

Only red-roofed houses interrupt the vast carpet of fields that surround the village of Gornje Nedeljice, in western Serbia. To resident Marijana Petković, this is the most beautiful place in the world. She's not against Europe's green transition, the plan to make the bloc's economy climate neutral by 2050. But she is among those who believe Serbia's fertile Jadar Valley—where locals grow raspberries and keep bees—is being asked to make huge sacrifices to enable other countries to build electric cars.

Around 300 meters away from Petković's house, according to the multinational mining giant Rio Tinto, there is enough lithium to create 1 million EV batteries, and the company wants to spend \$2.4 billion to build Europe's biggest lithium mine here. But Petković and other locals oppose the project, arguing it will cause irreparable damage to the environment. When asked about that claim, a spokesperson for Rio Tinto told Wired that throughout the project, the company has "recognized that Jadar will need to be developed to the highest environmental standards." Petković is not convinced. "I want the western countries to have the green transition and to live like people in Jadar," she says. "But that doesn't mean that we need to destroy our nature."

Officially, the Jadar mine is not happening. After months of protests against the project, the government conceded, and in January it was canceled. "As far as Project Jadar is concerned, this is an end," Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić said on January 20, after Rio Tinto's lithium exploration licenses were revoked.

There is widespread suspicion, however, that the project was canceled to stop protests overshadowing the presidential and parliamentary elections on April 3, and could restart if the government is reelected. "This might have been a pre-election ploy," says Florian Bieber, a professor of southeast European history and politics at Austria's University of Graz. "I wouldn't be surprised if the government picks up this issue again once the elections are done, because they see the economic benefits." A Rio Tinto shareholder expressed a similar expectation to *Reuters*, adding they expect the mine to be renegotiated after the vote. Rio Tinto denies this is its intention and says it has not planned or implemented any activities contrary to the project's legal status.

Europe has big plans to phase out fossil-fuel cars. In July, the European Union proposed a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2035. The bloc wants to replace those cars with electric vehicles, built with locally produced raw materials like lithium. The top lithium producers are currently Australia, Chile, and China. But Europe has ambitions to produce more of the materials it needs for electric cars at home. These materials "are extremely expensive to ship and are transported across the world several times over," says Emily Burlinghaus, a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Germany. "So it's much cheaper and much safer to have these operations close to battery manufacturing plants or auto manufacturing plants."

For Europeans it's also a security issue. "We cannot allow [the EU] to replace [its] current

reliance on fossil fuels with dependency on critical raw materials," said Maroš Šefčovič, the commission vice president for inter-institutional relations, in 2020.

The problem is that Europeans don't trust mining companies in their backyards. The resistance that Rio Tinto has faced in Serbia is not unique. Portugal also witnessed protests against lithium mining in October. The following month, mining company Vulcan Energy "paused" its lithium operation in Germany's Upper Rhine region after facing community opposition to its plans. But the ferocity of Serbia's opposition to the mine marks a major problem for the European Union's ambitions to source lithium from closer to home. In 2020, Šefčovič said the EU cannot achieve its climate goals without raw materials like lithium, adding that the bloc will need 18 times more lithium by 2030, and 60 times more by 2050. Rio Tinto's charm offensive in Gornje Nedeljice started soon after the mining group discovered an entirely new type of mineral in the area in 2004. The mineral, called jadarite in tribute to the Jadar Valley where it was found, contained both borates and lithium—two materials that Rio Tinto says have a role in the green transition. Lithium is used in EV batteries while borates can be used in wind and solar projects.

In the years that followed, activists say, Rio Tinto employees made an effort to immerse themselves in village life. They turned up to villagers' weddings and celebrated religious holidays with them. Adverts were also beamed onto local TVs telling villagers if they work with Rio Tinto, together they could save the planet.

Relations with locals were good in these years, according to Petković, who is a member of the local campaign group Ne Damo Jadar. The villagers weren't too worried when Rio Tinto said it wanted to build a modest mine on just 20 hectares. "They said it is going to be a modern mine that will not damage nature," Petković says. But last year, locals discovered that plans for their village had drastically changed. Rio Tinto wanted to build on 600 hectares, nearly the size of 10,000 tennis courts.

"We started to fight against the mine when they found out the company was lying to us for 14 years; when we found out how big the mine really is," says Petković. Environmental concerns also started to emerge.

The Guardian obtained a study, funded by Rio Tinto, which outlined how the mine would cause irreversible changes to ecosystems and local rivers. The study recommended "the abandonment of planned exploitation and processing of the mineral jadarite."

It was at this point that local anger toward Rio Tinto ignited national frustration toward Serbia's relationship with foreign mining companies. Investors are drawn to the small country because it borders the EU but does not have the same strict regulations, says Bieber.

In April, thousands of people took part in protests in the capital Belgrade that became known as Serbia's "environmental uprising." Those protests continued on and off through the rest of the year. The movement "is not about one company," says Žaklina Živković, an

activist with the Right to Water initiative, adding that the government plans to open 40 mines in the next 15 years, including seven lithium mines. "Rio Tinto is a metaphor for all of the different investors and all the mines that are being planned in Serbia," Živković says. Arriving soon after a year marked by protests, this weekend's election was supposed to be the breakthrough movement for Serbia's environmentalists, says Engjellushe Morina, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "Just as we were expecting that there will be a bit of a win for environmentally friendly movements in Serbia, we have the Russia debate," she says, referring to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

She believes the return of war to Europe has empowered the ruling coalition parties and the incumbent president, Aleksandar Vučić. The ruling coalition which approved the mine, led by president Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party, was comfortably leading in polls as of Thursday.

Back in the village of Gornje Nedeljice, Petković has the sense that Rio Tinto is not worried about the election's outcome. She believes the company has invested too much to stop, whatever the result. The miner has created its own technology to extract the jadarite, which is found nowhere else in the world. Since the government canceled the project, Petković says, there have been no signs Rio Tinto is preparing to leave. The machinery stayed, and the miner kept buying up local real estate, she claims.

On March 30 another activist organization, Marš sa Drine, published the details of a phone call that they claim proves Rio Tinto is preparing to restart work on the mine after the election. The phone call was between a University of Belgrade professor involved in the Rio Tinto project and an anonymous source impersonating an employee of Rio Sava, Rio Tinto's Serbian subsidiary. In the conversation, the two discuss the arrival of equipment from the German company DMT and an Austrian company called Thyssen, which the professor said is "likely" to arrive in April. Neither DMT, Thyssen, nor the professor replied to Wired's request for comment. In a statement, a Rio Tinto spokesperson described the "alleged" recording as "misinformation," adding that the agreement with the two suppliers was signed before its permission for the mine was withdrawn.

"They lied to us in January," Marš sa Drine said on Twitter, urging their followers to vote against the project on Sunday. "Why is any equipment, no matter whether it's a bolt or a bulldozer, being discussed within the context of a project that has been canceled?"

Some believe that Rio Tinto has faced so much opposition in Serbia because of the company's legacy, associated with multiple cases of environmental damage. "Mining companies have been viewed so negatively historically that it doesn't matter in the eyes of the public if they are transitioning to minerals that are being used for the energy transition," says Burlinghaus.

Resistance to EV mining across Europe is not Nimbyism, says Diego Marin, associate policy officer for environmental justice at the NGO the European Environmental Bureau.

"Communities are saying, 'We're having our areas devastated and sacrificed to make what? Cars for rich people that our communities can never afford,'" he says. "In the end, we pay the price that our air gets cleaner but our land gets poorer." It's not that these activists don't want clean air. But an idea is beginning to spread among green groups in Europe: that the green transition is turning into a capitalism rebrand that is still focused on planet-harming mass production.

"The purpose of the green transition is to make an industrial transition sound like it fits in with a solution to a problem that cannot be solved through industry," says Bojana Novakovic, an activist with Marš sa Drine and also an actress.

Officials have tried to reassure Europeans that this is a new era of mining. "Mining in the past was a very dirty operation," said Peter Handley, head of the European Commission's raw materials unit, speaking at a conference on "green" mining in Lisbon last year. "It is becoming highly technological these days."

But Europe's environmentalists are divided on whether "green" mining is possible, even by new companies that are untarnished by their history. "I don't care whether Mother Teresa wants to extract lithium from the Jadar Valley; she wouldn't be doing it on my watch," says Novakovic. "There is no green way to extract lithium from fertile soil. Period. It has never been done before", Wired writes.