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MINING LITHIUM IN EUROPE'S (SEMI)PERIPHERY AND THE MAKING OF AN EXTRACTIVIST FRONTIER

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Perhaps more than any other material, lithium has, in recent years, been increasingly presented as the silver bullet for the so-called *twin transition*—the digital and the green transitions. Lithium is essential to most conventional batteries used in diverse technologies, from phones and laptops to increasingly and overwhelmingly so in electric vehicles. It has become the symbol of growth-based solutions to climate change where technological fixes, rather than more equitable and just structural changes, take the primary role.

Escalating concerns within the EU regarding its material sovereignty and security have been intensified by the conflict in Ukraine and the growing awareness about China's dominance of the battery supply chain, as well as other green technologies. As a result, ensuring access to critical raw materials such as lithium has emerged as a paramount priority for the Western powers. The introduction of the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) in 2023 has further underscored this goal, signalling a strategic shift towards mining closer to "home" for better control over supply chains.

In line with this objective, the EU has strongly supported mining projects in member states as well as in its "immediate outside." Notable plans for lithium mining include projects in Portugal, Spain, Germany, and the Czech Republic, where they have also attracted significant opposition from the local communities. In Serbia, an EU candidate country, the construction of Europe's biggest lithium mine was to begin in 2022. Led by Rio Tinto, one of the largest mining companies in the world, the Jadar Project in the western part of the country has been portrayed both as a green solution for the EU and as an unprecedented economic opportunity for Serbia.

Yet, the project has attracted widespread resistance from part of the local community that refused to sell their houses and leave their land. They are predominantly farmers and agricultural workers fighting for their right to say no and to protect nature, the environment, and their way of life. Their resistance also becomes a fundamental challenge to the hegemonic understanding of sustainability and the green transition coupled with digitalisation and electrification based on relentless mining and extractivism (see Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2022). Following months of mass protests that erupted in the autumn and winter of 2021 and attracted tens of thousands of people that blocked roads, bridges, and highways, the Serbian government was ultimately forced to

cancel the Jadar Project in January 2022, before the construction of the lithium mine could have even begun.

The cancellation marked a notable triumph for the anti-lithium mining movement. However, Rio Tinto continues to operate in Serbia, openly supported by the government, President Aleksandar Vučić, and some Western embassies. Locals and activists maintain their resolve to prevent lithium mining, opening space to envision different green and sustainable futures from the semi-periphery. Based on ethnographic research and close collaboration with the locals and activists resisting lithium mining in Serbia, this short essay attends to questions of peripherality and the making of an extractivist frontier in the Balkans.

From the "Balkans" to the "Western Balkans"

The dominant discourses on "the Balkans" are not new but a product of the long history of othering (Todorova 1994, 1997; Goldsworthy 1998; Wolff 1994). Todorova, in her seminal work on *Balkanism,* writes, "the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and the 'West' has been constructed" based on this "dark side within" (1997: 188). While closely related to Orientalism, Balkanism is distinct in that it denotes a particular geographical space, occupying a liminal position between the West and the Rest, historically as a borderland between the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and at present between the EU and the non-EU.

In the decades since the publishing of Todorova's work on Balkanism, scholars on the regions have both built on the concept and further complicated it, emphasising the semi-peripherality of the Balkans as being in a constant process of becoming rather than firmly set within the clichés of wars and ethnic hatred (Rajković and Vasilijević, forthcoming). Crucially, important work has been done

to position the scholarship on the Balkans or ex-Yugoslavia in the broader conversations on post-socialism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism (see Kušić et al. 2019). This has particularly been the case since the end of the wars in the 1990s, neoliberalisation, and the involvement of the EU and US in the construction of the Balkans materially, politically, and discursively.

In his exploration of Serbia's peripherality, Matković (2014) provocatively asks: "How does one become a periphery?" Looking into the structural, legal, and institutional systems that underpin peripherality, Matković argues that most of Serbia's "legal and even fiscal policies are determined by its peripheral role." Importantly, Matković stresses that *becoming* a periphery is a process and refrains from categorizing Serbia as a periphery just *yet*. While Matković refers mainly to the politico-economic exploitation and dependencies that come out of the global unequal power relationships, Kušić and others highlight the affective experience of peripherality that is based not only on outside representations but also on the internal subjectivities inhabited by "peripheral selves" (Majstorović 2020).

What has recently become known as the "Western Balkans" serves as a political and geographical category for a particular part of the Balkans. The area is characterised by one defining feature: these countries are not yet members of the EU, but all are candidate states, marking "another kind of Europeanization" (Petrović 2014). Relatedly, Jensen (2009: 820) traces how the process of "the creation of a 'borderless Europe' [...] involved the making of its 'immediate outside'—an outside that was to become an inside." It is through these liminal and multiple degrees of peripherality at the border of the EU that the green extractivist frontier emerges – and is resisted.

Mining lithium at the "doorsteps of Europe"

The enduring legacy of colonial extractivism, which persists into the present day, has been characterized by the unequal extraction of raw materials from the Global South for the benefit of the Global North (Petras and Veltmeyer 2017; Acosta 2013; Gudynas 2009). However, the new green geopolitical paradigm marks a fundamental shift, or rather an expansion, of extractivist frontiers to new places and spaces. In the name of green growth, mining projects are expanding across the globe at an unprecedented rate, following the extractivist logic of ever-increasing material consumption and economic growth.

The case of lithium mining in Serbia makes visible the contested relations between green extractivism, the making of the sacrifice zones and peripheries, and the "Europeanisation" of Serbia. A case in point is Rio Tinto's framing of the mining project, positioning the planned mine at the "doorsteps of Europe." This conveniently constructs Serbian space as not European—or not European enough—despite its geographic location in Europe. At the same time, however, Rio Tinto has promised to "position Serbia as the European hub for green energy." Here, the mine occupies a liminal position, like the country itself—both central to Europe's green transition and yet, from certain perspectives, outside of Europe.

The notion of being on the "doorsteps of Europe" resonates strongly with Serbia's positioning as being in the "EU's waiting room," a characterization often used to describe Serbia's EU accession process. Jansen (2009) describes in detail what he refers to as the "present entrapment," a sense of being "stuck" that the citizens of the Western Balkans experience through the discriminatory visa regimes and immigration policies. Todorova's depiction of the country as perennially "lagging and lacking," stuck in a perpetual process of catching up, further reinforces this sense of stasis. Consequently, the mining project becomes easily

justifiable as a development opportunity on Serbia's path to finally joining the EU.

The green transition marks a new shift in the global commodity and supply chains and relations between the cores, the peripheries, and the semi-peripheries as the extractive frontier expands in unprecedented ways, as pushed for by the mining industry and other interest groups. But the Balkans, whether referred to as such or as the Western Balkans, or in this case Serbia, have been subjects of numerous transitions, from the post-socialist transition marked by a weakening of labour rights and social protections, privatisation of key industries and neoliberalisation of life itself, to the ongoing green transition.

Towards networks of solidarity against green extractivism

The inherent liminality of this position, existing within Europe yet outside the EU, or, to put it differently, being European but not European enough, carries important implications. While many peripheries exist within the cores, and there are notable lithium and other critical raw materials mining projects within the EU borders, the situation in Serbia stands apart. As Matković (2014) puts it: "In contrast to many countries on the edge of the EU, Serbia is located on the periphery of the periphery." The weakness of the Serbian institutions, the semi-authoritarian regime of President Vučić, the culture of corruption, and the atmosphere of fear all contribute to the hailing of large-scale infrastructure projects like the lithium mine as a path to development.

At the same time, the situation in Serbia is far from equal to the long colonial and violent histories of extractivism in Latin America and other places across the globe where Indigenous people are at the forefront of the struggle against the ever-expanding extractivism. Understanding the colonial histories of extractivism and the construction of peripheries is vital. Yet, these terms must

be used with care when describing the dynamics within Europe—a geographical space itself subject to contestations.

It is the local communities and activists who are readily bridging different geographical and political categories, including the reductionist overemphasis on nation-states, in their effort to create solidarity networks against lithium mining and other forms of green extractivism. In July 2022, representatives of nine organisations from Chile, Portugal, Spain, and Germany came together with the locals and activists in Serbia to sign a Jadar Declaration, a joint basis for international cooperation and solidarity in their resistance to lithium mining. Since then, many similar meetings and gatherings have facilitated the exchange of experiences and empowered vastly different local groups from different sides of the world. These groups share a common vision of justice and a close relationship with the land.

The case of lithium mining in Serbia thus reveals the shifting and ever-expanding extractivist frontiers and the fluid integration and designation of peripheries. Yet, crucially, amid these shifts, the resistance to the lithium mining project, with its echoes of global anti-colonial and anti-extractivist sentiments, serves as a testament to the possibility of envisioning and fighting for alternative sustainable futures.

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