

'I cannot sell this land. It belongs to my children': Serbian village fights mining deal

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Sleepy settlement rises up against plan to source lithium for batteries that power phones and cars in the EU



Partially demolished houses bought by Rio Tinto company in the western Serbian village of Gornje Nedeljice. Photograph: Andrej Isakovic/AFP via Getty Images

Lorraine Mallinder in Gornje Nedeljice, Serbia

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The drive through Serbia's Jadar valley, located near the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina, offers postcard-perfect views over swaying fields of corn and the rust-red peaked rooftops of old farmhouses. But, turning a narrow side road into the village of Gornje Nedeljice, a desolate cluster of windowless homes fronted by signs reading "Danger: No Access" breaks the bucolic spell.

The sleepy village of 700 inhabitants is at the centre of an almighty battle pitching much of the nation against the government. Last month, President Aleksandar Vucic cleared the way for Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto to build a €2.2 billion mine, a project that

will allegedly transform large swathes of the fertile landscape, providing up to 90 per cent of the lithium the European Union needs for the batteries that will power its green revolution.

It appears to be a win-win deal. Serbia, a long-standing EU aspirant, has signed a “strategic agreement” with Brussels that will see it provide nearly 60,000 tonnes of “white gold” a year to the likes of Germany’s Mercedes-Benz. In return, it expects to receive €5.5 billion in investments, enabling it to manufacture electric cars and batteries at home. Optimists see the deal as a sign that Serbia, viewed as the bad poster child of accession owing to its cosy relationship with Russia, is firmly in the EU fold.

All is set for Rio Tinto to start digging, possibly opening the mine in 2028. Except that tiny Gornje Nedeljice is not letting the mining giant in. For Zlatko Kokanovic, a local milk and livestock farmer, it’s an existential battle. Ensnared in his wooden hut bordered by land already sold, the leader of the Ne damo Jadar (We will not give up Jadar) movement recounts how he sent the firm’s representatives packing when they first came knocking four years ago, giving donations to the local school, the hospital and other good causes and offering local farmers vouchers for pricey agricultural equipment.

The father of five, whose roots in the area are seven generations deep, refused point blank to budge, even when locals were warned that the government might force them to sell their land for a third of the price Rio Tinto was offering. “I cannot sell this land. This land is not mine. It belongs to my children,” Kokanovic says. . “We know the EU wants to take what they need for their green environment and turn Serbia into a dump for mining waste”.



Zlatko Kokanović, leader of the Ne damo Jadar (We Will Not Give Up Jadar) movement. Photograph: Tess Mallinder Heron

Environmentalists fear that waste dumps in the flood-prone Jadar valley could spill toxic waste into the Korenita and Jadar rivers, eventually polluting the Drina river, which flows into Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Sava river, which joins the Danube in Belgrade. They say forests, meadows and farmland could all be threatened, with a knock-on negative impact on 145 protected species in the area.

The Irish Times contacted Rio Tinto for comment, but received no response.

In July, Reuters reported: “The company said the project will be subject to stringent environmental requirements including an ‘extended phase’ of legal, environmental and permitting procedures and public consultations before it is implemented”.

A month earlier, Rio Tinto said newly published environmental studies showed the project would be safe for local communities.

On Tuesday, the Serbian health ministry formed a commission that will study the impact of lithium mining on human health.

“There will no digging for two years, so ... stirring up panic makes no sense,” Vucic told reporters on Wednesday evening.

Rio Tinto, which has said it will convert liquid waste to “dry cakes”, needs 220 hectares for the underground mine and has reportedly already bought about 70 per cent of land for the projected site. Environmental groups such as Ne damo Jadar say more than 600 more

hectares will be needed for transportation, waste management and other infrastructure, with the entire project set to upend 22 villages.

Nebojša Petkovic, a 52-year-old insurance agent, says Gornje Nedeljice was targeted first because the mining giant believed the tiny and “not so well educated” farming population would be easily won over. About 30 of approximately 200 houses in the village have been sold, says Petkovic. Families have been torn apart by the affair, with disagreements over whether or not to sell up. “Some of the people got scared. There are lots of sad stories.”

Waiting for her two children outside the village primary school, Natasa Pavlovic, a 34-year-old economist, claims the mine would destroy lives. “We love our village and we don’t want it to change,” she says. But she is confident that locals will win. As she put it, the villagers of Gornje Nedeljice have “awakened ... the whole of Serbia”.

Resistance to Rio Tinto has indeed rallied the nation, with pundits saying the issue poses the biggest challenge to the government since the so-called Bulldozer Revolution that saw Serbians oust strongman Slobodan Milosevic from power in 2000.



Natasa Pavlovic is opposed to the mine. Photograph: Tess Mallinder Heron

Milosevic may be long gone, but the region is still volatile, Belgrade accused of tacitly encouraging ethnic Serbian separatists in neighbouring Bosnia and refusing to recognise former province Kosovo as an independent state.

Vucic, who once served as Milosevic's information minister, has himself demonstrated increasingly autocratic tendencies, particularly in last year's snap parliamentary and local elections, decried by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe for media bias and "serious irregularities", including vote buying and ballot-box stuffing.

Amid the democratic backsliding, Europe's largest lithium mine has become a lightning rod for people's frustrations. Two years ago, the president had revoked Rio Tinto's licence, buckling under pressure from protesters just before the 2022 general election. But secure after last year's allegedly rigged national elections, he resuscitated the project with the backing of the constitutional court, which ruled that the earlier ban was unlawful. Trust in the president is now at an all-time low.

Far from being reassured by deepening ties with the EU, activists feel let down by the bloc. In any case, with Serbia's track record on the rule of law, its position on fellow EU contender Kosovo, and its decision not to impose sanctions on Russia over Ukraine, the president's "strategic goal" of joining the club seems a distant prospect – mine or no mine.

"What is the goal? So, Serbia will become a member of the EU? With Vucic? Never," said Nebojsa Zelenovic, co-leader of the green Together party, at a rally attended by thousands last week in the town of Šabac, about 50km from the mine site.

He believes the government is ready to turn Serbia into a "big mining country", exploiting billions of dollars worth of strategic minerals such as lithium, boron, cobalt, nickel, gold and silver at the expense of the environment. "This is about the future decomposition of the country."



Nebojsa Zelenovic, co-leader of the green Together party, in the town of Sabac. Photograph: Tess Mallinder Heron

The demonstration – one of four last week – attracted people from across the political spectrum – environmentalists from the left and right, pro-democracy liberals and far-right ethno-nationalists.

“This is the biggest issue of the past 25 years. It’s a battle for survival,” said Tatjana Markovic Topalovic, a lawmaker from the Serbia Centre party, amid the din of horns and whistles. “We want to be a part of the EU, but we don’t want to be a place for the garbage of the EU.”

On the ground, people are actively turning towards Russia, old wounds from the country’s tortured history reopened by new fears. Milos Vukic, a 32-year-old electrical engineer, said that the country was better off without the EU. Vucic, he said, was “losing control” of the country. He likened the mining project to Kosovo, accusing the president of “giving away” land “bit by bit”.



A demonstration in Sabac attracted people from across the political spectrum – environmentalists from the left and right, pro-democracy liberals and far-right ethno-nationalists. Photograph: Tess Mallinder Heron

Vucic has vowed to forge ahead, first offering a poll on the project, later changing it to a recall referendum. Unconvinced, activists have threatened to block railways and roads if the government does not introduce a ban on geological exploration and on the mining of lithium and boron by August 10th.

The Irish Times contacted the Serbian ministry of mining and energy with questions, but had received no response at the time of writing.