

“Serbia is (not) for Sale”: On Lithium, Hunger and Other Betrayals

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This is the first part of a two-part series on anti-lithium mining protests that have erupted in Serbia over the last several months, and the broader environmental movement around it.

Last September, the outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel made her farewell tour to the Balkans. In Belgrade, she was welcomed by Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian president whose authoritarian stunts she was repeatedly willing to overlook in exchange for a stable partnership. But perennial topics – Kosovo’s status and Serbia’s accession to the EU – were pushed to the side. Instead, [Merkel revealed](#) that Germany, too, was interested in Serbia’s lithium. “We have a large number of investments in the automotive industry” said the Chancellor, positioning Germany itself as the biggest foreign employer in Serbia. “And we all know how important lithium is for future mobility and battery cells... If the whole world is interested, we are also interested.”

Merkel’s announcement came just two days after a massive *Ekološki ustanak* (Ecological uprising) took place in Belgrade. This time, the organisers singled out the [project Jadar](#), a \$2.4bn plan for the extraction of lithium in western Serbia by the Anglo-Australian multinational Rio Tinto. The company – the world’s second-largest metals and mining corporation – has announced that Serbia holds some 10% of the world’s deposits of (solid) lithium in the form of *jadarit* – a compound of sodium lithium boron silicate hydroxide said to be unique to Serbia. Proposing to turn about 850 hectares of land into a mine around the Korenita river, a tributary of the Jadar river, Serbia was to become the biggest European source of lithium and borate, both needed for the transition into a green economy. After two decades of prospecting the land, the government has all but given the final permits for mining, lauding the tax revenues and strategic benefit that extraction, and eventually battery production, would bring to the country.

But for the residents of the Jadar valley, the mine means their removal from the fertile land they now cultivate. They interpret the obscure agreements and unlawful benefits the company obtained from the government as a loss of their sovereignty, a state-assisted expulsion of its own population. Their protest against the land expropriation has been supported by environmental scientists and activists – members of the wider eco-movement brewing in the region – who point to the irreversible pollution that sulphur-assisted mining would bring for local living species and drinking water, as well as the nearby rivers the Sava and Danube. In turn, the farmers have been joined by a myriad of opposition parties and civil society organisations, as well as [thousands of people](#) for whom Rio Tinto has become a symbol of the wider dispossession in the hands of the regime. The loss of soil, the coming environmental contamination, and the legal expropriation of land have thus all converged into a shared image of betrayal – politicians selling out the country and its citizens’ lives to foreign capital, all in the name of the green transition.

“The ultimate high treason is at work. We are witnessing a full-on attack on everything healthy in this country. People and natural resources have become the prey of profiteers and corrupt authorities. That is why we call all citizens to stand up in defence of our water, our air, our country

and, in the end, life itself, of us and of the generations to come. Let us all rise.” So spoke Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta, one of the leaders of *Ekološki ustanak* who had previously cut his teeth as an activist in *Odbranimo reke Stare planine* (Let’s defend the rivers of Stara mountain), a movement against the small hydropower plants in the Balkan mountains. These plants, which produce no carbon dioxide and harm river networks and villagers’ lives nevertheless, provoked an unprecedented wave of rebellion against water enclosures in the country’s mountainous south. The so-called ‘[river guardians](#)’ forged an alliance between villagers, environmentalists, and a motley crowd of the urban (un)employed, who questioned the justness of a capital-led green transition and who, in doing so, shaped new forms of [local sovereignty](#). Spread through Facebook groups, protests, and barricades, this fight in turn inspired dozens of other movements against air pollution, water privatisation, and land contamination across the country. And when the state moved its interests from private hydropower plants to mineral wealth instead – announcing more than forty new mines in the coming years – the frontier shifted from the water rich south to the mineral rich west and east. At a protest in September, [Rio Tinto](#) came to be seen as the chief enemy uniting the ‘people’ in a fight for survival.

“If the project Jadar goes on, Serbia is done”, said Zlatko Kokanović, the vice-president of *Ne damo Jadar* (We will not give Jadar) group and a large-scale milk-producer, whose all 40 hectares would be all expropriated if the mine would open. “Those without clean air, water, agriculture to work on will be left to die out.” His words were echoed by Ljiljana Bralović, a farmer and a poet from the Jadar Valley who compared the ruling party to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia’s government that had capitulated in WWII. Politicians who voted for the mine, she said, were no better than the German troops that had pillaged the country. In turn, the vice-rector and forestry engineer Ratko Ristić decried the unfairness of global energy transition. “Serbian lives should not be sacrificed in order for London to breathe cleaner air”, he later said, pointing out that the biggest reserves of European lithium lie unmined in Germany and the Czech Republic. “Serbia, wake up your bears, wolves, eagles and snakes!” demanded Aleksandar Panić, a river guardian from the South.

For her part, the chemist Dragana Đorđević spoke about the detrimental chain reactions that Rio Tinto’s tailing pond would expose the surrounding living species to. The actress Svetlana Bojković ignited the crowd by shouting “Profit has replaced God!”. In turn, members of the centre-left party *Ne davimo Beograd* (Do Not Let Belgrade Drown) and their liberal ally, Nebojša Zelenović (who have by now become *Ekološki ustanak*’s coalitions partners for the upcoming elections), tried to redirect the discourse to the commons, struggles for urban space, and ‘civil’ politics. Another speaker condemned the privatisation laws of the early post-Milošević’s governments, seeing them as a prelude to attacks on the environment. Still another said the vaccines and expropriation were parts of the same global assault on private lives.

And after both religious and antifascist anthems were sang, left and right slogans chanted, claims over common property and claims of private property upheld, what united various ideological lingos and classed aesthetics were the slogans “Serbia is not for sale” and “Serbia is not a colony”. They sold the country, man!” I heard two youths saying to one another, as we went to barricade a bridge. Treason (*izdaja*), survival (*opstanak*) and uprising (*ustanak*) – these became the keywords of an ecopopulist assembly.

In November, the matter came to a tipping point when the government adopted amendments of two laws which, its opponents believed, would ease Rio Tinto’s final instalment in the country. The first was a change in the Expropriation Law, which would allow the express purchase of private property that the government proclaimed to be of ‘public interest’ – thus depriving legal leverage to the 70% of the affected residents who have still not willingly sold their land to the company. The second amendment changed the Referendum Law – which, its opponents believed, would make an eventual referendum about lithium mining easily co-optable by the regime’s voting army. So after the

president signed the two laws, the initiative *Kreni-promeni* (Move and Change) organised road barricades in several cities, demanding the withdrawal of his signature. In turn, thugs associated with the ruling party came out to attack the protestors, and the crowd attacked them back. These images of violence – despite the regime’s earnest attempts to blame them on the opposition – spectacularly backfired. [As one commentator put it](#), a president who had called all his opponents traitors now seemed to be the ultimate betrayer himself. Thus, even more massive barricades of roads and highways ensued in over fifty cities. Fearing a drop in popularity, Vučić was forced to give in, withdrawing the two laws back to the Parliament, and announcing that Rio Tinto as well as his own party would be under higher scrutiny from now on.

There is still a debate over whether this victory belongs to the crowd or to Vučić who reframed the public resentment and ultimately pacified the protests. Vučić’s promise to create the Green Fund, and the EU’s opening of new accession chapters with Serbia – as well as the “Green Agenda” fund – leave all to speculate whether the project Jadar was just postponed until after April elections, or whether other companies might profit by taking the lithium from Rio Tinto’s hands. *Ekološki ustanak* continued with road blockades until the government finally abolished the plan for the project this January. *Kreni promeni* argues that this was done in a legally disputable way, and demands a 20-year long moratorium on lithium extraction. Other organisations demand a complete ban, or a society-wide discussion about lithium extraction. In turn, the Serbian prime minister cites the astronomical indemnity fee that the state would have to pay to the company for cancelling the works, while other companies – including Volt Resources, Eurolithium and Balkan Mining Minerals – continue getting lithium exploration permits. The residents of the Jadar Valley report that Rio Tinto’s construction crews are still operating, and with police back up. At the time of writing these lines (in the second week of February), they set up a camp in front of the president’s office. And ever since the season’s first snow brought down the national electricity system, the regime is now back to blaming what it calls the ‘fake ecologists’ for energy insecurity, committing itself to both new thermal-plants in state possession and a large hydropower project to be built by China.

Serbia’s environmental unrest, however, goes beyond both Vučić’s authoritarian theatrics and Rio Tinto’s involvement. At stake more broadly is how the global transition to carbon-free energy is being forged in regionally uneven ways – and how it is reconfiguring locally inherited relations between the capital and the state, citizens and soil, labour and debt. At the moment, the situation very much resembles how [Rosa Luxemburg saw revolution](#): a medley of spontaneous actions from below and organised framings from above, with many actors competing to intercept processes that, in their speed and scale, outdo anyone’s capacities to fully think them through. This is the reason I disagree with some observers on the Left, including Ognjen Kojanić, who argue that leftists should overtake the rebellion and turn “[what Gramsci called common sense into ecosocialist good sense](#)”. While this may be true, the Left is unable to control the rebellion, no more than it was able to channel the spontaneous uprisings in Russia that Luxemburg observed. Therefore, if leftists would like to act *with* the people and not only *for* them, there is no other way forward but through the populist common sense – with all its ‘goods’ and ‘bads’. What is more, as the environment is becoming a new reservoir of political imagination in the Balkans, both nation and class get new meanings. The result is a repositioning of all involved, including the Left, who cannot claim to know the terrain beforehand. The energy transition is historically embedded, but it is no historical refrain.

If we want to think with, rather than against this popular common sense, the public indignation over *treason* is a good place to start. On the face of it, “treason” sounds like nothing more than common liberal-nationalist slogan. A nation-state is seen as belonging to its citizens, and thus the rulers who sell out to the foreign interests are deemed as traitors. But who has the power not to sell out themselves? When we move our gaze away from both Rio Tinto and the national state, I argue, we can start noticing the multiple forms of class appropriation that the talk of national betrayal can

convey.

Take for example Savo Manojlović, the leader of *Kreni promeni* who initiated the road barricades. The protesters, he declared at a recent protest in February, are free citizens who “cannot be put into shackles and who do not sell themselves for a sack of flour.” *Domaćin* (household head), rather than a slave, Manojlović points out, as if to be a self-sufficient householder does not imply the help and the landless. This is the bourgeois freedom of the individual, whose political liberty is imagined as if it is above the market exchange. Which is why it needs the counterexamples of others who are unfree in that same respect – the “sold souls”, as the villagers who sold their land to the company are sometimes called. “We are not sandwich bots” – Manojlović is at pains to explain, alluding to the meals the ruling party provides for its digital trolls. “The free citizens choose what they will eat.” Again, a postmaterialist liberal subject: the hunger is for slaves.

At the same protest, however, two older women articulated quite different stances on class, hunger, and debt. One is the actress Svetlana Bojković, who recalled the times of Serbia’s embargo in the 1990s when, she said, you could not buy food in Belgrade even if you had money. Then the city dwellers survived thanks to the villagers who helped them. And if another hunger comes out of the reshuffling of the world in the coming years, Bojković argued, it is logical that we will stand behind the rural producers: “our lives depend on theirs”. Similarly, the resident activist Ljiljana Bralović claimed that calling the politicians prostitutes is not fair: the prostitutes sell their own bodies to feed themselves, she said, while the politicians sell an entire people to fill their pockets. Both women thus imagined a collective that is not above market transactions, but crucially shaped by them. In this discourse, my body might be my own, but it can survive only thanks to other bodies with whom I enter into asymmetrical relations of exchange. So here, the traitor was not the one who sold himself, but rather the one who sold others while calling that transaction *sharing*.

It is that same dialectic between commoning and privatisation, the sellers and the sold ones that has often fragmented the local eco-movement itself. Long before Rio Tinto’s project came to the public light, accusations of betrayal had been rampant on the eco-scene, with different activist groups calling one another parasites, copycats, fakes. At best, a person is accused of appropriating the struggles of others to accumulate cheap ego thrills, or a political fame. At worst, the ‘inner traitors’ are accused of covert selling out to the regime, or outright profiteering from protest donations. When we move away from the spectacular details of such rumour mills – improvable details of who took what – we often find people disappointed by their comrades, feeling ultimately betrayed. And behind this bitterness, a still more sobering truth: environmental countermovements inevitably depend on the same political economy they are struggling against. For hunger is not only the villagers’ – the urban activists must also sustain themselves. Which is one reason why the struggles for commoning can often become possessive affairs. Put differently, there are appropriations within appropriations and there are betrayals within betrayals. And who ever said the Left cannot betray?

If ‘ecosocialism’ is to really tear down the abstract illusions that both green capitalism and green nationalism create, it must start from two fundamental *unfreedoms* that we all share. These are the depths in which we are always already bought by others – indebted in advance. The first is unfreedom of the wage, that is, the fact that we are all forced to constantly sell ourselves in the games of many capitals we play. The second is life’s own vicarity – the fact that each living being can exist only in exchange with the lives of others. Both these modes of transaction can be messy, uneven, and violent. Both complicate our road to an inclusive emancipatory ‘we’, for they reveal all our asymmetries. But there is nothing more cunning than a claim of universality that pretends to be above the exchange. Socialists, after all, need to eat as well. The question is not with whom, but how they break bread.

Ivan Rajković

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