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The dreams of some, the protests of others

Serbia faces a fierce backlash over a proposed lithium mine in the Jadar Valley, as economic promises, environmental fears and EU interests collide

Over the past few weeks, Serbia has witnessed numerous protests. In Belgrade, more than 40 000 citizens took to the streets, with some estimates suggesting participation from up to 120 000 people, blocking the motorway and the two main railway stations until the morning, when riot police intervened. Several activists were subsequently arrested, prompting further protests demanding their release.

The protests brought together environmental and civil society organisations alongside opposition parties from diverse ideological backgrounds, all with a common goal: to stop a controversial lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley in western Serbia. Lithium mining is currently the number one issue in Serbian politics and the revitalised opposition could present a formidable challenge to the government's agenda. Moreover, the EU's visible support for the mining project has raised understandable concerns in Serbia.

A partnership with the EU...

On 19 July, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič visited Belgrade for a conference on raw materials. The main outcome was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a 'Strategic Partnership on Sustainable Raw Materials, Battery Value Chains and Electric Vehicles' between the European Union and Serbia. Additionally, several other letters of intent were signed between Serbia and various companies, including the German automobile giant Mercedes-Benz.

The memorandum was clearly linked to the proposed lithium mine in the Jadar Valley, to be developed by the international mining company Rio Tinto. While Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić hailed the mine as a huge economic opportunity for the country, Scholz described it as 'an

important European project and contribution to Europe remaining sovereign' and a 'good project for Serbia'.

There is no question why German and EU officials would have an interest in supporting a project that could lead to having a critical resource such as lithium – essential for the EU's green transition – being mined close to home. However, the rosy picture of a Serbian-EU or Serbian-German partnership that emerges from this deal hides some much uglier truths and concerns, both environmental as well as political.

...but a strong opposition at home

Supporters of the mining project, including Vučić, claim that environmental damage could be minimised. Critics, however, argue that the mine is certain to cause huge environmental damage that cannot be justified by comparatively modest economic gains. The potential environmental impact of lithium mining in the Jadar Valley is not yet fully clear, but there are fears in Serbia that the mine could irreparably damage the environment in the western part of the country and cause pollution in the Drina, Sava and Danube rivers, thereby affecting a large part of the country.

Opponents of the project also claim that such a mine will be opened in Serbia, rather than in Germany or other EU member states, precisely because environmental standards are lower in Serbia. In other words, they fear that Serbia will become a mining colony of the EU.

Fifty-five per cent of Serbian citizens are opposed to the opening of the mine, while only 25 per cent support it.

Due to these concerns, lithium mining is a very controversial issue in Serbia and there is quite a strong opposition to the opening of the mine in the Jadar Valley. Polls show that 55 per cent of Serbian citizens are opposed to the opening of the mine, while only 25 per cent support it. It is important to note that this opposition exists *despite* the government's strong promotion of the project, and in an environment where the government is usually able to shape public opinion as it wishes through its control of the vast majority of mainstream media. This means that the mining project may prove to be too strong a nut to crack.

In fact, previous protests against lithium mining in 2021 and 2022 were the most successful protests during Vučić's regime. Triggered by legislative changes believed to be connected to the mining project, these

protests took place across Serbia and forced the government to backtrack on the changes and halt the mining project.

The protests were successful because there were signs of opposition to the lithium mine even among the supporters of the ruling parties. Moreover, they were driven by both environmental concerns and nationalist fears of being 'colonised' or even existentially threatened by the West, which has been portrayed as the enemy of the Serbian people by pro-government media for the past 12 years.

After being halted in 2022, the Rio Tinto mining project was resumed in July 2024 after the Constitutional Court overturned the previous decision of the government from 2022 – speaking volumes about the rule of law in Serbia. It was at this time that the Memorandum of Understanding was signed, with the EU and Germany clearly backing the lithium mining project.

'Stabilitocracy' and Serbia's path to EU accession

As already mentioned, the support of the EU and its member states for the mining project is understandable, as it could indeed bolster the EU's green transition as well as its economy. It is also understandable that the EU sees the project as an economic opportunity for Serbia itself – especially as the project would be followed by a whole value chain of lithium processing plants, car battery factories or electric car factories – and a chance to strengthen the EU-Serbia partnership.

But the EU must tread very carefully when it comes to this project. It cannot allow itself to ignore the issue of democracy in Serbia, and thus the country's EU membership prospects, for the sake of its own economic interest. Troubling signs of this were already visible on 19 July, as Scholz and Šefčovič's visit followed a period of severe democratic decline and strong anti-EU and especially anti-German propaganda in Serbia. During the visit, Scholz did not in any way address these issues, while Šefčovič said that the memorandum was proof of the EU's desire to integrate Serbia as soon as possible.

Following Scholz and Šefčovič's visit, even the people with a pro-EU and pro-Western stance are disillusioned with the EU.

This approach resembles the much-criticised policy of 'stabilitocracy' — the EU's preference for stability and the defence of specific interests in the Western Balkans at the expense of democracy and the rule of law. By turning a blind eye to problems with democracy and

> praising – which is actually non-existent – progress on the EU path, the EU is simply buying favours in the region without any benefit to the countries' progress towards EU membership.

Scholz and Šefčovič's visit has further damaged the EU's already tarnished reputation in Serbia. Now even the people with a pro-EU and pro-Western stance are disillusioned with the EU. They see high-ranking German and EU officials supporting what they believe to be an environmentally catastrophic project and seemingly turning a blind eye to the country's problems with democracy and the rule of law.

Nevertheless, the Serbian government will certainly know how to make the best of the situation. By keeping a seemingly anti-EU opposition on the streets and buying favours in the EU with the promise of opening the mine, it hopes to avoid criticism of its democratic institutions and, paradoxically, position itself as a key EU ally in the region.

It is precisely this calculation – that the current government is favourable to any potential alternative and that therefore shouldn't be put under too much pressure – that lies at the heart of stabilitocracy. If this policy continues, Serbia's future in the EU is all but over.



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