



THE JADAR LITHIUM PROJECT AND THE EROSION OF CIVIC SPACE IN SERBIA

GREEN EXTRACTION, SHRINKING FREEDOMS

Executive Summary

The Jadar Lithium Project, a multibillion-euro mining venture backed by Rio Tinto, is projected to become one of Europe's largest lithium extraction sites. While promoted as a gateway to green energy, its development has instead highlighted serious breaches of environmental law, civic rights, and democratic norms in Serbia. The government's approval process bypassed key safeguards under the Aarhus Convention, denying affected communities access to environmental information and participation in decision-making. Widespread protests were met with repression, media censorship, and legal harassment. Investigative journalists and environmental defenders faced Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), while infrastructure failures like the Novi Sad train station collapse exposed systemic corruption. This briefing examines the Jadar case not as an isolated dispute, but as a reflection of Serbia's shrinking democratic space and eroding rule of law, calling for urgent accountability from both domestic institutions and international partners, especially within the context of Serbia's EU accession process.



Serbian soldiers raising the national flag at a ceremonial event, with the cityscape of Belgrade in the background.

Issue Overview

In recent years, Serbia has sought to position itself as a viable candidate for European Union membership. Yet beneath the surface of formal alignment with EU standards, the country's internal governance has increasingly drifted away from democratic principles and core human rights obligations. Although promoted by Serbian authorities and international stakeholders as a gateway to "green growth," the Jadar Lithium project has instead become a symbol of institutional opacity, environmental risk, and the suppression of civic dissent.

Expected to extract up to 58,000 tons of lithium carbonate annually over 40 years, along with 286,000 tons of boric acid and 255,000 tons of sodium sulphate, the Jadar project promises economic gain. However, its social, ecological, and legal costs are severe. Residents of the Loznica region have voiced alarm over potential contamination of the Jadar and Drina river basins, irreversible soil degradation, and long-term health consequences.

The Serbian government's approach has been marked by procedural shortcuts, lack of public consultation, and repeated circumvention of transparency standards. Civil society watchdogs such as RERI have documented numerous violations of the Aarhus Convention and raised legal challenges to permitting processes.

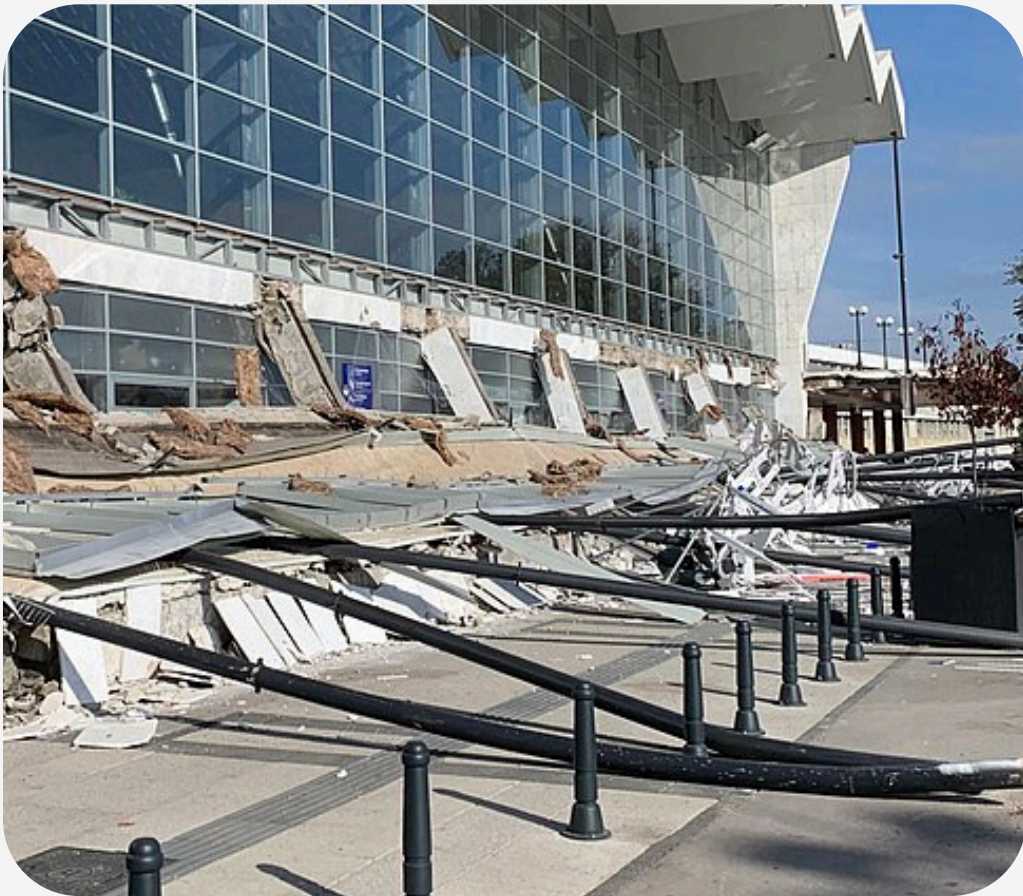
Following mass environmental protests in 2021 and 2022, the government appeared to halt the project. Yet in July 2024, the Constitutional Court reversed this decision, reigniting tensions and drawing scrutiny over Serbia's credibility as an EU candidate state.

Key Developments

- Environmental Risk and Violations of the Aarhus Convention:** Communities in the Loznica region, where the mine is planned, have consistently been denied meaningful consultation. Environmental watchdogs documented a lack of transparent environmental impact assessments, rushed spatial planning procedures, and inaccessible feasibility studies. Local experts and civil society groups have raised serious concerns about the ecological consequences of the project, including the contamination of the Jadar and Drina rivers, the destruction of agricultural land, and risks associated with tailings and chemical use. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts has publicly questioned the project's environmental feasibility and the government's unwillingness to disclose essential risk data. A formal complaint has been submitted to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee, arguing that Serbia's conduct violates both the letter and spirit of the treaty.
- Protest Suppression and Intimidation of Environmental Defenders:** The rise of the Jadar Lithium Project has sparked some of Serbia's most sustained environmental protests in decades. Between late 2021 and early 2022, tens of thousands of citizens participated in demonstrations across more than 50 cities. These protests, largely peaceful and grassroots-led, called for transparency, environmental protection, and respect for public consultation procedures. In response, Serbian authorities escalated repression. Protestors were met with heavy police presence, including riot units in Belgrade and Šabac, where video footage captured officers using excessive force and turning a blind eye to masked pro-government counter-protestors who assaulted demonstrators with batons. Dozens of protestors were detained or fined under vague charges such as "obstruction of public order" and "unauthorised gatherings." In several cases, organisers faced police questioning and surveillance. Peaceful assemblies, particularly on environmental and anti-corruption issues, were treated not as constitutionally protected rights but as public threats—further shrinking space for democratic participation and human rights advocacy.
- Media Silencing and Strategic Disinformation:** Independent media in Serbia face mounting pressure, with the Jadar project becoming a flashpoint, exposing a broader strategy of media silencing, disinformation, and legal intimidation aimed at shrinking civic oversight. Leading investigative outlets such as KRIK, BIRN, and N1 have been systematically excluded from government press conferences and denied access to key public documents. In 2022, BIRN and the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute faced Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) after publishing investigative reports on legal irregularities in the Jadar permitting process. Simultaneously, state-aligned media outlets have pushed a disinformation narrative framing environmental protests as foreign-funded attempts to destabilise the country. Serbia's press freedom ranking fell to 91st out of 180 in Reporters Without Borders' 2023 World Press Freedom Index. By targeting the very actors tasked with informing the public, the Serbian government undermines freedom of expression, access to information, and public participation—rights that are essential to both environmental justice and democratic governance.



The beautiful Drina river valley near Višesava.



On 1 November 2024, 35 m of canopy of the main railway station in Novi Sad collapsed onto people walking and sitting underneath.

- Infrastructure Failure and the Novi Sad Case:** In February 2024, the roof of Novi Sad's central train station—built just three years earlier as part of a government-led infrastructure push—collapsed, killing 16 civilians and seriously injuring more. Investigations by independent media outlets revealed that the project was awarded through a non-transparent procurement process, involving firms closely linked to ruling-party donors. Engineering reports indicated the use of substandard construction materials. Despite public outrage, the government refused to launch a formal inquiry or hold responsible actors accountable. Public protests soon followed, including a demonstration outside the Novi Sad Assembly. Reports from the scene alleged that police deployed a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) —a powerful sound-based crowd control tool—against peaceful demonstrators, including students and elderly citizens, reportedly causing nausea, auditory pain, and disorientation. This alleged deployment of LRADs marks a dangerous escalation in Serbia's approach to protest management. Human rights organisations have warned that such tactics violate international standards on the use of force and freedom of assembly, particularly when used against unarmed civilians. That the state would respond to calls for accountability over infrastructure collapse with repressive crowd control techniques reflects a broader pattern of securitised governance and institutional impunity. As in the Jadar case, public safety failures are not met with reform—but with resistance to scrutiny.

Analysis and Implications

The Jadar Lithium Project is more than an environmental controversy. It is a revealing case study of how economic interests, political opacity, and shrinking civic space intersect to erode human rights in Serbia. The government's handling of the project—marked by procedural violations, repression of dissent, and the silencing of watchdogs—signals a broader shift toward securitised and extractive governance, where transparency and accountability are sidelined.

Each stage of the Jadar project's development—from the sidelining of the Aarhus Convention to the weaponisation of protest policing—has unfolded in a landscape of weakened institutional checks. These patterns are not isolated. As the Novi Sad case illustrates, even unrelated civic mobilisations—demanding accountability for public safety failures—are met with intimidation and unaccountable force.

The use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), digital surveillance, and, in some instances, acoustic crowd control devices reflect an increasingly hostile environment for civil society and the media. Public trust in institutions continues to erode, particularly in rural areas and regions affected by extractive development.

Internationally, Serbia continues to present itself as aligned with European values and legal standards. However, its internal governance contradicts this image. The Jadar case casts doubt on the credibility of Serbia's environmental transition narrative, especially in the context of its Memorandum of Understanding on critical raw materials with the European Union. Without robust legal guarantees, local participation, and independent oversight, Serbia's "green transition" risks reinforcing, rather than resolving, structural injustices.

For human rights defenders, the Jadar conflict underscores the urgency of safeguarding civic space—not only as a matter of political freedom but as a precondition for sustainable and equitable development. Environmental justice in Serbia cannot be achieved without reversing the trends of repression, corruption, and elite impunity that currently define the state's engagement with dissent.

Recommendations

1 For the Serbian Government:

- Take concrete steps to address institutional opacity and environmental injustice to safeguard civic space and restore democratic accountability
- Permanently withdraw the Jadar project and make all feasibility and environmental assessments public
- Protect peaceful protesters and environmental defenders, drop all charges and end harassment and surveillance
- Cease the practice of deploying SLAPP to silence civil society and the media
- Guarantee press freedom through equal access to public information and protection of independent journalism
- Launch transparent investigations into infrastructure failures, particularly the Novi Sad train station collapse, to hold accountable those responsible for procurement irregularities and substandard construction

2 For the International Community:

- Condition Serbia's EU accession progress on tangible reforms in judicial independence, media freedom, and civic space protections
- Investigate Rio Tinto's conduct under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, with a view to corporate accountability
- Prioritize sustained funding for watchdogs, legal aid, and experts in Serbia
- Include enforceable human rights safeguards in green investment frameworks to ensure that the push for climate neutrality does not come at the expense of civil liberties or local well-being

References

- Bogdanovic, N. and Kostic, D. (2024). *U Dolini Jadra u Srbiji neće litijum, Dok Vlast Oživljava Projekat Rio Tinta*, Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/litijum-rio-tinto-srbija-jadar-rudnik-gornje-nedeljice/33052226.html> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).

- *Dve trećine građana Srbije Najviše Veruje Stručnjacima O Pitanju Litijuma* (2024) Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/demostat-litijum-strucnjaci-gradjani-srbije-istrazivanje/33152643.html> (Accessed: 05 June 2025).
- *Evropska Komisija Potvrdila da je primila 46 prijava za strateške Projekte U Trećim zemljama* (2025) Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropska-komisija-srbija-projekat-jadar-litijum-vucic/33361112.html> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- Ferreira Santos, S. (2024) *Serbia: Thousands join Belgrade protest against Lithium Mining*, BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cged9qgwrvyo> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- *International protest against Lithium Mining in Serbia* (2025) Transnational Institute. Available at: <https://www.tni.org/en/event/international-protest-against-lithium-mining-in-serbia> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- Roscic, D. (2024) *Tri razloga za litijum iz Srbije I DVA PROTIV – DW – 21. 7. 2024.*, [dw.com](https://www.dw.com/sr/nemačka-štampa-tri-razloga-za-litijum-iz-srbije-i-dva-protiv/a-69721610). Available at: <https://www.dw.com/sr/nemačka-štampa-tri-razloga-za-litijum-iz-srbije-i-dva-protiv/a-69721610> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- Todorović, I. (2025). *Protest in Brussels scheduled ahead of screening of documentary, debate on Jadar Lithium Project*, Balkan Green Energy News. Available at: <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/protest-in-brussels-scheduled-ahead-of-screening-of-documentary-debate-on-jadar-lithium-project/> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- Vasovic, A. (2024). *Serbian protestors rally to oppose Rio Tinto's lithium mine project*, Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbian-protestors-rally-oppose-rio-tintos-lithium-mine-project-2024-10-16/> (Accessed: 01 June 2025).
- Vračar, A. (2024) *Battle for jadar: Tens of thousands rally against Rio Tinto's mining project in Serbia*, Peoples Dispatch. Available at: <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/08/12/battle-for-jadar-tens-of-thousands-rally-against-rio-tintos-mining-project-in-serbia/> (Accessed: 02 June 2025).

Author

A.T., ISHR Volunteer and Guest Writer

CONTACT US

International Society for Human Rights (ISHR)

Reuterstrasse 116
53129 Bonn (Germany)
Phone: +49 228 30426360
Email: secretariat@ishr.org
WhatsApp: +49 157 33969004
www.ishr.org



Editor of the ISHR Briefing Paper Series:
Matthias K. Boehning