.

A significant shift from farms to pits and waste facilities is not a neutral conversion of land use but a transformation of the social ecology of the Jadar region. This includes the erosion of farming livelihoods, the breaking of intergenerational ties to land, and the weakening of local food systems. Even in a best-case scenario of compliance with “highest standards,” the baseline alteration of landscapes and waterscapes introduces irreversible changes to the lived environment, resulting in psychological stress, uncertainty, and the loss of place-based identity.

When it comes to a traditional lifestyle lasting for centuries, it would be significantly changed as a great amount of agricultural and livestock farming land would be lost through repurposing. In addition, Paulje necropolis, located nearby, is one of the biggest central Balkans cemeteries from the Bronze Age (Filipović, Bulatović, and Gligorić, 2022)

The realisation of the project would endanger the ecosystem in the long term, with 145 species of both flora and fauna in the area having the status of protected species (Ministry of Environmental Protection, Republic of Serbia, 2022).

### Deeper conflicts within the local community

It must be considered that the Jadar project has divided the small community into those willing to cooperate with the company and sell the land and/or house, and those opposed to it. We can easily predict the consequences (Bebbington et al., 2008; Marca Lazo, 2022; Roche et al., 2024; Jerez, Garcés, & Torres, 2021, Velicu, I., & Kaika, M, 2017) for the people who do not have resources for migration outside of the area in case the mine opens. With the decline of agriculture and livestock farming, along with economic activity around them, some of the residents would be negatively incentivised to work for Rio Tinto. In the eyes of the others, that would make them collaborators.

### Political demobilisation

As mentioned, about 5% of Serbia’s population has signed the petition against the mine, while some of the most populous gatherings in recent history have been sparked by this project. These have gathered people across the political spectrum along with those considering the project not as a political question, but as a question of “survival” (Rajković, 2022; Perisic 2025). The struggle that preceded major opposition to Rio Tinto was “Defend the rivers of the Old Mountains”, where the locals and people all over the country joined, representing a rare and successful conservation projects. With this halted construction of mini hydropower plants in the area of Old Mountains, people became more hopeful and trustworthy about the efforts of local environmental movements.

The Jadar Valley is one of numerous active exploration sites in Serbia managed by a variety of foreign companies. With the Jadar project implementation, investors and authorities in other places in Serbia would have a project to point to in the media, while, more importantly, a lost battle over this project could significantly weaken any future conservation efforts. This would work in two ways: other locals and all the actors joined in the anti-lithium struggle would demobilise due to defeat in the battle, joined by the wide ideological spectrum of opposition parties, consensus in the scientific community, and most importantly, people from all over Serbia coming to rallies in Gornje Nedeljice and the capital. To pinpoint again, even the declarative stoppage of the project was a precedent for the current government, and they would not have even considered it if the public opinion polls were not showing the magnitude of the opposition towards it.

Taken together, the Jadar case shows that the pursuit of “green” growth in a semi-peripheral context like Serbia is experienced less as an opportunity and more as an unfolding loss. Interpreted through the lens of Loss and Damage, the project entails not only projected material harms—pollution, biodiversity loss, displacement—but also anticipatory and already-felt non-economic losses: erosion of trust in institutions, weakening of intergenerational ties to land, and a profound sense of uncertainty about the future. These forms of harm are not easily captured by conventional cost-benefit analyses or narrow transition metrics, yet they are central to how local communities understand what is at stake. The discourse analysis demonstrates that while EU and government actors narrate the project as a contribution to decarbonisation and European integration, affected communities and critical experts frame it as a process of dispossession and imposed risk, challenging the idea that green transition is inherently benign or “just.”

From an environmental justice perspective, the Jadar project exemplifies intertwined distributive, procedural, and recognitional injustices. Distributively, environmental risks and livelihood losses are concentrated on a rural, economically vulnerable population, while the anticipated benefits are framed in terms of national growth and EU value chains. Procedurally, key decisions unfold through opaque negotiations, shifting legal frameworks, and belated or symbolic consultation, marginalising local knowledge and democratic participation. Recognitionally, the ways of life and territorial attachments of farmers and rural residents are treated as expendable in the name of European decarbonisation goals, marking the Jadar valley as a potential sacrifice zone for distant climate and industrial agendas. These dynamics are not accidental side-effects but are embedded in the multi-scalar governance of critical raw materials. Jadar is not only a local conflict over a mine but a paradigmatic example of how loss and damage, environmental justice claims, and sacrifice zone dynamics are produced and contested within contemporary green transition politics.

## 7 Recommendations

The Jadar case reveals how green transition policies, when shaped by geopolitical urgency and extractivist logics, can sideline community wellbeing, reproduce historical inequalities, and normalise the creation of sacrifice zones. To ensure that transition pathways in Serbia and similar semi-peripheral contexts align with principles of justice, democracy, and long-term socio-ecological sustainability, the following recommendations are proposed:

### **Embed non-economic Loss and Damage into transition governance**

Current regulatory and planning frameworks fail to account for cultural, social, and ecological harms that arise long before extraction begins. Serbia and the EU should: recognise intangible losses—erosion of trust, cultural displacement, community fragmentation, uncertainty—as legally relevant impacts within environmental and mining legislation. Require EIAs and strategic assessments to include indicators for non-economic Loss and Damage, co-designed with affected communities. Ensure that no mining project advances without clear, independently verified evidence that non-economic harms have been fully assessed and minimised.

### **Prevent the creation of sacrifice zones**

To avoid repeating patterns seen in other extractive regions such as Bor, policy must shift from managing harm to preventing it: Introduce legal “no-go zones” for mining in areas of high agricultural productivity, priority habitats, or significant cultural heritage. Require cumulative-impact assessments that evaluate the long-term, systemic risks of concentrating hazardous facilities in rural or economically vulnerable areas.

### **Rebalance transition policy away from extractive dependency**

The Jadar case demonstrates how semi-peripheral countries are pressured to serve external industrial supply chains rather than local transition goals. To counter this it is necessary to prioritise policies based on sufficiency, circularity, and material demand reduction (e.g., battery recycling, repairability standards, reuse targets) to lower reliance on primary mining. Reassess national energy, mobility and industrial strategies to ensure that potential critical raw materials extraction aligns with Serbia’s own transition priorities rather than primarily European industrial needs.

Lessons from Jadar call for a transition model that rejects the logic of sacrifice zones, recognises and prevents non-economic harms, and places democratic participation and community wellbeing at the centre of decision-making. Without these shifts, green transition policies risk repeating extractivist patterns under a new colour, deepening rather than resolving socio-environmental injustices in Serbia and beyond.

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