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Cultural mobilisation in Serbia's anti-lithium movement: Examining protest music, environmental democracy and public sentiments

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Abstract
This paper examines how Serbia's anti-lithium environmental protests, centred on opposition to Rio Tinto's Jadar lithium mine, are situated within the country's broader history of civic mobilisation and democratic struggle for change. As part of the methodology, this study draws upon social movement theory (particularly the concepts of political opportunity structures and cultural framing) alongside cultural resistance scholarship, which explores the relationship between protest music and contemporary socio-political events. It also engages with environmental democracy frameworks, focusing on public participation rights. Together, these theoretical perspectives are useful in demonstrating how protest music operates as both a cultural and political resource in processes of social and political transformation.

Furthermore, drawing on qualitative discourse analysis of news reports, non-governmental organisations' (NGO) statements, activist interviews, and two popular protest songs, "Fire in Darkness" and "March Out of My Yard" (Vatra u mraku and Marš iz moje avlije), the study investigates the role of cultural expression, such as music, in sustaining activism. It also considers the fusing impact of the November 2024 Novi Sad railway station tragedy, which catalysed a broader pro-democracy coalition by linking environmental grievances to systemic governance failures. The paper argues that the Serbian case illustrates how environmental movements in post-socialist contexts can evolve into multi-issue campaigns for democratic accountability, with protest music and popular cultural production acting as a unifying force across social divides.

Keywords: Serbia; environmental protests; lithium mining; civil society; protest music

Introduction

Protest music has long been recognised as a mobilising tradition in social movements, helping to inspire and energise protesters (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). This study aims to examine Serbia's recent resurgence in environmental activism, through the case study of anti-lithium protests, and the evolution of anti-lithium activism into a broader social movement calling for greater transparency and democratic accountability in the Balkans.

Furthermore, no foreign investment project in Serbia's history has attracted as much controversy as the proposed Rio Tinto mine, which opened its first subsidiary in Serbia in 2001. The project, worth more than AU$2.5 billion, came to light in 2020 as the company was preparing for lithium extraction near the western Serbian town of Loznica. Opposition to the project united diverse Serbian non-government groups, diaspora organisations, and members of the political opposition, developing into a broader cultural movement which used music, art, and collective memory to express

dissent and sustain anti-government opposition even in periods of political repression (Street, 2012). If completed, the Jadar project would be Europe's largest lithium mine, powering more than 1 million electric cars, reducing Europe's dependence on China and meeting most of Europe's lithium demands. Opponents say that the project would make Serbia the most polluted country in Europe, destroying its natural resources and adversely affecting local environment.

Background

Music and certain genres such as rock music have often played a key role in Europe's major upheavals, even signalling regime change. For example, the 1974 Portuguese Eurovision entry "And After Goodbye" (*E Depois do Adeus*) triggered the uprising that overthrew Portugal's government. Historian John Kennedy O'Connor states that "this [song] remains the only Eurovision entry to have actually started a revolution", since its debut broadcast was a signal for the Portuguese troops to mobilise for action (O'Connor, 2025). Then in the 1980s, Estonian caricaturist-turned-politician Heinz Valk coined the term "Singing Revolution" to describe peaceful protests in the Baltic states (1988–1991) where mass singing united people against socialism (Thompson, 1992; Tambur, 2024).[1] In Slovakia and Poland, rock music helped rally protesters against communist oppression. By the late 1980s, Yugoslav rock music had become the people's voice, reflecting opposition to socialism, war, poor living standards, and corruption (Markovic-Khaze, 2019; Spasovska, 2011).

Serbia has had a long tradition of grassroots protest, with roots in the late socialist period and a strong legacy of student-led mobilisation against nationalism and war.[2] In the early 1990s, movements such as *Otpor* ("Resistance") challenged authoritarian rule using symbolic tactics, satire, and mass rallies to confront political repression (Markovic Khaze, 2018). Earlier episodes, including the 1991–92 student demonstrations and the sustained 1996–97 protests over electoral fraud and corruption, saw diverse coalitions of students, civilians, and opposition parties confronting entrenched power. Over the past seven years, protest activity in Serbia has periodically surged, from the "1 of 5 million" anti-government rallies of 2018–20 that were sparked by an assault on Borko Stefanovic, then the opposition leader, to the nationwide anti-violence marches of 2023, to daily street civic opposition protests in 2024-25, which have occasionally turned violent. Serbia's history of public defiance on the streets has provided tactical repertoires and a collective memory of resistance that contemporary movements continue to draw upon in the broader Western Balkans (Vuksanović & Cvijić, 2025). In Serbia, anti-mining protests, though not new locally, have grown to disrupt national mining policies and highlight wider issues like corruption, nepotism, slow reforms, and government inefficiency (Niranjan, 2023).[3]

[1] In Estonia, the anti-Soviet movement was in part motivated by concerns of the Estonians about the environmental impact of mining, and the demographic threat to the Estonian national identity posed by the influx of foreigners who came to work on large Soviet development projects, such as in phosphate mining. The activists called their movement "The phosphorite war" (Auer, 1998).

[2] Interestingly, in Kosovo too rock music was a vehicle of popular dissent against the Serbian government's coercive control in political and security arenas (Xhoni & Rasimi, 2025).

[3] Though outside this paper's scope, Serbia's anti-lithium protests also drew support from the diaspora, with activists as far as Melbourne, such as the Australian actress of Serbian origin Bojana Novakovic, backing Serbia's protest initiatives by participating in the anti-lithium mining roundtables and therein boosting protesters' morale with international support (van Leeuwen, 2024)

Environmental issues in Serbia's protest movement

Environmental issues have emerged as a particularly potent rallying point in Serbia's protest tradition. Starting around 2019, public anger in Serbia over air pollution, deforestation, and industrial waste began to unify disparate activist networks.[4] The period from late 2021 to early 2022 saw the rise of the "Ecological Uprising" that was marked by large-scale road blockades and protests opposing legislative changes perceived as enabling foreign corporate control over natural resources.[5] Although the Serbian government formally revoked Rio Tinto's exploration licenses in January 2022 under public pressure (shortly after Novak Djokovic's expulsion from the Australian Open added fuel to the growing anti-Western sentiment in Serbia), anti-mining activists continued to demand a permanent, legally binding ban on lithium mining in Serbia.[6] These events set the stage for a resurgence of anti-lithium activism in 2024, when the issue of lithium extraction re-entered political discourse amid growing distrust in government institutions.

By 2024, public trust in Serbia's institutions and governance was severely eroded, creating fertile ground for broad-based protest. Surveys showed that 68% of Serbian citizens perceived domestic media reporting as biased, a consequence of pro-government media dominance since Aleksandar Vučić came to power.[7] The December 2023 elections were widely seen as fraudulent, and a tightly controlled media landscape had reinforced popular cynicism. Vuckovic et al. found that populist discourses increased during Vučic's time in power, "to ensure its survival", and divided the population into "them versus us" (Vuckovic et al., 2025). Furthermore, on 1 November 2024 the concrete canopy above the entrance of the main railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia, collapsed, killing 16 people just before noon on a Friday morning. A major reconstruction had recently taken place at that station, with the official reports stating that it did not include the collapsed structure. This tragedy sparked large-scale student-led protests across Serbia, exposing broader concerns about public safety and state accountability.

Against this backdrop of eroding citizen trust and weak accountability, environmental activism ("them") became a vehicle to challenge not only ecological harm but also the broader democratic deficits underpinning Serbia's governing coalition ("us"). It is within this context of political opportunity structures that cultural forms of protest, involving music, gained prominence as tools to galvanise public support and articulate demands for change.

Songs for change as illustrative case studies in cultural framing

This paper examines the phenomenon of Serbia's anti-lithium and anti-state activism, analysing how cultural expression, particularly protest music, sustains grassroots mobilisation and amplifies demands for democratic accountability. It foregrounds two

[4] This type of large-scale protest that brings together activists from different social and political spaces was common to the post-1990 era in the Balkans. In that region, as the British sociologist Catherine Baker observed, "the breakdown of Yugoslavia's cultural space" has occurred in parallel to the formation of new political structures, with social dissent accompanying this process (Baker, 2010, p. 176).
[5] *Global Witness* found that mining for critical minerals globally was linked to 334 incidents of violence, protests, and deaths between 2021 and 2023, with 90% occurring in emerging economies (Root, 2024).
[6] Two Balkan affairs observers recently made a point on this topic in their article with a tongue-in-cheek title "Is Serbia turning into an EU mining colony" for *Politico* (Weizman & Ahmatović, 2025).
[7] Most surveyed Serbian residents thought that media in Serbia tends to be government-dominated, with little to no space for alternative perspectives, including opposition parties (Security Radar, 2025).

contemporary songs, *Vatra u* mraku ("Fire in Darkness") and *Marš iz moje avlije* ("Get Out of My Yard"), as case studies in cultural framing. Analysis of their lyrics, performance contexts, and popular reception shows how artistic expression forges solidarities across urban–rural and class divides. [8] The paper also situates this soundscape within broader protest culture by discussing the renewed prominence of Generacija 5's 1985 track *Za milion godina* ("For a Million Years"), widely played at public gatherings since 2024 and linked to student-led protests. The song's focus on love and solidarity counters themes of corruption and state violence.[9] Its revival links Serbia's current fight for accountability with the defiant spirit of the 1980s, showing music's enduring role in dissent and democratic resistance.

The analysis is guided by the following research question:

> How does protest music function as a tool for mobilisation and for articulating democratic accountability within Serbia's anti-lithium movement, particularly in the context of shifting political opportunity structures?

By addressing this question, the study sheds light on the interplay between cultural resistance and political activism in a post-socialist society facing both environmental and democratic crises.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on social movement theory, cultural protest literature, and environmental democracy concepts. Next, the methodology is described, followed by an overview of the case background, including the historical emergence of anti-lithium protests. The main sections then analyse the current phase of the movement, the democratic implications of the protests, and the catalytic impact of the Novi Sad tragedy, all while highlighting the role of music and culture. The discussion integrates insights from global lithium extraction conflicts and recent public opinion data, illustrating the broader significance of Serbia's experience. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the movement's transformation into a multi-issue campaign and its implications for both environmental sustainability and democratic accountability.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on three intersecting bodies of theory to examine Serbia's environmental protest movement: (1) social movement theory, (2) scholarship on cultural protest (including the role of cultural production such as music in social movements), and (3) frameworks of environmental democracy. Together, these perspectives provide a lens for understanding how the anti-lithium campaign has evolved and how protest music serves as both an expressive and political resource.

Classic social movement theory offers tools to analyse the emergence, dynamics, and outcomes of collective action. Sidney Tarrow's concept of political opportunity structures emphasises that movements arise and gain traction when shifting power relations, institutional openings, or crises create opportunities for challengers to press

[8] These songs were not the only songs replayed by Serbian anti-lithium protesters, but their popularity in reference to the protest movement's transnationalism and content that specifically relates to mining and environmental concerns makes them an illustrative case study.

[9] The chorus sings "Never be afraid, somebody is with you, who wants to give love to you and a piece of their warm dream, … the children in us know it all, the real road into new dreams" (Nikad ne boj se, s tobom neko je, ko zeli ljubav da ti da, deo svoga toplog sna. Nikad ne boj se, ljubav jaca je, deca u nama znaju sve, pravi put u nove sne.")

their claims (Tarrow, 1988). By analysing social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Tarrow found that "in the intersection between politics and mass mobilisation lies the greatest potential for research on social movements" (Tarrow, 1988, p. 456). This is what the Serbian case study as explained below aims to contribute to.

In Serbia, the anti-lithium protests have unfolded amid a flux in political opportunities, including the government's wavering stance on the Jadar project, international scrutiny tied to EU accession talks, and domestic unrest over corruption, which movement entrepreneurs have leveraged. Likewise, the concept of focusing events is pertinent, showing that sudden crises can dramatically expand a movement's scope (Birkland, 1998).

The Novi Sad train station disaster in November 2024 exemplifies a focusing event that galvanised new constituencies and reframed the movement's narrative (as discussed later). Social movement scholars also highlight the importance of resource mobilisation and networks (e.g. cross-sector alliances, diaspora support) in sustaining protests, as well as cycles of contention that shape protest waves over time (Tarrow, 1988, Birkland, 1998, Castells, 1983). These concepts help explain how Serbia's environmental activism from 2021 resurged in 2024, and how it linked with other grievances to become a broad pro-democracy front. Lasia Leofreddi, an Italian scholar, observed that:

> This (broad social) movement now includes academic staff and students, farmers (notably those who opposed the Rio Tinto lithium extraction project), artists, journalists, taxi drivers, engineers, and other citizens. Serbian government is pushing a 'protest of the privileged' narrative. In reality, resistance cuts across class and generational lines, uniting people from urban centres and rural areas.

By early February 2025, independent source *Arhiv javnih skupova* had recorded protest activity in at least 419 locations across Serbia (Leofreddi, 2025).

Furthermore, David Snow and Robert Benford's work on collective action frames shows that movements must frame issues in ways that resonate with the public's values and experiences to mobilise participation (Snow & Benford, 1988). In Serbia's anti-lithium protest movement's case, activists have framed mining not just as an ecological risk but as part of a larger struggle against corruption and "neo-colonial" exploitation (as strong-worded lyrics in the "Get Out of My Yard" song clearly demonstrate). This frame alignment broadens the movement's appeal beyond environmentalists to include citizens outraged by governance failures. The incorporation of the Novi Sad tragedy into the movement's narrative is a powerful example of frame bridging, linking infrastructure negligence to the mining controversy under an overarching theme of systemic failure. Social movement theory helps explain how Serbia's protests evolved from a single-issue campaign (e.g. anti-Jadar project) into a broader movement, shaped by political opportunities and the activists' strategic framing.

Beyond political structures and frames, the current Serbian pro-democracy movement can be understood through the lens of cultural resistance. Music can create collective identity, sustain morale, and communicate movement values in emotionally resonant ways (Street, 2012). In the Serbian protests, songs became a key part of the movement's symbolic repertoire. The song "Fire in Darkness", co-authored by acclaimed young artists Marko Louis and Marcelo in early 2025, blended rock and hip-hop elements

and was quickly embraced by student demonstrators. Dubbed a "student protest anthem" in local media, it was performed at rallies and circulated widely on social networks, its lyrics speaking of a new generation's hope for change. Likewise, "Get Out of My Yard" song by the popular hip-hop collective Beogradski Sindikat (known for its socially conscious music) delivered a defiant message, essentially directed at perceived outsiders and exploiters. With references to guarding the homeland's earth and water, the song fused patriotic sentiment with environmentalism, echoing how some activists portray the lithium battle as a defence of national sovereignty against corporate interests and neo-colonialism. These songs tap into folk notions of resistance (in Serbia's case, drawing on both the memory of anti-regime songs from the 1980s and 1990s and older folk protest themes) to inspire collective action.

In Serbia, where mainstream media marginalises protest voices, music and social media have become alternative channels to reach broader population. The anthems mentioned were shared via YouTube, TikTok, and at concerts, amplifying the movement's narrative beyond formal protest events. John Street's work on music and politics notes that songs often frame political arguments in accessible, metaphorical language, making complex issues personally relatable (Baker, 2010; O'Connor, 2005; Street, 2012). "Fire in Darkness" and "Get Out of My Yard" songs did exactly this, the former framing activists as bearers of light in dark times, with the latter framing the mining project as an invasive threat to one's home and wellbeing. Theoretical perspectives on cultural framing can thus illuminate how music became a unifying force in Serbia's anti-lithium movement, helping bridge urban–rural divides (the city-based youth and the village landowners could rally behind the same chorus) and sustaining engagement across protest cycles.

The third pillar of the framework is the concept of environmental democracy, which integrates environmental protection with democratic principles of transparency, participation, and justice. Dryzek and his colleagues have articulated how environmental conflicts often reflect deeper struggles over voice and rights in decision-making (Dryzek et al., 2003). In Serbia's case, the anti-lithium protests explicitly invoke principles of environmental democracy, with activists demanding adherence to the Aarhus Convention (which guarantees public access to environmental information and participation in decision-making, an end to top-down deals on natural resources, and accountability for environmental harm). Environmental democracy theory helps explain why the lack of consultation can become a flashpoint as their voices and local knowledge are being excluded in favour of powerful state or corporate interests.

Furthermore, environmental democracy is linked to accountability and justice. Schlosberg (2007) emphasises that environmental movements frequently evolve to address issues of distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition. In Serbia, the anti-lithium protests quickly transcended NIMBY ("not in my backyard") sentiments to raise broader questions: Who benefits from these projects? Is the push for "green" industries overriding concerns of corruption and rule of law? These questions place the movement firmly in the realm of environmental democracy, where the fight is not just to stop a mine, but to reshape governance so that development choices are made transparently and equitably. Thus, environmental social action provides a framework to connect the dots between an ostensibly single-issue environmental protest and a larger democratic reform agenda.

Social movement theory elucidates how political opportunities, and framing strategies allowed the movement to grow and link issues; cultural protest theory highlights the role of music and symbolism in mobilising and maintaining the coalition; and environmental democracy situates the struggle in a normative context of rights and accountability. This integrated framework of multiple analytical lenses will help to guide the analysis of how the protests unfolded and why they have had such resonance in Serbian society.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology, combining discourse analysis with elements of digital media analysis and interpretive field insight. Data were gathered from a variety of textual and audiovisual sources to triangulate perspectives on the anti-lithium protests. First, a corpus of media reports (international and Serbian news articles, NGO press releases, and advocacy reports) from 2021 to 2025 was collected to trace the chronology of events and official responses. Key sources included reputable outlets such as *AP News, Reuters, Balkan Insight*, and *The Guardian*, as well as regional civil society reports (e.g. the IDEA Democracy Tracker). These were analysed for narrative framing, recurring themes, and claims by different stakeholders (activists, government, experts).

Second, the study examined social media content and protest materials. Hashtags on Twitter/X (e.g. #NeDamoJadar, "We Won't Give up Jadar") and Facebook posts by environmental groups were reviewed to understand grassroots communication. Notably, the use of hashtags allowed activists to embed the lithium issue within broader narratives and reach diverse audiences, including diaspora. What protesters chose as their slogans, flyers, and banners (as seen in photographs and videos of rallies) were also considered as textual evidence of framing (for instance, slogans that linked Rio Tinto's project to "EU colonialism" or government treason, which is also evident in the lyrics of Get Out of My Yard song).

Finally, a focused content analysis of protest music was undertaken. The lyrics and music videos of "Fire in Darkness" and "Get Out of My Yard" were analysed for symbolism, rhetoric, and emotional appeal (Beogradski Sindikat, 2025). Attention was given to how these songs reference political and environmental themes (for example, "Get Out of My Yard" explicitly mentions guarding one's "*soil and sky*" against exploitation, invoking both ecological and patriotic imagery). Viewer comments and engagement metrics on YouTube and TikTok were reviewed to gauge public reception of these songs; both tracks garnered hundreds of thousands of views within weeks of release and continue to be frequently mentioned in protest-related social media posts, indicating their diffusion among supporters.[10]

This methodological approach allows for a deeper understanding of the Serbian anti-lithium movement as a major socio-political phenomenon in contemporary Balkan politics, which remains understudied. The goal is to develop insights that are analytically rich and theoretically informative, and insights that can speak to similar cases of environmental contention and cultural resistance elsewhere. In the following

[10] As of 27 October 2025, the official video for *Vatra u mraku* had 1.8 million views for the high-resolution (4K) video version, the most of all songs used in the protest.

sections, the historical and current trajectory of the movement are examined, laying the groundwork for a discussion of its broader implications.

Historical context of anti-lithium protests

Opposition to lithium mining in Serbia, particularly the Rio Tinto–backed Jadar project, falls within a longer trajectory of environmental awareness, eco-protests and civic mobilisation in the region. In the 1980s, environmental consciousness grew especially in Western Yugoslav republics like Slovenia (Oset, 2019). In Serbia during the 1990s, anti-state public demonstrations occurred almost daily in Belgrade and across regional centres, with grievances ultimately targeting the Milošević government's economic mismanagement and wartime policies during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In the 2000s, Serbia's environmental activism began to align more closely with Western European trends, partly due to financial and institutional support from the European Union following the fall of Milošević in October 2000. Local campaigns against air pollution and mining projects catalysed the growth of grassroots networks. By 2021, these once-fragmented environmental concerns had coalesced into a unified front marked by growing public distrust in state institutions, fuelling one of the most significant protest waves in the Balkans since the democratic uprisings of the early 2000s.

The Ecological Uprising of late 2021 was a watershed moment. It began in September 2021 as a direct response to proposed amendments to Serbia's expropriation and referendum laws, which were widely perceived as tools to facilitate state seizure of private land for mining and infrastructure projects without proper public consent. Activists argued that these legal changes disproportionately favoured corporate actors (notably Rio Tinto, but also other foreign mining companies) at the expense of local communities and property rights (Petrović, 2023). The movement's composition was remarkably pluralistic, uniting rural landowners from the Jadar region, urban environmental NGOs, student groups, and opposition political parties in an unusual coalition.

In response, the Association of Environmental Organisations of Serbia (SEOS), together with allied activist networks, launched a citizens' initiative calling for a complete ban on lithium and boron mining. The petition, endorsed by more than 38,000 signatories, was formally submitted to the National Assembly on 18 May 2022. This demand went unmet, with the Constitutional Court naming the ban unconstitutional (Popovic et al. 2025). Protests continued into the general elections, with environmental leaders attempting to channel the movement's momentum into institutional politics. A green-left electoral alliance nicknamed *We Must* ("Moramo") succeeded in entering parliament, winning 13 out of 250 seats. This represented a modest yet symbolically significant foothold for environmental advocates within the National Assembly (Baletic, 2024).

Through 2022 and 2023, environmental protest activity waxed and waned. It often merged with broader anti-government currents, reflecting how ecological issues in Serbia are intertwined with governance concerns. For instance, protesters against lithium mining frequently joined the "Serbia Against Violence" rallies in 2023, which were sparked by unrelated grievances (mass shootings and perceived government failures in their aftermath) but evolved into general anti-regime demonstrations (Djukanović, 2025). By late 2023, the Jadar project was back as a flashpoint. The

Serbian leaders had been negotiating with the European Commission to revive the lithium project as part of securing raw materials for Europe's electric vehicle industry (European Commission, 2024). After the earlier license revocation, confidence had eroded that the government would truly halt the project. Many Serbs suspected that economic pressures and incentives from abroad would eventually override the 2021–22 concessions, a sentiment that proved prescient as events unfolded (Bundesregierung, 2024, Vivoda, 2025).

In sum, by mid-2024 the stage was set for a resurgence of mass mobilisation against lithium mining. The historical underpinnings of this movement are crucial: years of environmental activism had fertilised a network of engaged citizens, and repeated frustrations with governance had transformed a local environmental dispute into a proxy battle for democracy. The movement that re-emerged would draw on the tactics and experiences of the Ecological Uprising, even as it expanded its scope in new and unexpected ways (Müller et al., 2025).

Current phase of anti-lithium protests (2024–25)

Serbia's anti-lithium protests re-emerged as a national political force by mid-2024, driven by a confluence of environmental, economic, and governance-related grievances. The immediate trigger was President Vučić's announcement in July 2024 that lithium extraction "could start as early as 2028," coupled with public endorsements by European leaders of a partnership to develop Serbia's raw materials (Despite protests, 2024). To activists, these statements confirmed their fears that the Jadar project was quietly being resurrected (Dzihic, 2024).

Indeed, just weeks after Serbia's Constitutional Court removed a key legal obstacle (overturning parts of the referendum law that had halted the project), German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and EU officials visited Belgrade to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on sustainable raw materials and e-mobility (Bundesregierung, 2024). This signalled that the European Union was backing lithium mining in Serbia, even as formal EU accession talks stressed governance reform. Brussels approved the strategic partnership in June 2025, demonstrating further the perceived disconnect between the EU's green industrial ambitions and its democracy promotion goals in Serbia (European Parliament, 2025, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025).

The new wave of demonstrations which began in August 2024 in the western town of Loznica (near the proposed Jadar mine site) quickly spread to major cities like Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac, as well as numerous smaller municipalities across the fertile Mačva region. Protesters' concerns in this phase coalesced around four main themes which include the lack of public consultation, anticipated environmental harm, corruption and corporate governance and political struggle for the government's transparency in decision-making and public accountability (Thousands hit the streets, 2024; Filipovic, 2024).

The composition of the movement during this current phase was diverse. Academic observers such Stepanovic noted the presence of tech-savvy university students livestreaming protests on TikTok and Instagram, rural villagers from the Jadar and Rađevina areas fighting to protect ancestral lands, urban NGOs and intellectuals linking environmental justice to human rights, and even members of the Serbian diaspora amplifying messages abroad. This broad coalition mirrors patterns

seen in other global environmental justice movements where localised ecological grievances become vehicles for expressing larger democratic deficits (Stepanovic, 2024; Ivanović et al., 2023; Đorđević, 2024). As David Schlosberg (2007) argues, environmental struggles often generate broader demands for justice and democratic participation, which is clearly visible in Serbia's case.

Throughout late 2024, protests continued to grow, and weekly turnouts in Belgrade swelled to tens of thousands. By early November 2024 (just prior to a tragic event detailed in the next section), activists and journalists were describing the anti-lithium rallies as "the largest environmental protests in Serbian history" (Tare, 2024). Notably, these protests were among the most peaceful and self-organised in recent Serbian history. Decentralised networks, which were primarily coordinated through social media and grassroots organisations, successfully mobilised simultaneous demonstrations across multiple cities with minimal formal leadership. This reflected a renewed vitality in civic mobilisation, echoing earlier protest movements such as *Otpor* in 2000.

The mid-2024 resurgence of Serbia's anti-lithium movement transformed what began as a local environmental concern into a national platform of dissent. The movement's agenda, from immediate environmental demands (no mining without consent, protect our water and land) to systemic political ones (end corruption, increase transparency, heed the will of the people), reflected the intertwining of environmental and democratic struggles (Bárcena, 2024). As the next sections will explore, a dramatic incident in Novi Sad further amplified and broadened Serbian protest movement, pushing it into a decisive new phase which is still developing.

Democratic implications of the protests

The anti-lithium protests have become a litmus test for the resilience of Serbia's democratic institutions and the relationship between state and society. On one level, the protests showcase the strength of civil society and popular mobilisation in an increasingly authoritarian context. Decentralised activist networks proved capable of assembling mass demonstrations across multiple cities with minimal formal hierarchy, tapping into pent-up public frustrations. Environmental issues, once considered apolitical or niche, have now entered mainstream parliamentary debate. Opposition MPs have introduced bills to ban lithium mining and regularly grill government ministers about the Jadar project, though without majority support so far (Stojanović & Jovanović, 2024). This indicates that citizen activism has at least forced environmental governance onto the political agenda.

However, the state's responses to the protests have highlighted systemic democratic weaknesses (Popović et al., 2025). The rule of law in Serbia was strained as authorities resorted to punitive measures against peaceful demonstrators. In August 2024, for example, three student activists were arrested and swiftly sentenced to 30 to 40 days in jail for blocking Belgrade's main train station during a protest (European Western Balkans, 2024). Although these convictions were overturned on appeal, domestic civil rights groups condemned the initial sentences as politically motivated and aimed at instilling fear. Numerous reports by NGOs, echoed by *AP News* coverage and *The Guardian*, documented incidents such as pre-emptive police raids on activists' homes, confiscation of phones and laptops, and interrogations under vague accusations of inciting disorder (Henley, 2024). This pattern suggested a criminalisation of dissent,

sending a chilling message and undercutting Serbia's commitments to uphold freedoms of assembly and expression as an EU aspirant nation.

Media freedom (or the lack thereof) has been another pressure point. Public broadcasters largely ignored or downplayed the protests in their news programs, while government-aligned tabloids and TV channels engaged in smear campaigns. Activists were variously labelled (and continue to be) as foreign mercenaries, anti-Serb ecoterrorists, or, intriguingly, agents of rival powers in different narratives. Protesters were accused of serving Western interests to sabotage Chinese investments, or conversely of serving Russian interests to undermine Serbia's EU path (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2025). Protesters thus increasingly relied on alternative channels, such as independent online media, YouTube streams, Telegram groups, and international press coverage, to get their message out. In effect, Serbia's information environment itself became a battleground, with activists fighting not only ecological misinformation from the mining company but also state-sponsored disinformation about their motives (European Western Balkans, 2025). The persistence of a biased media has contributed to a broader climate of mistrust: by 2024, 68% of Serbians believed the media to be biased, which in turn lends credibility to the protesters' claim that truth is being suppressed (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2025).

From a civil society perspective, one positive democratic implication of the protests has been the strengthening of cross-sector alliances. Environmental NGOs joined forces with legal aid organisations, student unions, farmers' associations, and even some workers associations to form coordinating bodies (one notable umbrella group emerging in late 2024 was the *Coalition for Popular Resistance*, uniting over seventy NGOs) (Mašina, 2024). The protests also energised the Serbian diaspora, which helped internationalise the movement's cause. Diaspora-led demonstrations in cities like Berlin, London, Toronto, Sydney, and New York (on 20 January 2025) garnered coverage from outlets such as *Deutsche Welle*, *Al Jazeera English*, and *The Guardian*, putting additional pressure on Belgrade (CIVICUS Lens, 2024). These efforts culminated in diaspora groups forming broad networks like the Serbian Diaspora for Justice and Sustainability, advocating not only against mining but arguing for democratic reforms and transparency in Serbia (Transnational Institute, 2025). Such transnational advocacy underscores the capacity of grassroots networks to bypass domestic constraints, engage supranational institutions and global public opinion, and strengthen connections with the Serbian diaspora.[11]

Crucially, the public opinion shifts spurred by the protests hint at longer-term democratic implications. By March 2025, polling indicated that support for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had dipped below 40%, which was a significant fall for Vučić's once-dominant force (Vreme, 2025). The sustained unrest led to serious talk of snap elections (originally, the next general election was due in 2026) as the opposition sensed an opportunity to capitalise on the momentum. For perhaps the first time in years, the government appeared vulnerable. Citizens who might normally be apolitical have become actively involved due to the tangible nature of environmental and safety concerns touching their lives (FEPS, 2025).

[11] In the late 1990s, *Otpor* developed strong diaspora linkages through its supranational anti-Milošević initiatives, particularly with Serbian diaspora associations and prominent individuals based in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and continental Europe.

The anti-lithium movement's rise has had a dual effect on Serbian democracy. Firstly, it has exposed the cracks in the system, from the judiciary's vulnerability to political pressure, to media capture and opaque governance. Secondly, it has also revitalised civic engagement and forced accountability issues into the spotlight. Serbia's experience affirms a principle observed in other post-socialist states, which is that environmental struggles can act as catalysts for democratic awakening, uniting citizens around core values of fairness, participation, and rule of law when other issues fail to mobilise them (European Parliamentary Research Service 2025). The Novi Sad tragedy, discussed in the next section, dramatically amplified these dynamics and continues to inspire a growing anti-government movement in Serbia.

The Novi Sad tragedy and the expansion of the movement

By late 2024, the anti-lithium campaign was already a focal point of environmental and civic activism in Serbia. This trajectory was dramatically altered on 1 November 2024, when a disaster unrelated to lithium mining struck but ultimately became intertwined with the movement's narrative. On that day, the canopy of Novi Sad's main railway station collapsed, resulting in the death of 16 people and injuring dozens. The Novi Sad tragedy quickly came to be seen not as a freak accident, but as a symbol of systemic failure.

Critics alleged that the station's canopy, originally built in 1964, had been poorly maintained and possibly structurally compromised during the recent renovation. Furthermore, they alleged that corners were cut in the refurbishment contract, which was awarded without open tender as part of a Belt and Road Initiative deal (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024a, 2004b). Indeed, local engineering experts pointed to shoddy work and oversight lapses, fuelling public outrage that corruption and negligence in high places had literally caused a deadly collapse. The tragedy underscored what many Serbians felt, such as that systemic governance failures and corruption were endangering lives (Sekularac, 2025).

From the outset, civic responses framed the Novi Sad station deaths not as an isolated accident but as a symptom of the same system the environmental activists were fighting. Within hours of the collapse, Novi Sad residents organised a candlelight vigil for the victims, which by the next day had spread to solidarity vigils in Belgrade, Niš, Kragujevac, and other cities (Garcia, 2025). These gatherings, shared widely on social media under the hashtag #NeZaboraviNoviSad ("Don't Forget Novi Sad"), soon transformed into protest rallies demanding accountability. Demonstrators drew direct parallels between the negligence that led to the canopy collapse and the secrecy, lack of consultation, and regulatory bypasses surrounding the Jadar project (Djukanović, 2025). Their placard messages merged the fates of the station victims with the cause of the lithium protesters, implying that whether the issue is public infrastructure or mining operations, the root problem is corrupt, unaccountable governance that prioritises profit and political gain over public safety (Chin, 2025; Vivoda, 2025).

The Novi Sad disaster served as a catalyst for cross-movement alliances, invoking what policy scholar Thomas Birkland calls a focusing event where a sudden calamity that galvanises previously fragmented actors and forces issues onto the public agenda (Birkland, 1998; Birkland, 2019). In the weeks following 1 November, new alliances were formed, with environmental groups formally reaching out to transport safety

advocates, who had long warned about aging infrastructure, and to urban planning watchdogs concerned with corruption in construction projects (Gec, 2024; Smith, 2025). Human rights organisations, which had been monitoring the crackdown on protesters, also joined forces. By December 2024, more than 70 NGOs spanning these domains united under a common umbrella. This coalition adopted a dual agenda, demanding justice for the Novi Sad victims (including legal action against officials responsible) and broader systemic reforms in governance, transparency, and environmental protection. In a remarkable convergence groups that might normally pursue separate issues found common cause under a shared narrative of demanding a government that cares for its people's lives and futures (Booth, 2025, Stojanović & Jovanović, 2024, Đerković, 2024).

Protest events began to explicitly honour the Novi Sad victims alongside anti-mining slogans, symbolically merging demands for safe infrastructure, ecological sustainability, and democratic accountability. These actions broadened the movement's appeal; many ordinary citizens who had not previously engaged in environmental activism started joining the protests out of anger or fear sparked by the tragedy. In essence, the movement grew beyond eco-activists to include urban middle-class families worried about infrastructure safety, professionals fed up with corruption, and others who identified with the victims' plight.

The Serbian government's initial response to the Novi Sad tragedy and the renewed wave of protests in late 2024–early 2025 was a mix of defensive dismissal and cautious damage control. President Aleksandar Vučić publicly described the station collapse as a "terrible accident" and announced an official investigation, attempting to project concern (Bzgabovic, 2024). Simultaneously, the administration continued a hardline stance toward protest leaders, indicating that its fundamental approach, tolerate no challenge to authority, had not shifted.

Another notable development following the Novi Sad tragedy was the increased engagement of the Serbian diaspora in issue-based mobilisation. While diaspora communities had previously participated in homeland politics (for example, during the 1990s), the post-Novi Sad tragedy period saw more structured forms of transnational activism centred on environmental governance and public accountability. From January 2025 onwards, coordinated vigils and protests were organised by Serbian expatriates outside embassies and consulates in major global cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Berlin, London, Paris, Vienna, New York, and Toronto. These actions were accompanied by open letters and petitions directed at EU institutions and international human-rights bodies, urging closer scrutiny of Serbia's democratic and environmental record (Zorić, 2025). The diaspora's participation contributed to the internationalisation of domestic concerns, framing environmental and governance issues within a broader discourse of transparency and institutional responsibility. At the same time, the Serbian government sought to manage these developments by portraying them as politically motivated or externally influenced. Despite potential risks of fatigue and fragmentation, the continued convergence of environmental, accountability, and anti-corruption frames has sustained mobilisation efforts and maintained public salience (Booth, 2025).

Conclusion

By 2025, Serbia's anti-lithium campaign had evolved into a broad-based civic movement, with the Novi Sad railway tragedy functioning as a key catalyst that revealed the systemic vulnerabilities of governance. Initially focused on opposition to the Rio Tinto mining project, the movement progressively incorporated overlapping claims for environmental justice, public safety, transparency, and institutional accountability. From a social-movement theory perspective, this trajectory exemplifies how a focusing event can activate diverse constituencies and foster cross-issue alliances, transforming a local ecological dispute into a wider demand for governance reform. The Serbian case thus highlights how environmental contention can serve as a mechanism for democratic engagement, linking sustainability concerns with broader expectations of accountable and participatory governance.

Furthermore, this study highlights the strategic function of cultural mobilisation within social movements. The Serbian case illustrates how protest music and other cultural repertoires can operate as mechanisms of collective identity formation and communication. By drawing on the country's historical protest traditions, from rock movements in the late socialist era to the politically charged cultural expressions of the 1990s, contemporary activists have adapted familiar symbols and narratives to the digital environment. Cultural artefacts such as songs, visual symbols, and online hashtags serve not only to articulate grievances in accessible terms but also to sustain solidarity and provide nonviolent means of contestation within constrained media systems. In this sense, Serbia's recent protest wave demonstrates how cultural framing remains integral to mobilisation processes, linking historical memory with emergent forms of digital activism.

The Serbian experience suggests that environmental sustainability and democratic accountability can be mutually reinforcing. The protests against lithium extraction articulated demands for a transparent, participatory, and environmentally responsible model of development. As Serbia navigates a pivotal political juncture, the anti-lithium movement presents a vision of governance rooted in solidarity, openness, and the defence of both natural and civic commons. Regardless of whether this vision is fully realised, the movement has already reshaped Serbia's public sphere. It demonstrated that organised citizens, through sustained and creative collective action, can challenge entrenched structures of power and influence trajectories of reform. Continued ethnographic and participant-observation research will be vital to examine the internal dynamics, networks, and repertoires of contention that define Serbia's protest cycles and their broader regional and global significance.

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