



“Mine your own business”: on the repression of the Serbian scientific community over the lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley (2020–2025)

Aleksandar Matković¹ and Adela Stettler²

¹The Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

²Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

Correspondence: Aleksandar Matković (aleksandar.matkovic@uab.cat) and Adela Stettler (adel.petrovic@natur.cuni.cz)

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Abstract. This article examines the repression of scientific dissent surrounding the proposed Jadar lithium–borate mine in Serbia. Based on media analysis, institutional documents, semi-structured interviews, and communication with the Rio Tinto mining company, the article analyses nine publicly documented cases of academic obstruction, delegitimization, intimidation, and censorship between 2020 and 2025. It shows that critical scientific arguments were primarily challenged not through open debate but rather through smear campaigns, ad hominem and verbal attacks, financial and legal intimidation, institutional exclusion, obstruction of fieldwork, attempts to retract research, and the selective mediation of expert voices. These practices personalized epistemic conflict by targeting the persons of the scientists rather than their evidence, thereby narrowing the space for public environmental debate. Situating the Jadar project within Serbia’s authoritarian political context and the European Union’s market-based green-transition agenda, the article argues that extractive projects require not only territorial and regulatory but also the disciplining of knowledge production, which became both systemic and public in Serbia. The Serbian case thus demonstrates how corporate-led green transitions can produce an anti-scientific climate in which critical expertise is marginalized and extractive development is presented as an inevitable response to climate and geopolitical pressures.

In times of increasing political polarization, accelerating climate crisis, growing anti-scientific rhetoric, and rising political and corporate control over a scientific world that is now run via principles of new public management, we need more than ever to ponder and perhaps rethink the close but also obfuscated relation between politics and science. (Willert, 2024:135)

1 Introduction

As autocratic regimes regain strength, scientific freedom and academic independence are being increasingly imperiled across the globe (Rudroff, 2025). From the efforts of state-led (Cinar and Kose, 2025; Yates et al., 2025) and profit-driven corporations (Legg et al., 2021), it is clear that the role of science is undergoing changes. Increasingly oppressive measures faced by scientists include attempts at sub-

tle control (as in industry-sponsored academic research biasing scholarship in favour of corporations; see Hiltner et al., 2024) and impacts on research integrity (Fabbri et al., 2025) to more heavy-handed approaches which lead to public discrediting, legal attacks, and threats, impacting the well-being and family life of scientists (Pitt et al., 2024). Even in cases where violence is not present, epistemic repression often includes misrepresenting data, attacking study design, and leveraging reputable individuals to spread confusion.

This creates an anti-scientific climate that delegitimizes scientists by questioning the epistemic basis of science: how scientific knowledge is produced, validated, and shared by the scientist. For, as Szabados (2019) put it, "it is not science but the scientist that the populist leader is suspicious of" (Szabados, 2019:229); hence, the "vilification" and the attacks on scientists are the most observable. These delegitimization strategies are beginning to serve as "epistemic weapons" that reshape the very way knowledge is produced. This is why Oreskes and Conway (2010) demonstrate how powerful actors systematically challenge scientific consensus not by producing better evidence but by creating the appearance of controversy, amplifying uncertainty, and attacking the credibility of scientists themselves. Such doubt-producing strategies are not neutral but also form the bases for broader political projects, enabling authoritarian governments and powerful corporations to construct "alternative truths" and manufacture uncertainty, using these to justify policy decisions, neutralize critique, and marginalize those who challenge dominant narratives used to consolidate authority (Shenhav, 1994). This weakens public scientific optimism and deepens epistemic reservations (Cinar and Kose, 2025). To label this process, some use the concept of "manufactured doubt" (Goldberg and Vandenberg, 2021).

The Serbian scientific sector is now facing precisely these strategies, which became especially prevalent in peripheral academia during the recent stages of the climate crisis. This has often reconfigured the relationship between science and politics, making neutrality increasingly untenable (Fossen, 2025). So far, geoscience-focused studies highlight how experts struggle to act as legitimate spokespersons in contested environmental arenas (Belland et al., 2024). In the context of the green transition, scientists faced criticism for not supporting government-backed "green" development agendas, leading to the idea that science should uncritically endorse these projects. For example, the "green" properties of lithium have often shielded it from criticism (Djukanović, 2022). This can lead to sidelining dissenting views through "greenwashing" (Teixeira and Oliveira, 2025), "redwashing" (Millington et al., 2019) and "localwashing" (Murrey and Jackson, 2020). One of these contested environmental arenas is the Serbian Valley of Jadar, a relatively densely populated area with over 22 villages where a proposed lithium mine – known as the "Jadar project" – has caused controversy with both the locals and the wider population of the country. Several geoscientists and experts from related disciplines have raised serious concerns about the project's devastating environmental and local community impacts (e.g. Simonović et al., 2022; Đorđević et al., 2024). Besides ecological damage (e.g. Dorn and Huber, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020), the project's economic viability was also questioned by Serbian geoeconomists (Matković, 2024; Radar, 2024; Vreme, 2024a) before their criticisms were met with state repression.

To explain the history of such repression, the following sections of the article will thus investigate how, instead of an

academic public debate over the project's pros and cons, an anti-scientific climate was created that led to several cases of individual and collective repression.

2 Extractive industries and their implications

Given that these cases directly relate to the EU's green transition, this study will examine how Serbia's green-transition agenda relies on the repression of critical scientific knowledge, showing that epistemic suppression is a central mechanism through which extractive projects are legitimized and advanced and how political and economic interests reshape territory and knowledge to advance extractive projects. The Jadar case, situated in the semi-periphery of Europe (Djukanović, 2024), demonstrates how extractive agendas are sustained by controlling and suppressing scientific knowledge, revealing the centrality of epistemic repression in shaping environmental decision-making, which exposes broader struggles over space, sovereignty, and scientific freedom. Some have used the concept of "post-truth geoscience" (Groves, 2019; Simon, 2022) to show how expertise is destabilized and weaponized in such settings, enabling extractive agendas to advance under the banner of climate necessity. Thus, the present study has a broader focus as it not only links resource extraction to epistemic repression but also situates it in a wider European perspective, given the international nature of the Jadar project. For clarity, we define extractive industries as sectors that involve the removal of natural, limited resources from the earth for processing and commercial use. These resources require specific conditions for profitable extraction, including a suitable built environment (Harvey, 2020), necessitating infrastructure and logistics investments (Harvey, 1989). However, apart from physical infrastructure, extractive projects also require strong local institutions to prevent corruption. While international frameworks help monitor corporate and state commitments to community engagement, stronger domestic legal systems and community involvement are essential for enforcement (Mandela Institute, 2017; Addison and Roe, 2018).

And yet, even in projects without corruption, extraction remains controversial as it raises questions about its safety, necessity, and risks (e.g. Buchanan, 2013; Carmona and Jaramillo, 2020). In such knowledge controversies, expert authority is unsettled as non-experts contest scientific claims with non-scientific means outside of scientific spaces, and legitimacy itself becomes part of the dispute over who has the right to participate in debates. New governance structures and regulatory practices can generate controversies that are not only about facts but also about the legitimacy of governance itself (Barry, 2012). Extractive industries often use various neutralization techniques, such as marginalizing concerned parties, to legitimize their positions in the governance of mining projects (Karidjo and Talbot, 2019). In such knowledge controversies, expert authority is destabi-

lized as non-experts challenge scientific claims outside scientific arenas, making legitimacy itself contested. Governance structures can create disputes not only over facts but over the legitimacy of governance (Barry, 2012). Anthropocene-oriented critiques further show how scientific knowledge is entangled in "epistemic friction" regarding how global environmental problems are framed, understood, and governed (Barber, 2018). Extractive industries further reinforce their position through neutralization tactics, including marginalizing critical actors (Karidjo and Talbot, 2019). Ethnographies of extractive industries reveal how mining corporations deploy consultation, expertise, and bureaucratic mechanisms as tools of surveillance, control, and doubt production, often undermining affected communities' legitimacy (Welker, 2014; Banks, 2024; Jakobsen, 2024). These forms of repression create what Barry (2012) terms "political situations", which are disputes in which actors, institutions, and competing forms of knowledge and expertise confront one another. Such situations are common in post-industrial landscapes (Jovanović, 2016), in green extractivist frontiers (Djukanović, 2024, 2025), and in conservation conflicts across eastern Europe (Iordăchescu, 2022).

New governance arrangements generate knowledge controversies that unfold across time and space (Barry, 2012). In this article, the Jadar project exemplifies how the EU's lithium ambitions turned Serbia into a site of contestation, where scientific knowledge became entangled with geopolitical and economic pressures. This analysis shows how dominant knowledge regimes are strategically stabilized during political and economic crises, often by suppressing or redirecting academic expertise to legitimize disputed projects. These dynamics indicate that scientific knowledge can become a site of struggle – instrumentalized for extractive agendas or suppressed when it challenges them.

3 Methodology

This research examines the suppression of scientific dissent within public discourse concerning the Jadar project. It traces the mechanisms that foster an anti-scientific climate, including how scientists are publicly delegitimized and criminalized, and the potential implications of these actions as it considers whose interests are advantaged by these portrayals. Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative, triangulated approach combining media analysis, semi-structured interviews, and institutional documents related to the Jadar project.

We attempted to cover all of the known controversial cases in which Serbian scientists were present; however, some scientists declined participation due to personal trauma or fear of further repercussions. Cases were included when they were publicly documented and when participants were willing to speak or allow their experiences to be cited. This allowed us to work only with cases for which triangulated

evidence was available. Using this methodology, nine cases of academic repression and knowledge contestation between 2000 and 2025 have been analysed, including six geoscientists and scientists from related disciplines and three collective academic cases.

To supplement this, direct testimonies from Dragana Đorđević and Ratko Ristić were gathered online during approximately 1 h long interviews with each, along with a personal testimony cross-referenced with publicly available information, given that one of the authors (Aleksandar Matković) has also been directly involved in the struggles described and is a victim of repression. A fourth inquiry was conducted via e-mail with Jelena Vasiljević, a researcher at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, regarding her role in a propaganda film favouring Rio Tinto. In the film, which we will mention below, her statements, along with those of Dragana Đorđević, were, according to them, misused. We then interviewed Dragana again about her role in the same film, thereby once again cross-referencing our interviews with other sources several times to ensure that the specific context of each case was analysed as thoroughly as possible. Since we also wanted to cross-reference the claims of those scientists who have agreed to be interviewed, we exchanged dozens of e-mails with the external communication service of Rio Tinto on several occasions in order to obtain information on their public-communication activities and to represent their views on the experiences described by scientists as much as possible. Wherever the company agreed to do so, we have tried to represent their claims as accurately as possible, as we have also done with the Serbian scientists, to ensure proper representation. We also asked Rio Tinto to provide critical feedback on our article before publication, but they explicitly declined to do so. In the absence of said feedback, in some cases, we were thus forced to rely on allegations made solely by the media and scientists themselves. In these cases, we attempted to emphasize the allegatory nature of their statements. Thus, the limitations of this article must be acknowledged. First of all, the article sought to cover all cases of academic repression known in the Serbian media, which involve elements of delegitimization or prosecution due to dissenting opinions. We also attempted to contact other affected scientists, including those not publicly reported, but some requested anonymity or exclusion, which we had to respect. Thus, this article does not present an exhaustive list of cases for it is based on information that was available to us at the time of its writing. Future researchers might uncover additional information after our article has been published. Moreover, the authors' partial involvement in these struggles – while offering unique insight – also introduces positionality that may shape interpretation. Once the data were assembled, we carried out a data analysis that involved thematic coding of nine documented cases of obstruction or discreditation in order to be as objective as possible without relying exclusively on subjective insights of those affected. This approach enabled us to identify recur-

ring patterns that, in our analysis, align with forms of censorship, narrative control, and epistemic repression. In what follows, we depict the context that led to the cases occurring after the Serbian government entered a working relationship with Rio Tinto (Sect. 4) and then highlight the patterns we uncovered (Sect. 5). In the conclusion, we will outline why the Serbian case constitutes a novelty in relation to similar practices within Europe and what it changes in terms of our understanding of contemporary academic repression.

4 Rio Tinto and Serbia: an economic history of investment in three stages

This section traces the evolving relationship between Rio Tinto and the Serbian state, revealing how historical patterns of investment and political alignment laid the groundwork for the Jadar project. By examining three distinct phases of engagement, we show how multinational capital embedded itself in Serbia's landscape, which scholars argue has advanced private interests while undermining local communities, environmental protection, and human rights (Letnar Černič, 2023).

Following the crises of Yugoslav mining companies in the 1990s and Rio Tinto's expansion, a prehistory of today's "Jadar project" can be traced back to Yugoslavia's final days, when Jelena Obradović's desk at Belgrade's Faculty of Mining and Geology received a letter from the company in 1997 (Dragojlo, 2022), marking the beginning of the "first period" in Rio Tinto's history in Serbia. Obradović et al. (2000) studied the former Yugoslavia for borate and lithium deposits, which attracted Rio Tinto researchers at "US Borax". At the same time, after the fall of Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian state began to establish closer ties with the company, as well as its host state, when, in 2002, the "Bilateral agreement on the promotion and protection of investments between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Serbia" was signed and ratified in 2004, lasting 10 years (Danas, 2021; Prvi Prvi na Skali, 2022).¹ Following that, the new government under Vojislav Koštunica cleared the region for geological research on 8 June 2004. During this period, Rio Tinto began to research the valley investigated by Obradović, which officially confirmed the existence of a new type of ore, found only in Serbia's Jadar region – a combination of lithium and borate called "lithium sodium borosilicate" (Mining Technology, 2021). The company signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Loznica municipality in 2011, signed by a ruling Serbian

Progressive Party member. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network states that the first political ties to the current government trace back to this deal (Dragojlo, 2021).

The second period began after the 2017 presidential elections. With previous contacts with the company established in 2011, Aleksandar Vučić's right-wing regime took advantage of the new lithium market. In July, 3 months after Vučić became president, Rio Tinto and the Serbian government signed an MOU to implement the Jadar project at the national level, thus finalizing what had begun at the local level in 2011 (OzonPress, 2021). Thus, by 2020, when the European Green Transition began, Rio Tinto was already deeply connected to the Serbian state at several official levels. This coincided with changes in Serbian laws that favoured the company, such as attempts to change the expropriation law in 2021 (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2021).

As mentioned, a European perspective regarding the project is important. Simultaneously, the EU, on 14 January 2020, announced "European Green Deal" plans (REHVA, 2020) under the pretext of decoupling from China regarding lithium production despite the fact that Chinalco, a major Chinese aluminium company, remains the largest shareholder in Rio Tinto (European Commission, 2023). Nevertheless, this marked the emergence of an official motive as the EU aims to be climate-neutral by 2050 and increasingly independent from foreign producers without challenging its corporations or addressing the structural drivers of resource demand. Accordingly, Rio Tinto exemplifies this by branding the project as a mine at "Europe's doorstep" (Djukanović, 2024). Concurrently, Rio Tinto completed a pre-feasibility study in mid-2020, committed EUR 2.4 billion to the Jadar project in July 2021, and aimed for initial production by 2026 with full-scale operations by 2029 (Mining Technology, 2021). Consequently, the project's details and associated problems were developed during this second period, in which Rio Tinto improved its relations with Serbia's new government.

We can finally speak of a third period, when mass resistance to Rio Tinto emerged in the country. The movement began in 2021, when the Serbian government attempted to reform the expropriation law (BBC Serbian, 2021). These legal reforms designated all affected expropriation cases as "urgent" and allowed the state to take possession of any necessary land (Prvi na Skali, 2021). To Serbian farmers from the Jadar Valley, where the mine was supposed to be located, this instantly raised alarms. However, with the new law reforms, the reason for expropriation could also involve international agreements, allowing a company like Rio Tinto to acquire new land through the state. The mining company had been purchasing land in the area and along the road to the mining project (Lazarević, 2022), as promoted on its website, even while the project was halted (Dragojlo, 2023), suggesting plans for new infrastructure and technologies for lithium mining, processing, and transportation (Radio Sto Plus, 2021). Nevertheless, the company still re-

¹Today, this agreement is particularly relevant as it enabled company heads to argue that, if Rio Tinto's investment gets cancelled, the corporation could sue the Serbian state for compensation since "Rio Sava Exploration," its local affiliate, previously received protection under the agreement, which guarantees compensation in cases of revolution, violence (article 4), or other unforeseen events leading to investment cancellation (article 15).

quired a third of the plots to build the mine's part above the ground (Savatović, 2024). To navigate this impasse, the Serbian state has amended the law several times to support potential lithium excavation, demonstrating the government's backing for its mining (Petrović and Pešić, 2023). This sparked nationwide protests in Serbia and initiated a movement against lithium mining (Djukanović, 2025), which grew into the country's largest environmental mobilization (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2024). This period coincided with the emergence of what can be described as an anti-scientific climate, which will be the subject of the next section.

5 "A storm of assaults": the creation of an anti-scientific climate

The first attempts at critical reflection on the project began on 27 October 2020, when Dragana Đorđević, an Associate Researcher at the University of Belgrade, spoke at a protest about the significant environmental risks posed by lithium mining in Jadar². Earlier in October 2020, she participated in a panel organized by the local activist group, emphasizing the substantial damage from the potential mine and citing global experiences documented in scientific papers. This marked the beginning of state repression (Dragana Đorđević, interview, 25 April 2025) as authorities sought to resolve the situation by creating conditions tailored to the interests of the already advancing project. However, there's a 20-year gap between Rio Tinto's initial entry into Serbia and the debate, impacting the Serbian scientific community. The first two articles mentioning the Jadar project were published in 2007. However, six additional articles, mostly on geological history, began to emerge only in 2022, indicating that, throughout the first and second decades of the 2000s, while Rio Tinto was preparing to purchase land for the project, no articles were published. While this might be a coincidence, upon requesting scientific literature from Rio Tinto, we received only the articles that were not critical of the project,³ suggesting that the company, at least in its communication with us, was distributing only that literature which was favourable to the project despite their knowledge of other literature as well (which is well documented as they have previously engaged with Serbian scientists publicly). When we asked the Serbian scientists critical of the mine to explain this gap, they told us that it stems from a lack of access to company data on the Jadar project as little to no information was available except for the company's promotional pamphlets (Dragana Đorđević, interview, 25 April 2025), resulting in information asymme-

try. When we again contacted Rio Tinto to confirm this, they responded that, until 2020, they had organized 4200 communication sessions but could not confirm attendance numbers (email from Rio Tinto, 14 June 2025). While the company likely intended to signal transparency, the absence of basic metrics makes it difficult to assess the extent of local involvement. This ambiguity resembles what scholars describe as "localwashing" with symbolic legitimacy, where invoking "communication" allows the company to appear to be responsive and democratic, even if the process was one-sided (Murrey and Jackson, 2020). Aside from Dragana and a small number of other Serbian scientists, it remains unclear to what extent the wider scientific community in Serbia, as well as locals, engaged with the project before 2020. In any case, the company's early communication strategy left much to be desired, which is why this "lag" in scientific research and impact-related data only began to "catch up" with the project in the latest phase of Rio Tinto's investment.

The problem was that increased local scientific knowledge about the project coincided with a less favourable view among the Serbian population. Initially, scientific debates contributed to polarization through the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Serbia's highest scientific institution. One of the first public scientific events to attract significant media attention took place on 6 and 7 May 2021, when the Academy's Environmental Board organized a conference titled "The Jadar Project – what is known?". The event gave floor to both representatives of Rio Tinto and the opposing local groups (like "Ne damo Jadar" from Gornje Nedeljice), who were all present in person.⁴ Most of the experts presented papers, later published in a book of conference proceedings,⁵ concluding that the project poses a serious threat to the country due to potential environmental damage. This provided the public with an initial, in-depth insight into the problems linked to the Jadar project. Consequently, the scientific community in Serbia also began publishing its first critical papers on the Jadar project in international peer-reviewed journals. A notable example is an article by Đorđević et al. (2024) on pollution during the drilling and exploration phase. According to *Nature's* metrics, it received

⁴The conference explored key aspects of the Jadar project – its role in Serbia's energy and tech development, environmental and legal implications, and community impact. Scientific research raised environmental concerns and questioned technological safeguards, triggering debates, mutual delegitimization, and accusations between project supporters and critics. More information on the conference can be found at the following link: <https://www.sanu.ac.rs/projekat-jadar-sta-je-poznato/> (last access: 16 October 2026).

⁵A book of conference proceedings was published following the event. In it, numerous academics, including the head of the board, Bogdan Šolaja; the engineer Slobodan Vukosavić, who specializes in battery production; the chemist Dragana Đorđević; the environmental jurist Sreten Đorđević; and the soil and water conservation expert Ratko Ristić, shared their opinions from their respective fields.

²Formulation by Dragana Đorđević that characterizes the period of repression she experienced.

³These are, according to a mail from Rio Tinto sent to one of the authors on 12 April 2025, as follows: (1) Whitfield et al. (2007), (2) Stanley et al. (2007), (3) Putzolu et al. (2022a, b), (4) Borojević Šoštarić and Brenko (2022), (5) Xie et al. (2024), (6) Rhodes et al. (2024), (7) Putzolu et al. (2025), and (8) Putzolu et al. (2025).

over 100 000 downloads (Nature, 2024), much higher than what is typical for an academic article, demonstrating the extent of the public attention the Serbian scientific community's arguments garnered. Other papers – mostly focusing on ecological risks and the movement against Rio Tinto – appeared around the same period (2022–2024) in both Serbian and regional peer-reviewed journals,⁶ while resistance to the project also became the subject of PhD and Master's theses (Luciani, 2025; ORA, 2026). Also, during those years, academic production became a subject of great public attention in Serbia. Consequently, the increased scientific output in Serbia has significantly impacted the anti-lithium movement. In 2024, "science became the spearhead of the environmental movement in Serbia", according to a Swiss media report (Wölfl, 2024).

Concurrently, other scientific groups and experts engaged in activism through civil society organizations signed the "Jadar Declaration" of international solidarity with "Ne damo Jadar" and groups of affected locals from various countries (Portugal, Spain, Germany, and Chile). This resulted in scientific knowledge about similar projects being communicated between local and international experts in more ways than one (Todorović, 2022). Thus, along with other oppositional groups,⁷ the Serbian scientific community could be said to have come out into the public and engaged with lithium-related questions in this "third phase" of Rio Tinto's investments, only after the project became visible in the media, and initial research and data started circulating despite the above-mentioned "lag". However, the presence of Serbian scientists, coupled with widespread initial protests and the 2022 elections, led to the project's cancellation by the Serbian state (Djukanović, 2025). According to several commentators, the movement significantly weakened President Vučić's political position, compelling him to withdraw his political support for the project amid his electoral campaign (Deutsche Welle, 2022). This context may help explain why subsequent government actions were perceived by many scientists as targeted pressure. Furthermore, the Serbian state revoked Rio Tinto's exploration licenses in January 2022 under pressure from its population and cancelled the spatial plan for Loznica, which was supposed to include the mine (Sekularac, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, during this period, state officials began exerting internal pressure on Serbian scientists who opposed the project, as evidenced by Zorana Mihajlović, the Minister of Mining and Geology at the time, calling Đorđević to investigate her reasons for opposing the project (Dragana Đorđević, interview, 25 April 2025). Namely, coupled with the above-mentioned oppositional groups, the project seemed to

have lost even the most basic support of the local community.⁸ According to a qualitative study, the local community's perception in the Jadar region regarding the lithium mine (Ivanović et al., 2023) demonstrates a lack of trust in the government and Rio Tinto due to its negative past reputation (negative environmental impacts). The findings also align with the citizens' perceptions, demonstrated by massive environmental protests across the country led by ecological activists (Ivanović et al., 2023) against "imperialism, colonization by multinational capital, and even as a struggle against global economic inequalities and unequal distribution of environmental risks" (Petrović and Pešić, 2023:411). The government accused some activists joining oppositional parties of contributing to the "politicization of ecology" (Nadić, 2022), seeking to delegitimize and condemn environmental activists and local communities by accusing them of insincerity and opportunism and of being mercenaries financed by foreign (western) interest groups and state enemies. This aligns well with the existing literature on populist regimes, which mobilize anti-scientific sentiment through moral denunciations of allegedly foreign-aligned scientists, democratic resistance to technocratic authority, and the epistemic privileging of common sense over scientific knowledge to legitimize political action (Bellolio, 2022). Despite such rhetorical attacks, the pressure on Serbian scientists increased in August 2024, following Olaf Scholz's visit to Serbia, which reinstated the Jadar project, with the Serbian Constitutional Court overruling its cancellation (Stojanovic, 2024). Serbia also signed MOUs with German firms like Stellantis for privileged access to lithium if mining proceeds (Delauney, 2024). Although unannounced, the visit led to greater repression of activists and scientists⁹, with locals protesting in Belgrade on 10 August (BBC Serbian, 2024; Djukanović, 2025).

5.1 The campaign against the scientists begins

The academic community, especially those researching the mining project and sharing findings, faced mistreatment after raising concerns and spurring public protests. Growing pressure from scholars and citizens stemmed from opaque decision-making, including permit approvals, urban plan changes, land repurposing, and the selection of lithium extraction technology (Popović, 2024; N1 Beograd, 2025a). Thus, the increase in publicly available data after it was cancelled and its documents were made public led to greater concerns in the scientific community. A case in point is the open

⁶Nadić (2022), Simonović et al. (2022), Ivanović et al. (2023), and Petrović and Pešić (2023).

⁷For instance, "Marš sa Drine", a coalition of local groups; "Eko straža", an informal environmental group active in all bigger Serbian towns; and movements like "Kreni promeni".

⁸Currently, according to the latest official representative polls (September 2024), 59.4 % of the population is against the mine, with the percentage increasing to 84.5 % if one looks at those below 40 years of age. For more information, refer to this article by Vukadinović (2024).

⁹Further details on police brutality and smear campaigns by the pro-governmental media against activists are provided in Djukanović's (2025) study.

letter written by geoeconomist Aleksandar Matković, a Research Associate at Belgrade University's Institute of Economic Sciences at the time. Matković's open letter got published on 10 August 2024, on the same day of what was the most massive anti-lithium protest at the time, on the cover of a weekend edition of a very widely read daily "Danas". In the letter, he showcased a 27-fold increase in mining foreign direct investment (FDI) in Serbia from 2014–2024, at a historical high, mostly coming from Rio Tinto, while the Serbian living standard continued to stagnate (Transnational Institute, 2024a). Following this, Matković and his family received a series of death threats, which lasted for more than 3 months. The messages he received also contained sensitive personal information otherwise unavailable to anyone but him or his family. The messages also urged him to stop his criticism of Rio Tinto under threat of physical harm, resulting in a case filed to the UN Special Rapporteur for Environmental Defenders (Neslen, 2024). The case was unique because some messages were written in German, which was highly problematic given that they occurred immediately after Scholz's recent visit to the country (Autonomija, 2024). Matković was subsequently put on a list of "ecological terrorists" by the pro-government Website "wewilldig.com" (<https://kopacemo.com/>, last access: 16 October 2026) and pro-government media like "Informer" and "Blic" (Danas, 2024a). This prompted more than 500 intellectuals across the globe to express their concern over Matković and other Serbian scientists in an open letter of support (INURA, 2024; Transnational Institute, 2024b), which raised awareness regarding the issue. Concurrently, Ana Brnabić, the Serbian Premier at the time, began publicly smearing Dragana Đorđević, one of the authors of the first critical peer-reviewed article on the Jadar project, via Twitter and other public media (Blic, 2024; Informer, 2026). At one point, Brnabić even questioned the peer-reviewed journal in which the article was published, saying that "although perhaps the most cited, Scientific Reports is not among the most recognized scientific journals in the world" (Andrić, 2024), on several of her social networks. Moreover, she, other pro-government politicians, and the Serbian pro-government newspapers like "Kurir" and "Informer" also targeted Ratko Ristić, a soil and water conservation expert present at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts' initial conference on Jadar, with the titles "Ristić is not a Professor", stating, among other accusations, that he is engaged in a "political struggle against the president" (Informer, 2024a; Kurir, 2024; Ristić, 2024). Although "Informer" was used by the government to target opposing scientists, when asked what methods they used to inform the public about their project, Rio Tinto told us that "Informer" was also featured in their strategy as it published open calls to the spatial plan related to the project (mail from Rio Tinto to one of the authors on 14 June 2025). This means that the newspaper used to start an official "public debate" was the same one that the government used to silence opposing views by Serbian scientists. One possible interpretation

is that, as smear campaigns proved to be ineffective, pro-government media increasingly relied on ruling-party members, presented as experts, who accused researchers supporting the opposition or portrayed them as false environmental activists spreading conspiracy theories (24sedam, 2024; Tanjug TV, 2024). Consequently, the Academic Councils of Research Institutes had to publicly distance themselves from such statements made by some of their academics in pro-regime media, asserting that these statements do not represent the official stance of the public community (Insajder, 2025). Furthermore, when 72 professors of the Council of the Faculty of Natural Sciences (University of Niš) decided to oppose the project publicly, the dean and vice-dean resigned, obstructing the faculty's daily work (N1 Beograd, 2024a; Stojanović, 2024). These events were widely interpreted as signalling a growing division between government and parts of the academic community, both publicly and within institutions.

5.2 What were the outcomes?

What we have just described is possibly the most common strategy used against Serbian scientists – smear campaigns and public discreditation. While all cases contain elements of persecution due to dissenting opinions, there is no "one size fits all" approach regarding the methods used against Serbian scientists; each case has its own specific logic, with only some cases overlapping in methods. The timing of these smear campaigns is also crucial as they coincide with a large wave of violence in Serbia, when activists and citizens were also physically attacked (European Western Balkans, 2024), and with smear campaigns happening shortly after Olaf Scholz's visit. Consequently, the scientists had reasons to fear for their safety as they became the object of a public targeting campaign by the head of government.¹⁰ With this context in mind, the following outline presents the various tactics used to intimidate Serbian scientists. These tactics are outlined below to clarify the mechanisms and patterns observed across cases.

5.2.1 (A) Smear campaigns

In all cases already mentioned, Serbian scientists have faced increasing public delegitimization strategies, often carried out by pro-government media and government officials themselves. They range from using public data to spreading false narratives about the scientists' moral standing to discrediting them as professionals by claiming that they are politicians and fake environmentalists (Fossen, 2025). The delegitimization of scientists exemplifies the broader theoretical dynamics outlined by Szabados (2019) and Cinar

¹⁰Given that President Vučić almost lost the election due to the project, it is no surprise that his government officials and party members publicly condemned critical voices and increasingly focused on the scientific sector.

and Kose (2025). The use of pro-government media and political actors to discredit and "vilify" scientists, whether through manipulation of public data or the construction of false moral narratives, reflects a strategic erosion of scientific credibility (Szabados, 2019). Furthermore, by undermining scientific authority, governments construct "alternative truths" that can serve to justify policy, silence critique, and erode scientific optimism (Cinar and Kose, 2025). Furthermore, the use of ad hominem attacks (Goldberg and Vandenberg, 2021) serves to delegitimize expertise and redirect public discourse away from substantive environmental concerns. Consequently, smear campaigns can function as an "epistemic weapon" to reshape public trust in knowledge.

5.2.2 (B) "Tactic of exhaustion" and "Silent repression"

The study, published in *Nature's Scientific Reports* (Đorđević et al., 2024) and written by a multidisciplinary team led by Đorđević, highlights the severe environmental impact of the Jadar project. After the paper was published, Nigel Steward, Chief Scientist of Rio Tinto, together with three other scientists from the University of Belgrade, requested that the journal withdraw or correct the article, citing shortcomings, inconsistent scientific methodology, and manipulation of facts and references, which they claimed led to incorrect and unfounded conclusions (Vreme, 2024b). Notably, the authors learned from media reports that their article had been "attacked" even before the editor told them. It was only subsequently that they received an email from the journal's editor informing them of the withdrawal request.

This is a tactic of exhaustion. Since August [besides the six revision rounds], we have been responding to various criticisms and denunciations. (Dragana Đorđević, interview, 25 April 2025).

Despite numerous attempts at retracting the paper and the authors asking to revise the text six times, the journal did not withdraw the article due to a lack of proof and justification for their accusations but instead requested only a few technical corrections from the authors (Danas, 2024b). However, on 6 January 2026, the journal finally succumbed to the pressure and retracted the article, stating that "although data is robust", the interpretation was not sufficiently argued (Mašina, 2026). In principle, disagreements over data interpretation could have been addressed through a separate article offering an alternative reading. In this case, however, a full retraction was demanded and subsequently granted. Goldberg and Vandenberg (2021) identify this tactic as "Attack Study Design," in which critics challenge the methodology and integrity of a study not necessarily to improve scientific but to cast doubt on its conclusions and delay accountability.

This came at a time when Đorđević and Ristić faced smear campaigns by government officials. However, what made the case even worse was that, according to his statements, Ristić was removed from several offices after the article was pub-

lished. Thus, one might deduce that the state and the company both reacted differently to the article. According to Ristić,

What followed [the publication of the scientific article] was silent repression. I was dismissed from my positions on several boards, where I had been invited based on my expertise and scientific achievements, such as the State Audit Committee for Projects of National Importance to the Republic, the Board of Directors of the Vinča Nuclear Research Institute, and my position as the Vice-Rector for International Relations by the current Rector, Prof. Vladan Đokić, without any consultation. (Prof. Ristić, interview, 25 April 2025).

Although the role of scientists within institutions helps improve the public's access to scientific information (Goldberg and Vandenberg, 2021), this is likely one reason for Ristić's dismissal from multiple institutional roles following his article. This aligns with scholarly accounts of how epistemic authority can be eroded under authoritarian governance, where scientific credibility is not merely ignored but actively dismantled through institutional exclusion.

5.2.3 (C) Insults

Scientists raising their voices against the lithium mine project have taken various measures and faced different consequences. As Đorđević testified, after one public speech and protest in Loznica around September 2020, an individual verbally assaulted her in the restaurant where she was dining, vociferously declaring that she was expressing nonsensical ideas in her criticism of Rio Tinto.

5.2.4 (D) Police repression

A senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, Bulatović Aleksandra, was summoned for questioning by the police for allegedly "calling for a violent change in the constitutional order" during her public speech emphasizing the need for transparency and professional dialogue (N1 Beograd, 2024b). Simultaneously, pro-government media like "Informer" have initiated a smear campaign against her (Informer, 2024b). The Institute condemned this and declared that scientists have faced threats for their views on lithium mining, adding that scientific articles should be met with scientific discussions, and urged the authorities to permit public debate grounded in scientific findings and the unimpeded exercise of civil rights (021, 2024). It should be noted that, in this and other cases, the police have failed to bring to justice any of the perpetrators.

5.2.5 (E) Financial intimidation

Ordering financial inspections and publishing protected data from tax declarations are just a few examples of finan-

cial intimidation. President Vučić publicly and through pro-government tabloids disclosed the alleged earnings from Ristić's tax declarations, which are publicly unavailable and strictly private information, calling him "a thief who robbed the state" (Kurir, 2023; N1 Beograd, 2024c). Furthermore, during the interview, Đorđević disclosed that, in 2023, a financial inspection was ordered to review all project budget expenditures at the Institute where she works. Shortly after, pro-government tabloids published false accusations claiming that she was hired by the Institute in 2020 (when she had actually been employed since 1999) to visit lithium mines in Serbia (none of which exist), demonstrating that she was the target of the inspection (Republika, 2024). Furthermore, in light of the absence of substantial evidence, the tabloids resorted to highlighting her temporary employment as a consultant to the Minister of Mining and Energy from mid-2021 until 2022, which she concluded upon the project's cancellation, to label her as a traitor to her nation while receiving government funds (Informer, 2026).

Although examples C and B are more extreme compared to those discussed in Pitt et al. (2024), they can likely lead to even greater psychological distress, family strain, and social isolation, particularly for women. In Đorđević's case, being verbally assaulted in a public space is not just humiliating but also a direct violation of her personal safety. Summoning Bulatović for questioning under accusations of threatening the constitutional order exemplifies how dissent is criminalized. It discourages scientists from participating in civic discourse, fearing legal consequences and reputational damage. Examples D and E reveal a more systematic effort to delegitimize scientific dissent, which can also have serious repercussions on the scientist's professional and private life and mental health (Pitt et al., 2024).

5.2.6 (F) Censoring critical voices who worked on the project

In addition to the initial pressure on scientists who publicly opposed the Rio Tinto project in Serbia, there were accusations of interference coming directly from the people involved in the environmental assessment of the Jadar project. Biologist Imre Krizmanić reported deliberate obstructions during biodiversity evaluations in the Jadar region,¹¹ in which several research institutes participated¹². According to Krizmanić, although the law required a year-long study, only 6 d were funded, making thorough research impossible. Krizmanić also emphasized that additional hindrances included restricted field access due to manipulated COVID-19 protocols, delayed departures, misleading navi-

gation, and company-imposed limitations on survey areas, as well as a constant dismissal of complaints raised by scientists, leaving them powerless to conduct proper assessments. In their response to us, Rio Tinto called Krizmanić's allegations "malicious and bizarre" and stated that the organization and the logistics of the study were the sole responsibility of the biological faculty, which the company hired to conduct the EIA (Imre Krizmanić, email communication, 9 August 2025).

Consequently, in 2023, Rio Tinto hired a private company, Ergo Group, to conduct the economic impact assessment of the Jadar project (Ergo Strategy Group, 2023) instead of hiring scientists from public institutions, rightfully assumedly due to the growing scientists' opposition.

Alleged obstructions during the field assessment were also addressed at the earlier-mentioned scientific conference. The published research reports from the conference and SANU's signed declaration against lithium mining were handed over to the National Government, and a reaction from the Ministry of Mining and Energy and the Ministry of Environmental Protection was requested. Several research institutions supported the declaration (Spasić, 2021; Faculty of Biology, 2024; UNA TV, 2024). However, the government did not respond to the declaration. Moreover, the Serbian media published allegations that the research reports were rewritten and adopted without the consent of some experts. Moreover, according to scientists interviewed here, as a result of censoring the reports, the Environmental Protection Institute of Serbia issued conditions specifying the areas and protection methods for Rio Tinto despite opposition from eight of its own experts who believed that the conditions were inadequate and could not prevent irreversible environmental damage (Đorđević, 2025). Among those scientists were also geoscientists whose spatial analyses and environmental assessments challenged the legitimacy of the Jadar project. Their work, often grounded in territorial diagnostics and place-based knowledge, was obstructed, delegitimized, or ignored, reflecting a broader pattern of epistemic policing within the geosciences. To date, we have not been able to trace further details on the case. However, we do note other instances of allegations of Rio Tinto censoring critical voices on similar projects elsewhere (Financial Times, 2020).¹³ Whether these allegations prove to be true or not, it remains clear that there exist conflicting statements over what happened inside a key institution when it comes to the adoption of key documents related to the project.

¹¹On Nesavršeni Čovek's (2025) podcast in the Serbian language, Krizmanić explains in detail the obstructions during the impact assessment.

¹²Including the Faculty of Biology (University of Belgrade), the Institute for Biological Research "Siniša Stanković", and the Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics (University of Niš).

¹³Even high-profile employees at Rio Tinto, such as Marcel Duffy, Rio Tinto's coach, who worked with various CEOs of the company, became whistleblowers after raising concerns over Oyu Tolgoi, a Rio Tinto copper mine in Mongolia, and indicating serious shortcomings related to the project's proposed benefits – this was around the same period as when the Serbian cases happened (Financial Times, 2020).

5.2.7 (G) "Filmwashing" – victimhood reversed

The pressure on Serbian scientists opposing Rio Tinto's Jadar mine extended beyond national borders. In December 2024, the documentary "Not in my Country" (Journeyman Pictures, 2024), produced by KU Leuven affiliates, aimed to explore environmental protests and disinformation by creating a "science communication" documentary (Hodgson, 2025) but omitted a key topic, namely, the violence and repression faced by Serbian scientists. Interviewees perceived the film as presenting a skewed narrative, portraying Rio Tinto as a victim while ignoring state-backed harassment of dissenting voices, which, in their view, illustrates how media can function as a tool of epistemic stabilization that contributes to the strategic erasure that reinforces dominant narratives, effectively silencing dissent and legitimizing extractive agendas under the guise of balanced reporting. Consequently, it failed to show the unequal terms under which the Serbian scientists critical of the mine were operating compared with the PR of the corporation, which had the backing of the state. This unequal footing is continued within the film through an asymmetrical representation of views.¹⁴ Furthermore, parts presenting opposing views are dubious as some interviews were included without consent,¹⁵ and one was later withdrawn due to concerns over bias and selective representation.¹⁶ Despite acknowledging political complexity, the documentary failed to separate science from geopolitics (Hodgson, 2025), a flaw underscored during its EU Parliament premiere.¹⁷ Subsequently, it was revealed that Rio Tinto had financial ties with the KU Leuven Institute for Sustainable Metals and Minerals, which produced the film (Kovačević, 2025), while companies appearing in it have been exposed

as directly funding the film (N1 Beograd, 2025b), implying an effort to subtly influence through corporate-funded academic research that biases scholarship to benefit corporations (Hiltner et al., 2024). The extent to which the film caused controversy is evidenced by it becoming a BA thesis topic for human geography students, focusing on propaganda practices (Popławska, 2025). The only reason that there were no lawsuits against the film, despite vocal opposition from those whose statements were used within it, was that the scientists involved in the film from the Serbian side either lacked the financial resources to do so or found the process personally frustrating (Jelena Vasiljević, email communication, 28 November 2025; Dragana Đorđević, interview, 28 November 2025). When we contacted Serbian scientists who appeared in the film, they told us that they were misled regarding the nature of the film and that their criticisms of the film have been ignored (Jelena Vasiljević, email communication, 28 November 2025). Vasiljević also forwarded her emails to the film's editors and producers to show that her pleas to have her role removed from the film have been ignored. In addition, she said she was not given any contract, in direct contradiction to what the filmmaker Peter Tom Jones had previously stated publicly. On the other hand, Đorđević, while claiming that she does not have the financial resources to file an international lawsuit, said that, due to the government's smear campaigns, she faced "a storm of assaults", which left her without the financial ability or the time to legally respond to problems and false accusations, such as those depicted in the film.

Importantly, in 2025, after all of the incidents of obstruction, delegitimization, and criminalization of the academic community, Rio Tinto announced that it condemned all attacks on independent scientists and appealed to building a culture of dialogue and open professional discussions based on facts and scientific evidence (Blic, 2025). According to existing research, this might allude to Rio Tinto's desire to portray itself as a socially responsible corporation that cares for the academic community, employing a "redwashing" reputational strategy, which has been a common tactic (Millington et al., 2019). Interestingly, this follows the documentary, which also sought to portray Rio Tinto as a victim of a "disinformation campaign". The very same Rio Tinto has been the subject of extensive criticism in the literature for past environmental and human rights controversies (e.g. Kapelus, 2002; Goodman, 2004; Kill and Franchi, 2016; Boege, 2022). Though it claims to have learned from its failures (Rio Tinto, 2026), doubts remain about whether those failures are truly behind it.

The film's premiere at the EU Parliament – coinciding with the CRM Board's decision-making period on funding the Jadar project – raised questions regarding timing. Although the board's verdict remained officially unknown, Serbia's president, Vučić, prematurely declared a positive outcome on 25 March 2025, a month ahead of schedule (Todorović, 2025). He soon reshuffled the government, appoint-

¹⁴Thereby, 54.13 % of the time was given to those in favour of the project (from which only Rio Tinto had 19.52 %), 29.25 % was given to inconclusive voices, and only 16.62% was given to those opposing the project. Calculation of the word count and a full transcription of the documentary can be found at the following link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U-60Ofkg_GY12hyfGtircM2CPLGr_ng4Ai0SGIFy1Sk/edit?usp=sharing (last access: 16 October 2026).

¹⁵An example is the brief insert about Đorđević, which was done without her knowledge and consent to be part of the documentary: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGcwX1o0i9/> (last access: 16 October 2026).

¹⁶Jelena Vasiljević, Senior Research Associate at the University of Belgrade, asked the producers to delete the interview recording with her from the documentary as it has demonstrated one-sidedness and "cherry-picked" speakers, suggesting that the Rio Tinto company was the victim of the opposition's ignorance and showing harassment of company workers without the state crackdown on scientists and activists opposing the project (Hodgson, 2025).

¹⁷A transcript of the panel debate can be found at the following link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U-60Ofkg_GY12hyfGtircM2CPLGr_ng4Ai0SGIFy1Sk/edit?tab=t.hvky1je5koj1#heading=h.3896kb2bd1xo (last access: 16 October 2026).

ing pro-Rio Tinto ministers (Euronews Serbia, 2025).¹⁸19 Altogether, the alignment between state actors and corporate interests suggests a consolidation of funding channels, while critical scientific voices face growing delegitimization. Moreover, no one has written a single scientific paper to fully refute the studies conducted by Serbian scientists opposing the project; these studies have been challenged mainly through non-scientific means, such as personal attacks, media discrediting, censorship, paper retractions, and expulsion from boards. This strategy seems to target the scientist rather than the scientific evidence itself, illustrating a personalized form of epistemic suspicion (Szabados, 2019). It reflects the manipulation of scientific discourse via non-scientific methods to serve corporate interests. In Barry's (2012) terms, the evidence suggests that state officials, pro-government media, and corporate communication practices contributed – through partly overlapping mechanisms – to the delegitimization of dissenting scientists. Rather than resolving the controversy through open debate, they sought to suppress knowledge claims that destabilized the project's legitimacy.

5.3 Creation of an anti-scientific climate

This section documents evidence of obstruction and control over scientists' work, posing both personal and professional risks (Pitt et al., 2024), and delineates the broad spectrum of mechanisms used to suppress scientists' opposition to the lithium mine project in Serbia. Thus, these mechanisms and conditions emerge as a critical response to the increasing politicization and silencing of scientific knowledge under autocratic and corporate pressures. This is in an era where academic autonomy is eroded (Rudroff, 2025) and where both state-led (Cinar and Kose, 2025; Yates et al., 2025) and corporate actors (Legg et al., 2021) seek to control knowledge production, leading to a strategic reconfiguration of science to align with dominant political and economic agendas.

Knowledge repression and policing the academy operate through both subtle and overt mechanisms and through rhetorical and institutional strategies that mirror several examples documented in global cases of "manufactured doubt" (Goldberg and Vandenberg, 2021), which are smear campaigns in government and pro-government media (compromising research integrity (Fabbri et al., 2025) and ad hominem attacks (Goldberg and Vandenberg, 2021)), followed by financial intimidation, mostly reserved for senior

scientists. Censorship and silent repression seemed to emerge whenever scientists were directly involved in the project, while threats and insults (Pitt et al., 2024) seemed to have been context-dependent and perpetrated by yet unknown individuals. Still, all of these forms of repression seemed to have one consequence: the exclusion of dissenting scientific voices critical of the Jadar project from the public sphere. These examples also demonstrate that the suspicion targets not science itself but the scientist, who is vilified and silenced, thereby reshaping what knowledge is visible, trusted, and actionable (Szabados, 2019).

In climate politics, as in this case, scientists who challenge green initiatives, like lithium mining, face criticism for not aligning with the dominant narrative. As Goldberg and Vandenberg (2021) show, targeted "spin" strategies manufacture doubt and delegitimize dissent, recasting critique as obstruction. They demonstrate how powerful actors deploy rhetorical and institutional tactics to frame critique as obstruction, thereby narrowing the epistemic space for legitimate debate. The suppression of dissent is not incidental but structurally embedded in the communicative strategies of climate governance, with detrimental effects on environmental discourse. Consequently, science is not just politicized but also rewritten, with its epistemic foundations distorted to serve power. It highlights the need for scientific communities to resist, reflect, and reclaim their role in shaping knowledge that is both credible and ethically sound.

6 Conclusions

The Jadar case shows how the EU's market-based green transition went hand in hand with the use of force within a peripheral European nation. The EU's green transition has not only led to attempts by the current Vučić government at territorial and legal reconfiguration but has also enabled systematic control over who can speak with authority about its consequences. In this way, the practice of science has clashed with the forces of the market. A situation has thus been created in which the freedom of the resource market coexists with the unfreedom of those who question its sphere of production, and this has transformed the conditions under which larger and larger parts of Serbia's scientific sector must operate: an anti-scientific climate emerged at the intersection of state power, corporate interests, and EU decarbonization agendas, in which smear campaigns, legal and financial intimidation, institutional exclusion, censorship of reports, and the retraction of key articles all worked to police academic dissent rather than to foster evidence-based debate. These practices targeted specific scientists and institutions rather than their data and arguments, thereby personalizing epistemic suspicion and narrowing the space in which critical scientific knowledge could be produced, circulated, and trusted. The Serbian case ultimately confirms the broader argument that scientific knowledge becomes po-

¹⁸Sara Pavkov is also an interesting case: she is currently the youngest MP. Previously she chaired the COP26 summit in Glasgow and the COP26 UN Conference on climate change. However, she is also a member of the ruling SNS party's presidency (Bulajić, 2025).

¹⁹Dejan Ilić, head of the Science Innovation Fund (Fond za inovacionu delatnost, 2026), actively promoted lithium mining. His remarks like "lithium runs through my veins" and public PR advice to Rio Tinto's Serbian head sparked controversy (Vojnović, 2023).

litically vulnerable when it threatens powerful economic interests (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Oreskes, 2019). The insights also echo broader findings that uncertainty and controversy are not merely emergent but strategically manufactured to stabilize extractive agendas and to delegitimize critique (Shenhav, 1994; Welker, 2014; Banks, 2024). However, the Serbian case stands out in two ways: first, the fact that these cases occurred in the scientific sector of a European country signals that a market-based green transition can alter the conditions under which academic research is conducted in Europe. While there were similar pushbacks against the scientific sector within Europe in the past (the Aznalcóllar Mine Disaster in Spain in 1998, The Roşia Montană Gold Mine Project in Romania during the 2010s, or the Kallak Iron Ore Dispute in Sweden since the 2010s), the Serbian case stands out for its contemporary geopolitical dynamics, which are intimately linked to the green transition. At a mass level, the Serbian academic research across a broad range of disciplines is now set to struggle with corporate interests in Europe itself. Due to this, academic research is no longer safe, and its engagement now goes well beyond the narrow confines of civil society. For, in the Serbian case, the struggle is less about argumentation and is becoming increasingly focused on whether academics can sustain multiple onslaughts of extra-judicial violence in order to do the job they are required to do. This is why the Serbian case currently stands out when it comes to the extreme means that were used or allowed to be used to repress the scientists. In short, the struggle has called into question the very conditions of scientific work in a peripheral European country and shows that extractive industries are reshaping international relations in Europe itself, especially regarding the role of scientific production.

Moreover, obstructions faced by scientists led to a narrowing of the space for democratic debate in general. Following the period analysed here (2020–2025), the methods used to police academic freedom have been extended to the rest of society, meaning that the patterns observed in the treatment of Serbian scientists appear to prefigure forms of repression later applied to other groups. Currently, as most Serbian higher-education institutions are under student blockades due to state repression and corruption, violence is gradually escalating: 927 protesters were arrested between November 2024 and September 2025, oftentimes without reason, and six students are in exile, while hunger strikes of those imprisoned have become common due to maltreatment (Bokić, 2025). This occurred immediately after the repression of the Serbian scientists and shows a similar pattern. In addition, the Serbian government has used smear campaigns against victims of police brutality, especially in the cases of female students (Đorđević, 2025), which has led to Serbia's downgrade to "repressed" in the global ratings report on civic freedoms in December 2025 (CIVICUS, 2025). Since August 2024, when the cases of Serbian scientists have occurred, state repression has thus permeated into the whole of society. Our analysis will also be informative for future scholars as it pro-

vides insight into how the escalating violence in the Serbian context began around 2024, when most cases analysed here occurred.

At the same time, the article shows that this repression has been neither total nor uncontested in the case of the Serbian scientists: conferences at SANU, collective statements such as those made by the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Niš, internal dissent within state institutes, and international networks of solidarity around Jadar indicate that academic and civic actors still seek to question extractive agendas, even under mounting authoritarian pressure. Yet the very need for such defensive mobilization reveals how far science in Serbia has been pushed into a reactive posture, being forced to protect the minimal conditions for inquiry and public accountability rather than proactively contributing to democratic environmental planning.

Taken together, these dynamics position Serbia as a semi-peripheral laboratory of corporate-driven climate solutions, where EU-framed lithium ambitions, local authoritarianism, and long corporate histories of abuse converge to manufacture doubt, marginalize inconvenient expertise, and stabilize extractive futures as the only viable path (Teixeira and Oliveira, 2025). As of the time this article was written (December 2025), the project is still awaiting publication of the environmental impact assessment study. However, considering current trends, the state may further pressure the academic community critical of the project. Moreover, the government has initiated a new Mineral Resources Management Strategy, which critics from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts claim would allow unrestricted mining. This means that the debate and the mistreatment of academia will likely continue along with the volatile situation in Serbia (Peljto, 2025). Given the current state of affairs in Serbia, it seems that the cases mentioned here have served as an "introduction" to widespread violence as the means to silence the scientists have extended since to encompass the whole of society – as smear campaigns and police intrusion into Serbia's Universities has become commonplace given that the state seeks to suppress the rising student movement (First Balkan Media, 2026).

As Willert suggested in his quote at the beginning of the article, now may be the moment to critically reimagine academia's purpose and role in society. This seems especially valid in places where academia is threatened and put in a position to defend the wider society rather than itself (INURA, 2024; Transnational Institute, 2024b; Vreme, 2025).²⁰ We

²⁰This is why one also sees emerging forms of academic solidarity across the disciplines in question. Fossen (2025) emphasizes solidarity within academia, suggesting that scholars should support each other's calls to action, even if they are not experts themselves in certain fields. Solidarity, as Bieliauskaitė (2021) describes, is a core principle of academic ethics that should be incorporated into the structure and guidelines of ethics codes. Therefore, to address the challenges faced by the academic community, discussions focus on creating spaces of solidarity. These include developing sup-

can therefore conclude that any just green transition must begin with the protection of academic freedom, geoscientific scrutiny, and epistemic justice: without institutions capable of resisting repression and refusing "filmwashing", "local-washing", and other forms of knowledge management, climate policy will continue to reproduce the very inequalities and forms of violence it claims to resolve.

Data availability. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. The transcripts of our interviews and our email correspondence are confidential as they contain sensitive information whose publication could cause further harm to our interviewees. These materials therefore cannot be made publicly available as datasets.

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port structures for researchers (Pitt et al., 2024) and encouraging international collaboration among universities (Bieliauskaitė, 2021). Rudroff (2025) advocates for international unity to safeguard academic freedom and foster scientific dialogue against anti-science movements. Hence, epistemic justice is crucial for understanding how knowledge is created, valued, and linked to identities and the context of power structures (Maddox and Morton Ninomiya, 2025) and for fostering spaces of solidarity, both locally, since academic solidarity is closely tied to place (Bednarski, 2024), but also internationally, especially when "trapped" in authoritarian regimes and threatened by contemporary capitalist trends.

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