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To cite this article: Milovan Vuković, Tamara Maričić & Marijana Pantić (29 Apr 2026): Discourses on Mining in Print Media, Public Participation and Decision-making: The Case of the Jadar Project (Serbia), Environmental Communication, DOI: [10.1080/17524032.2026.2663477](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2026.2663477)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2026.2663477>



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Published online: 29 Apr 2026.



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# Discourses on Mining in Print Media, Public Participation and Decision-making: The Case of the Jadar Project (Serbia)

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## ABSTRACT

Public debates on mining and mineral extraction often generate conflicting viewpoints, reflecting the tension between the global demand for critical minerals (“mining for climate”) and local environmental and socio-economic concerns. This paper examines recent heated discussions and mass protests surrounding the proposed lithium mine in Western Serbia, focusing on the narratives shaping public perceptions of the Jadar project. As the media play a key role in shaping public opinion through analytical articles, this research aims to identify dominant narratives on the (dis)advantages of the Jadar project in daily newspapers, the key actors behind them, and illustrate how poor governance and lack of transparency can delay or halt mining projects by increasing public dissatisfaction. The study analyses articles on lithium, their frequency, and discourse representation in two prominent Serbian dailies with contrasting editorial orientations: *Politika*, conservative and state-affiliated, and *Danas*, liberal and opposition-aligned. The findings show that the lack of transparency in the project’s early stages contributed to citizen mobilization and the politicization of the issue during 2023–2024. Two opposing narratives unfold simultaneously: a pro-mining narrative emphasizing economic benefits and an anti-mining narrative stressing environmental risks.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 April 2025  
Accepted 16 April 2026

## KEYWORDS

Lithium mining debate;  
environmental protests;  
media coverage;  
participation of stakeholders;  
content analysis

## 1. Introduction

The population growth and the expanding middle class in many developing countries significantly drive the rising demand for various metals and minerals, underscoring the importance of sustainable raw material supply. In 2020, the European Commission developed a dedicated program to secure domestic sources of mineral resources for the European Union (EU) countries (EC, 2020). The issue of ensuring the EU economy’s access to critical materials has been thoroughly examined in the Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials (EC, 2020). The analysis in this plan suggests that the future growth and competitiveness of the industry in EU countries should be based on the sustainable extraction of domestic mineral resources, thereby reducing imports of critical materials from other parts of the world. It is particularly important to secure minerals that provide metals essential for the so-called green transition, which involves a substantial reduction in carbon dioxide emissions (Arrobas et al., 2017).

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In this context, there is frequent mention of the increasing demand for lithium, known as the “white gold of the twenty-first century,” which is crucial for the transition to sustainable mobility and the mitigation of climate change impacts (United Nations (UN), 2015). As part of the EU’s ambitious European Green Deal (2019), the plan is to increase the number of electric vehicles from 1.8 million to 30 million by 2030 and to achieve zero vehicle emissions by mid-century. On the other hand, alternatives to expensive lithium, such as sodium-ion batteries, are already being developed (Shao et al., 2024).

The global demand for critical minerals needed for sustainable energy development and climate change mitigation has a legitimate counterpoint in local concerns about socio-environmental and economic disruption. The “Not in my backyard” (NIMBY) dynamic is evident here: although many residents support climate action in principle, few are willing to sacrifice their health, farmland, homes, or cultural heritage for the “common good.” Promises of new jobs rarely offset these risks. In developing countries, such concerns are intensified by secrecy surrounding planned developments and by recurrent corruption associated with large foreign investments (Chong et al., 2009; Katovich & Rexer, 2025). The creation of shared value and transparent decision-making – when present, or notably absent – strongly shape public opinion. Even in well-regulated EU countries such as Austria (Wolfsberg Lithium Project) and Germany (the tailings facility Industrielle Absetzanlage Bielatal), decision-making processes have lacked transparency, and local residents and politicians have had limited involvement. Combined with uncertainties about environmental and social impacts, this has prompted citizen initiatives opposing proposed lithium mining and processing projects (Ayeh & Rutjes, 2025; Kowasch et al., 2025). To counter such opposition, some multinational mining corporations adopt shifting “corporate personae,” portraying themselves as community-oriented or historically rooted, even when their activities generate environmental and social harm – as illustrated by the case of Rio Tinto Kennecott in the United States (Paliewicz, 2022; Paliewicz, 2024).

In contrast to the accelerated pace of mineral resource exploration and extraction, driven by the pursuit of a low-carbon future in developed European economies (particularly in Germany), are the needs and demands of various stakeholders regarding the sustainable use of land resources. In this context, sustainability entails analyzing a multitude of factors – geological, economic, technological, environmental, social, and political – to assess the pros and cons of typically large-scale development projects within extractive industries. This issue appears to be most challenging when considering future mining projects. Increasingly, despite the widespread acceptance of the sustainability concept, conflicts arise over pathways to achieving sustainability (Kalt, 2014). The very goals of the green economy – which, according to the UN, should be low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive – are being questioned (UN, 2022). To align with the principles of the UN and the green economy, four dimensions must be addressed: (1) enhancing human health and well-being; (2) promoting peace, social justice, and strong institutions; (3) addressing global climate change; and (4) ensuring sustainable consumption and production.

But the new, better, *sustainable* mining practice is a delusion, as mine-affected communities still combat with land grabbing, changed lifestyles, endangered health and degraded environment (Whitmore, 2006). Mining corporations, therefore, tend to control their sustainability reports by limiting assurance engagement (Fonseca, 2010). Analysis of scientific literature and observations of mines in Brazil by Monteiro et al. (2019) outlined that there are possibilities of reaching 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in the mining industry, especially promotion of jobs (SDG 8), contribution to the reduction of poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2). However, extractive industries do not recover the areas they degraded, compromising the achievement of SDG 2, 10, 13 and 15, while there is also evident lack of investment in inclusive education for local residents and employees (SDG 4), and low incidence of women in the workforce (SDG 5) (Monteiro et al., 2019).

Research conducted by the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2021) devotes special attention to the sustainable and responsible development of critical minerals. It points out that “failure to manage environmental and social impacts from minerals development will slow clean energy

transitions” (IEA, 2021, p. 192). Although these public resources have the potential to foster economic growth and provide fair benefits to governments, companies, and local communities, numerous cases show that resource development has failed to produce sustainable economic gains and has instead generated social harm. The legal framework for regulating social and environmental aspects of extractive activities in Serbia spans much broader than the Law on mining and geological research, and has been elaborated by Maričić and Oranje (2025).

The diverse social consequences and negative environmental impacts of mining have recently attracted increased attention from the general public, experts, various levels of government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (particularly environmental movements), and others. Due to the rapid development of mining worldwide in the early decades of the twenty-first century, criticism from NGOs and local communities toward mining companies – and, to a lesser extent, government institutions – has intensified because of potential environmental hazards. This is especially evident in South America (Arsel et al., 2016; Conde & Billon, 2017; Espinosa, 2022; Heikkinen et al., 2023; Schilling-Vacaflor & Eichler, 2017).

These disagreements sometimes escalate into serious social conflicts associated with the operations of existing mines or concerns about the consequences of future mining projects. The Environmental Justice Atlas recently identified 20 conflicts related to lithium extraction in the USA, China, Canada, Spain, Serbia, Zimbabwe, and, notably, in the countries of the “Lithium Triangle” – Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile (EJA, 2021). Such disputes also affect European countries, including Portugal, the Czech Republic, Finland, and Serbia (Eerola, 2024; Saleth & Varov, 2023). For instance, in Serbia, exploration activities by Rio Tinto in the Jadar Valley sparked what may be the country’s largest environmental conflict in history on 25 November 2019 (EJA, 2021). Tens of thousands of citizens signed a petition against the opening of the mine (Đorđević et al., 2024).

Opposition to environmental advocates sometimes takes the form of “ecological nationalism” (Petrović & Pešić, 2023, p. 398). One of the critical issues under scrutiny is whether local communities can truly benefit from the exploitation of mineral resources (Shiquan et al., 2022). Consequently, the question of how mining companies contribute to sustainable development has become a “key challenge” for the extractive industry (Wang et al., 2016). The contemporary trend of rapid natural resource depletion, or “extractivism,” fueled by the neoliberal paradigm, has transformed what once appeared to be a purely economic-political or technical issue into a socio-cultural concern of “paramount importance” within public discourse, academia, and expert panels (Banović et al., 2022, p. 231). Ultimately, some authors view this issue at the most general level of analysis, as a classic “ethical dilemma” between addressing global climate and sacrificing local lifestyles and ecosystems (Köppel & Scoville-Simonds, 2024). Of course, a third (or middle) option is also conceivable: the development of new economic activities with minimal socio-environmental impact. This ethical dilemma/trilemma, slightly rephrased, boils down to the following question: Should communities and natural values in certain areas rich in lithium reserves simply be sacrificed for the sake of higher development goals? (Jerez et al., 2021; Saleth & Varov, 2023). A similar deliberation was used in the recent past when searching for suitable sites for storing spent uranium in the USA (Church & Crawford, 2018).

The issuance of a mining permit to a company for the exploitation of a mineral deposit should be preceded by a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of the specific project, in order to minimize risks and ensure the informed participation of all interested parties (Esteves et al., 2012; Nevskaya et al., 2024). This necessitates the creation of shared value for all stakeholders during the implementation of the project, as is the case in other industrial sectors (Porter & Kramer, 2011). There is a pressing need for active participation of stakeholders in the management of mining projects to achieve sustainable development goals. Recent experience shows that many mining projects are delayed, interrupted, and sometimes entirely rejected as a result of, primarily, the lack of effective and efficient communication with the local community (Moffat & Zhang, 2014; Que et al., 2015).

This paper analyzes the results of empirical research on the involvement of various stakeholders (the state, local communities, environmental organizations, and the media) in the decision-making process regarding the implementation of large mining projects. At the center of this analysis is the Rio Tinto project for the extraction of lithium from deposits in Western Serbia (in the Jadar River valley). Rio Tinto is a British-Australian multinational mining and resources corporation, founded in 1873 in Spain and registered in London. Today, the company operates in 35 countries with over 55,000 employees (Rio Tinto, 2025). In the third quarter of 2025, it was the 2nd largest mining company in the world by market value of \$115.6 billion (Mining.com, 2025). Since 1995, it has operated under a dual listed companies (DLC) structure. The ownership structure of Rio Tinto (RIO) stock is a mix of institutional (as asset management firms and pension funds), retail, and individual investors. Approximately 5.5% of the company's stock is owned by Institutional Investors, and 94.51% is owned by public companies and individual investors. Key shareholders in 2025 include Aluminum Corporation of China Limited (14.6%), Vanguard Group (3.6%), BlackRock (3.3%), and others. In the last two decades, Rio Tinto has faced criticism by environmental groups worldwide (Corporate Watch, 2012; Sadler, 2004; Stuehlen & Anderl, 2024).

In 2008, the Ministry of Finance of Norway decided to exclude the company Rio Tinto from the Government Pension Fund Global (the world's second-largest pension fund) due to a risk of contributing to severe environmental damage in the Grasberg mine in Indonesia (Ministry of Finance of Norway, 2008). The Rio Tinto espionage case marked 2009/2010, when Rio Tinto executives were arrested and sentenced for bribery and industrial spying (Chong et al., 2009). Another scandal rose in 2020, when Rio Tinto blew up the millennia-old Aboriginal Juukan Gorge cave system in Western Australia, which had evidence of 46,000 years of continual human occupation, despite alternative options (Nicholas & Thomas, 2022). In 2023, the company agreed to pay \$15 million for violations of the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) arising out of a bribery scheme involving a consultant in Guinea in 2010 (SEC, 2023).

The main goal of the research is to identify the dominant perceptions, or narratives, about the advantages and disadvantages of the planned lithium extraction project, the key players behind these narratives, and to determine ways to improve stakeholder participation in this and future mining projects. A detailed analysis of specific mining debates can provide insights that will help avoid similar situations in the future.

The paper begins with a brief outline of the theoretical framework, namely the concept of shared value creation and the role of dominant media in shaping public discourse on mining. It then describes the applied methodological approach based on quantitative-qualitative content analysis. In the following sections, we present and interpret the research findings derived from the sample of media publications and propose measures to enhance the quality of participation – particularly citizen participation – during public debates on the future of major development projects.

## 2. Theoretical and historical background

There are several key terms on which this research relies, which are ambiguous, that is, they have different or multiple meanings depending on the context and the involved actors, i.e. state, corporation, local community, international organizations. The concept of sustainability has already been highlighted from a few angles. Some of the remaining most significant notions include energy transition, shared value and sacrificial zones.

Historically and globally, there have already been several energy transitions. The latest one is global and refers to the switch from fossil fuels to sustainable, i.e. dominantly renewable energy systems due to global climate change and scarce petroleum supplies (Solomon & Krishna, 2011). One of the hottest topics in recent decades is the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources (RES) and alternatives (as nuclear energy), labeled as “just green transition” (Berisha et al., 2025; Maričić & Pantić, 2025). In this regard, the agreements and guidelines by the EU (the

European Green Deal) and in the region (The Green Agenda for Western Balkans) are of particular importance for Serbia.

For a country that relies heavily on fossil fuels (over 73.5% in 2022), above all low-calorie lignite in the production of electricity (over 61.5%), and depends on oil and gas imports, with numerous ongoing problems in terms of a polluted environment, outdated technology, low energy efficiency in all parts of the energy chain, rather centralized – predominantly state-owned energy sector, at the same time on the periphery of the EU for too long, the new requirements that are being set in this regard represent a great burden (Maričić & Pantić, 2025; MME, 2024). New geopolitical circumstances, above all the war between Russia and Ukraine, highlight the importance of energy security, and in the new Energy Development Strategy (MME, 2024), influence the decision to continue relying on domestic coal reserves until the production of electricity from RES is sufficiently developed as a replacement. At the same time, the EU is pressuring Serbia through the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA, 2024), in accordance with which strategic projects for the exploitation of raw materials outside the EU borders were declared in 2025. That list of 13 projects in third countries includes several controversial mining plans – and among the most controversial is the plan to open a lithium mine in the Jadar Valley in Serbia. The signing of a strategic raw materials partnership in July 2024, between the EU and the Serbian government, enables the EU to ensure the collective supply of strategic raw materials, to reduce the high level of dependence on Chinese raw material imports, and in parallel expand its geopolitical influence in the Balkan raw materials sector (Müller et al., 2025). However, this partnership is connected with different economic (i.e. the proportion of targeted state aid in Serbia has ranged between 2–5% of GDP, whereas the European average is just 0.5%) (Müller et al., 2025) and environmental risks (in a populated and fertile agricultural area, with rich but sensitive hydrogeology reserves) (Đorđević et al., 2024). Serbia is in this case merely a site of extraction, with questionable benefits, although the President of the Republic of Serbia recently announced that over 80% should be processed locally.

After the UN finally acknowledged the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (the UN Human Rights Council resolution 48/13) in 2021, the Special Rapporteur (UNHRC, 2022) emphasized the ongoing toxification across the world, which is causing environmental injustices and creating “sacrifice zones” – areas with severe contamination where vulnerable and marginalized communities suffer an unfair share of the health, human-rights, and environmental impacts caused by pollution and toxic materials. He claims that tens of millions of people are suffering strokes, cancers, respiratory problems and heart disease as a result of toxic contamination of the environment. According to Lerner (2010, p. 2), the term sacrifice zones originates from “National Sacrifice Zones,” an Orwellian label created by U.S. government officials to designate regions dangerously contaminated due to uranium mining and processing for nuclear weapons. Remote mining communities present example of sacrifice areas where state or corporate business practices demand from low-income and racialized communities to shoulder more than their fair share of environmental harms, i.e. to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that wealthier people can avoid, so a pattern of injustice and equality is established as a form of environmental racism (Lerner, 2010; Scott & Smith, 2017; Škokić, 2025).

Countries that prioritize the development of mining and energy sectors, especially those striving to rapidly increase their GDP, rely on the media to implement these public policies. This creates space for manipulative actions. Cvetkovski (2013a), for example, points to an increasing synergy in recent times between mining magnates and media moguls. It raises a legitimate question whether this trend serves the best public interest, as a few powerful individuals control the majority of both the mining and media sectors. Cvetkovski (2013b) observes that

the potential for elites to influence public debate and therefore shape attitudes and beliefs about the impact of natural resource development is worthy of greater critical political and economic analysis. Mining-media convergence in a weak regulatory environment essentially becomes a ‘game about placing blocks to build anything you can imagine’.

On the other hand, the media are a kind of “catalyst” for change (Krivić et al., 2014). Improving the conditions for the economic, political, and socio-cultural life of people living in mineral-rich areas can positively affect overall societal development (Suhendarwan et al., 2024). Although mining has been associated with income higher than average and increased employment, these benefits are usually unevenly distributed between population groups (OECD, 2023). However, economic inequalities tend to increase in mining regions (Kasnar et al., 2024). Bird (2016, p. 631), for example, notes:

In spite of often well-meaning efforts, the wealth produced by most mining firms in developing areas largely benefits those immediately involved, sometimes neighboring communities, and often those in the governing strata. One way mining operations can foster more inclusive wealth development is to adopt much broader approaches towards the construction of the various physical and social infrastructures required for their own operations.

Additionally, the short-term environmental impacts of new mining operations are not felt uniformly across the country, which consequently leads to different perspectives, or perceptions, of mining among citizens (Teye et al., 2024).

Mass media (print, radio, and television) play an important role as they stimulate “the dissemination of information, the diffusion of innovations, and set the agenda for future development” (Tadesse, 2015, p. 4). The interconnection of different social subsystems and media is inevitable in contemporary “information-intensive” societies. In these societies, media portrayals of phenomena and processes are central to “knowledge sharing, the diffusion of new ideas, and mobilization of action,” making them significant for both democratic and non-democratic regimes as sources of “information, disinformation, or abuse” (Lyytimäki et al., 2020, p. 2).

Print media, as the oldest form of mass communication, provides information to interested citizens by opening space for their direct participation in organizing various gatherings (such as meetings, discussions, protests, etc.), introducing “innovative ideas into the public discourse” and directing readers’ attention to pressing issues of the day (Vuković et al., 2021, p. 660). These newspapers offer more room for the confrontation of different viewpoints and facilitate the transmission of complex information from government institutions, lower levels of government (municipalities and cities), and experts to the public. Newspaper articles significantly shape public perceptions of the sensitivity of various issues related to the sustainable use of resources and environmental protection (Mandić et al., 2021).

Serbia is an example of a country where the utilization of various mineral resources has played a significant role in its development – from the establishment of the medieval state under the Nemanjić dynasty to the modern era, marked by the exploitation of vast reserves of coal and metal ores, primarily for the production of copper, zinc, lead, nickel, gold, antimony, and more. Currently, there are 26 active mines in Serbia, with 200 exploitation fields and 127 exploration sites. A prerequisite for further development of the mining sector is a positive public perception of shared value, that is, the benefits for various stakeholders, including local communities. In situations where their traditional way of life is disrupted due to projects of national importance – especially when excluded from public discussions – these communities find it easier to connect with the broader public through the media (Akter & Azad, 2021). As a predominantly rural country, Serbia has 129 local self-government units (encompassing 3,904 settlements) situated in rural areas, with substantial mineral reserves for potential exploitation (Bogdanov, 2015).

When presenting a mining project, especially in the early stages of the participation process, all aspects of the project should be outlined so that various stakeholders can rationally assess its advantages and disadvantages. A useful starting point is the perspective of creating *shared value*, introduced by Porter and Kramer in 2006 as a “new conception of capitalism” that would regain societal trust in business and boost economic growth. Porter and Kramer (2011, p. 67) define *shared value* as “policies and practices that enhance a company’s competitiveness while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates.” More

precisely, the shared value perspective means: “When businesses can improve profitability while also improving environmental performance, public health and nutrition, affordable housing and financial security, and other key measures of societal wellbeing.” Creating shared value is an integral part of a company’s profitability, as it is based on the premise that social value creation is necessary to achieve desirable economic outcomes. Critics argue that this concept lacks clarity in terms of meaning, application, and impact (Royo-Vela & Cuevas Lizama, 2022) or theoretical validity (Dembek et al., 2016; Wieland, 2017).

In recent decades, *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) and the commitment of mining companies to social responsibility have been widely studied as a new concern for extractive industries. All of these studies have been associated with the three basic dimensions of CSR (i.e. social, economic, and environmental). CSR refers to the commitment of a company to improving sustainable economic development and providing a higher quality of life for its subsidiaries, workers’ families, local communities and society. An extensive evaluation of the papers about CSR in mining, dealing with the indicators of sustainable development, reveals six key research topics: (1) the role of CSR in mining communities; (2) the role of CSR in mining companies; (3) the role of CSR in environmental control around mines; (4) the impact of CSR on stakeholders; (5) planning in the field of CSR in mining communities; and (6) CSR/sustainability reporting (Pouresmaieli et al., 2024).

The Pyramid of CSR, suggested by Carroll, is created from a stakeholder perspective wherein the focus is on the whole, not the different parts. According to the CSR pyramid model, companies should engage in decisions, actions, policies and practices that simultaneously fulfill the four social responsibilities, starting from the base: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. The first two responsibilities are *required*, while ethical and philanthropic responsibilities are *expected* and *desired*, respectively (Carroll, 2016). Only ethical responsibility affects all stakeholder groups. When a company meets the highest component of SCR, a philanthropic responsibility, then it gains the status of a corporate citizen. Corporate citizenship means that “there is a parallel line between companies and individual citizens and that companies are endowed with both the right and responsibility to undertake their operations” (Adonteng-Kissi & Adonteng-Kissi, 2017, p. 198).

However, transparency and access to information alone do not guarantee fair participation, as structural power asymmetries between corporations and local communities often shape who can meaningfully influence decisions (Agyeman et al., 2016; Perreault, 2011/2018; Schlosberg, 2007). Communities may lack the financial, organizational, or political capacity to engage effectively, which limits the practical relevance of shared-value claims in extractive contexts.

From this perspective, shared-value approaches risk overlooking the structural conditions that limit communities’ agency and may inadvertently reproduce unequal participation opportunities (Franks & Vanclay, 2013; Jenkins & Yakovleva, 2006). While the shared value perspective provides a useful analytical lens, its emphasis on alignment between business profitability and community wellbeing tends to downplay the fundamentally asymmetrical relations between corporate actors and affected communities. Research in environmental governance and critical resource studies argues that access to information – though essential – does not eliminate disparities in power, expertise, and procedural influence (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Without mechanisms that actively redistribute decision-making power, shared value frameworks may remain aspirational rather than transformative.

### 3. Methodology

Based on the general research objective, an appropriate methodological approach was chosen to overcome the challenge associated with studying phenomena and processes that are highly context-dependent, shaped by specific circumstances relevant to the research subject. The media serves as the primary platform where narratives about mining are constructed and reproduced.

Despite the fragmentation of the media industry, the growing importance of social media, and the declining readership of print media, daily newspapers remain crucial for information

dissemination. In Serbia, newspapers still have a significant number of readers despite a noticeable drop in circulation. According to recent data,

the print market experiences a steep decline over the years, and this is the only media segment constantly losing audience – its audience was cut in half between 2016 and 2022. Data from IPSOS shows that on average, print daily editions reach about one million people, while around 350,000 are reached by weeklies per edition. (BIRN, 2023)

However, the most influential newspapers typically play a crucial role in stimulating public debate by facilitating interactions between information sources, journalists, and the interested public. Newspapers, through the presentation or omission of certain topics, or by shaping them in a particular way, influence the public and policies in the areas of economic development and natural resource management.

Interesting to note, some mining companies, as Rio Tinto, developed strategies to creatively use persons – but also objects, places, and spaces – as media for translating their identity or personality to meet different demands, while avoiding individual responsibilities (Paliewicz, 2022). Paliewicz (2024) warns that mining must be criticized not only for material harm, but for the narratives that enable and justify that harm. He also shows how activists, Indigenous groups, and environmentalists use counter-narratives to challenge and expose the extractive, colonial, and destructive reality behind the corporate façade (Paliewicz, 2024).

The methodological approach used in this research involves content analysis. This method is appropriate when it is necessary to determine, describe, and classify the characteristics of a message (Hedding, 2017; Manić, 2017; Matejova, 2023; Neuendorf, 2002; Vuković et al., 2021). Despite the strong focus on quantitative research, content analysis still holds a respected position among qualitative methods, as it allows for critical reflection by considering the context in which the data were collected. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorf, 1980). This research technique is an indispensable tool in the study of symbols and messages contained in the newspaper materials through collection of data, analysis and comparison of media content to the “real world” (Wimmer & Dominic, 2000). Qualitative content analysis is particularly useful when determining the overall tone of newspaper articles on mining, identifying key actors who express their views, and highlighting specific themes emphasized in the analyzed texts (Lyytimäki et al., 2021). Identifying key issues in media publications involves a subjective evaluation of not only the manifest content but also the latent content of news and visual materials, when possible (Somerville & Ames, 2020).

Lyytimäki et al. (2021) chose three regions (within Germany, Spain and Finland) that represented different geological, political, and socio-economic contexts but shared a cross-national EU framework. Their analysis focused on the regional level newspaper coverage covering selected regions and nearby areas. According to these authors, regional-level newspaper coverage is the “best basis for the analysis since exploration and mining are place-based activities with considerable regional and local social, economic, and physical effects, as well as high awareness among the local community” (Lyytimäki et al., 2021). The sample from all three investigated regions, which covered 18 months from September 2018 to February 2020, allowed charting of the overall volume and temporal development of the mining debate, as well as identification of the main topics presented. The aim of this study was also to determine the tone of the articles, based on simple categories of “positive,” “neutral,” or “negative” in order to provide reliable interpretations and comparability between cases with earlier research. Frequency distribution tables were used to summarize the data.

Due to the specificity of the focus, media content on the potential exploitation of lithium, published in print media, was analysed. This included newspaper articles of an informative (news reports, interviews) and analytical (commentaries, articles, etc.) nature, as well as critically expressed opinions in the form of articles by public representatives and stakeholders. Identification of the main topics involved a subjective assessment that focused not only on the manifest content

but also the latent content of the news items. The key actors that were present in the news were coded from the gathered texts as well. Somerville & Ames, for instance, demonstrated that media framing in favor of some mining project, based on expectations that it could bring economic recovery, was not the case (2020). Some other concerns, mainly environmental ones, were dominant in coverage and topics of political responsibility.

Two sample periods were selected in our study. A shorter period was selected – from 23 July to 2 August 2024 – since this timeframe corresponds to the central period of the latest (summer) wave of protests against mining, not only lithium but also other metals in Serbia. A longer time – twelve months – was chosen in order to identify recent media discourse on mining, specifically the potential mining of lithium in Serbia and how it correlates with participation of various stakeholders. For this purpose, a sample of 51 critical articles (opinions) about the potential mining of lithium was collected during the twelve months from 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024. The selected periods coincide with a series of events, particularly in 2024, related to various aspects of the Jadar project. Monitoring media content over a longer period allows insight into various transformations: the appearance of certain topics, their elaboration and withdrawal before other topics.

Two influential national daily newspapers were analyzed: *Politika* and *Danas* as representatives of the serious informative press. Actual data on the circulation of daily newspapers in Serbia is not officially available, but it is evident that they are quite small, especially when it comes to non-tabloid newspapers. That is also a consequence of the well-known paradox of an apparently excessive number of media (especially newspapers) in a rather small and poor market (Penezić, 2021). On the other hand, most of the national dailies in Serbia have published their versions online since 2000.

The newspaper *Politika* began publishing in 1904, and it is considered “the oldest and most influential daily newspaper in this part of Europe” (Politika, 2025). It has been conservative-oriented and loyal to the government, with politically appointed editors. The readers used to be older generations, middle class and highly educated. In 1997, it was transformed into a joint stock company, state-owned and state-controlled. The German media group WAZ bought a 50% stake in 2001 and sold it to an unknown Russian company, East Media Group, in 2012, which resold it in 2022 (Media ownership monitor, 2023). Since January 2025, *Politika* has been 100% owned by a private company, “Media 026” Ltd., that (despite opposition from the media and cultural community) purchased the remaining 50% from the joint stock company “Politika a.d.,” where the state owned 90% of the shares.

The newspaper *Danas* was established in 1997 by a group of journalists opposing the regime of Slobodan Milošević, then president of Serbia. It is liberal, pro-European and left-oriented, devoted to criticism of the government, profiled as a newspaper read mainly by intellectuals and the professional public (Penezić, 2013). The United Media, a media company based in Luxembourg, acquired *Danas* in March 2021. The editors-in-chief, some of whom were founders, previously worked as journalists at *Danas*.

The subject of the analysis also included the cover page content of these newspapers, as it could serve as an indicator of the importance editors attribute to topics related to mining and lithium extraction. Additionally, the overall content of these newspapers on mining-related topics was analyzed in detail. These two papers have the characteristics of high-quality, reputable and influential press with greater social influence and a stronger orientation towards an emancipated audience (Vuković et al., 2021). Other dailies were not analyzed since they have a semi-tabloid or tabloid character and, on the other hand, do not deal with environmental issues in a systematic way. While traditional or so-called serious press respects three requirements (current, important, interesting), the tabloid press emphasizes only the third dimension, which it tries to decorate with a triangle: shock, sensation, admiration (Milić, 2014). The tabloid editorial approach probably does not leave enough space for quality public reporting on topics of a complex nature, such as mining in general or the analysis of individual mining projects.

## 4. Results

The possibility of exploiting mineral deposits in the Jadar River Valley for lithium extraction has sparked significant interest in Serbian public discourse in recent years. The controversies surrounding this issue are somewhat unusual, considering the long tradition of mining in Serbia. Thanks to mining, the country has successfully maintained energy stability for decades through coal extraction. By the end of 2023, the mining sector in Serbia employed over 30,000 people or 1.25% of the total workforce. In 2024, their number increased to 37,700 or 1.3% of the total workforce. The share of mining in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped from 3.2% in 2022 to 2.9% in 2024.

This part of the paper firstly presents the research findings related to the presence of different ideas in the media regarding the potential lithium extraction project in the Jadar Valley in Serbia. The results are later explained and interpreted to identify the narratives present and their dominance in public discourse. Given that specific events can greatly influence public opinion, sometimes completely overturning the majority viewpoint, [Table 1](#) presents key events that led to the noticeable mobilization of the public, expressed through long-term protests during two periods – fall 2021 and summer 2024.

The topic of lithium began to attract the attention of the wider public in Serbia when the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area of implementing the Jadar project for the exploitation and processing of jadarite minerals, along with the accompanying strategic environmental assessment, was presented in November 2019. During the public review, potential environmental impacts were revealed. The issue of lithium extraction then became contradictory, eventually becoming the basis for mass protests and eventually being politically articulated. It could be said that the topic of spatial planning moved into the ecological sphere and then into the political sphere. Initially, the representatives of non-governmental environmental organizations were most prominent, followed by various political actors and representatives of mining companies. Only later did experts from the relevant fields begin to speak out to address doubts surrounding the Jadar project. These concerns relate to the extraction of jadarite, its processing (to obtain lithium carbonate –  $\text{Li}_2\text{CO}_3$  and borates –  $\text{B}(\text{OH}_3)$ ), and measures to mitigate harmful environmental impacts.

The differing views within the expert public also contributed to the creation of a gap, or mistrust, between the general and potentially endangered public on one hand, and mining companies and government institutions on the other (Đorđević et al., 2024). The involvement of scientists, as one of the interested stakeholders, raises the issue of their neutrality. Namely, the research on the role of scientific expertise in the mining industry often indicates that expert reports (or assessments) are framed to align with particular interests, not necessarily through bias, but through selective inclusion or avoidance of key dimensions (Romain, 2015). But some biases in mining are unavoidable. Hilson (2019), for example, identifies a special type of bias – so-called large-scale mining “bias” – present in many countries in which development policies are “biased” in favor of large-scale extraction of mineral resources. This bias, along with financial funds, can significantly affect the objectivity of judgments in terms of the potential extraction of mineral ores.

Broadly stated, the primary duty of the experts in the extractive industry is to obtain scientifically valid results while promoting and protecting the integrity of research. The conduct of research dealing with the extraction of critical mineral resources in an ethical manner, which protects the rights of research subjects and trust in the obtained results, helps to achieve the goals of this type of research. Under such circumstances, their results and judgements are acceptable to a wider audience and provide, more importantly, a solid ground for increased public participation.

The specificity of mining adds to the difficulty of public participation. Every new mine is a story in itself – primarily due to the composition of the ore being exploited and the specific technological process suited to the properties of the natural resource from which lithium is obtained – whether it be a mineral, a salt solution, or geothermal water (Stefanović et al., 2023). However, despite the

**Table 1.** The most significant events related to the Jadar project.

Date	Event
1990s	Prof. J. Obradović, with associates from the Belgrade University – Faculty of Mining and Geology, was the first to report on a high content of lithium and boron in Jadar Valley (Obradović et al., 1997, 1999).
2001	The Rio Tinto Group established the company Rio Sava Exploration d.o.o., a subsidiary company founded and incorporated in Serbia to conduct geological exploration activities.
July 2004	The Government of the Republic of Serbia grants a permit to Rio Sava Exploration d.o.o. for exploratory drilling.
December 2004	A new lithium- and boron-bearing mineral (LiNaB <sub>3</sub> SiO <sub>7</sub> (OH)), jadarite, was discovered and named after the Jadar River Valley where it was first detected.
17 March 2005	The company Rio Tinto has been granted permission to explore within expanded boundaries.
26 September 2005	Geological research is approved in the territory of Loznica.
2006	The Mining Law is amended so that only those with exploration rights can obtain exploitation rights.
2007–2009	Rio Tinto is granted three new, additional exploration fields.
February 2012	Rio Tinto receives the first permit for large-scale drilling in the Jadar basin.
May 2017	The company Rio Tinto estimates reserves at 136 million tons, which can be exploited for 50 years, with 2023 being set as the start of mine construction and 2026 as the start of lithium ore extraction.
25 July 2017	Rio Tinto and the Government of the Republic of Serbia sign a Memorandum to begin lithium extraction, and the project is named Jadar.
2017–2019	Five cycles of testing jadarite processing are conducted in Rio Tinto's pilot plant in Australia.
Early 2020	Consideration of the lithium extraction plan through public consultation in two phases – preliminary (15 days) and draft development (30 days), with no significant objections from citizens.
March 2020	Adopted Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose of Implementing the Jadar Mineral Extraction and Processing project and the accompanying strategic environmental assessment.
6 and 7 May 2021	A scientific conference organized by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts is held under the title: The Jadar Project – What is Known?
13 September 2021	Angela Merkel, the former Chancellor of Germany, expresses her country's interest in lithium mining, battery production, and electric vehicles during her visit to Serbia.
End of 2021	Several environmental organizations, with the support of some opposition parties and opposition-oriented media, organize mass protests in late 2021 to halt lithium extraction.
20 January 2022	The Government of the Republic of Serbia halts the process of issuing a permit to Rio Tinto for opening a lithium and boric acid mine – a project worth 2.4 billion US dollars. It also adopted a decision suspending the validity of the spatial plan for the special-purpose area designated for the Jadar project's mineral extraction and processing. ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia," 2022).
2022	Serbia signs a Letter of Intent leading to an agreement with the EU on critical raw materials.
September 2023	Several political organizations express firm opposition to potential lithium extraction during the parliamentary election campaign on 17 December 2023.
17 January 2024	On the margins of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Rio Tinto contacts Serbian officials to leave room for future agreements regarding the Jadar project's fate.
June 2024	Rio Tinto voluntarily publishes drafts of three environmental impact studies confirming that ecology and economy can go "hand in hand."
28 June 2024	Almost 2,000 citizens, organized by the Union of Ecological Organizations of Serbia, gathered for a "Ne damo Jadar" ("We Don't Give Jadar") protest in Loznica, opposing the opening of the mine.
7 July 2024	The environmental movement "We Don't Give Jadar" interrupts railway traffic for two hours near Loznica.
12 July 2024	The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia annuls the Government's decision of 20 January 2022 (US IUo No. 39/2022, 11 July 2024, published in the "Official Gazette of RS" (2024a)).
16 July 2024	The Government of the Republic of Serbia reactivates the regulation on the Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area of implementing the Jadar project's mineral extraction and processing ("Official Gazette of RS," 2024b).
19 July 2024	Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor of Germany, officially visits Serbia; a Memorandum of Understanding is signed between Serbia and the EU on a strategic partnership in sustainable raw materials.
10 August 2024	Large demonstrations (over 30,000 participants) mark the end of the summer protests wave (almost 30) in many places and cities, mainly in western Serbia, with the main demand being for the state to abandon lithium extraction.
28 August 2024	The government organizes a meeting with representatives of the academic community, with a clear call for scientists to engage in the public debate in the coming period.
7 September 2024	Public debate on lithium in Ljubovija, near the planned mine, attended by representatives of the Government, Rio Tinto, and citizens; a call for active participation of the expert public in dialogue and a commitment by the company to release environmental impact studies in the next 22 months.
17 September 2024	The Government puts on public display (15 days) a Request for determining the scope and content of the environmental impact study for the Jadar project based on Rio Tinto's submitted request.

heightened attention, there was no resistance during the public review that would have prevented the adoption of the plan, which is why the plan was adopted in 2022.

#### 4.1. Lithium in the media

During the mass protests in cities across Serbia (mainly in Belgrade) in the autumn of 2023, as well as in existing and potential mining areas (Eastern Serbia, Šumadija, Western Serbia), a generally negative stance towards mining as an economic activity was expressed. According to the draft Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2021–2035 (however, still in the adoption phase), new mines are planned to open in Serbia by 2035. In speeches, mostly by environmental activists, locals, ecologists, and members of the academic community, the focus was on the harmful consequences of future projects on the environment, the threat to the traditional way of life of people living in rural areas, and the need to abandon the mining of lithium and other valuable metals in some discovered deposits in natural landscapes.

Professor Ratko Ristić of the University of Belgrade (former dean of the Faculty of Forestry and at the time prorector of the University of Belgrade), at such a meeting held on September 30, 2023, in Guberevac (Gruža), regarding new mining research for gold and copper, stated:

First of all, we are not against mining that serves the public interest, and the public interest is what satisfies the needs of the majority of people living in our country. We have no objection to that, but we are against serving the interests of private foreign mining corporations that, through their subsidiary companies, literally come to Serbia in flocks with only one goal: to turn our country into their resource base. (*Danas*, October 3, 2023)

The local populations' messages, displayed during the discussions, reflected animosity towards foreign mining companies: "Dig gold in front of your own house!"; "Warning – you are not welcome here!"; "We won't give up our Serbia, we won't give up our Šumadija, we won't give up our Guberevac!"; "We don't want Gruža to be like the river in Bor!" and so on.

The effect of what began as sporadic gatherings and protests in various parts of the country quickly escalated, partly due to the media's interest (especially those favorable to opposition parties) and partly because of the intense politicization of one of Serbia's future economic development issues. Environmental protests were primarily covered by TV stations TV *NI* and *Nova S*, and daily newspapers *Danas* and *Nova*. Lithium mining became an unavoidable topic in debates ahead of the last parliamentary elections in Serbia (17 December 2023). It seems that after the parliamentary elections, there was a noticeable effort in the wider public to revive enthusiasm for the Jadar project, primarily for the sake of social development, increasing GDP and employment. This can be inferred from the growing media presence of high political officials, pro-government analysts, representatives of Rio Tinto, and experts in the fields of geology, mining, metallurgy, and environmental protection. Media outlets aligned with the government and "analysts" claim that the activists against lithium exploitation are working for foreign governments, and that the stories about potential pollution are false or exaggerated.

Debates on commercial television about lithium mining began to intensify again in June 2024, after Rio Tinto released drafts of three environmental impact studies for the Jadar project. Data from the Bureau for Social Research's monitoring show that the campaign to revive the Jadar project began intensively on June 2, as lithium was only mentioned 37 times in the national media in May, before the local June elections. By June, lithium was mentioned 330 times, and from July 1 to 24, it was mentioned 809 times (*Danas*, 26 July 2024). This seems to have prompted environmental organizations in Serbia to start a long wave of summer demonstrations, beginning with the first gathering in Loznica on June 28 (symbolically on Vidovdan, a Serbian national and religious holiday), with 40 protests across smaller and larger cities, aiming to convince the government to permanently abandon the lithium mining project (Table 2). This demand was most explicitly expressed at the largest gathering in Belgrade on 10 August 2024, where over 30,000 activists gathered. It was the largest environmental rally ever held in Serbia. The main slogan in Belgrade was: "There will be

**Table 2.** Protests in Serbia against mining and the Jadar project.

Date	Location	Participants	Share of population (%)
28 June 2024	Loznica	3,200–3,500	13.00–14.45
22 July 2024	Valjevo	2,500	4.34
25 July 2024	Grocka	100	1.23
25 July 2024	Koceljeva	280	6.00
26 July 2024	Negotin	170–180	1.16–1.23
27 July 2024	Arilje	350	5.28
28 July 2024	Krupanj	400	9.68
28 July 2024	Bogatić	1,450–1,500	19.73–20.41
29 July 2024	Arandelovac	1,500	6.58
29 July 2024	Barajevo	260	2.82
29 July 2024	Šabac	7,000–7,500	13.73–14.67
29 July 2024	Ljig	400	12.93
30 July 2024	Kosjerić	750	20.09
30 July 2024	Mladenovac	1,400	6.29
31 July 2024	Požega	1,300	10.48
1 August 2024	Mionica	550	34.61
1 August 2024	Raška	300–320	3.54–3.76
2 August 2024	Topola	470	10.26
2 August 2024	Ub	500	7.52
2 August 2024	Pančevo	2,500	2.89
3 August 2024	Paraćin	380	1.70
4 August 2024	Osečina	750	27.46
5 August 2024	Rekovac	400	26.3
5 August 2024	Bresnica	220	16.98
5 August 2024	Rača	350–400	14.81–16.91
5 August 2024	Smederevo	1,300–1,400	2.17–2.38
5 August 2024	Bor	200	0.69
10 August 2024	Belgrade	40,000	3.10

Source: Archive of Public Gatherings, 2024.

no mine” (*Rudnika neće biti*). This largest gathering was preceded by a series of protests in smaller and larger cities across Serbia, with more than 10,000 participants at 10 of these events. Proportionally, the number of participants was higher in smaller towns near the planned mining locations for not only lithium but also other metals. This can be attributed to strong fears about the potential environmental consequences of lithium mining and distrust in plans and agreements of the government adopted without informed consent and participation of the public, which has served as a powerful motivator for massive citizen mobilization on this issue. This clearly highlights the need for a shift from one-way communication to mutually beneficial, multi-way communication among all relevant stakeholders regarding the exploitation of jadarite. Following the Constitutional Court’s decision on 11 July 2024, Rio Tinto began proactively communicating with the media.

This part of the paper presents the results of a content analysis of lithium-related articles in relevant daily newspapers (*Politika* and *Danas*) from the perspective of their impact on both the general public and specific audiences in terms of their political preferences.

The most influential daily newspaper, *Politika*, primarily reported, before the summer wave of protests, on the statements of political officials and basic facts about the Jadar project and the circumstances under which Rio Tinto was engaged. The general tone of these articles advocated for finding the “cleanest” solution, both for nature and for people, and for intensifying public debate on whether the project should proceed.

During the summer demonstrations (from 28 June to 10 August 2024), *Politika* covered these events with a smaller number of articles compared to *Danas*. During the analyzed period (23 July–2 August 2024; amidst the protests), *Politika* published only four reports on protest gatherings (Table 3). Potential lithium mining appeared only once on the cover page of the newspaper during this period. The majority of the 23 articles published in this period focused on the economic benefits of potential lithium mining and processing in Serbia. Editorial pieces on lithium mining in *Politika* had a predominantly positive tone.

**Table 3.** News coverage about lithium mining by journalistic format.

Journalistic format	<i>Danas</i>	<i>Politika</i>
News	22	6
Report	19	4
Interview	8	1
Article	23	5
Reportage	2	–
Commentary	10	–
Cartoon	5	–
Critical view (opinion)	17	7

After the summer wave of ecological protests, *Politika* began to encourage public debate on the potential for lithium mining. In this effort, *Politika* allocates significant space for eminent experts in the fields of economics, geology, mining, metallurgy and environmental protection. However, their expert position is often not neutral – extensive interviews were published with e.g. Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Jovović, who leads two EIA studies for Rio Tinto, Branko Terzić, who worked for the USA Government, Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Cvijetić and Prof. Dr. Dinko Knežević, who are engaged by Rio Tinto on Jadar EIA study; dr Michael Tost, who worked for Rio Tinto. Extensive interviews with university professors from the aforementioned fields, as well as their authored articles, can address many of the public’s uncertainties.

In comparison to *Politika*, the daily newspaper *Danas*, used more frequently informative formats (news, reports, and interviews), as well as analytical journalistic formats (primarily commentary). This newspaper published as many as 107 contributions in order to convey more comprehensively not only the views of journalists on the possibility of reviving the Jadar project but also the opinions of environmental activists and experts in the field of technology (from 23 July to 2 August 2024). Most of the texts consisted of news and reports on protests held throughout Serbia. These often included statements from activists of local environmental associations (for example, “Protect Jadar and Rađevina”):

The people of Serbia have repeatedly expressed opposition to the Jadar project and continue to do so. We are certain that nothing can change here, neither for our association nor for the local community. Therefore, this mine must not and will not be opened. (*Danas*, Vučić “revives” the Jadar project, January 19, 2024, by Radmila Marković)

Out of all daily newspapers in Serbia, the daily newspaper *Danas* followed all protests against the revival of lithium mining during the summer of 2024 the most closely, as well as all other developments related to this issue, particularly the activities of government institutions. This is illustrated by the newspaper’s front pages, where, in 10 consecutive issues; central attention was given to topics related to the potential lithium mining in Serbia (Table 4). Additionally, the word “lithium” appeared in *Danas* between 44 and 94 times across 10 consecutive issues, from July 23 to August

**Table 4.** Topics about lithium mining on the cover pages of *Danas* and *Politika*.

Date	Newspaper	Title of the text	Attitude towards lithium mining
July 23rd	<i>Danas</i>	<i>The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) remains silent on lithium mining</i>	negative
July 24th	<i>Danas</i>	<i>Lithium mines are possible at 30 locations in Serbia</i>	negative
July 25th	<i>Politika</i>	<i>Who wants to profit politically from lithium</i>	positive
	<i>Danas</i>	<i>The elite trades resources to stay in power</i>	negative
July 27th	<i>Danas</i>	<i>Serbia as a sacrificial zone because of lithium</i>	negative
July 30th	<i>Danas</i>	<i>Opposition is also divided over the lithium mine</i>	negative
July 31st	<i>Danas</i>	<i>People are increasingly stronger and more intense in their opposition to lithium</i>	negative
August 1st	<i>Danas</i>	<i>They want the government to ban lithium mining in Serbia</i>	negative
August 2nd	<i>Danas</i>	<i>The regime is on the verge of panic over protests</i>	negative

2, with 7 to 11 articles on this topic daily. Based on the content analysis of all the articles, it can be concluded that *Danas* predominantly maintains a negative tone towards the Jadar project.

Despite different editorial conceptions, *Politika* and *Danas* set aside significant space for critical opinions of different actors; 17 and 7 articles, respectively (Table 3). The space in the newspaper *Danas* was also used by the company Rio Tinto on two occasions to present its side of the story. Once, this company reacted with an extensive article to the text published on 27 July 2024, which presented Serbia as a “sacrificed zone” (Table 4). Critical opinions published in these two dailies served to analyze the lithium narrative.

#### 4.2. Lithium narratives

Given that there is a wide diversity of viewpoints regarding the potential exploitation of lithium in the area of the Jadar micro-region (and beyond), which also characterizes the media space (see Tables 5 and 6), an attempt was made to collect, analyze and identify the present narratives on this topic based on media content over a longer period as well as during protests against lithium mining. The impetus for this type of analysis also comes from different levels of government in terms of the need for “more public discussion” when it comes to the fate of not only lithium but also other potential mining projects.

Considering the complexity of the mining problem, public discussion is suitable, which enables the consideration of many facts in order to reach an acceptable decision for the largest number of actors, that is, interested parties. The extensive and analytical texts that *Politika* publishes under the “Views” column represent the right source for this purpose. It is important to bear in mind the fact that the articles published in the “Views” section reflect the views of the authors, most often political analysts and experts on specific issues, but they are not always a reflection of the newspaper’s editorial policy. The same applies to experts in economic development or environmental protection. However, it should also be borne in mind that the appeals for meaningful public participation came only after the majority of people began to turn against the Jadar project. Considering the complexity of the mining problem, suitable channels of public discussion are those which enable the consideration of many facts in order to reach a decision acceptable to the largest number of actors.

In the period from 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024, *Politika* published analytical articles in which numerous aspects of lithium exploitation (direct or indirect) were reviewed. The number of published articles in the “Views” column, a total of 51 in the observed period, points to the diversity of opinions expressed regarding the exploitation of lithium, which can only encourage public debate. However, it only seems so at first glance. Namely, only a few analysts and experts have engaged in the discussion about lithium, and some of them contributed considerably more often than others. For example, Dejan Vuk Stanković (political analyst (currently, education minister), 9 articles), Vladimir Đukanović (political analyst and member of national parliament, 7 articles in the period from July 8 to September 2), Vuk Velebit (political analyst, 6 articles), Vladimir Marinković (economist and former member of parliament as representative of ruling party, 5 articles) and Boris Jašović (sociologist, 4 articles).

Lithium is mentioned 18 times in the titles of these texts in the “Views” column. Apart from the phrase “Project Jadar,” the headlines emphasize the energy transition, batteries and electromobility, as well as the fight against prejudices and untruths when it comes to potential lithium mining. At

**Table 5.** Critical articles (opinions) about lithium published in *Politika* in the period 23 July–2 August 2024.

Date	Author	Article title
24 July 2024	Vladimir Vuletić	<i>Tramp, Ukraine and Lithium</i>
25 July 2024	Oliver Subotić	<i>A triple key to understanding the lithium controversy</i>
29 September 2024	Vladimir Đukanović	<i>Being against untruths</i>
30 July 2024	Vuk Velebit	<i>Lithium as political capital</i>
1 August 2024	Bransilav Simonović	<i>Spinning on lithium from the same kitchen</i>

**Table 6.** Critical articles (opinions) about lithium recently published in *Danas* in the period 23 July–2 August 2024.

Date	Author	Article title
23 July 2024	Marko Omčikus	<i>Organic agriculture and livestock breeding are “lithium”</i>
23 July 2024	Savo Đurđić	<i>Legal manipulations in the Jadar case</i>
23 July 2024	Miroslav Parović	<i>What the minister told me about lithium</i>
24 July 2024	Nenad Kostić	<i>Thirteen shames of Rio Tinto's angry ally</i>
25 July 2024	Radovan Francuski	<i>Insults and slander instead of the lithium debate</i>
26 July 2024	Goran Zečević	<i>Lithium mining threatens fish rights</i>
27/28 2024	Milica Kočović De Santo	<i>Serbia as a zone of sacrifice</i>
27/28 2024	Milorad Opačić	<i>Everything You Didn't Want to Know About Lithium</i>
27/28 2024	Aleksej Ključušas	<i>To kill the sparrows?</i>
29 July 2024	Branislav Klanšček	<i>The Jadar project is becoming less of an environmental issue</i>
29 July 2024	Slobodan Cvejić	<i>Prime Minister in the jaws of sustainable development</i>
29 July 2024	Rio Tinto	<i>Agriculture will continue in the vicinity of the lithium mine</i>
31 July 2024	Branislav Omorec	<i>Chinese century and Serbian decades</i>
31 July 2024	Dragan Eraković	<i>The last defense of Serbia</i>
1 August 2024	Mladen Obradović	<i>Who are the real patriots regarding lithium mining in Serbia?</i>
2 August 2024	Milica Kočović De Santo	<i>The Public Interest Response to Corporate Identity</i>
2 August 2024	Hanibal Kovač	<i>Rio Tinto and Vučić's games</i>

the beginning of the monitoring period (from October to December 2023), the topic of lithium was sporadically represented – only six critical opinions were published; two per month. The topic of lithium becomes relevant starting from January 2024.

Most of the articles about lithium were published during the protests against the mining of this metal, as well as after the protests subsided. While two such articles were published in June, there were already eight in July and 15 (the most) in August. There were also days in this period when two extensive texts on lithium were printed in the same issue with opposing opinions of their authors.

The collected and analyzed articles, or “views” (opinions), published in the newspaper *Politika*, suggest the existence of two narratives that are present in the public discourse in the Republic of Serbia regarding the exploitation of mineral resources – pro-mining and anti-mining narratives.

#### 4.2.1. Pro-mining narrative

The pro-mining narrative, most characteristic of government officials and businessmen, broadly states: *The world, in an effort to address the global climate change problem, must begin the energy transition. Since one of the key technologies enabling this transition is based on the use of lithium-ion batteries, it is essential to intensify the mining of critical materials.* Almost two-thirds of the analyzed articles follow this narrative. Below, we highlight the main ideas presented in the texts within this narrative.

Vladimir Marinković in his article *Serbia at an Energy Crossroads* argues that lithium does not only imply “the best world investors, new jobs, and balanced regional development” but also an opportunity for Serbia to “finally join the ranks of the most developed European countries.” It seems that Serbia, according to Marinković (President of the Serbian-American Friendship Congress), is at a crossroads and needs to decide:

whether it will succumb to various blackmail and pressure from obscure local so-called politicians and fighters for human rights and environmental protection and their mentors, who are only comfortable with a Serbia with limited growth and development possibilities ... or will we continue to insist on making decisions independently, defining our own rules of the game, and develop the country to unprecedented limits.

A similar opinion is presented by Dejan Vuk Stanković (Professor at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy). In the articles *Serbia in the “Lithium Fever”* and *The “Jadar” Project in the Media Whirlpool of Ecological Apocalypse and Developmental Opportunities*, Stanković argues that the media dramatization of the Rio Tinto case in the so-called independent media stirs tensions in a society already burdened with various forms of stress. Mentioning “defiance toward progress” as a relic of one of the aspects of Serbian political culture, this author concludes that progress is

achievable only through striving for the efficient use of resources and creating innovative products. In the article *Facts and Prejudices About Lithium*, Stanković notes that public attitudes towards the suspension of the Jadar project are largely based on ecological aspects, with only partial consideration of economic factors. He believes that contemporary Serbian society is too transparent, so no form of “dirty technology” and so-called capitalist greed, as well as potential corruption, could be hidden, justified and defended in the long term (*Lithium Knot*). In the case this project is abandoned, Stanković believes that Serbia would suffer what he calls “reputational damage,” as it would be “perceived as a stagnant country when it comes to investments, which would cause insecurity among already present investors and very likely, radical doubt in the certainty of investing in new projects.” The democratic moratorium on ecological populism, Dejan Vuk Stanković views as a “window of opportunity” for socially responsible mining (*Moratorium on Ecological Populism*). In this case, slogans like “Rio Tinto, get out of Serbia” could, as Stanković notes, be replaced with a responsible debate among relevant stakeholders (*Future of the “Jadar” Project*)

According to Darko Obradović (political scientist and master of digital media and communications), as stated in the article *The Great Green Race*, no country is renouncing lithium but rather seeking the best ecological and technological solutions. However, “under the pressure of disinformation, we reject the possibility of being the winners of the twenty-first century. We discard the chance to increase our national power without a fair debate.” Obradović believes that the geopolitical perspective of critical raw materials “is further complicated by various populist movements, who are convinced that it is possible to maintain a comfortable life without mining and nuclear energy” (*Serbia in the Global Race for Critical Raw Materials*). Populists, as he notes in his article, “easily make claims and propose solutions that are not based on scientific facts,” which also applies to the Jadar project, which has been under “a barrage of disinformation” over the past three years.

A similar belief is held by Vladimir Đukanović (lawyer and high-ranking member of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party), who thinks that public debate and the confrontation of arguments regarding the Jadar project will gradually reduce the number of supporters of the “cemented narrative that we will all be poisoned” if lithium mining begins (*Being Against Untruths*). This author also draws attention to the “disastrous consequences” of abandoning this project. Đukanović notes that if Serbia were to abandon lithium mining, it could become “a battleground for geopolitical struggles” over this resource, with accompanying negative consequences. Đukanović warns that if Serbia gives up mining lithium, despite having enormous reserves of “white gold,” “someone would occupy us and exploit it themselves. There isn’t even a one-in-a-million chance that it would stay in the country without anyone touching it, and the demand for it is higher than ever” (*Now, Only the Sky is the Limit*).

Finally, the texts that provide examples of lithium exploitation in European countries are worth mentioning. Political scientist Vuk Velebit, for example, in relation to the two-day official visit of the French president to Serbia, reflects on the experiences of that country regarding potential lithium exploitation in the case of the Emili project:

From the planned mine in central France, it is possible to produce as many as 700,000 batteries for electric cars. The local population is concerned about the potential environmental and health consequences of lithium mining, and a six-month public debate has been organized, the results of which will be known by the end of September, with nearly 4,000 people participating in dozens of events. (*What Macron Brings to Belgrade*)

The French experience related to lithium is taken as an example of responsible dialogue that is necessary to ensure both citizen oversight of the entire process and space for rational and scientific discussion. Just a few days later, on September 4th, Nebojša Bakarec (politician and member of parliament), also a prominent member of the Serbian Progressive Party, comments on the planned start of lithium mining in Finland in 2025, although “Finnish ore contains seven times less lithium than Serbian,” with reserves estimated for a shorter period (only 16 years), and concludes: “All advantages are on Serbia’s side” (*Why is the Lithium Mine in Finland Acceptable to the West, but Not in Serbia*).

Therefore, as it was shown, various discursive frames were used to delegitimize opposition to extractive projects. In addition, some web-sites were developed, such as, for instance, “We will dig” (“Kopaćemo”), in order to oppose to anti-mining activists. The described narrative, regarding the Jadar mining project, that stand in defiance of progress is not unique to Serbia. Two decades ago, the rise of the Finnish mining industry resulted from activities carried out by foreign companies, and, uranium exploration restarted in Finland, which raised opposition. The initial Uranium Debate (UD) represented rebirth of environmental movement and opened spaces for local resistance in the countryside (Eerola, 2024). When uranium exploration ended in Finland, just like in Serbia, the UD continued as attention shifted towards other projects associated with uranium.

#### 4.2.2. Anti-mining narrative

The second narrative, which mainly characterizes the liberal media, numerous citizen associations and a large part of the academic community. Anti-mining narrative could be depicted as follows: *The exploitation of mineral resources is not justified if there are huge negative consequences on the environment and society, while financial benefits are questionable.* Almost one-third of the analyzed articles follow this narrative. We point out, in brief, the basic ideas presented in these texts.

According to some advocates of this narrative, not lithium but water will be the “oil of the twenty-first century” since the world is running out of drinking water and wars will be fought because of this most precious liquid (Boris Jašović, *Aggressive Prolithium Lobbying*). Water management usually appears as a source of tension between mining companies and local communities (Fraser, 2021).

Sociologist Boris Jašović, in his article *When the Spirit Bonfires Burn*, argues that economic explanations, if not combined with non-economic facts, are invalid and do not deserve attention. Many African countries, despite their vast natural wealth, do not belong to the group of the richest nations. Jašović points out the practice of deception, omission, shifting of arguments, and diversion from key issues used by the “necro-capitalist” order. In this way, critical opinions easily turn into prejudices. Jašović vividly illustrates this:

If you oppose lithium mining, arguing that the dirty mining technology will devastate the environment, which means everything to you but absolutely nothing to the corporate mind, its defenders will try to refute you with economic ‘facts’ that are on par with those claiming the Sun revolves around the Earth. Namely, lying on ores and minerals does not necessarily mean that economic prosperity will result from it, especially if the country is in a colonial position to the necro-capitalism that holds it in its grip and drains its lifeblood. (directly and through intermediaries)

In another published article, *The Tactics of Exhausting Protests*, Jašović focuses on the methods the government uses to render various movements meaningless. A Patriotic action, according to this sociologist, is “to protest against the sale of land and water, against air pollution, against investor-driven urban destruction, against turning Serbia into a mine and a dump site for corporate capitalism.”

Advocates of this narrative reject the concept of “green mining,” arguing that it makes more sense to speak of “ecologically responsible mining.” An integral part of this narrative is also the perception of the extreme asymmetry in the benefits of mining, as transnational companies make much larger profits than the state and local communities. This is clearly expressed in one article as follows: “They try to convince us that ‘Rio Tinto’ will spend maximum resources on ecological mining, thus significantly reducing projected profits just so that Serbia can prosper” (*Lithium and Plums*).

If mining is to be developed in the public interest, in accordance with the majority of citizens. In that case, the deposits should be owned by public enterprises to ensure that the benefits outweigh the damages that accompany every mining project. Opponents of lithium mining often emphasize the danger that Serbia could simply become a mining colony, like many African countries, for the most developed world, which would extract precious resources.

The mentioned views do not necessarily represent an anti-Western sentiment. Local protests in the interior can be viewed through the lens of the concept of ecological justice, or the “urban-rural divide” (Eerola, 2024; Kelly-Reif & Wing, 2016). Despite its local nature, the Serbian anti-lithium movement has national and international networks with similar struggles elsewhere. Anti-mining protests worldwide can be seen as a global Environmental Protest Wave (EPW), and, as part of the global environmental justice movement against extractivism, which has intensified since the 2000s. National mining-related EPWs have been noticed, for instance, in Australia (Adamson, 1999), Peru (Arce, 2014), Finland (Eerola, 2024) and elsewhere. Eerola (2024), for example, contends that the Finnish mining-sceptical movement represents a new EPW and describes its evolution through subsequent mining debates, culminating in impacts on legislation like the 2023 revision of the Mining Act, which strengthened local decision-making.

In the Finnish sceptical-mining movement, just like in Serbia, the media played a significant role. The turning point in the long-lasting mining debate represented the publication of a magazine article on Talvivaara by the journalist Juha Kauppinen (2010). According to the presented facts, the intention to extract uranium was not handled in the original mining license application for Talvivaara, but it was submitted afterwards, when the mining license had already been authorized. This was treated as “immoral hiding,” with the accusation that the aim was to establish a uranium mine (Eerola, 2024).

### 4.3. Polarity of opinions on lithium exploitation

In order to indicate the polarity of pro-mining and anti-mining narratives regarding the potential mining of lithium in Serbia, a comparative analysis of ideas presented in critical opinions in the daily newspapers *Politika* and *Danas* was conducted. The selected period for monitoring articles (from 23 July to 3 August 2025) corresponds to the central period of the wave of ecological protests against lithium mining. Tables 5 and 6 list the articles that were the subject of analysis. All the texts from *Danas* (Table 5) follow the anti-mining narrative and are predominantly in favor of environmental protection. However, the authors point out the necessity of confronting arguments and creating an atmosphere for dialogue.

Milica Kočović De Santo (senior scientific associate, Institute of Economic Sciences), in her article *Serbia as a Sacrifice Zone*, elaborates the thesis on whether Serbia should be “forever treated as a peripheral region,” and whose interest that is:

The interests of international big capital are not easily achieved when those holding formal political power are not willing to disregard the rights of their people. This implies that feasibility studies should be approached carefully from as many positions of expert and scientific analysis as possible, and everyone is welcome.

In a similar tone, Aleksej Kišjuhas (sociologist and university professor), in his article *To Kill the Sparrows?*, observes that the real problem is not lithium, but the lack of trust, irrational emotions, and the spreading of ignorance. According to Kišjuhas, these factors foster the creation of two sharp poles in the lithium debate:

The first is the government, which sees lithium as an opportunity to build its progressive utopia, like the Chinese communists during the campaign to exterminate pests. The second pole consists of the opposition, activists, and citizens who see (yet another) mine in Serbia as a catastrophe, even though their understanding of lithium is as naive as Mao’s understanding of sparrows.

Milorad Opačić (engineer), in his article *Everything You Didn’t Want to Know About Lithium*, also observes that in the absence of dialogue, the lithium conflict is intensifying. On one side, as this author notes, are the government representatives (encouraged by the “colonially interested EU, Germany, Britain, and the USA”), “compromised radio&TV and engaged professors, parroting media, court analysts, and spinners,” while on the other side are “scared locals, ecological activists, part of the expert and more ecologically conscious public, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts

(SANU), and the incompetent opposition.” Opačić believes the first side is closer to victory because the second side is “disorganized, naive, and almost exclusively plays the ecological card, which suits the government and radio&TV, as they will make a study that shows the project is acceptable.”

Radovan Francuski (history professor), in his article *Insults and Defamation Instead of Debate on Lithium*, believes that the debate on the issue of lithium does not bring Serbia closer to making any decision but rather polarizes society significantly, and he warns:

Pointing fingers at those who think differently, accusations and slanders, insults, and harsh words do not create an environment in which a rational decision on this matter can be made, so it would be of utmost importance to return things to normal channels.

## 5. Discussion

The discourse surrounding lithium extraction is often shaped by economic considerations, which can overshadow critical discussions on its environmental and social impacts. Similar tendencies are present when it comes to research topics related to lithium-ion batteries. In a way, the economic concern serves as a “barrier to the discussion of the negative consequences of using lithium batteries, including their recycling” (Đorđević et al., 2024). Recently, it was found that only 5% of these studies addressed the socio-ecological consequences of lithium battery production (Agusdinata et al., 2018).

Over time, the pro-mining narrative becomes more prominent in print media in Serbia. The growing presence of this narrative, especially since the summer of 2024, could be taken as an indicator of the government’s decision to activate the Jadar project in the near future. Published and analyzed “views” from the daily newspapers *Politika* and *Danas* undoubtedly contributed to the high positioning of the issue of potential lithium exploitation in Serbia in the public (agenda setting). This opened up opportunities for efficient and meaningful public participation and, consequently, the search for participatory methods, especially participation of experts from different fields.

From July and August 2024, for example, experts from the relevant fields who present their arguments regarding the Jadar project began to publicly express opinions, mostly and most completely on the pages of the analyzed newspapers *Politika* and *Danas*. This justifies the choice of *Politika* newspaper, the oldest daily newspaper in the Balkans, and *Danas* newspaper, the main newspaper for expressing critical opinions about the government’s activities, for the purpose of researching the lithium narrative in Serbia. The obtained results of content analysis indicate that portrayals of the lithium debate are based on the political ideology of the chosen dailies (Dotson et al., 2012). Table 7 presents a comparative overview of the themes and provides examples of key issues present in the described narratives.

This binary classification is intended to highlight the polarized character of media narratives surrounding the Jadar project. In practice, many narratives were highly dichotomous – positioning the project either as economically beneficial or as socially and environmentally harmful – with little nuance or middle ground (Boykoff, 2008; Entman, 1993). While this simplification does not fully reflect the complex reality, it allows for a clear illustration of the contrasting emphases that dominated public discourse. The dichotomous presentation highlights a key feature of public discourse on the Jadar project: media coverage and stakeholder statements tended to polarize opinions. While such simplification helps in analytical clarity, it may obscure the nuanced positions and mixed motivations that exist in reality. Real-world perceptions of mining projects are rarely entirely “economic” or “socio-ecological”; rather, they often combine concerns about local development, environmental protection, and social justice. This polarized representation may reflect cognitive and communicative tendencies to frame complex issues in “either-or” terms (Boykoff, 2008; Entman, 1993), but it risks reinforcing simplistic interpretations and overlooking opportunities for dialogue and compromise.

**Table 7.** Main topics and examples of the key issues presented in the described narratives.

Pro-mining narrative	Anti-mining narrative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy transition</li> <li>• Electromobility</li> <li>• Critical materials (mainly lithium, Li)</li> <li>• Technologies (lithium extraction, Li-ion batteries)</li> <li>• Serbia as part of European energy security</li> <li>• The imperative of mining development and new mines</li> <li>• Geopolitics of the extraction of critical raw materials</li> <li>• Economic benefits for the economy and the local community</li> <li>• Creating shared value</li> <li>• Value chain</li> <li>• Development of lithium mines in the world (USA, Finland, France, Portugal)</li> <li>• Obligation of companies to respect environmental standards</li> <li>• Prejudices and misinformation about mining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks and dangers of lithium mining and extraction technology (polluting water, waste disposal, use of sulfuric acid)</li> <li>• Endangerment and loss of agricultural land</li> <li>• Little benefit from mining to the local community</li> <li>• Fairness (unequal distribution of profits between the local community, the state and the company)</li> <li>• Distrust in the environmental responsibility of multinational mining companies (Rio Tinto)</li> <li>• Putting Serbia in a neo-colonial position</li> <li>• Legitimacy of citizens' expression of dissatisfaction at protests</li> <li>• Cooperation between the government and leading mining companies</li> <li>• Distrust of citizens in institutions</li> </ul>

Serbia today is an example of a developing, politically unstable country with a corruptive heritage, weak institutions and weak rule of law. The analysed case of Jadar in Serbia is specific, immersed in a large number of interwoven complex historical, political and geopolitical, economic, social and other circumstances that created a specific social environment. The position of ex-socialist transitional Serbia's is specific, because since the collapse of Yugoslavia and the civil wars in the area (1991–1995), followed by the NATO bombing in 1999, and ongoing tensions in Kosovo, the country has been neglected on the periphery of the EU – but even after two decades of negotiations towards EU integration, with little prospect of ever becoming a full member. As a result, it is less interested in fulfilling the EU's needs for critical materials, except when it directly benefits the ruling elites who, thanks to weak law enforcement, make secret/non-transparent agreements with international investors behind closed doors. At the same time, the ruling elites try to balance and prosper in an attempt to maintain good foreign trade relations with different global power centers, with the EU and the USA, but also with Russia and China. Those specificities require a thoughtful approach and development of government strategies, and international coordination by EITI, ICMM and other bodies can provide valuable support.

Published and analyzed critical opinions from the newspapers *Politika* and *Danas* undoubtedly contributed to the high positioning of the issue of potential lithium exploitation in Serbia in the public agenda setting. This opened up opportunities for efficient and effective participation and, consequently, the search for methods of public participation, especially professional participation. From July to August 2024, for example, experts from the respective fields who present their arguments regarding the Jadar project began to advertise in public, most notably on the pages of the analyzed daily newspapers.

### 5.1. Creating shared value and lithium extraction

The approach of finding the appropriate technology for mining and obtaining lithium implies the creation of a common value for as many different actors as possible, whereby technological, economic and environmental factors must be taken into account, and in some cases, such as the recent ambivalence regarding the potential extraction of lithium from jadarite, also factors of a political and cultural character. The company should, based on the creation of shared value, present facts that show the project: (1) has importance from an ecological and economic point of view (i.e.

that it supports sustainable development); (2) can redefine productivity in the value chain with an emphasis on issues of a social nature (for example, use of natural resources, care for working conditions, health and safety of employees, etc.) so that they are not treated as externalities; and to (3) enable the development of local economic clusters based on the interdependence of various industries and infrastructure (Porter & Kramer, 2011). In this sense, mining companies must act proactively to develop mutually beneficial relationships with two key stakeholders: the local community and government institutions (Buddu & Scheepers, 2022). In this sense, as shown in this paper, the media plays an important role. By choosing to create shared value as a potential business strategy, mining companies strive to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (Fraser, 2019; Saenz, 2023).

The potentially interested company and different levels of government, it seems, were not sufficiently involved in dialogue and public discussion in the initial period. A problem was that the public hearing was of a formal nature, reduced to minimal requirements, which, in fact, led to minor participation of citizens and experts. Due to the aforementioned facts, in June 2024 Rio Tinto published the preliminary drafts of three environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies of the Jadar project – EIA for underground mine; EIA for the ore processing plant; and EIA for the industrial waste landfill – in order to allow the general public to gain insight into the project's environmental impacts and their mitigation.

The publication of the three preliminary EIA studies in 2024 occurred four years after the spatial plan for the Jadar project was adopted and two years after it had been abolished. Moreover, the release followed a period of extensive nationwide protests. This timing suggests that the publication may have been partly a response to public pressure and that it could also have served other purposes. The likely aim of releasing these preliminary studies was to present citizens and other stakeholders – particularly those opposed to the mine – with information intended to demonstrate that the anticipated environmental impacts may not be as severe as critics had claimed. Similarly, the Government of the Republic of Serbia took three steps at the beginning of August 2024: (1) formed a health team (consisting of eight members) to investigate the impact of lithium on human health; (2) introduced a contact center for providing information about the Jadar project under the auspices of the Ministry of Mining and Energy; and (3) formed a working group “Sustainable Serbia” within the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation, which collects scientific results and prepares them for GIS presentation to the general public. Six months later, there has been no news regarding the progress and success of those initiatives.

In November 2024, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a decision on the scope and content of the EIAs for the Jadar project. The Ministry of Environmental Protection has allowed the company Rio Tinto to begin compilation of three EIA studies of the Jadar project. Rio Tinto has done so-called salami slicing, i.e. instead of one EIA, three are done for each aspect of the same project to make it appear that the environmental impacts are smaller. Citizens responded to this decision through legal channels, submitting a large number of complaints.

A prerequisite for reaching a consensus for projects with an expected large impact on economic, ecological and social aspects is the transparency and informing the local population and wider citizens in the phase before the creation of the spatial plan (early public inspection according to the Law on Planning and Construction) about all advantages and disadvantages. In the case of Jadar, a meaningful public discussion was delayed, leading to the development of extremely distant discourses that are difficult, if at all possible, to reconcile. As a result of the expert discussion, the Jadar project has been altered by suggesting new technology that is supposed to reduce environmental impacts. However, distrust in guarantees and implementation quality persists and has even grown following the collapse of the canopy at the newly reconstructed railway station in Novi Sad, which triggered the largest peaceful protests in Serbia to date.

Good governance at the state level is important to avoid corruption and geopolitical tensions with potentially negative consequences for society and the environment. The government alone, as noted by Wolters and Brusselselaers (2024), is not enough to avoid the mentioned negative

effects. Lodhia and Hess (2014), for example, believe that the involvement of environmental NGOs and government as regulators is essential to increase the responsibility of multinational companies, especially when it comes to the social and environmental consequences of their activities. The belated and partial transparency of the Jadar project had a dominant effect on its current unfavorable position and general social disapproval.

## 6. Conclusion

Reducing the participation of citizens to a formal procedure in the planning of a project with a significant impact on the environment, social relations, and even the economic status of citizens and the state proved to be impractical in the case of the Jadar project. The lack of transparency and information of the citizens before the development of the spatial plan opened a training ground where it was possible to develop two opposite and restless media discourses and, it seems, irreconcilable values among investors, authorities on the one side and NGOs and citizens on the other.

Subsequent measures by the government and the Rio Tinto mining company are interpreted by citizens as “bait.” Citizens do not show confidence in the provided documents, studies and promises. The offered documents do not guarantee compensation for the deterioration of the environmental quality, social structure and interruption of the traditional activities of the population of the Jadar region. This does not seem to be enough to remove doubts about the transparency of the public participation.

In the analyzed case, the investor did not talk to the citizens about the creation of contracts, such as SLO (Social License to Operate) or corporate social responsibility (Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR), and the state did not stand as a guarantor behind the citizens, but left the impression that it was on the side of the investor. Therefore, due to the lack of formalization and guarantee, citizens’ awareness of potential consequences does not allow for subsequent reassurance. Common value should therefore be sought at the intersection of the traditional responsibilities of companies, authorities and civil society.

The success of mining projects is largely based on the consent of the local and wider public; sometimes also part of the international public. That is especially emphasized in the case of natural resources, the extraction of which can have significant negative effects on the environment and the population (health, displacement, etc.). Public misunderstanding of the importance of a mining project arises mainly when the company externalizes the social, environmental and economic effects. The necessary pillars to achieve efficient mining rest on spatial planning, dialogue and cooperation between all stakeholders. “Efficient mining” does not refer solely to operational or economic efficiency, but to a model of extractive development that is socially legitimate, environmentally responsible, and procedurally fair. The dialogue should start as early as possible so that all involved stakeholders can express their interests in the pre-draft stage of decision-making, through a free exchange of arguments. However, we recognize that proposing early-stage dialogue and a “free exchange of opinions” risks overlooking the deeply unequal power relations among governments, corporations, experts, and residents. In practice, freedom of expression is constrained by asymmetries in expertise, access to information, economic dependence, and political influence. Therefore, meaningful participation requires more than opening consultative channels – it necessitates mechanisms that actively redistribute voice and influence, ensure that marginalized actors can speak without fear or disadvantage, and enable their contributions to shape substantive outcomes. In line with this, we emphasize that participatory processes must also create space for communities to articulate acceptable trade-offs regarding environmental risks and social impacts. This implies a reciprocal arrangement in which both the company and affected residents gain something and lose something: companies may secure profitability while committing to investments and mitigation measures that align with local priorities, and residents may benefit from employment opportunities and socio-environmental measures while facing inevitable changes to environmental quality and social dynamics. Importantly, participation should also guide how benefits are distributed:

community investments must reflect residents' own priorities rather than projects unilaterally selected by companies without consultation.

Projects like Jadar clearly show that the legally prescribed framework in the process of spatial planning (early public consultation and public consultation) is not enough. The trust in the government can be partially regained only after the government switches its role from public defender of investors' interests to a provider of diverse channels of meaningful public participation. Local public perceptions have to be taken more into account when it comes to the future of lithium extraction in Europe and worldwide. Local residents have to be fully aware of proposed development options and consequences, and integrated into decision-making processes from the very beginning, through formal and informal participatory methods.

Despite a rising need for critical raw materials in Europe and worldwide, we agree with Kowasch et al. (2025) that there is an increasing urge to develop a strong degrowth strategy in order to reduce mineral consumption and the need to open new mines, while in parallel terminating destructive mining projects in developing countries. That will calm the spreading of ongoing tensions between global ("mining for climate") and local environmental concerns. The second thing that needs to be done is to fully commit to responsible mining practices, which will help to reduce global environmental injustice.

In a world of growing demand for rare minerals, the kind of extractive practices and accompanying manipulative narratives employed by Rio Tinto may become more widespread. As IEA (2021) finds out, the relationship between mining companies and communities can be improved through various government strategies, as well as through international coordination. To support governments worldwide in creating critical mineral policies, IEA (2022) has developed the Critical Minerals Policy Tracker as a tool, providing a database that includes over 35 countries and 450 policies, focusing especially on reducing environmental, social and governance impacts. International coordination on sustainable and responsible extraction exist over two decades, including initiatives as International Council on Mining & Metals (ICMM), Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development (IGF), Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and others play significant role in encouraging companies to behave responsibly and transparently, especially in developing, politically unstable countries with corruptive heritage, weak institutions and weak rule of law.

Future research should focus on investigating informal methods of participation and the dynamics of participation through the different phases of projects, in order to improve the positive outcomes of projects with significant social and environmental impact, such as mining projects. By examining how informal channels can complement formal mechanisms and identifying when and how actors are most effectively involved, researchers can provide actionable insights for strengthening trust, inclusiveness, collaboration, and shared value creation. This understanding is particularly important for large projects, where participatory processes significantly affect long-term sustainability and public acceptance, such as the Jadar lithium mine.

## Acknowledgements

Milovan Vuković: Writing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Formal analysis, Data curation, Visualization; Tamara Maričić: Writing, Methodology, Funding Acquisition, Writing; Marijana Pantić: Writing, Methodology, Funding Acquisition, Validation, Project Administration.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Milovan Vuković**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Tamara Maričić**: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Marijana Pantić**: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work has been funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (grant #7598) and the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (grant number 451-03-137/2025-03/200131 and 451-03-66/2024-03/200006).

## Data availability statement

All the data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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