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FEATURES

Rio Tinto says it's halting work in Serbia, but what's really happening?



Photo: Bojana Novaković

Author: Bojana Novaković, coordinator of the Marš sa Drine network of environmentalists

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As a school teacher in Gornje Nedeljice in western Serbia, Marijana Trbović Petković is both inquisitive and open-minded. So when in late December the CEO of Rio Tinto and its Rio Sava's Jadar project, Vesna Prodanović, announced that the company's lithium mine proposal had been put on hold due to 'an intense anti-mining and negative campaign', many of us from that anti-mining campaign, including landowners like Marijana, member of the local group Ne damo Jadar, wondered what 'on hold' meant, when really what we all need is to see them stopped and gone.

My role as campaign coordinator of a decentralized national movement Marš sa Drine against the Jadar project and Rio Tinto, is that of a glorified postman. I keep up to date with everything on the local level, deal with a team for national legal strategy, a team for European laws and institutions, media campaigns, cultural initiatives, social media and more.

When I noticed that European media was covering the latest moves by the company and president Vučić in a positive light, without regard for legal loopholes that led to masterful manipulation on the part of the company and the government, I realized the Western media had not been consulting with any of those people on the ground about what was actually going on.

If the project is on hold, why this pressure on locals to sell our land?

"This is exactly like it has been up to now. It's skilled manipulation. Ms. Prodanović says that the project is on pause. But they have been going from house to house offering again to buy land. They're calling and texting people on their phones, they're offering plastic furniture. How does the company have these people's numbers? How do they know who to contact and where? This is a complete violation of privacy," says Marijana.

"If the project is on hold, why this pressure on locals to sell our land? We at Ne damo Jadar are residents of 17 villages who don't want to negotiate with Rio Tinto. She now wants to do public consultations, but they already did these. They brought life coaches, and women's groups and they did webinars and all sorts of PR stunts. They now want to do more, it's not flying with any of us."

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Marijana is right. The kind of public consultations we activists, experts and locals are waiting on are ones that are part of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process, where minutes are taken and then become part of legal procedure, required by Serbian and European law.

“Ms. Prodanović constantly refuses to appear on TV with any of us or our experts,” adds Marijana. Indeed, despite many efforts on our part to participate in televised debates with those working for the company, Ms. Prodanović has cancelled her TV appearance with our experts countless times.

“She can say what she wants. As far as we are concerned, the case with Rio Tinto is closed. They can try to bring in machinery and let them see what happens. That’s as much as I can say about that.”

Rio Tinto under investigation for human rights abuses in Papua New Guinea

Those who read between the lines understand that Marijana and the people of the villages in the area are resolved to protect this land with their lives. Everyone is avoiding it, but if it comes to it, they say there will be a civil war.

No activist in this battle is shy of using that term, although it shocks diplomats. As if the diplomats who brought Rio Tinto here (including those from Europe who our campaign members have met with) never read that the company is under investigation for human rights abuses in Papua New Guinea, where they provoked a civil war, in which tens of thousands of people died.

Like they don’t know that only 12 months ago Rio Tinto blew up a sacred 46,000-year-old Australian Aboriginal cave, and claiming it had learned from its mistake, a month later tried to open a mine on sacred native land in Nevada. Is this a big game of pretend with politicians who don’t know how to read? If they don’t know who the company is, do they know who we are?

Marš sa Drine in its mission to stop the mining of lithium in the Jadar valley

The Marš sa Drine campaign is a network of over 20 organizations, experts, and local groups united in their mission to stop the mining of lithium in the Jadar valley and beyond on the basis of environmental, humanitarian, legal, political and cultural grounds. We are supported by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Engineering Academy of Serbia and countless universities. Ne damo Jadar is a group of local landowners from Gornje Nedeljice and other 16 villages, on the frontlines of the battle with Rio Tinto.

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Bojana Novaković (pictured second from right) with member of European Parliament Viola von Cramon (second left) and Marijana Trbović Petković (third left)

The location of these frontlines are of enormous historical importance to Serbia. The Cer mountain, part of the Jadar valley, was the first line of defense in World War One against Austria-Hungary and Germany, and a major line of defense in World War Two. Stories of war and defending Serbian freedom permeate these parts. Thousands of women and children were slaughtered, thousands of soldiers died, and the people of the Jadar valley know, through family history and aural tradition, what it means to fight for this land.

If it comes to expropriation, the whole of Serbia will rise

Europe must be under no delusion – if it comes to expropriation of the people of this region, the whole of Serbia will rise. Veterans, students, business professionals, artists, activists, experts, football hooligans, teachers, mothers, brides, musicians and dancers. We will all come to the Jadar valley.

We won't just camp and defend. We will have weddings on the fields, we will conduct folk dancing classes and sing Elvis songs in Serbian. What will expropriation look like then? They will have to lift brides from their grooms and children from their mothers.

"The government has passed the buck on to the company due to their inability to convince locals to sell. They made promises to the company, now they are making promises to us," Marijana continues.

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“They say they will listen to the voice of the people. We sent a request for the cancellation of the spatial plan including special purpose area Jadar (not to be confused with the local, city spatial plan, which is a lesser act and ineffective in stopping the company) as well as a constitutional request and nothing has happened. This is all just buying them time. We’ve sent our conditions. No one has responded, not the government, not the constitutional court. We don’t have another option but to hit the streets. When we come out, we will not go back to our homes until this is stopped.”

The request does not include ore processing and final products, well chemical and other ore treatment, or planned solutions for treatment and disposal of waste. Rio Tinto’s own brochure ‘Answers to questions about the Jadar project’ from February 2021 contradicts the published data.

The official proposal has seven times less negative impacts on the environment than the full Jadar project, presented on its site. With the splitting of the project and manipulation of the procedure, which aim to cover the real and enormous negative effects of the entire project on the environment, and circumvent mandatory legal procedures, the ministry can face criminal charges.

While European media stuck to their reports of a people’s win, Vučić announced that the project would not be halted. SEOS, a local coalition of ecological associations, responded by hitting the streets again. Vučić then doubled down with manipulation of the highest order, announcing that if Serbia was to get rid of Rio Tinto, it would owe the company a billion dollars (even though it spent only a quarter of that since 2004).

“What we are living through and surviving through here in Gornje Nedeljice is unbearable. We are constantly exposed to pressure from the company and now pressure from the government. It’s constant manipulation of the story, homes that have been demolished, psychological breakdown of us with this law and that law. It has to stop. We just want any talk of any kind of mine in this area to stop. And we want to return to our normal little lives which we were living before Rio Tinto and before this government and before all this hardship that you now find here in every house,” Marijana stressed.

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The first meeting of SEOS

We hope to get the attention of Western media that praise Rio Tinto and the Serbian government

So now Western media publishes articles praising the company for its discretion or the Serbian government for its supposed democracy, while it permits the company to break laws.

The project has been split into smaller parts. Section 2.2 of the project proposal states that it “refers to only one part of the entire project, more precisely to the underground exploitation project.” Yet Rio Tinto is obliged to prepare an EIA study for the entire complex-project (the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Environmental Protection, decision number 353-02-00984/2020-03, dated 5.6.2020).

The provisions of the EIA directive cannot be avoided by splitting projects into smaller projects, and failing to take into account their cumulative environmental impact. We hope the media will also consider contacting us, the campaign activists, experts and local citizens fighting for environmental and human rights – those living on the ground, those with stories from the front lines, those who know the truth and want you to share it.


Mark Twain said “a mine is a hole in the ground owned by a liar.” Better speak to the people who dance in the fields and sing Elvis in Serbian than to the liars who want to expropriate them.

“The truth is like the sun, you can shut it out for a time but it ain’t going away” – Elvis Presley.

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Bojana Novaković is an actor, documentary maker and campaign coordinator for Marš sa Drine. Marijana Trbović Petković is a school teacher in Gornje Nedeljice in the Jadar valley and a member of Ne damo Jadar, a collective of landowners from 17 villages who are opposed to Rio Tinto's Jadar project, and are either facing forced relocation or direct effects from the mining and extraction facilities.

Tags: Bojana Novaković , environmental impact , jadarite , lithium , lithium research , mining , protest , Rio Tinto

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Zoran / January 19, 2022

Srbija neće biti rudnik.
Puna podrška.

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John / January 21, 2022

Serbia will not allow neither Rio Tinto nor its German or Chinese competitors to mine lithium and boron ores in Serbia and destroy its nature and people's health.

If Rio Tinto purchased any promises from previous government officials of Serbia – they will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law along with all insiders who made this process possible.

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