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There and Back Again: Extractive Diplomacy, Rule of Law Deterioration and Lithium Rush in Serbia

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Executive Summary

In June 2025, the European Commission approved the Jadar lithium and boron mining project in Serbia, led by Rio Tinto, as a “Strategic Project” under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA). Although the decision does not constitute an official environmental consent, it implies full alignment with EU’s environmental, social, and governance standards. However, the realities on the ground in Serbia paint a contrasting picture marked by democratic decline, weakened environmental governance, and broad societal opposition.

The project has emerged as a litmus test for EU conditionality and policy coherence in the Western Balkans. Serbia, classified as an electoral autocracy by leading democracy indices, has experienced significant rule of law deterioration, shrinking civic space, and deep political polarisation. Environmental procedures linked to the Jadar project have been consistently opaque and marked by irregularities. The Ministry of Environmental Protection approved an Environmental Impact Assessment scoping request submitted by Rio Tinto, despite reasonable complaints related to its incomplete scope, lack of data on waste, water consumption, and ore processing, and failure of the investor to disclose key environmental risks.

The EU and German leadership have framed the Jadar project as vital for Europe’s strategic autonomy, particularly regarding lithium supply for the automotive sector. Former Chancellors Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz both publicly supported the project, with Scholz emphasising its importance for resilient supply chains. However, such political endorsement has been accompanied by a failure to address Serbia’s poor enforcement of the environmental law, weak institutions, and lack of compliance with EU environmental and rule of law standards. While the CRMA Regulation requires that strategic projects in third countries meet the same environmental and social standards as those in the EU, the Jadar project’s procedural and legal context falls far short of these benchmarks.

Civil society actors, local communities in the Jadar Valley, environmental organisations, and segments of the political opposition have strongly opposed the project. Massive protests erupted between 2020 and 2022, culminating in the Serbian Government’s decision to annul the spatial plan for the Jadar project in January 2022. Yet, without meaningful consultation or policy dialogue, the project was reactivated in 2024, shortly before the signing of the EU-Serbia Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership on raw materials. Protesters have since returned to the streets, joined by a new wave of anti-corruption activism led by students, who view the project as symbolic of broader state capture and elite impunity.

Despite these weaknesses, the European Commission’s decision to list Jadar as a strategic project has proceeded without public participation, undermining the EU’s commitments under the Aarhus Convention. The Memorandum of Understanding with Serbia, signed in July 2024, also misrepresents the actual state of Serbia’s environmental legal framework, citing “significant progress” despite the absence of alignment with key EU directives. For example, the Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment laws referenced were adopted under controversial circumstances, without parliamentary debate, and remain only partially harmonised. Similarly, Serbia has failed to transpose and implement the Environmental Liability Directive and continues to violate its obligations under the Large Combustion Plants Directive.

The failure to acknowledge these issues in the official EU documentation has contributed to growing Euroscepticism in Serbia. Public opinion increasingly perceives the EU’s engagement as extractivist and transactional, prioritising raw material access over democratic reform. This perception undermines the EU’s credibility as a normative actor and risks weakening the broader enlargement agenda.

1.

About the Jadar Project

Rio Tinto lithium and boron mining project in the Jadar Valley (Western Serbia) has been a subject of contestation for years, revealing deep political polarisation in Serbia, structural deficiencies in environmental governance and the rule of law. The Serbian government presented the project as a strategic economic opportunity and political imperative

with regard to its contribution to the EU's raw materials supply. Nonetheless, the project has ignited widespread protests, exposed institutional weaknesses, and highlighted concerns about human rights, environmental protection, and democratic safeguards in Serbia.

The Jadar project timeline and key events ¹

2001

The Rio Tinto Group established Rio Sava Exploration Ltd, a subsidiary incorporated in Serbia for the purpose of conducting geological exploration activities

2004

Jadarite mineral, rich in lithium and boron, discovered in the Jadar River Valley in Western Serbia

2004 - 2017

Ministry of Mining and Energy issued exploration permits

March 2012

Draft Strategy for the Management of Mineral Resources until 2030 was submitted to the National Assembly.² It identifies lithium and boron exploitation in the Jadar Valley as key for mineral sector development, with exploitation deemed certain.³ There is no information confirming its adoption

July 2017

Signed Memorandum of Understanding between Government of Serbia, Rio Tinto Minerals Development Limited and Rio Sava Exploration Ltd in respect of the implementation of the Jadar project

October 2017

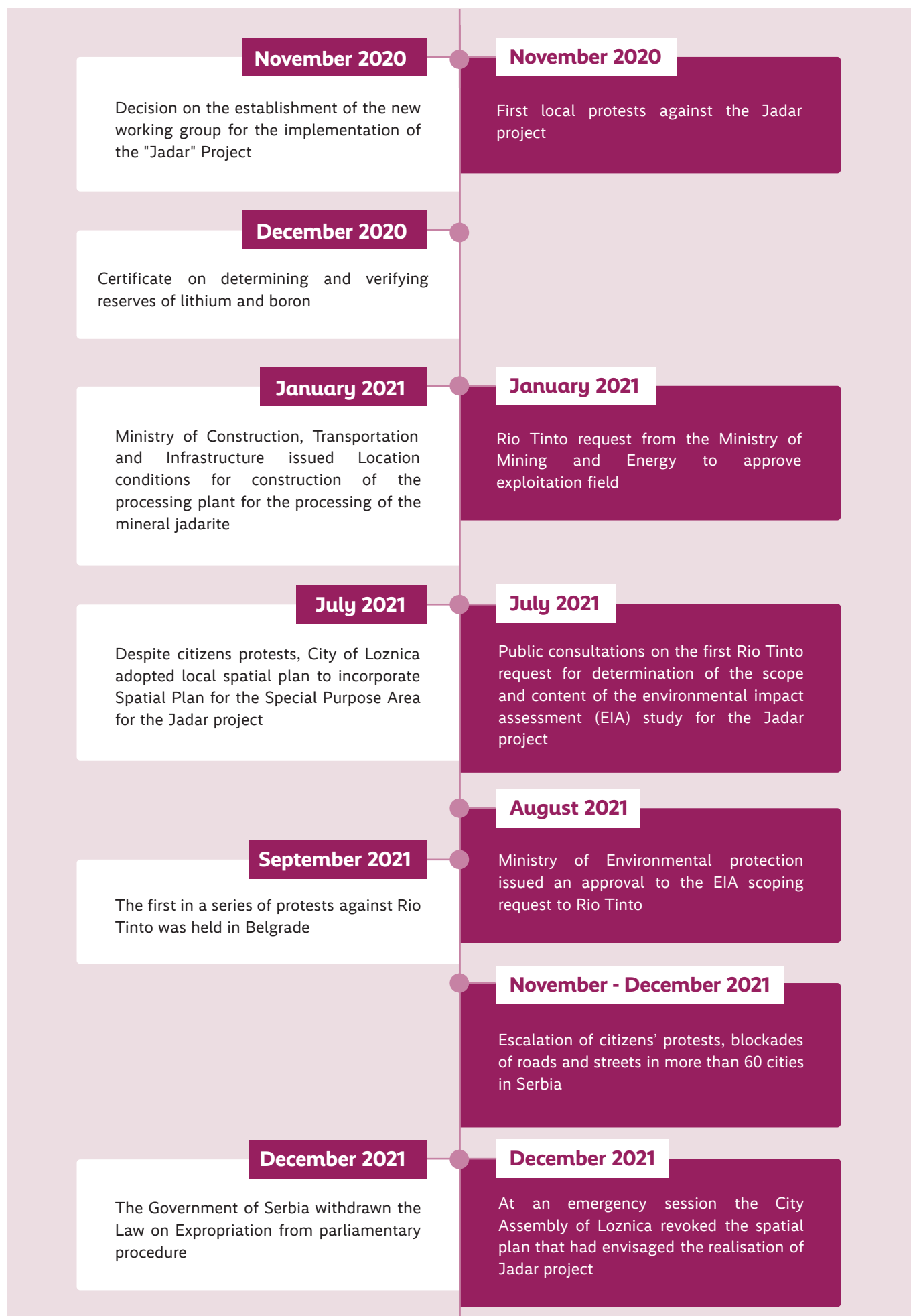
The Government of Serbia established first working group for implementation of the Jadar project

November & December 2019

Public consultation on the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the Jadarite Mineral Exploitation and Processing Project

February 2020

Adoption of the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the Jadarite Mineral Exploitation and Processing Project



January 2022

On 8 January, citizens in Serbia blocked roads for the fifth time, demanding that the Government revoke the Spatial Plan Decree for Rio Tinto's Jadar project

January 2022

On 20 January, The Government of Serbia annulled the Spatial Plan Decree for Rio Tinto's jadarite mine and processing plant, thereby invalidating all related decisions and permits

September 2023

Signed the Letter of Intent between the EU and Serbia. The Parties agree to work towards creating a strategic partnership and expanding their cooperation on critical raw materials (CRMs) and electric vehicles (EV) value chains, including materials, batteries, manufacturing and recycling

July 2024

On 20 July, EU signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the Serbian government on strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles

July 2024

The Serbian Constitutional Court issued a verdict and concluded that the Government exceeded the limits of its authority, highlighting that the manner in which the Government of Serbia revoked the Special Purpose Spatial Plan in 2022 was not in accordance with the Constitution. The Government decision to annul the Spatial Plan Decree for Jadar project is canceled

July - August 2024

Protests emerged around Serbia, on 10 August massive protest was organised in Belgrade

September 2024

A part of the Parliamentary opposition submitted a proposal to amend the Law on Mining and Geological Research, which calls for a ban on research and exploitation of lithium and boron

September 2024

On 17 September, Rio Tinto submitted a second request for determination of the scope and content of the EIA study for the Jadar project

October 2024

The Parliamentary majority rejected opposition proposal for amendments the Law on Mining and Geological Research

November 2024

Ministry of Environmental protection issued an approval to the second EIA scoping request to Rio Tinto. Thousands of complaints are submitted and remained unresolved

June 2025

The European Commission approved Rio Tinto's Jadar lithium and boron project in Serbia as a "Strategic Project" under the Critical Raw Materials Act



Protesters gathered in Belgrade against plans for a lithium mine.
Marko Djokovic / AFP - Getty Images file

- 1 Balkan Green Energy News: [The Jadar project - the most important events that marked the most controversial investment in the recent history of Serbia](#); N1: [Rio Tinto in Serbia from 2001 to today - permits, protests, hitchhiking, "lobbying"](#); Rio Tinto: [Jadar Project](#); authors own sources
- 2 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 53rd Session of the Industry Committee, 5 March 2012: http://www.parlament.gov.rs/Pedeset_tre%C4%87a_sednica_Odbora_za_industriju_15090.941.html
- 3 Draft Strategy for the Management of Mineral Resources until 2030 is available on web portal Otvorena vlada: https://otvorenavlada.rs/extfiles/112/strategija_mineralni_resursi0595_lat.doc

2. Socio-Political Impacts of the Jadar Project: Strategic Importance and Local Resistance

Under the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Serbia became an electoral autocracy with one of the most substantial deterioration rates, facing significant decline in democratisation, political rights and civil liberties, and corruption levels on relevant global rankings. In the last ten years, according to the Freedom House democracy ranking, Serbia downgraded from a semi-consolidated democracy to a hybrid regime,⁴ while the report published by V-Dem Institute in 2025 ranks Serbia among countries with the biggest democracy decline on a global level.⁵

It is also ranked as a *partly free* country, with significant deterioration in recent years, as the ruling party “has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations”.⁶

The extractive imperative has become Serbia’s dominant development narrative, adopted without inclusive public debate on the role of natural resources in socio-economic progress.

2.1. Key Narratives about the Project⁷

Economic Impacts	Environmental Impacts	Socio-Political Impacts
The ruling party (SNS)		
<p>"It is our white gold, our treasure, but if we are stupid enough to give up on our gold or oil – I am fine with it."</p> <p>– President Vučić, FONET, 22.01.2024</p> <p>"I want a successful Serbia, its accelerated growth; they want to stop the growth."</p> <p>– Vučić, FONET, 22.01.2024</p> <p>"The full value chain reaches as much as 16.4% of our 2023 GDP. That's a different country."</p> <p>– Vučić, European Western Balkans, 19.07.2024</p>	<p>"We believe that the mine won't endanger anyone or anything, but first we need to receive guarantees from Europe that the environment and the lives of ordinary citizens will be preserved and improved with new jobs and higher wages than today."</p> <p>– Vučić, Radio Free Europe, 16.07.2024</p> <p>"If I was asked, we would start tomorrow... based on the German example."</p> <p>– Vučić, FONET, 22.01.2024</p>	<p>"With lithium (...) Serbia would be a country with the power to make decisions and impose them on others."</p> <p>– Ana Brnabić, Speaker of the National Assembly, RTS, 21.08.2024</p> <p>"Lithium production in Serbia will enable the country to make a quantum leap into the future, and it is up to Serbia to be a reliable partner to Europe, Germany, and the entire world in the overall production chain"</p> <p>– Vučić, NIN, 19.07.2024</p> <p>"Opposition is not against lithium mining...they oppose it only until they come to power."</p> <p>– Brnabić, RTS, 21.08.2024</p>

⁴ Freedom House, “[Nations in Transit: Serbia](#)”, 2024

⁵ Marina Nord et al. [Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?](#), University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, March 2025

⁶ Freedom House, “[Freedom in the World: Serbia](#)”, 2024

⁷ To present the dominant narratives about the project by the key actors, the table includes illustrative quotations, collected from publicly available media statements.

Economic Impacts	Environmental Impacts	Socio-Political Impacts
Political opposition		
<p>"The company's profit expectations are astronomical (...) Then it's easy to bribe hungry and greedy local politicians."</p> <p>– Democratic Party MP, N1, 19.06.2024</p> <p>"Their motive is the lowest mining royalty of 3%... We, the ordinary people, will be left with nothing but misery, poverty, and devastation, while foreign companies will reap enormous profits they can't even dream of in the EU."</p> <p>– People's Movement of Serbia MP, DIREKTNO, 19.07.2024</p>	<p>"The project poses a major risk of land degradation, destruction of forests, endangerment of surface and groundwater, leads to the displacement of the population, cessation of agriculture, and a constant threat to public health."</p> <p>– Green-Left Front</p> <p>"An epic crime against people and nature."</p> <p>– Environmental Uprising MP, Deutsche Welle, 18.07.2024</p>	<p>"For two years, the government was not allowed to return to the Jadar project until two cycles of early elections were completed... Instead of its own people, the government chose to serve a foreign company – Rio Tinto."</p> <p>– Go-Change (Kreni-Promeni) Movement leader, Radio Free Europe, 16.07.2024</p>
Local activists		
<p>"There are some things that money cannot buy."</p> <p>– Local farmer and activist, Reuters, 05.06.2025</p>	<p>"The plan is that the main processing plant will be here... a few hundred meters from our church. 4,000–5,000 tonnes of rock will be crushed daily, treated with 1,000 tonnes of sulphuric acid, and washed with huge amounts of water, which will end up in the Jadar River."</p> <p>– Local activist, Deutsche Welle, 18.07.2024</p>	<p>"Cars for Europe, batteries for the Chinese, and landfills, diseases, cancers, and who knows what else for us Serbs. It's better to mine in Serbia than in Germany or France."</p> <p>– Activist from Ne damo Jadar, Deutsche Welle, 18.07.2024</p>
Experts and scientists		
<p>"Based on available information, it can be concluded that the economic effects of the Jadar Project for Serbia are extremely uncertain, and in the best-case scenario, are close to zero."</p> <p>– Analysis by economic experts, N1, 10.10.2024</p>	<p>"There is no way for environmentally acceptable lithium miningt."</p> <p>– Professor of physical chemistry, N1, 26.02.2025</p> <p>"The mine is vulnerable to groundwater contamination... the largest regional source of drinking water."</p> <p>– Hydrogeologist, VOA, 04.12.2024</p> <p>"There are no conditions that can prevent the irreversible destruction of this area as well as the habitats of numerous species."</p> <p>– Expert from the Institute of Nature Conservation, Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia, 07.02.2025</p>	<p>"The key issue in Serbia is the lack of trust, both in the institutions and politicians, which is the result of the fact that we have been living in a captured state over the past twelve years (...)</p> <p>The citizens of Serbia who protested against lithium mining are not against the EU standards, they just want to be treated equally as citizens of EU member states respecting their right to be included in dialogue on important choices."</p> <p>– Political science expert, BIEPAG, 08.12.2024</p>

2.2. Social Mobilisation for Transparency and the Rule of Law

The announcements of the Jadar project in 2020 raised serious concerns about the environmental impacts of the project, leading to mobilisation against the lithium mining in Western Serbia led by local civic associations.⁸ In the lack of a transparent and participatory decision-making process, local residents and activists voiced their concerns over the environmental impacts of the mining and planned disposal sites, contamination of water and soil, but also fears of land grabbing. It was not long before the project gained nationwide attention, as the first protests in Belgrade were organised in the spring of 2021.⁹ Opposition towards the project among both local and experts' community has been primarily based on concerns about significant environmental degradation, particularly having in mind the biodiversity and agricultural potential in the Jadar Valley. However, it was

the Government's decision to initiate the changes of the legislative framework which would pave the way for the project's implementation that sparked massive public protests against the project.

Thousands of citizens have joined protests and road blockades in Belgrade, demanding that the Government withdraw from the legislative procedure the draft Law on Referendum and People's Initiative and amendments to the Law on Expropriation, as they were perceived as attempts of the ruling party to facilitate the implementation of the project by further diminishing citizens' rights and participation in decision-making processes. The mass environmental protests underscored deep public distrust in the government's ability to safeguard public interests and ensure legislative compliance in the context of the rule of law deterioration and democratic backsliding recorded in Serbia in recent years.

Date / Period	Location(s)	Event / Action	Outcome / Impact
2019–2020	Gornje Nedeljice, Loznica	First local resistance, local community petitions	Emergence of grassroots movements
April 2021	Belgrade	First Ecological Uprising	Lithium mining project becomes a nationally recognised environmental issue
September 2021	Belgrade	Bridge blockades, second mass protest	Border alliance against the Jadar project
Nov–Dec 2021	Nationwide	Road blockades, law protests	Expropriation and spatial plans revoked
Jan–Feb 2022	Belgrade	Sit-ins, camp-ins	Government declares the project suspended
June–August 2024	Belgrade	Mass protests, road and rail blockades across Serbia opposing the reinstatement of the project and signing of the MoU	Tens of thousands protest the project revival

Source: Balkan Green Energy News, [Jadar project timeline: a full overview of the most controversial investment in Serbia's recent history](#)

⁸ Balkan Green Energy News, "[Voices of discontent over Rio Tinto's jadarite mine investment in Serbia grow louder](#)", 6 November 2020

⁹ Igor Novaković, "[Activists gather at Ecological Uprising in front of Serbian parliament](#)", *Balkan Green Energy News*, 12 April 2021

In the context of growing political polarisation, the media capture an “obstructed” environment for civil society, while civil society organisations and activists have been exposed to smear campaigns and attacks.¹⁰ The organisations and individuals opposing the project were put under pressure, protestors were attacked by masked individuals with the police failing to guarantee safety, which was also reported by the European Commission.¹¹ The attacks against activists and organisations started intensifying in July 2024, as mass nationwide protests opposed the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the EU and revitalisation of the project.

Public concerns were raised also having in mind the significant corruption risks, as executive domination and institutional vulnerabilities continue to grow,¹² while Serbia marks its lowest score so far in the Corruption Perception Index.¹³ The governance of SNS has been marked with numerous capital projects and investments proclaimed as being of “national interest” to enable flexible, selective or even complete lack of application of the laws to suit certain foreign investors, often completely disregarding the public interest and legislative framework in place, including environmental legislation.¹⁴

2.3. A Temporary Political Shift in a Polarised Environment

Faced with a growing public opposition, the Government eventually withdrew the proposed legislative changes and adopted the Decision suspending the spatial plan and all relevant permits for the Jadar project. The-then Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated that “...this is the final Government’s decision. I believe that it is the right decision, confirming once again that we listen to our people and that it is our job to protect their interest. Even if we think differently, citizens should know that we will listen to them and *put an end to what they disagree with*”.¹⁵

The decision was adopted looking forward to the snap parliamentary elections, which were held in April 2022 in an atmosphere of significant polarisation and conditions favouring the ruling party.¹⁶ Although President Vučić afterwards repeatedly stated that giving up on the project was “the biggest mistake”,¹⁷ the lithium mining project was

almost completely sidelined in the election campaign, while other topics gained primacy over environmental topics.¹⁸ Looking for long-term reassurance that there will be no implementation of lithium and boron mining projects in Serbia, civic associations started a citizens’ initiative to ban lithium and boron mining, which was signed by more than 38,000 citizens and submitted to Parliament in June 2022. Parliament, however, failed to verify the citizens’ signatures, as the initiative was reported “lost”, after which the organisations submitted an appeal to the Constitutional Court of Serbia. The European Commission, in its 2023 annual report, underlined that there had been no follow-up to a citizens’ legislative initiative with 38,000 signatures, on banning lithium mining, despite this being a legal obligation.¹⁹

In the period from January 2022 to July 2024 there were no public debates or consultations with relevant stakeholders about the Jadar project. In the meantime, the Ministry of Mining and Energy extended the deadline for Rio Tinto to complete documentation for an exploitation permit 18 times over two years, without justified reason,²⁰ until the project was reannounced in the summer of 2024. As public officials began calling for the decision on the project to be reconsidered, the Constitutional Court of Serbia, in July 2024, overruled the Government’s suspension of the project, declaring it unconstitutional. The Court’s decision was rendered only days before the official visit by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Vice President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič, during which the EU signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the Serbian government on strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles.²¹

In the meantime, the Constitutional Court did not rule on the citizens’ initiative opposing the mining. Arbitrary institutional response further fuelled public dissatisfaction in Serbia, signalling state capture and raising serious concerns about the independence of the judiciary. One of the initiators of the initiative, which gained popularity during environmental protests against lithium mining, the movement “Kreni-promeni” has for the first time participated in the local elections held in June 2024, coming second to SNS with 17.2% of the votes. These elections were organised after months of protests that followed parliamentary and

10 Civicus Monitor, “[Tracking Civic Space: Serbia](#)”, 2024

11 European Commission, [Serbia 2022 Report](#), SWD(2022) 338 final. Brussels, 12 October 2022

12 Nemanja Nenadić, [National Integrity System Assessment: Serbia 2023](#), Transparency Serbia, Belgrade 2024

13 Transparency International, “[Corruption Perception Index: Serbia](#)”, 2024

14 Hristina Vojvodić, “[In Serbia, Private Interest Becomes National Interest](#)”, *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*, 17 January 2022

15 Politika, “[Ukinut prostorni plan za Jadar, Rio Tinto poništene sve odluke](#)”, 20 January 2022

16 OSCE, Serbia, [Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 3 April 2022: Final Report](#), Warsaw: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 12 August 2022

17 Igor Todorović, “Mihajlović: Lithium mine in Serbia would be digitalised, with no liquid waste”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 16 August 2022

18 Mila Bajić, [Nedovršena priča: Analiza predizborne onlajn kampanje 2022](#). SHARE Fondacija, June 2022; Transparentnost Srbija, [Monitoring izbora 2022](#). Transparentnost Srbija, December 2022

19 European Commission, Serbia 2023 Report, Brussels, 8 November 2023

20 RERI, “[Ministry of Mining and Energy without justification continues to extend the deadline for Rio Tinto to obtain license for lithium exploitation in Serbia](#)”, 11 April 2023

21 Igor Todorović, “[Constitutional Court of Serbia rules in favor of Rio Tinto’s lithium project](#)”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 11 July 2024

partial local elections organised in December 2023 with numerous irregularities, opening the issue of the Government's legitimacy.²²

As the Government's decision suspending the project was annulled, it was officially back on the agenda, in the context of even deeper social polarisation, unfavourable environment for civil society and erosion of democratic standards and the rule of law. Protests against lithium mining were organised during the summer in over 50 towns across Serbia, articulating demands for the rule of law and democratic environmental governance.

Public opinion polls show the majority of citizens are against the Jadar project. According to the research conducted by Demostat in September 2024, approximately one-third of the respondents had predominantly positive attitudes towards the environmental protests, of whom 25% had actively participated, while 31% of the citizens perceived the ongoing environmental protests against lithium mining and small hydropower plants as an "overreaction".²³ The same survey showed that the majority of citizens (65%) trust mining and environmental experts the most when it comes to lithium mining, followed by 20% of those who "trust no one", while a smaller percentage of the respondents trust the President, civil society organisations or the opposition political parties. However, the survey revealed that respondents are more likely to base their attitudes towards lithium mining on their political orientations, with those closer to the ruling party being much more likely to label the environmental protests as "too much" (67%) compared to those closer to the opposition (5%).²⁴ A research conducted by New Serbian Political Thought (*Nova srpska politička misao*) in December 2024, revealed that, alongside growing political polarisation regarding lithium mining, there is also significant polarisation by age: 88.2% of respondents younger than 30 oppose the project, compared to around 34% of those older than 60. This difference also correlates with their political orientation.²⁵

In the context of growing social polarisation around the issue of lithium mining and a polarised media environment, concerns voiced by local activists, civil society representatives, and the academic community have been met with smear campaigns and attacks by government officials and pro-regime media. Protesters and civil society organisations

opposing the project have reported suffering physical threats online, where they have been targeted as "foreign mercenaries", "traitors" or even "eco-terrorists".²⁶ However, activists and organisations opposing the project have been targeted not only in the media, but also through arbitrary police investigations and unlawful surveillance, raising further concerns about the rule of law and protection of human rights and civil liberties.²⁷ The European Commission also noted reports of arrests, house searches and seizures of IT equipment of environmental activists following protests against lithium exploitation.²⁸

2.4. A Reminder That "Corruption Kills"

Contestations of the lithium mining project have continued, regaining importance in the light of the newly emerged anti-corruption movement in Serbia. Mass protests, led by Serbian students, have been organised across the country, demanding accountability for the collapse of the canopy of the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad, which killed 16 people on 1 November 2024. As illegalities and corruption in the reconstruction project began to emerge,²⁹ grief over the tragedy transformed into a broader social uprising. The initial demands for transparency regarding the renovation project and institutional responses to the identified illegalities and violence against protesters, mobilised hundreds of thousands of citizens in a joint call for accountability, rule of law and democratic reforms.

This movement, whose demands have been supported by around 80% of Serbian citizens, has not only mobilised an unprecedented number of people, but also articulated broader anti-corruption and rule of law demands, including the voices opposing the lithium mining project on similar account.³⁰

The students, supported in their demands by the academic community, have repeatedly voiced their concerns over the Jadar project, offering symbolic support to the local community in Western Serbia and positioning themselves as allies in the broader struggle for democracy and accountability. The students have clearly and unequivocally shown their stance regarding the lithium mining by organising numerous lectures on the subject, sending an

22 OSCE, *Serbia Early Parliamentary Elections*, 17 December 2023, Warsaw: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 28 February 2024

23 Demostat, "[Prezentacija nalaza Demostatovog istraživanja: Vlast?-Nezadovoljstvo/Institucije?-nepoverenje/Život?-Zadovoljstvo](#)", 9 October 2024

24 *Ibid.*

25 Nova srpska politička misao, "[Decembar 2024 - vlast, opozicija, Rio Tinto, EKSPLO i nacionalni stadion po starosnim dekadama](#)", 3 January 2025

26 Arthur Neslen, "[Activist opposed to Rio Tinto lithium mine receives anonymous death threats](#)", *The Guardian*, 22 August 2024; Mašina, "['They were dead silent': Protest held in front of RTS against repression of activists](#)", 2 September 2024

27 Amnesty International, "[Serbia: Authorities using spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools to hack journalists and activists](#)", 16 December 2024

28 European Commission, [Serbia 2024 Report](#), SWD(2024) 695 final. Brussels, 30 October 2024

29 Snezana Rakic, "[New evidence of corruption in the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station](#)", *Serbian Monitor*, 9 January 2025

30 CRTA, "[Ubedljiva podrška građana Srbije studentskim zahtevima i protestima](#)", 19 February 2025

open letter to the EU calling for suspension of the project,³¹ marching to the Jadar Valley and protesting the project on the Day of Victory in Europe³², and expressing their objection to the European Commission's decision to declare the project of strategic importance, primarily pointing out concerns about corruption and Serbia's geopolitical position amid EU demands for raw materials.³³ Strong opposition of Serbian youth towards the project has also been confirmed by the data from the Alternative Report on the position and needs of youth in Serbia, published annually by the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS). The research KOMS conducted in April and May 2025, including the representative sample of Serbian youth (aged between 15 and 30), shows that 93% of young people are against the lithium mining in

Serbia.³⁴ The same research shows that young people consider the state of environment in Serbia poor, while 91,7% believe that the state does not contribute to environmental protection.³⁵

Research from April 2025 showed that the student movement is trusted more by Serbian citizens than the President, confirming that it has become an important political actor.³⁶ As their demands remained unfulfilled for months, the students called for extraordinary parliamentary elections this year. It remains to be seen whether their opposition to lithium mining in the Jadar Valley will be incorporated into a political programme should snap elections be announced.

31 Mašina, "Studenti su protiv projekta Jadar" i danas će predati pismo u sedištu Evropske komisije u Srbiji", 1 April 2025

32 BBC News, "'Marš na Drinu' protiv litijuma: Studentski protest u Loznici", 9 May 2025

33 [Studenti u blokadi](#), Instagram @studenti_u_blokadi, 6 June 2025

34 [Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije](#), Instagram @komsmladi, 6.8.2025.

35 *Ibid.*

36 CRTA, "[Raste nezadovoljstvo vlašću: natpolovična podrška studentima](#)", 23 April 2025

3.

Impact of the Planning Processes and Implementation of the “Jadar” Project on Socio-Economic Development

The area of the Jadar project includes 22 settlements, within the city of Loznica and the municipality of Krupanj. According to the 2022 population census, the number of inhabitants living in the area covered by the project is 16,617, while according to the 2011 population census, there were 19,697 inhabitants. The Spatial Plan of the Special Purpose Area and the Report on the Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment of the Jadar Project were adopted before the 2022 census was carried out. According to projections from the Spatial Plan, it is estimated that 19,201 inhabitants will be living in the planning area in 2025; however, given the proven trend of depopulation, this target is clearly unlikely to be achieved.³⁷

When it comes to economic structure, within the Spatial plan area individual farmers are dominant, while the service sector is following (trade, tourism, transport). The smallest percent in total employment is mining (0.3%).³⁸ The most significant economic problems are high unemployment rate (18.6%, which is above the national rate of 14.1%)³⁹, low level of economic competitiveness and relatively weak effects of privatisation.⁴⁰ Among its goals, it was stated that the Jadar project strives to achieve stable economic development and increase opportunities for employment of the local population by opening new jobs in rural areas. It should be emphasised that the project will lead to a limited loss of land (341.5 hectares of agricultural land and 413 hectares of forest, which together account for 100% of the mining, industrial and landfill zones)⁴¹. This may negatively affect the traditional means of income generation for local households.

According to data from the Spatial Plan the primary sector accounts for 1.1% of total employment in the planning area (or 10.2% when including the share of individual farmers), the secondary sector accounts for 32%, and the service sector dominates with 57.8%. Mining has the smallest share of total employment (0.3%). The most significant economic problems are the high unemployment rate, which stood at 14.5% during the preparation of the plan, being above the national average (9.6%), the low level of economic competitiveness and relatively weak effects of privatisation.⁴²

According to data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in 2023, the economic structure of total employment in the area of the city of Loznica and the municipality of Krupanj in 2023 was characterised by 1.1% of people employed in the primary sector (or 8.4% when including the share of individual farmers), 42% were employed in the secondary sector, and the service sector dominated with 48% (trade, tourism, transport), while mining had the lowest share of total employment (0.6%).⁴³ The unemployment rate in 2023 for the area of the city of Loznica and the municipality of Krupanj was 18.6%, which was above the national rate of 14.1%.⁴⁴

The estimated number of employees is up to 400 workers in the mine, about 100 in the industrial sub-zones, and about 200 workers in maintenance, which amounts to 700 employees in total.⁴⁵ The planning document does not specify the required educational classifications or the nature of commercial activities. It also lacks details on how many of the 700 workers will be local residents, as well as the

³⁷ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Census of population, households and dwellings 2022: Comparative overview of the number of inhabitants 1948-2022

³⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Municipalities and regions in the Republic of Serbia 2024

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Spatial Plan of Special Purpose Area for the Realisation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of the Jadarite Minerals “Jadar” (“Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia”, nos. 26/20, 08/22 and 60/24)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Spatial Plan of Special Purpose Area for the Realisation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of the Jadarite Minerals “Jadar” (“Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia”, nos. 26/20, 08/22 and 60/24)

⁴³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Municipalities and regions 2024, 141

⁴⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Municipalities and regions 2024, 161; Population by economic activity by age and sex, in municipalities and cities

⁴⁵ Spatial Plan of Special Purpose Area for the Realisation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of the Jadarite Minerals “Jadar” (“Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia”, nos. 26/20, 08/22 and 60/24)

accompanying investments that should ensure additional employment of local residents.

The Jadar project involves land and property acquisition, including the relocation of affected households to facilitate planned land use. The Spatial Plan, as the resettlement instrument, requires that relocated households receive living and working conditions equal to or better than those before relocation. Self-relocation is the preferred method. However, the plan does not address the relocation of cemeteries or immovable cultural heritage, posing risks to the identity of certain settlements and their communities. A framework resettlement plan is anticipated to specify the detailed terms of relocation.

The strategic environmental impact assessment report fails to adequately assess the project's effects on demographic changes, including potential shifts in the age and educational structure of the population. It also neglects to evaluate inevitable changes in employment, economic activities, and population characteristics. The report lacks basic health data for the area covered by the spatial plan and provides no assessment of health impacts during the project's implementation. Without this baseline information and impact analysis, no measures have been proposed to prevent or mitigate adverse health effects, nor have the necessary resources for health and social protection been defined.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment Report of Spatial Plan of Special Purpose Area for the Realisation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of the Jadarite Minerals "Jadar": Balance of Surface ("Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia", nos. 26/20, 08/22 and 60/24)

4.

Strategic Sustainability or Political Expediency? The EU's Endorsement of the Jadar Lithium Project in Serbia

In June 2025, the European Commission approved Rio Tinto's Jadar lithium and boron project in Serbia as a "Strategic Project" under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA). This decision implies full compliance with EU sustainability and governance standards - yet it substantially contrasts with the reality in Serbia.

The European Union (EU) is guided by consistent climate and depollution objectives. Its long-term vision of a climate-neutral continent aligns with zero pollution ambitions and biodiversity preservation.⁴⁷ The EU Green Deal established a framework for environmental, climate, and industrial policies, where access to sustainable raw materials is essential to safeguard economic resilience. The EU stresses that strategic raw materials projects must be implemented in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner, respecting human and labour rights. Moreover, Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 emphasises that *"both strategic projects in the Union and Strategic Projects in third countries or in overseas countries or territories (OCTs) should comply with the same level of social and environmental sustainability."*⁴⁸

Nevertheless, paper doesn't refuse ink.

The EU's support for the project and close cooperation with the government on its implementation have been perceived in the public as a message that Brussels prioritises its strategic interests over fundamental reforms, overlooking democratic backsliding and implicitly legitimising the autocratising government as a credible partner. This perception has been particularly significant given the deep political crisis in Serbia in recent months.

In their unequivocal support for Rio Tinto's lithium and boron extraction project in Serbia, EU officials and political leaders of member states have shown a willingness to overlook the country's deteriorating rule of law, democratic

backsliding, and deepening social crisis - while continuing to perceive Serbian authorities as credible partners in establishing a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials.

Therefore, it was not a surprise that the European Commission, in June 2025, approved the Rio Tinto Jadar project as a strategic project under Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 (CRMA Regulation). Although the European Commission's decision is by no means official approval of the Jadar project, it indicates the Commission is convinced the project meets all criteria set out in Article 6(1) of the CRMA Regulation. Recognition of the Jadar project as strategic required explicit approval from the Republic of Serbia.⁴⁹

Although the European Commission's decision came as no surprise - and bearing in mind that the Jadar project has not yet received final, national approval, it remains important to discuss whether the project meets the criteria set out in Article 6(1) of the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) Regulation. The deep political and social crisis, to which the Serbian government's support for the Jadar project has contributed significantly, along with the deterioration of rule of law standards, rising repression, and weak, inadequate and insufficient environmental safeguards, suggests that the project cannot be implemented in line with EU principles for sustainable raw materials. In present-day Serbia, it is not possible to ensure that the project meets the same level of social and environmental sustainability as is required within the EU. Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute's (RERI) previous research into the procedures initiated by Rio Tinto and overseen by the responsible ministries indicates non-compliance with Serbian regulations.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ European Commission, Environment Action Programme to 2030: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/environment-action-programme-2030_en

⁴⁸ Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1252/oj/eng>

⁴⁹ European Commission Decision of 4 April 2025 recognising certain 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: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/document/download/808502c2-21c7-4ca8-855f-ff0b528f91c4_en?filename=C_2025_3491_1_EN_ACT_part1_v4.pdf

⁵⁰ Additional details are provided in the articles referenced below:

Rio Tinto - Salami slicing in accordance with "the highest European standards of environmental protection": <https://reri.org.rs/en/rio-tinto-salami-slicing-in-accordance-with-the-highest-european-standards-of-environmental-protection/>

The Ministry of Mining and Energy without justification continues to extend the deadline for Rio Tinto to obtain a license for lithium exploitation in Serbia: <https://reri.org.rs/en/ministry-of-mining-and-energy-without-justification-continues-to-extend-the-deadline-for-rio-tinto-to-obtain-license-for-lithium-exploitation-in-serbia/>

5.

Between Standards and Dependencies: German Leaders' Endorsement of Lithium Mining amid Serbia's Environmental Governance Gaps

Already during one of her final visits to Serbia, in September 2021, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised Germany's interest in the lithium reserves in the Jadar Valley. "If the whole world is interested, then so are we, that is clear. We have a significant number of investments in the automotive sector, including here in Serbia, and we all know how important lithium is for the future of mobility and battery cells. That is why it was a topic of our discussions," she stated. Chancellor Merkel also addressed concerns about whether lithium extraction would be conducted in accordance with environmental standards. She remarked: "I believe the EU has strong sustainability standards, so this is not solely a matter of German interest. It is certainly an issue that EU Member States will consider, given that climate neutrality is a truly important objective within the EU."⁵¹ The then-Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, praised the EU-Serbia Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles, during his extraordinary

visit to Belgrade in July 2024. He stated that the Memorandum of Understanding is vital for Europe's independence and that it "increases resilience and promotes industry", underlining that "We need to reduce our dependencies, we need to have resilient structures in our supply chains, and that means that we need to develop new raw material tools around the world."⁵² According to Politico, Scholz emphasised the importance of the environmental concerns, assuring that Germany would closely monitor the development of the unconstructed mine and pledged to "provide ecologically acceptable solutions and the knowledge of our [German] mining engineers every step of the way."⁵³ It appears that German leaders reiterated the conclusions outlined in the EU-Serbia Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials – critically highlighting the need for strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials while underestimating the weaknesses of environmental governance and the rule of law in Serbia.

⁵¹ Balkan Green Energy News, [Merkel: Germany is interested in lithium in Serbia as well](#), 14 September 2021

⁵² Reuters, Serbia, [EU and Germany sign battery supply chain deal](#), 19 July 2024

⁵³ Politico, Berlin inks lithium deal with Belgrade despite environmental concerns, 19 July 2024

6.

Unconditional Support for the Project – An Issue for EU Conditionality

Mr Peter Tom Jones:

“Is the opening of the Jadar lithium mine a precondition for Serbia to become part of the European Union?”

Mrs Hildegard Bentele, MEP, Group of the European

People's Party (Christian Democrats): “No, certainly not, but it would show that they embrace the values we have, that means to have sustainable industries, to adhere to high standards, to become more independent from autocracies like China or Russia. So it is an offer and it can be rejected or it can be accepted.”⁵⁴

Despite strong public opposition and concerns about environmental and human rights endangerment, the EU has included Rio Tinto's controversial “Jadar” mine on its list of 13 strategic raw material projects in non-EU countries.⁵⁵ Such a decision has been adopted not only disregarding appeals by Serbian citizens, academic community and civil society representatives,⁵⁶ but also conclusions of various reports by EU institutions which pointed out the lack of enforcement of environmental legislation, rule of law deficiencies and democratic backsliding in Serbia.

In its strong support for the project, the EU appears to have overlooked the lack of fundamental reforms and democratic governance, which have been underscored by the new enlargement methodology as a key precondition for progress in the accession process. EU officials praised the strategic partnership on critical raw materials as an important means of enhancing the integration process, and “reaffirm Serbia's EU path”, failing to address serious environmental and human rights concerns.⁵⁷ In its last progress report on Serbia, the Commission failed to point out many of the gaps in the implementation and enforcement of the environmental legislation, which it had been highlighting in its previous annual reports.⁵⁸ It seems indicative that the 2024 Report failed to mention any of the structural deficiencies, including deficiencies in implementation of EIA procedures, lack of

transparency about investments and their environmental effects, and endangered freedom of expression and assembly in the environmental sector, which were mentioned in the previous reports, without noting any progress in this regard.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and the Republic of Serbia on a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles (hereinafter: the Memorandum) contains a surprisingly positive description of development in the field of Serbian environmental regulatory framework.⁵⁹ It is stated that “a number of significant developments have taken place in the last few years that have been taken into account in drawing up this Partnership”. That is followed by a list of normative and strategic documents in the field of environment, probably with the aim of justifying this “significant development”. However, some of the enlisted normative documents, such as the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment were not adopted in July 2024. These laws were adopted in November 2024, at the session of the National Parliament where violence prevailed and laws were passed without prior parliamentary debate - a key element of parliamentary work and decision-making.⁶⁰ These laws, which are highly relevant for the establishment of preventive mechanisms in environmental protection, are still not aligned with corresponding EU directives. It appears that the Memorandum creators overlooked significant deficiencies in the Serbian environmental regulatory framework, both in terms of transposition and application. The Serbian Low Carbon Development Strategy 2023-2030, highlighted in the Memorandum, is obviously an example of significant development. However, it was overlooked that this long overdue strategy does not come with an Action Plan, a key tool for implementation of the Low Carbon Development Strategy, which was never adopted. Adoption of the Air Protection Programme in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022-2030 is also stipulated as significant

⁵⁴ Not in my county, a documentary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of_ADK3yW8g

⁵⁵ European Commission, “[Commission selects 13 Strategic Projects in third countries to secure access to raw materials and to support local value creation](#)”, 4 June 2025

⁵⁶ Jelisaveta Perišić, “[Serbian organizations, academic community urge EU against declaring lithium project Jadara strategic](#)”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 2 April 2025

⁵⁷ European Commission, “[EU and Serbia sign strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles](#)”, 19 July 2024

⁵⁸ European Commission, [Serbia 2024 Report](#), SWD(2024) 695 final. Brussels, 30 October 2024

⁵⁹ European Commission, “[EU-RS Memorandum of Understanding](#)”, 19 July 2024

⁶⁰ CRTA, “[Inicijativa CRTE pred Ustavnim sudom: Narodna skupština nezakonito usvojila 54 zakona](#)”, 12 February 2025

development. Although the programme may be ambitious, its implementation is clearly lacking.⁶¹

While both the 2023 and 2024 European Commission annual reports highlighted the need for legislative alignment with the environmental liability and environmental crime acquis, the progress is still lacking. In particular the transposition of the Environmental Liability Directive is of significant importance for establishing the effective framework to keep mining companies liable for environmental damage.⁶² Contrary to the Memorandum's statement of "significant development" in the Commission's 2023 annual report, the state of play in the field of environment was described as "some level of preparation", while progress, compared to the previous report (2022) was described as "some progress". On the scale from 1 to 5 "some level of preparation" is similar to 2, while "some progress" on the scale from 1 to 6 is similar to 3. The annual report in 2024 did not use an assessment scale to describe the state of play and progress.

Such an approach threatens to severely harm the EU's credibility in Serbia, particularly having in mind growing indifference of Serbian citizens towards EU membership.⁶³ To some extent, declining support for EU accession can also be understood in the context of the lack of credibility of its conditionality policy, as a concerning high percentage of citizens believes that Serbia will never become a member of the EU.⁶⁴ Furthermore, in the perception of the Serbian public, these signals reinforce notions of core-periphery relations in which the EU's approach is seen as driven by its economic and geostrategic interests, at the expense not only of local resources, but also of democratic reforms and the rule of law, thereby invoking negative sentiments.⁶⁵ Such perceptions threaten to further undermine the EU's impact in Serbia, particularly its potential to act as a democratising force, weakening the credibility of its enlargement policy.

⁶¹ Status of the implementation of the Air Protection Programme available at: Branislava Matić et al. *Analiza stanja kvaliteta vazduha u Republici Srbiji za 2024. godinu*, Belgrade: RERI, June 2025

⁶² In accordance with the Decision of the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community (2016/14/MC-EnC of 14 October 2016) contracting parties were required to comply with the provisions of the Directive 2004/35/EC of 21 April 2004 on environmental liability with regard to the prevention and remedying of environmental damage by 1 January 2021.

⁶³ Regional Cooperation Council, "Balkan Public Barometer", 2024

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Dragoslav Rašeta et al. *Strane investicije i spoljna politika: mediji i stavovi građana, dvomesečni pregled jul 2024-septembar 2024*, Belgrade: Novi treći put, September 2024

7.

In the Land of Shadows: The EU Environmental Standards Reception in Serbia

7.1. Words Mean What I Choose Them to Mean: The EU Standards and Selective Leadership

The EU has been proudly stating that it leads by example complying with the highest social, labour and environmental standards, while the environmental and social standards in many accession countries, including Serbia, are far from the highest. The “leading by example” principle was staggered with recent deregulation tendencies marked by the proposal for adoption of the EU Omnibus package, further weakening the possibility to hold companies accountable for misconduct in their supply chain.⁶⁶

The main political framework for consideration of environmental reforms in Serbia is the EU accession process, since Serbia committed to harmonise its legislation and objectives with those of the EU under the Stabilisation and Accession Agreement. Although Serbia has been an EU candidate country since 2012, it continues to struggle with harmonising its legal, strategic, and institutional frameworks with EU’s environmental, energy and climate policy objectives. This commitment was further reaffirmed by the signing of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. On the Energy Community level, adapted regulation 2018/1999 was adopted to ensure consistency with long-term relevant policy objectives at EU, UNFCCC and Energy Community levels through adoption of the National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (NECP).⁶⁷ Adopted strategic documents (the Energy Development Strategy and the Low Carbon Development Strategy), with minimal efforts to mitigate climate impacts, clearly show that climate neutrality goals for 2050 will not be met.⁶⁸

The national legal system is significantly lagging behind the EU standards when it comes to transposition and implementation of key preventative environmental protection mechanisms. Serbia’s national legal system is not fully aligned with Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, neither with Directive 2011/92 on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment nor with the revised Directive from 2014, which leads to numerous difficulties in the application of the laws, not providing appropriate responses to the evolution of the life protection system environment and democratic governance at the global and EU levels. After twenty years of key preventative laws implementation, Serbia is witnessing the deepening collapse of impact assessment procedures, the violation of the public participation rights, the increasingly poor quality of impact assessment studies and the lack of appropriate legal protection.⁶⁹ Impact assessment becomes merely a formality and environmental protection measures are reduced to mere compliance with the minimum standards prescribed by the regulations.

Furthermore, the Serbian integrated pollution prevention and control legal framework is still not fully aligned with the IPPC Directive or with the Industrial Emissions Directive, and certainly not with the revised standards and objectives for industrial protection in the EU. The implementation of the law - which has been extended twice and under which more than 150 operators continue to operate illegally - is still lacking, with the period for implementing BAT standards further prolonged.⁷⁰

66 EU Raw Materials Coalition, “[What the Omnibus Package would mean for the minerals and metals sector](#)”, 17 June 2025

67 Decision of the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community D/2021/14/MC-EnC: [Amending Article 20 and Annex I to the Treaty establishing the Energy Community and incorporating Directive \(EU\) 2018/2001, Directive \(EU\) 2018/2002, Regulation \(EU\) 2018/1999, Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/1044, and Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2020/1208 in the Energy Community acquis communautaire](#), 30 November 2021

68 Energy Development Strategy until 2040 with projections until 2050 (“*Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia*”, no. 94/24), Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan of the Republic of Serbia for the period until 2030 with projections until 2050 (“*Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia*” no. 70/24) and Low-Carbon Development Strategy for the period from 2023 to 2030 with projections until 2050 (“*Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia*”, no. 46/23)

69 More information on the EIA procedures in Serbia available at: Hristina Vojvodić et al. [Implementation of the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment in the Republic of Serbia – twenty lost years](#), Belgrade: RERI, March 2024

70 More information on the implementation of the IPPC law in Serbia available at: Hristina Vojvodić et al. [Analiza sprovođenja Zakona o integrisanom sprečavanju i kontroli zagađivanja životne sredine](#), Belgrade: RERI, March 2024

However, the mere transposition of the EU acquis does not guarantee compliance, and the most notable example of breaching international and national legal commitments remains the lack of implementation of the Large Combustion Plants Directive.⁷¹ Since its entry into force, Serbia has been failing to ensure serious emission reduction, and seven years in a row EPS's TPPs continue to emit four to six times more pollutants than permitted. It is important to note that, for years, administrative authorities failed to enforce environmental regulations, leaving citizens with no option but to seek judicial intervention.⁷² Although the court ultimately ordered the public electricity company to comply with the law, the ruling remains unenforced, and the company continues to operate without consequences. To date, the government has not taken effective measures to ensure compliance or uphold the rule of law. This persistent failure illustrates a broader pattern of institutional inertia, weak regulatory accountability, and legal uncertainty, raising serious concerns about the credibility of Serbia's commitment to meeting future environmental and legal standards in high-stakes projects such as the Jadar project.

This concern is further underscored by the fact that the project is being rushed into implementation despite the absence of a strategic or planning framework for large-scale mining projects.

The National Development Plan, which shall be Serbia's highest long-term planning document, setting out priority development goals and guidelines for their achievement, has yet to be adopted, even though it was legally required to be submitted no later than 1 January 2020.⁷³ Likewise, the adoption of the new National Spatial Plan, the country's principal spatial planning instrument, remains pending despite the statutory deadline set for 2021. Although the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure initiated a public consultation process in 2021, the procedure was marked by significant procedural deficiencies, including non-compliance with the legal requirements for transparency and effective public participation.⁷⁴ Finally, the Management Strategy for Mineral and Other Geological Resources,

identified in 2011 as a key instrument for defining strategic development goals in mining and geological exploration, also remains unadopted. These documents are critical for ensuring coherent natural resource governance and fostering informed public dialogue on major development initiatives.

7.2. Learn the Hard Way - Environmental and Social Consequences of Mining in Serbia

Mining in Serbia is largely perceived through the lens of experience with the ongoing projects and their environmental and social consequences. Particular focus is placed on copper extraction in Southeast Serbia, which is implemented through the strategic partnership between the Republic of Serbia and Chinese multinational mining company, Zijin Mining Group.⁷⁵ This arrangement allows a foreign company to extract and export raw and processed materials, becoming one of the most profitable entities in the country.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, local communities are left in deteriorating and often unlivable conditions, facing toxic exposure, violation of human rights, and deep social despair.

From the moment Zijin took over the state-owned and debt-ridden company RTB Bor, the Chinese company frequently operated with limited or no adherence to legal procedures, particularly related to the prevention of adverse environmental effects of their activities. To this day, the company often operates without or contrary to the mining, construction, operation and environmental permits.⁷⁷ Despite the company being fully cognisant of the unlawful acts, the prosecution often dismisses criminal or commercial reports without adequate explanation, and the sanctions imposed for Zijin's illegal activities are insufficient to force the company to comply with the law.⁷⁸ The Serbian government, acting both as a regulator, monitoring authority and investor, has effectively become the investor's „partner in crime“, tolerating and, at times, actively enabling and supporting illegal operations.⁷⁹

The court fines imposed on Zijin are symbolic. In 2022, for the pollution of the Mali Pek River, this company was ordered to

71 More information on the implementation of the Large Combustion Plants Directive and its interlinkage with the rule of law available at: Ivana Milićević et al. [Governing the Green Shift: Rule of Law and Energy Reform in the Western Balkans - Assessment Report](#), Belgrade: RERI, June 2025

72 More information on the court case led by RERI against the Public Electricity Company of Serbia available at: [LEGAL ANALYSIS OF THE COURT PROCEEDINGS INITIATED BY RERI AGAINST PUBLIC ELECTRICITY COMPANY OF SERBIA FOR ENDANGERING HUMAN HEALTH](#), Belgrade: RERI, April 2024

73 Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia (*“Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia”*, no. 30/18)

74 RERI, [“Ponoviti javni uvid u Nacrt prostornog plana Republike Srbije zbog učinjenih propusta i nezakonitih radnji Ministarstva građevinarstva”](#), 25 June 2021

75 In August 2018, Zijin Mining Group Co., a Chinese multinational mining company with state agencies as its institutional shareholders, became the largest shareholder in RTB Bor, a state-owned and debt-ridden company. It became Zijin's first company in Serbia when it took over the company in 2018 (63% of Mining Smelter Basin Bor's shares), as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and renamed it to Serbia Zijin Bor Copper, see more: <https://zijinbor.com/en/about/>.

76 Most of the extracted copper, both mineral and refined, is being exported to China, see Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, [Statistical Yearbook for 2023](#).

77 More information on illegal extraction in Krivelj village, near the City of Bor, available at: RERI, [“Bor je žrtvovana zona: Stanovnici Krivelja ugroženi nelegalnom eksploatacijom”](#), 16 June 2025

78 For example, see the fines imposed for illegal mining works, available at: RERI, [“Zijin sentenced to two million dinars for illegal construction in Bor”](#), 6 September 2024

79 For example, the Minister of Environmental Protection publicly praised the illegal construction within the Zijin industrial complex, see: RERI, [“The Minister of Environmental Protection is satisfied with the progress of the construction of illegal facilities in Bor”](#), 13 September 2021

pay 8,500 EUR for humanitarian purposes.⁸⁰ For carrying out the works without prior consent to the EIA study, this company was fined 3,800 EUR.⁸¹ These fines cannot be considered as measures that deter the polluter from breaking the law. Between 2021 and 2024 Zijin was fined six times for the construction without construction permits, and each time the fine was below the statutory minimum.⁸²

Zijin has exploited and abused regulatory gaps by strategically fragmenting its projects to bypass comprehensive and timely EIA.⁸³ Activities such as extraction, waste disposal, processing, and even demolition or preparatory works are treated as separate projects, effectively diluting oversight and avoiding impact assessment for the whole project. The EIA studies are of extremely poor quality, often recycling outdated or copied data, and fail to offer anything more than formal compliance with minimal legal requirements. The Ministry of Environmental Protection takes for granted everything that Zijin defines in the studies, leaving Zijin to lead the procedures, sometimes not even waiting for the previous phases in the EIA to be finalised, stating that effects on the environment will be assessed in some future phases of the project implementation.

Zijin is currently operating unlawfully, without the required integrated environmental permits for both its smelter facility and the Zagrađe lime plant.⁸⁴ Its expanded smelter facility has been operating illegally for more than a year without the required operating permits. This continues a pattern of non-compliance, and underscores the systemic failure to impose sanctions strong enough to deter such behavior, as the company also operated without an integrated environmental permit in 2021, for which it received only a symbolic fine of just over 2,000 EUR.⁸⁵ During the court proceedings, the responsible person stated that they had started illegal operation since “significant funds were needed to reconstruct the smelter and that they started the business in order to finance it and provide preconditions for submitting an application for the integrated permit”, which shows a dismissive approach to legal compliance.⁸⁶

When preventive mechanisms fail, inspections serve as the first line of defense against environmental harm. However, inspection remains one of the weakest points in Serbia's environmental protection system.

According to the 2024 Annual Report of the Geological and Mining Inspection, there were six mining inspectors and 526 companies in total carrying out geological research and exploitation of mineral resources at over 768 facilities.⁸⁷

Environmental, construction, and mining inspectors routinely neglect to carry out oversight, and although such procedures are legally classified as urgent due to the potential risks involved, inspections are often delayed, sometimes by nearly a year.⁸⁸ Even when illegality is identified, inspectors frequently fail to take appropriate follow-up actions, including initiating penalty procedures.⁸⁹

Social impacts of mining activities in the Bor region are imminent. In the Bor region, there is hardly anyone who has not been affected by the activities of the mining companies or does not know someone who has been evicted from their property. Those who resist face particularly intense pressure, as the companies often invest heavily in legal action and public messaging to make an example of them within the local community. The legal system will not be there to protect citizens since the procedure is lengthy and the owners of the properties are expelled from their land prior to the fair compensation being determined. Mining companies are also controlling certain public roads restricting the movement of the population, as well as trespassing villagers' properties, often resulting in a factual expropriation.

The local communities have effectively been abandoned, while the affected areas are turned into sacrificed zones, places that are extremely contaminated, where local populations bear a disproportionately large burden, and where there is a violation of basic human rights.⁹⁰ Yet, amidst this neglect lies a critical opportunity: as the awareness of the true social and environmental costs of mining grows, so does the demand for accountability, too. Mining does not become sustainable simply by being labelled as such. Real accountability requires enforceable

80 RERI, “[Based on the criminal complaint submitted by RERI, Zijin Copper and the director of the company were fined one million dinars for the pollution of the river Mali Pek](#)”, 17 May 2022

81 RERI, “[Based on RERI's reports ZIJIN was fined for operating without the necessary approvals and permits](#)”, 23 November 2022

82 *Ibid.*

83 Examples of abuse of EIA procedures available at: Hristina Vojvodić et al. [Implementation of the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment in the Republic of Serbia – twenty lost years](#), Belgrade: RERI, March 2024

84 In accordance with the Law on Integrated Prevention and Control of Environmental Pollution (IPPC Law), transposing the elements of the EU's IPPC Directive, certain mining activities are not allowed without consent to the integrated environmental permit (IPPC permit).

85 RERI, “[Based on RERI's reports ZIJIN was fined for operating without the necessary approvals and permits](#)”, 23 November 2022

86 Decision in case 7 Pk 108/2022 issued by the Commercial Court in Zaječar

87 Ministry of Mining and Energy, [Annual Report on the Work of the Department of Geological and Mining Inspection for 2024](#), 1 March 2025

88 For example, for the operation of the mining waste without a permit and the construction of the smelter in Bor without proper permits.

89 More information about the weaknesses of the inspection surveillance in Serbia available here: [Rule of Law, Climate Ambitions and Foreign Investments](#), Chapter V: Ineffective preventive measures - inspection surveillance, Belgrade: Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute, 2023

90 Special rapporteur on human rights and the environment, [Annex 1 to A/HRC/49/53](#), 2 March 2022

standards, transparent oversight, and effective redress mechanisms available to the affected communities.

7.3. A Tale of Two Standards: Environmental Governance and the Jadar Project

Rio Tinto is often claiming that the reason for distrust is the lack of information about the project.⁹¹ However, instead of providing for meaningful public engagement, which would include information and debate on every aspect of the project, the company opted for dismissing concerns and shifting the narrative towards information provided by experts close to the company and unsigned impact assessment studies which are not part of the official procedure.⁹² Although there are numerous aspects of the project implementation that raise high concerns for the public and expert community, key issues related to water consumption and general impact on water resources, processing of the raw materials, and production and management of waste are still unknown and not addressed in an official EIA procedure. Therefore, it is clear that the aspects of the project that are of public interest and spark the debate on environmental and social impacts of the project are still undisclosed to the public.

RERI expressed its concern about the fact that the EIA scoping request, which should contain the crucial information on the project, was developed with heavy use of *salami slicing* methods, making it even harder to understand the actual scope of the project for which the EIA procedure was initiated.⁹³ The scoping request is lacking any information on ore processing and its environmental impacts.⁹⁴ Since ore processing is likely to produce the greatest volumes of wastewater and waste, the absence of information on the reagents used leaves the types of waste generated unknown. Likewise, there is no information on the storage of industrial waste or sludge from processing lithium carbonate, boric acid, and sodium sulfate - materials with potentially significant adverse long-term environmental impacts.

There is also no information on flood protection measures for the Jadar and Korenita rivers, nor sufficient assessment of the flood defence system's reliability in the event of accidents such as earthquakes or traffic incidents. For instance, the only mention is of an embankment, without details on its design, materials or height, and its potential impact on the mining and industrial waste in the valley. The

greatest perceived risk is that landfill material could enter the river and be carried downstream towards the Drina River valley.

There is no information on how the project will affect water supply security, nor does the scoping request include key measures and requirements set by the Republic Directorate for Water. These primarily concern the preventive protection of springs of strategic importance in the Drina River valley and the right bank of the Sava (Mačva). Rio Tinto states that details regarding the water supply will be addressed in a separate project, and a separate EIA study as well.

A common EIA misconception is the inappropriate application of the "*the more, the merrier*" principle. *Au contraire!* Rio Tinto has proudly claimed that it will conduct more than one EIA study for the Jadar project, almost as if the examination of the parts of the project exceeds legal expectations and signals greater accountability. However, as stipulated in the Spatial Plan of the Special Purpose Area for the Realisation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of Jadarite Mineral, there is only one project: the integrated extraction and processing of lithium and boron. Accordingly, a single, comprehensive EIA study is required to assess the full scope of environmental impacts - from preparatory works and construction through processing to decommissioning.

Cumulative impacts must also be assessed, but this refers to the interaction between the project and other existing or planned projects or activities - not to separate components of the same project. Fragmenting the assessment undermines its integrity and comprehensiveness, contradicting the purpose of a holistic environmental evaluation. On the other hand, it speeds up the investment and takes Rio Tinto one step closer to the official approval of the project.

Despite serious flaws and the omission of key environmental risks, the Ministry of Environmental Protection issued a scoping decision approving the content and scope of the EIA study at Rio Tinto's request.⁹⁵ The Ministry failed to account for the specific nature of the project and its location - otherwise, it would have returned the documentation for revision and requested further input. Instead, the implicit message conveyed to the public is one of blind trust: that Rio Tinto's assurances alone suffice and that the project will somehow meet the highest environmental and social standards without transparency or public scrutiny. According

91 Rio Tinto, "[Concerns and Facts about the Proposed Jadar Project](#)", 2025

92 Rio Tinto, "[Radni nacrti studija o proceni uticaja na životnu sredinu](#)", 2025

93 RERI, "[Rio Tinto – Salami slicing in accordance with “the highest European standards of environmental protection”](#)", 8 October 2024

94 Information and deficiencies of the scoping request available at: RERI, [Opinion on the Request for Establishing the Scope and Contents of the Environmental Impact Assessment Study of the Project for the Underground Exploitation of Lithium and Boron Deposits “Jadar”, at cadastral parcels within the cadastral municipalities of Gornje Nedeljice, Brnjac, Veliko Selo, Jarebice, Slatina, Stupnica, Šurice and the City of Loznica](#), from 1 October 2024

95 Ministarstvo zaštite životne sredine Republike Srbije, "[Izdato je rešenje o obimu i sadržaju za rudarski deo projekta “Jadar”, strogi zahtevi za izradu studije](#)", 21 November 2024

to the Ministry's stance, there appears to be no obligation for the mining company to disclose details to the public - at least not yet, and not before the project is approved. However, given the large number of complaints submitted, the scoping decision is still not enforceable. The Government, as the second-instance authority, was obliged to decide on these complaints but failed to do so, exceeding the legal deadline by over six months.

7.4. The Silence of the Standards: When the EU Forgot to Lead by Example

Even the European Commission has faced criticism over its procedures for approving strategic projects under the CRMA Regulation. The selection process is seriously undermined by a lack of transparency and democratic oversight. Both the application process and the assessment and selection of strategic projects were carried out without public participation, calling into question the EU's commitments under the Aarhus Convention and raising serious concerns about accountability and public participation.⁹⁶

Despite the fact that the public, neither at the EU level nor at the level of third countries, had the opportunity to participate in the procedure, we can read a lot from the European Commission Decision recognising the Jadar project as strategic projects under the CRMA Regulation.

The Commission is convinced that the Jadar project meets all the criteria set out in Article 6(1) of the CRMA Regulation. Having that in mind, we may consider that the European Commission is convinced that the Jadar project will "become technically feasible within a reasonable timeframe", since it is a selection criteria defined by Article 6.1(b). It means that external experts that were engaged by the European Commission to provide a consolidated opinion which serves as the basis for the Commission Decision of 4 June 2025 (point 7. of the Decision), as well as the Commission itself, are not aware of the obvious facts:

→ The Government of Serbia formally cancelled the Jadar project in January 2022, driven by purely opportunistic motives, concerned that continued support for the project could jeopardise the Serbian Progressive Party's chances in the upcoming elections;

→ Rio Tinto submitted an incomplete EIA scoping request covering only one part of the project, the underground mine, leaving significant uncertainty about the environmental risks and technical challenges the developer may face during the broader project development;

→ Although the request was not prepared in accordance with the regulations and contains numerous deficiencies, the Ministry of Environmental Protection did not return the EIA request to Rio Tinto for amendment, but rather issued an EIA decision favoring investor's needs;

→ Despite a clear legal deadline for deciding on EIA scoping decisions, complaints on the EIA scoping decision remained unresolved for more than six months.

The project may be recognised as strategic by the European Commission if the Commission is convinced that the project will be implemented sustainably, particularly with regard to the monitoring, prevention, and minimisation of environmental impacts, as stipulated in Article 6(1)(c) of the CRMA Regulation. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that *"both strategic projects in the Union and strategic projects in third countries should comply with the same level of social and environmental sustainability"*. These are not minor requirements. Given the serious shortcomings in Serbia's environmental standards and the clear incompatibility of its regulatory framework with the EU environmental acquis, it is evident that this condition cannot be fulfilled.

Due to a non-transparent decision-making process and circumstances that clearly suggest the Jadar project cannot be implemented in Serbia in line with CRMA Regulation requirements - factors the Commission failed to consider - the decision to approve the Jadar project as strategic remains clouded by doubts over its objectivity and the EU's commitment to its own foundational standards.

⁹⁶ EU Raw Materials Coalition, ["Critical Raw Materials: Strategic Projects Selection Bypasses Civil Society"](#), 25 March 2025

8.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident that the development of the Jadar project has taken place amidst a broader context of democratic decline and weakening of the rule of law in Serbia. These developments have been accompanied by serious deficiencies in environmental protection and a clear lack of institutional capacity to enforce the existing legislation. This has been consistently documented in the European Commission's annual progress reports - up until 2024, when a sudden and unexpected shift in narrative occurred. In contrast to the previous reports, the Commission began to express a remarkable degree of understanding for the structural weaknesses of Serbia's environmental governance. The Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Serbia even contains conclusions that directly contradict those found in earlier Commission reports.

Democratic backsliding in Serbia, along with growing social polarization, has evolved into a deep political and societal crisis. In response, the Serbian authorities have increasingly relied on repression and the misuse of police and prosecutorial powers to suppress citizens' legitimate demands for justice, accountability, and anti-corruption reforms. There is an unmistakable connection between the civic protests against the Jadar mine and the broader social mobilisation triggered by the tragic incident in Novi Sad. Even to the casual observer, the conflict reveals two distinct sides: on one, a corrupt political oligarchy that has lost its social licence to operate; on the other, citizens demanding respect for basic democratic standards, accountability and justice.

These citizens' movements enjoy the explicit support of the academic community and a majority of independent experts, who have provided well-reasoned arguments outlining why the Jadar project presents environmental and social risks that the Serbian authorities and society are not capable of managing. For most citizens of Serbia, the fundamental question is not whether lithium will be extracted by Western or Chinese companies, but whether they will live in a country that protects their human rights, health, lives, and property. Serbia in 2025 is not such a country.

The challenges facing Serbia cannot be reduced to the simplistic notion that the country is successful in transposing EU environmental standards but fails in implementation. This assertion is inaccurate. For over twenty years, the Serbian authorities and public administration have systematically avoided proper transposition of EU environmental standards. Failures in implementation are not merely the result of insufficient capacity, but often stem from deliberate inaction or abuse of power.

This raises an important question for the European Union, its institutions, and political representatives, particularly those from member states with strong interests in Serbia's mineral resources - Germany being a clear example. Will they uphold the rule of law and sustainability standards that the EU claims to promote, or will they abandon these principles in favour of an uncertain partnership with a repressive and undemocratic regime?

Ultimately, the issue of respecting fundamental European values - democracy, rule of law and human rights - is not merely a short-term concern for the current generation of political leaders. These values have been built and refined over centuries; they do not belong solely to today's politicians, or today's generations, and should not be set aside for the short-term interests of economic elites. For nearly a year, the citizens of Serbia have made their choice clear. It is only a matter of time before the political elites in the EU must make theirs.

In order to respond to the rule of law and sustainability challenges related to critical raw materials and the EU energy transition resource demands, the pro-democracy politicians should advocate for:

Reconsideration of the Jadar project strategic status: The European Commission should reconsider the designation of the Jadar project as a Strategic Project under the CRMA until Serbia demonstrates full compliance with the environmental acquis and effective public participation procedures. There is a need for alignment of the CRMA procedures for selection of strategic projects with the Aarhus Convention, transparency and participation standards of the EU.

Enforced conditionality: EU support for raw materials partnerships must be clearly tied to the rule of law benchmarks, including judicial independence, civic freedoms, and environmental safeguards. To ensure the credibility of the conditionality mechanisms, it is crucial that Serbia's alignment with the EU rules and standards and their implementation is evaluated in line with the principle "fundamentals first".

Strengthened oversight: The European Parliament and national parliaments of member states should scrutinise the implementation of strategic projects under the CRMA, ensuring transparency and democratic accountability. The precondition for independent parliamentary oversight is the ending of abuse and intimidation of the political minority in

the Serbian parliament and restoring functional parliamentary practice.

Support civic space: The EU and its member states should increase support and diplomatic backing for civil society organisations and independent institutions monitoring extractive projects in accession countries, supporting government accountability on the local level and local ownership of the accession process.

Establishing a fact-based technical dialogue: It is essential to enable the civil society, environmental think-tanks and independent experts to engage in a technical, evidence-based dialogue with their counterparts in Germany and the EU, presenting arguments and documentation that expose the weaknesses of Serbia's environmental protection system, the misuse of environmental impact assessment procedures, and violations of laws and procedures by public officials and private operators. Those actors in Serbia who, through knowledge and facts, challenge projects with harmful environmental and societal consequences must be given the opportunity to engage with informed interlocutors who understand the context, and to present their arguments with an adequate level of detail and precision.

Support to internationally recognised standards in the extractive industry in Serbia: Bilateral partners should require that internationally recognised standards in mining and the extractive industries be established and applied in Serbia, as outlined in the CRMA Regulation. The adherence to and effective implementation of these standards in practice is a prerequisite for any future projects and activities in the mining sector to be considered.

Revise communication strategies: The EU must transparently address the limitations of candidate countries' environmental governance in its public messaging, to avoid reinforcing perceptions of double standards.

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