

Where There Are Tailings, No Grass Grows: Serbians Protest Against Rio Tinto

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Another fault line has opened in the mining wars. In Serbia, resistance is gathering steam against various deals made between Belgrade and companies that risk environmental degradation and lingering spoliation.

In this regard, the globe’s second largest metals and mining corporation, features prominently. Rio Tinto, bruised in reputation but determined in business, finds itself in a hunting mood in the Balkans, hoping to establish a lithium mine and processing plant in the valley of Jadar.

As the infamous destroyer of the Juukan Gorge Caves outlines in a [statement](#), the Jadar site is intended to “produce battery-grade lithium carbonate, a critical mineral used in large scale batteries for electric vehicles and storing renewable energy”. This greening shift – because all canny mining entities are doing it – promises to “position Rio Tinto as the largest source of lithium supply in Europe for at least the next 15 years.” In an effort to make matters sound even more impressive, Jadar will also “produce borates, which are used in solar panels and wind turbines.”

The company has been extensively involved in cultivating relations with the government of Aleksandar Vučić. As far back as 2018, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić was [already convinced](#) what the future lithium borate project might hold. “As Jadar can significantly influence the development of the whole region, the government has established an inter-ministerial working group to cooperate with the investor on all aspects of the project.” Capitulation, rather than cooperation, would be the more accurate description.

How the Anglo-Australian mining giant finds itself in this position has been troubling to local activists and the citizenry of Jadar for years. The *Ne damo Jadar* (We won’t let anyone take Jadar) group is particularly concerned by the clandestine memoranda of understanding signed between the company and the Serbian government. Zlatko Kokanović, vice president of the group, [states the position](#) with irrefutable clarity.

“Rio Tinto’s proposed jadarite mine will not only threaten one of Serbia’s oldest and most important archaeological sites, it will also endanger several protected bird species, pond terrapins, and fire salamander, which would otherwise be protected by EU directives.”

An [online petition](#) against the mine, which has garnered 283,364 signatures to date, also notes the risk posed to “thousands of sustainable multi-generational farms” through the poisoning of water sources. This was bound to occur given generous use of sulphuric acid in separating the lithium from the jadarite ore.

Rio has countered this by vague promises that it will conduct sound environmental assessments and neutralise any risks arising from sulfuric acid, arsenic and the inevitable tailings that will follow. In [the words](#) of the CEO Jakob Stausholm,

“We are committed to upholding the highest environmental standards and building sustainable futures for the communities where we operate.” Stausholm promised, “that in progressing this project, we must listen to and respect the views of all stakeholders.”

Ever since Rio Tinto began sniffing around in Serbia, evidence of such listening and respect has been in short supply. Requests and concerns by locals go unaddressed. Its use of private security goons has also been a point of some nastiness. Marijana Petković, a member of *Ne damo Jadar*, insists that they have been harassing and conducting surveillance of villages which are proximate to the mine. One has to keep the local tribes in check.

In June, the company [claimed](#) that the security contractors were “engaged to carry out activities in full compliance with the Law on Private Security, which provides for both the way of securing private property and moving at a certain time between several mutually separated places/facilities”.

The company also countered with its own claims that, as a law-abiding entity, it has been unjustly attacked by fractious thugs intent on disrupting the prospects for local improvement. After a protest that same month, Rio Tinto [stated](#) that “employees working on the Jadar project were examined for injuries at the Loznica Emergency Centre, where they were provided with assistance.”

Serbian lawmakers have certainly been [facing a mouthful](#) from the Alliance of Environmental Organisations of Serbia (SEOS) and the *Kreni-promeni* organisation. The latter has produced a video to counter Rio Tinto’s own glossy narrative of the lithium project which has saturated much of the media. Hearty efforts by *Kreni-promeni* to convince the Serbian public broadcaster RTS to broadcast its rebuttals have so far failed.

The eternally calculating Vučić has decided to put the issue of Rio Tinto’s lithium mining effort to a referendum, enabling the mining giant to further step up its campaign to convince voters. The protestors are in no doubt that the measure is designed to secure approval in order to outmanoeuvre the contrarians.

A large protest movement is taking shape in Serbia, centred on the importance of clean water, air, soil and observance of sound environmental regulations. The month of November saw protesting efforts that involved blocking roads in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Užice, Loznica and Kruševac, amongst others.

Rio Tinto, environmental vandal par excellence, has shown, along with other mining giants, a marked tendency to ignore local grievances and fears while flattering gullible authorities with promises of a glittering future. The future for the Jadar valley, outlined by one sceptical ecologist, Mirjana Lukić Anđelković is suitably dark. The company, [she told](#) the morning program TV Nova S “Wake Up” in March this year, promises to mine for six decades and “make a mountain of tailings.” Where there are tailings, “there is no grass, nothing grows.”

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