



Weaponizing Influence: How Russia's and China's Soft Power Clashes Serbia's Civil Society using Lithium Controversies

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Summary

Introduction

In August 2024, the Serbian government, with strategic backing from Russia and China, significantly intensified its efforts to shrink civic space, targeting activists involved in environmental protection, human rights, and anti-corruption work. Over the course of just ten days, these actions led to at least 33 arrests or detentions across 17 cities, alongside the launch of a massive media smear campaign against 39 organizations and 11 donors, including the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom. The government, while emphasizing the economic potential of lithium mining, has leveraged this agenda to suppress dissent, portraying opposition as anti-national and justifying its repressive actions through unlawful arrests, smear campaigns, and heightened surveillance. This surge in repression highlights a coordinated effort to stifle any challenge to the government's narrative, using sensitive financial data to fuel its crackdown. As Russia and China's influence in Serbia grows, this alignment threatens to further erode democratic freedoms, making it imperative for the international community to respond.

Anti-Lithium Protests and Democratic Values

Protests against lithium mining in Serbia are not solely about environmental concerns; they also represent broader demands for transparency, rule of law, and democratic governance. These movements challenge systemic corruption and authoritarian practices, highlighting the public's desire for accountable and participatory decision-making processes. The government's aggressive response to these protests underscores its resistance to addressing underlying issues of corruption and lack of rule of law.

Serbia's Cooperation with Russia

Serbia's cooperation with Russia, particularly in countering "color revolutions," reflects a shared strategy to suppress civil society. This collaboration has been openly celebrated, with both governments framing environmental protests as foreign-influenced attempts to destabilize Serbia. The narrative justifies harsh responses to protests and bolsters the alliance between Serbia and Russia.

Leveraging Western Support and Russian Tactics

The Serbian government has intensified its repression of civil society by strategically leveraging Western economic interests in lithium mining while simultaneously employing Russian-style tactics to suppress dissent. This approach targets activists involved in environmental protection, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts, framing their legitimate protests as threats to national stability and development.

Media Campaigns Against Civil Society

State-aligned media outlets have intensified smear campaigns against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists, labeling them as foreign agents and destabilizing forces. Utilizing narratives that mirror Russian disinformation strategies, these campaigns aim to delegitimize and marginalize civil society actors who oppose government policies or expose corruption. This campaign intensified after a Chinese report accused the U.S. of interfering in Serbia's internal affairs through these NGOs. The narrative, echoed by government officials and media, paints NGOs as foreign agents working to overthrow the government.

Resumption of Unlawful Investigations

There is convincing evidence that the government has revived and escalated unlawful investigations into NGOs and activists, abusing legal mechanisms to surveil, harass, and obstruct their work. These actions include unauthorized financial scrutiny and public disclosure of confidential information, all intended to stifle criticism and deter civic engagement. Such practices violate domestic laws and international standards, further eroding trust in state institutions and the rule of law.

International Implications and the Need for Balanced Support

The Western international community's emphasis on economic collaboration, particularly in the lucrative lithium sector, often overshadows pressing concerns about democratic backsliding and human rights abuses in Serbia. This imbalance allows the Serbian government to continue its repressive practices unchecked, exploiting geopolitical interests to its advantage. It is imperative for Western democracies to adopt a more balanced approach that integrates economic cooperation with steadfast support for democratic principles, human rights, and environmental protection. Sustained and vocal international support for civil society is crucial in promoting accountability and preventing further democratic erosion in Serbia.

Introduction

During August 2024, the Serbian government intensified its crackdown on civil society, weaponizing influence to suppress dissent and undermine democratic efforts. Leveraging support from Russia and China, the state has orchestrated smear campaigns and unlawful arrests, framing civil society organizations and activists as threats to national interests. By aligning their efforts with pro-lithium narratives, these authoritarian-backed strategies aim to delegitimize and isolate those who challenge the government's agenda, particularly those involved in issues related to corruption, organized crime, human rights, and environmental protection.

The crackdown on activists and civil society in Serbia intensified significantly following the rise of anti-lithium protests across the country. As these protests gained momentum, rallying citizens around demands for environmental protection the government began to view them as a direct threat to its authority. In response, state-led repression escalated, with activists facing smear campaigns, unlawful arrests, and increased surveillance. This wave of suppression targeted not only those directly involved in the protests but also broader civil society organizations that supported democratic values and human rights. The government's crackdown is a clear reaction to the growing democratic energy of the protests, which challenged the status quo and threatened to disrupt the centralized control that the current regime seeks to maintain.

The primary reason the Serbian government opposes the anti-lithium protests is not solely because of the economic implications of halting mining projects, but because these protests embody a democratic challenge to the government's authority. The movement represents a grassroots demand for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation—core democratic principles that directly threaten the centralized power and control that the current government seeks to maintain.

By rallying against decisions made without public consent, the protesters are exposing the undemocratic practices of the state, where decisions are often made in secrecy, and where private interests are prioritized over those of the citizens. The government's aggressive response to these protests, including smear campaigns and unlawful arrests, reflects its fear of losing control and being held accountable by the public. In essence, the democratic nature of the anti-lithium movement poses a significant threat to the government's hold on power, making it a target for suppression.

Understanding Anti-Lithium Protests in Serbia

The latest anti-lithium protests in Serbia are not solely about opposing the extraction of lithium; they stem from a broader context of widespread distrust in governmental institutions, pervasive corruption, organized crime, and ongoing human rights abuses. The protests represent a culmination of public frustration with systemic issues that have plagued the country for years. Civil society, activists and citizens alike see the push for lithium mining as symptomatic of deeper governance problems, including a lack of transparency, the marginalization of local communities, and the prioritization of corporate and private interests over environmental protection and public welfare. The movement against lithium mining thus serves as a broader critique of the state's failure to uphold the rule of law, protect human rights, and act in the best interests of its citizens.

Additionally, controversy surrounding Rio Tinto in Serbia extends beyond lithium mining, highlighting serious concerns about the company's practices and the government's handling of these issues. The opposition is fueled by environmental degradation, including fears of water and land contamination, and a perceived lack of enforcement of environmental protections. Local communities have faced forced displacements and inadequate consultation, leading to widespread resentment. Economic exploitation concerns include unfair compensation and unfulfilled promises. Additionally, opaque dealings and allegations of human rights violations have deepened public distrust, making Rio Tinto a symbol of broader systemic failures in governance, transparency, and the protection of citizens' rights. Also, the [citizens at the protest](#) held in front of the Constitutional Court of Serbia pointed at the lack of independence of institutions in the state, and above all to the political control of the judicial branch of government.¹ In his [latest article](#) on Peščanik, Rodoljub Šabić, the former Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, addresses one of the affairs involving Rio Tinto, highlighting key issues related to transparency and the protection of citizens' rights.

The latest protest is continuation of a broader and more complex environmental movement that has its roots in earlier efforts, such as the fight to protect Stara Planina and various other environmental initiatives, becoming more visible with the first bigger protests in April 2021, called the ecological uprising². The protest was organized by forty local organizations and grassroots groups. As the movement expanded, it began to encompass a wide range of citizen initiatives and protests across Serbia. These initiatives not only targeted the potential environmental impact of lithium mining but also addressed

¹ On July 11, 2024, the [Constitutional Court of Serbia](#) issued a Decision by which it determined that the Decree on the Termination of the Decree on Establishing the Spatial Plan of the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the Jadarite Mineral Exploration and Processing Project "Jadar" is not in accordance with the Constitution and the law. The decree was previously passed by the Government of Serbia in 2022 after mass protests against lithium mining, and immediately before the presidential and parliamentary elections of that year. Citizens' suspicions that the Decree was adopted to calm tensions before the elections turned out to be justified. The issue of lithium exploitation was brought up to date after the elections held in June of this year by the [statement of President Vučić](#) on June 24 that "We need to open a discussion in which arguments will dominate, and not empty stories, we will not give Jadar or Rađevina". The Constitutional Court, less than a month later, adopts the Decision on the repeal of the 2022 Decree.

² Later, some environmental activists decided to form a partisan group with the same name and ran for parliamentary elections.

other significant projects involving foreign investment, particularly those connected to Chinese mining operations and infrastructure developments.

Finally, the broader environmental movement in Serbia is not centralized but consists of multiple strands of activism, each contributing to a collective resistance against the exploitation of natural resources, which arose from corruption, organized crime and violations of human rights. While the protests against lithium mining have garnered significant attention, there has been continuous, albeit sometimes less visible, resistance against other, often Chinese-led, projects. In regions affected by the Bor mining operations and similar ventures, local communities have organized to protest the environmental and social impacts of these projects. These grassroots movements are often overshadowed by the larger global and national debates on lithium but remain a critical part of the broader environmental struggle in Serbia.

How Anti-Lithium Protests Uphold Democratic Values in Serbia

The anti-lithium protests in Serbia are fundamentally pro-democratic. They represent a collective stand against the erosion of democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, and public participation in decision-making. At their core, these protests are about more than just environmental protection; they are a response to the systemic failures of governance where citizens feel excluded from meaningful dialogue about the future of their communities and natural resources.

The vast majority of participants and leaders in these protests are advocating for a more inclusive and transparent process in which the voices of local communities and civil society are respected and considered in governmental decisions. The movement challenges the concentration of power that allows the state to prioritize corporate and foreign interests over the well-being of its citizens, often behind closed doors and without adequate public scrutiny.

By opposing lithium mining projects that were seen as being pushed through without proper environmental assessments or community consent, the protesters are asserting their right to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives. This demand for greater accountability and the protection of public interests is at the heart of democratic governance.

Moreover, the protests highlight the need for the rule of law, where laws are applied fairly and consistently, rather than being manipulated to benefit a select few. The resistance to lithium mining is thus not just about protecting the environment, but about safeguarding democratic values against captured state and private interests. In this way, the anti-lithium protests are a vital expression of the struggle for a more democratic and just society in Serbia.

On the other hand, there is an urgent concern that the character of the anti-lithium protests in Serbia might shift, as frustration grows over the perceived indifference of Western governments and embassies. This change has been fueled by actions like the recent visit of Olaf Scholz, who voiced support for mining projects but failed to address serious concerns about basic freedoms and the corruption associated with Rio Tinto and the Serbian government's actions. By neglecting these critical issues, Western governments

and embassies are inadvertently alienating protesters, who are beginning to view Western involvement as indifferent to their democratic rights and the rule of law.

Open Cooperation Between Serbia and Russia on Fighting Protests

Environmental protests, as well as last year's "Serbia Against Violence" protests, are increasingly being labeled as attempts at "colored revolutions" by government representatives. This kind of narrative reflects the Russian influence on government officials in Serbia, who are trying to discredit the protests and dissuade citizens from participating in them.

Back in 2021, N1 [reported](#) that Serbia and Russia have agreed to jointly combat "colored revolutions," which they view as Western tools for destabilizing their countries. N1 reported back in December 2021, that Serbian official Vulin³ had his third meeting so far with Nikolai Patrushev⁴, and that he emphasized Serbia's commitment to this partnership, noting its significance under President Vučić's leadership. The term "colored revolutions" refers to mass protests that have led to regime changes in various regions. The Associated Press reported that this collaboration came amidst growing public dissatisfaction in Serbia with Vučić's autocratic rule, particularly over environmental issues.

Additionally, Russia and Serbia have formed a "Working group against colored revolutions," tasked with regulating NGOs, countering unrest, and monitoring opposition activists and independent journalists. The working group is no longer mentioned by government representatives, but colored revolutions are referenced, especially in statements by the President of Serbia, along with claims that foreign intelligence services are behind the citizens' protests. Radio Free Europe [reported](#) in May 2023 that that President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić stated at a Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) rally in Pančevo that foreign intelligence agencies informed him that the "Serbia Against Violence" protests, which were called by some opposition members, are attempts at "colored revolutions." He mentioned receiving information from various agencies, including those from the East, but did not specify which agencies.

The articles listed below reflect a growing number of statements in Serbian and Russian state-controlled media about the collaboration between Serbia and Russia in countering what they continue to describe as "color revolutions." The analyses reveal that Serbia's cooperation with Russia is not only transparent but is openly celebrated and proudly emphasized by both governments. These reports focus on framing ecological protests and other forms of civil unrest as foreign-influenced efforts to destabilize Serbia. The narrative is deeply intertwined with accusations against Western countries and organizations, portraying them as orchestrators of these movements. The articles serve to justify and legitimize the harsh responses to these protests and to reinforce the image of strong ties between Serbia and Russia in combating perceived threats to their governments.

³ Since May 2024, Vice President of the Government responsible for monitoring the status of projects across multiple ministries and special government organizations in coordination with the President of the Republic, former Director of the BIA, Minister of Internal Affairs and Minister of Defense.

⁴ Secretary of the Security Council of Russia from 2008 to 2024, since May, Aide to the President of Russia.

22.05.2023. [Russia Today](#) Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is quoted addressing ecological protests, labeling them as attempts at a "color revolution" orchestrated by foreign influences. He emphasizes Serbia's resolve against such movements, portraying them as threats to national sovereignty. The article reinforces the narrative that external actors, particularly from the West, are attempting to destabilize Serbia through these protests. The lack of any counter-narrative or critical analysis supports a one-sided view that aligns with both Serbian and Russian state interests.

26.12.2023. [Sputnik](#) Aleksandar Vulin, a prominent Serbian politician, is quoted discussing his collaboration with Russian officials to counter color revolutions. Vulin frames his removal from office as a response to his efforts in this regard, suggesting that foreign powers, particularly from the West, are attempting to undermine Serbia's stability. The article emphasizes the close cooperation between Serbia and Russia, portraying it as a strategic alliance against Western interference. The lack of critical analysis or alternative perspectives further cements the narrative of a foreign threat.

11.08.2024. [Tanjug](#) This article reports on President Vučić's statements accusing the founder of United Group, Dragan Šolak, of being behind the ecological protests against lithium mining in Serbia. Vučić claims these protests are part of a broader hybrid strategy aimed at initiating a color revolution in Serbia. The article aligns with the ongoing narrative of external manipulation, further delegitimizing the protests by associating them with foreign agendas. The absence of any exploration of the protesters' concerns reinforces the portrayal of these movements as illegitimate.

14.08.2024. [Russia Today](#) Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov praises President Vučić for his resistance to Western attempts to instigate a color revolution in Serbia. Lavrov highlights the solidarity between Russia and Serbia in opposing these alleged Western strategies. The article reinforces the theme of mutual support between the two nations against perceived Western aggression, framing it as a defense of national sovereignty. The narrative is consistent with the broader messaging found in both Serbian and Russian state media, which seeks to vilify Western influence.

16.08.2024. [Novosti](#) This article claims that the ecological protests against lithium mining are not genuinely about environmental concerns but are instead part of a strategy to create conditions for an extra-institutional change of government. The language used suggests a conspiracy, framing the protests as part of a well-known model of color revolutions. The article lacks any examination of the environmental issues at the heart of the protests, instead focusing entirely on delegitimizing them as foreign-influenced attempts to destabilize the government.

16.08.2024. [Russia Today](#) In this article, Nikolai Patrushev, a Russian official, asserts that the West is using various pretexts to organize color revolutions and attempts to overthrow legitimate governments, including in Serbia. The report aligns with the ongoing narrative of Western subversion, reinforcing the idea that Russia and Serbia are united in their resistance to these efforts. The article does not provide any counterarguments or perspectives, maintaining a singular focus on the threat posed by the West.

These articles collectively propagate a narrative that frames ecological protests and other civil movements in Serbia as part of a broader Western strategy to destabilize the country through color revolutions. The cooperation between Serbia and Russia is presented as a necessary defense against these alleged threats. The absence of critical analysis and the use of sensational language serve to delegitimize legitimate civil concerns and reinforce the image of Western interference, thereby justifying harsh measures against protesters and bolstering the alliance between Serbia and Russia.

Arrests and Detentions of Activists in Serbia Following Anti-Lithium Protests

The wave of arrests and detentions of civil society activists across Serbia was ordered, following the widespread anti-lithium protests. Most of the activists are being summoned for questioning for the crime of "endangering the constitutional order or security of Serbia, calling or inciting to change its constitutional order by force, overthrowing the highest state authorities or representatives of those authorities." Prosecution authorities refer to Article 309 of the Criminal Code - calling for a violent change of the constitutional order and to Article 320 preparation of an act against the constitutional order and security of Serbia. Elements of these acts were allegedly found in the posts of activists on social media, their speeches, or their participation in protests. According to the Criminal Code, a sentence of 6 months to 5 years is prescribed. Activists are being detained because of posts on social media where they express their opposition to the project of the company "Rio Tinto". These acts of freedom of expression cannot represent a threat to the constitutional order.

According to the records of Civic Initiatives, at least thirty-three people have been arrested or detained for informational interviews since the beginning of the protest against lithium mining. Most of those who are charged are charged with the serious crime of "violent overthrow of the constitutional order", and they are being detained because of the critical views they expressed via social media. The criminal law is misused to limit the freedom of expression, but also of assembly, because the purpose of arrests is to intimidate citizens from further participation in the protests.

The day after the protest held in Belgrade on August 10, three young activists who were also the leaders of student demonstrations against rigged elections in December were arrested. The reason was the alleged attack on an employee of the pro-regime media "Informer" during the protests. Namely, during the blockade of the Prokop Railway Station, the crowd booed an employee of "Informer" who was filming the protest and provoked the participants. Young activists placed banners and a sandwich in front of her, which she tried to remove. Although it is possible to see what really happened on the video, the prosecutor's office expressly condemned the activists for the crime of "insulting and attacking the journalist", although she was the one who physically attacked the activists. The pro-regime television and tabloid "Informer" is known for its campaigns against political opponents of the Serbian Progressive Party, and this media has for years been among the record holders in the number of published fake news. The activists were sentenced to prison: Ivan Bjelić to 40 days, and Nikola Ristić and Jevđeniđe Julijan Dimitrijević to 30 days. Because of the express condemnation of the activists, citizens gathered in front of the police department, but also the Government of Serbia.

The activists were taken to prison on the same day, but after strong public pressure, they were released on Tuesday, August 13, when the verdict was overturned based on the accepted appeal of the lawyers of the convicted, but the case is not over and will go to regular proceedings. The prison terms for the alleged attack are only the result of a day-long campaign against activists.

The data suggests that the recent arrests and detentions of activists in Serbia are part of a broader government strategy to stifle civil society and suppress dissent, particularly following the anti-lithium protests. The charges brought against activists are often vague and visibly politically motivated. This crackdown not only affects the individuals targeted but also has a chilling effect on citizens and civil society as a whole, undermining democratic processes and the ability of citizens to engage in peaceful activism. The wider report is attached as Annex 1.

Media Campaign Against “Pro-Western NGOs”⁵

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a report on August 9th analyzing the activities of the American foundation NED (National Endowment for Democracy) worldwide. The report contains typical claims by authoritarian regimes that the United States aids in combating them globally, often through organizations like NED. The report mentions Serbia, where the U.S. is accused of fighting Chinese influence by funding NGOs such as the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, organizing protests against the Serbian government, and interfering in the 2022 and 2023 elections by supporting "pro-American" candidates. The Chinese report also explains the protests against violence in Serbia, following mass killings in May 2023, as follows: "In May 2023, after two consecutive incidents (tragedies) in Serbia, human rights groups sponsored by NED and pro-American opposition organizations organized mass demonstrations demanding the resignation of the Serbian government."

The report was immediately and extensively covered by pro-government media. All articles jointly conveyed a similar narrative about foreign interference in Serbia's internal affairs, based on the Chinese report. These texts rely on sensationalism, dramatic language, and a lack of critical analysis to support the government's narrative of being threatened by Western countries, especially the U.S. For example, Politika particularly highlighted the accusation that the U.S. funded the protests in Serbia during 2023. This accusation from the report was also presented as absolute truth by other government-controlled media, such as B92, Glas javnosti, Kurir, and Alo.⁶

⁵ All referenced media sources and their translated versions can be found in the Annex 3.

⁶ The article on Politika.rs, titled "American NED sponsored protests against the Serbian government," conveys a part of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, where it is alleged that the U.S., through NED, financed protests in Serbia during 2023. This text did not critically analyze the report but presented the accusations as facts, without providing context or responses from the other side. The article on B92.net, titled "The official report of the People's Republic of China reveals shocking details: America stood behind the opposition protests," carries similar claims as Politika, but with an additional sensationalist note. The text uses sharp and alarming language ("shocking details"), further dramatizing the situation, which increases the sense of threat and legitimizes the narrative of foreign interference. The article in Glas javnosti titled "The Chinese reveal: Here is who finances colored revolutions around the world" deals with the broader narrative of so-called "colored revolutions," implying that the protests in Serbia are part of a global destabilization strategy supported by the U.S. The article emphasizes conspiracy theories without providing concrete evidence or fact-checking and uses a sensationalist tone to support this thesis. The article on Kurir.rs titled "China calls NED the white gloves of the American government" focuses on the accusation that NED is an instrument of the

Politika also had a special article about independent media being an extension of the U.S. for overthrowing the government in Serbia. The Russian government-controlled media, such as Sputnik, immediately used the report and "expanded" it with investigations into the connections between NED and the Serbian NGO sector.

The Chinese report was not only extensively and affirmatively retold in all pro-government media but also confirmed by comments from editors and journalists. A good example of this is the concluding paragraph of Večernje novosti, after they thoroughly relayed the information from the report: "The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through this detailed analysis with numerous examples from around the world, has deeply scratched the well-rehearsed systems of the NGO sector—what has emerged from it shows how major powers, under the banner of 'rights to democracy,' through their NGO sector, most severely violate the rights of individual nations to establish order in their own states, and most brutally interfere in their internal affairs, with the aim of establishing governments that are 'more cooperative,' which will serve their interests instead of their own countries."

President Aleksandar Vučić announced on August 17, 2024, in the village of Međica that a huge amount of money from the West had been invested in his overthrow, mentioning hundreds of millions, even billions of euros: "This year and last year, these are record amounts of money. Huge money. Just look at the media content and everything else; it is not hundreds of millions of euros, but billions. Just calculate that, and I will not talk about anything else. In the first six or seven months, you have 78 million euros invested through this NGO sector, and not in every NGO sector, but this very political and anti-state oriented one." He also commented on the Chinese report and stated that he would "study it in detail," but added that "there have been many strange things both last year and this year, many strange things." On that occasion, Vučić announced: "You will see in the coming days that a huge amount of money has been injected into our country with the aim of destabilizing the state and overthrowing me," signaling the start of a campaign.

Lawyer Vladimir Đukanović, a member of the SNS presidency, immediately on August 17 posted a graphic on his X account showing the income of the organization RERI, which he called a "fake environmental organization," and linked it to Sofija Mandić and Rodoljub Šabić, questioning for what that organization was receiving money. The next day, on August 18, he posted a new graphic for the organization CEPRIS, "which is wreaking havoc in the Serbian judiciary and whose head is the 'independent' Majić," also with a list of donors, and then immediately a graphic for the USAID project jointly implemented by Trag, CRTA, and several other organizations.

American government for undermining foreign governments, including Serbia's. The text uses dramatic formulations and conveys the Chinese report as unquestionable truth. The absence of critical review and the one-sided presentation of accusations creates the impression that the claims made in the article are indisputable. The article on Alo.rs titled "How an American organization is trying to overthrow the government in Serbia? The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed everything" follows the same line as the previous texts, further focusing on the accusation that the U.S. is trying to destabilize Serbia through NED. The article conveys information from the Chinese report without any critical distance, further strengthening the conspiracy theory of foreign interference. As with other articles, there is no analysis or different perspectives on the claims made, making this article part of a broader propaganda campaign.

That same evening, Đukanović organized a space on the X network, with the theme being the Chinese report. On August 20, Đukanović wrote on his account that he would "close down all NGOs that are financed from abroad, and none would be allowed to operate."

Minister of Justice Maja Popović stated on August 17 that "those who supposedly fight for ecology are actually leading a political struggle against Aleksandar Vučić" and that "they are actually hiding their true face and intention to destabilize the country, and this with significant financial support from abroad."

The Minister of the Interior, Ivica Dačić, stated on August 19, 2024, that there is a list of NGOs "that are financed from abroad and interfere in Serbia's internal politics." He added that many countries have laws against this, but Serbia cannot introduce such a law due to European standards, which he said are designed "so they can protect their countries well from this. But we do not have the right to protect ourselves from them. Only they have the right to protect themselves from us."

The campaign also involved the governor of the National Bank of Serbia, Jorgovanka Tabaković, who announced on August 20 that the protests against the government were financed from abroad through NGOs, and she made even more specific accusations: "Our investigation has uncovered the association 'Helvetas,' which receives huge amounts of money without receipts, shuts down for a bit, then reappears. Our investigation also found that all of this is connected to certain Civic Initiatives and environmental parties. A foreign organization sends money that is supposed to end up in these associations. People are receiving urgent donations for environmental protests. It's shocking that you have registered associations and foreign organizations, there are 39,000 registered associations, but only 18,000 have submitted a financial report to the APR. As for 'Helvetas,' they have imagined projects and funding until 2027, as well as the overthrow of the state without elections."

On August 19, 2024, *Informer* reported that a "confirmation from the American deep state" had been received, claiming that Americans organized the protests to overthrow Vučić, citing an interview with Daniel Serwer in the Montenegrin newspaper *Pobjeda*.

On August 20, member of parliament Nebojša Bakarec and member of Presidency of the Serbian Progressive Party, wrote on his blog and social media the following: "The West, primarily America, provides huge amounts of money to NGOs and the media, with the goal of regime change. USAID funds Ivan Bjelić, the armed one leading part of the opposition, as well as that big, bearded guy who works for Deutsche Welle. USAID wants to destabilize Serbia and stop the economy. CRTA received millions of euros, which it then distributed to other NGOs. Anti-Serbian organizations and media receive 10 million dollars annually, and in the 12 years that Vučić has been in power, they have received 120 million dollars." Pro-government media, such as *Informer*, immediately disseminated this text.

On August 21, 2024, Ana Brnabić stated that a lot of money had been invested in overthrowing Vučić, with nearly 79 million euros invested in 2024 and the first half of this year, about three times more than a few years ago, because Serbia, she emphasized, had dared to make independent decisions.

TV *Informer* on August 20 and 21, 2024, aired a special program about NGOs as enemies of Serbia. In the program, *Informer* editor Dragan Vučićević presented charts on the financing of environmental organizations from January 1, 2023, to February 24, 2024, then several selected NGOs (about 20 of them) from January 1, 2020, to August 18, 2021, and especially a chart on the financing of NGOs in 2024 by the European Commission, USAID, NED, RBF, CSM (Charles Stuart Mott), and the European Climate Foundation from the Netherlands. These donors were accused of transferring money with the aim of overthrowing the government in Serbia, with the money being channeled through NGOs and given to civic activists.

A special chart was made for the Civic Initiatives (author of this report), showing donors, specific transactions to private companies and individuals from the CI account from January 1, 2024, to August 12, 2024, as well as a complete list of all employees, their salaries, and photos of the financial staff of CI. CI was accused of withdrawing cash and using it to finance protests at the behest of Western donors. The transactions were listed randomly, for example, payment to audit company is listed as money laundering. Participating in the *Informer* program were SNS presidency member Vladimir Đukanović and pro-regime analysts like Saša Borojević, who agreed that NGOs work against Serbia, that the goal of the USA and the European Union is to weaken Serbia and overthrow the government and assassinate President Vučić. They also called for the government to crack down on NGOs and legally limit their activities.

The hostile activities of Western countries and NGOs are a regular topic after the president's address and on TV Pink programs. For example, on August 18, 2024, pro-government journalists and analysts appeared on TV Pink's morning program, and one of them, Slavko Ivković, concluded that "billions of euros have been injected into our country with the aim of overthrowing Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić" and that "a law needs to be passed so that every foreign dinar that enters the country with a certain aim is recorded, as is the case in America." *Informer* journalist Zvezdana Jevtić stated on this occasion: "President Vučić confirmed yesterday that billions have been coming from foreign countries over the past seven, eight years. This is proof that all those protests happening in Serbia are supported by foreign money. The goal is to overthrow the state of Serbia, primarily President Aleksandar Vučić." In the same program on August 20, 2024, they brought in pro-government analyst Stevica Deđanski and journalist from the pro-government tabloid *Večernje Novosti*, Dušan Stojaković, who talked about "anti-Serbian" and "anti-state" NGOs and how money is being siphoned through NGOs to overthrow the government in Serbia.

TV Pink also broadcast a statement from the well-known GONGO (Government-organized NGO) *Transparentnost* from Trstenik, which stated that "several NGOs from Serbia received at least 10 million dollars, where there is a well-founded suspicion that this is targeted at undermining the integrity of Serbia" and called on state authorities "to start controlling this and similar financing, as is the case in the countries that generously fund the destabilizing capacity in Serbia."

On August 17, the editor of the Russian propaganda agency *Sputnik*, Ljubinka Miličić, appeared on TV Prva and provided information that "the American NGO sector is overthrowing the government in Serbia" and warned that NED is not the only one, but that this is also done through other foundations.

Večernje novosti also joined the campaign announced by President Vučić. On August 20, they published an article about NGOs in Serbia, among which “are those whose activities supposedly involve aiding the development of democracy,” concluding: “It is a public secret—the issue is the influence of certain foreign countries on events in our country through NGOs.” *Novosti* expressed surprise as to why there isn’t a single case before the Constitutional Court of Serbia to ban NGOs for endangering the constitutional order of the country. The text particularly emphasized the role of NED (National Endowment for Democracy), citing information from the Chinese report and noting that Russia has banned the activities of this organization.

The previous day, *Novosti* published that a “Beomajdan” is being prepared for September under the orders of Western countries. *Novosti* also stated: “Among the numerous activists of the local pro-Western NGO sector, it is a public secret that an intense procurement of a large number of tents is underway, and in this regard, all eyes are on the NGO ‘Civic Initiatives’ as the most agile and prepared organization for action.” It is also speculated that certain environmental organizations are preparing Molotov cocktails and advocating for an armed uprising.

Politika also extensively wrote on August 20 about the hostile actions of NGOs and the funds mentioned by Vučić, concluding that “the foreign stake in controlling and weakening Serbia continues to grow.” The interlocutors of *Politika* were representatives of SNS and well-known GONGOs, who collectively concluded that the West seeks to weaken or overthrow the government in Serbia, which is “sovereignist” and “guided by the wise, statesmanlike, cautious, yet decisive sovereignist policy of Aleksandar Vučić,” despite being “deep in NATO waters, surrounded by a sea of NATO, a sea of the European community, a sea of the Western world.”

The Russian propaganda outlet *RT* published an article on August 21, 2024, about who controls payments to NGO accounts in Serbia. The article references claims by Vučić, Tabaković, Dačić, and other officials that “there is knowledge of record amounts of money paid into the accounts of part of the NGO sector in Serbia, there are suspicions of abuses, and there is even a list of NGOs interfering in the internal politics of our country.” *RT* questions why Serbia does not have records of these payments and calls for the adoption of a Foreign Agents Law.

The editor of *Srpski telegraf*, Saša Milovanović, appeared on the morning program of TV Informer on August 22, 2024, and stated that they also have information on NGOs being used by the West to overthrow Serbia. He included the opposition and “anti-Serbian media” in this conspiracy, concluding that they operate under the orders of the West with the following words: “Now, overthrowing the state is a very normal thing because if state institutions react, opposition media immediately try to portray the attacker as a victim. It is more convenient for them to talk on their own media than to go to a national television. We have never had so many anti-Serbian media. We see how much Vučić and his success and development of Serbia bother them.”

Momentum Harnessed for Push for “FARA Law” and Investigations of CSOs

Russian-style “Foreign Agents Law” announcement

The idea of a Russian-style “Foreign Agents Law” had occasionally emerged in public discussions before, but it has now become more frequent, with one of its most prominent advocates being Aleksandar Vulin, currently holding position of Vice Prime Minister, sanctioned by U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). A recent example from this year shows Vulin promoting such a law during several television appearances on government-aligned TV channels. In one of these [appearances](#) in March 2024, Vulin stated that his political group in the Serbian parliament would advocate for the adoption of a “law on non-governmental organizations,” describing it as “a law that, like in America, will create a list called ‘foreign agents.’ Anyone who receives money from abroad is a foreign agent.”

A similar appeal to the Foreign Agents Act was made by Bosnian politician Milorad Dodik during the process of adopting a similar law in the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska. However, the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo issued a denial, explaining why the American law is diametrically opposed in principle to the law proposed in RS. Later in April of this year, Vulin again spoke on government-aligned television programs. On this occasion, he stated that someone “cannot be funded from abroad without it being known, without it being transparent, and without knowing what the goals of that funding are.” Alongside Vulin, several other politicians and figures who frequently appear on pro-government television channels have advocated for the same idea.

Finally, Vulin’s party called for the adoption of such a law in the Serbian parliament in May 2024. The proposal was put forward by Bojan Torbica, an MP and member of the Presidency of the Socialists’ Movement, a party whose vice president is Aleksandar Vulin. NIN [reported](#) that “Torbica called for the adoption of the so-called foreign agents law, demanding that all organizations receiving foreign aid be denied government funding and be labeled as foreign agents.”

Aleksandar Vulin’s name is often mentioned in the context of cooperation with the Russian security services. His regular meetings with the former head of the Russian Security Council and now Vladimir Putin’s adviser, Nikolai Patrushev, spread suspicions about Vulin’s involvement in the arrest of Russian opposition activists. [Andrei Pivovarov](#), a Russian opposition activist recently released in the exchange of prisoners between Moscow and the West, told Radar that Aleksandar Vulin, then the Minister of Police of Serbia, played a role in his arrest in 2021. Three years earlier, Russian journalist and activist Vladimir Kara-Murza first made the same claims. In 2021, [Kara-Murza](#) stated that Vulin informed the first man of the Security Council of the Russian Federation about a meeting of Russian activists in Belgrade who, as he stated, were wiretapped.

The pressure on Russian activists and journalists who live or just want to visit Serbia has been noticeable since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war and subsequent sanctions against Russia, a large number of Russian citizens have moved to Serbia. Among them are Russian anti-war activists and journalists, who are being persecuted in Russia for their activities. Since then, cases of Russian activists/journalists being banned from entering our country, as well as other Russian citizens who did not even express their political views, have been increasingly recorded in Serbia. The formal reason given for these entry bans or orders to leave the country by the Ministry of Internal Affairs is a supposed "threat to national security". This method is now started to be used and directed towards activists from the region, who are dealing with environmental issues, when they want to enter Serbia. We could see this at the example of environmental defenders from Bosnia and Herzegovina that showed their support to anti-lithium protests in Serbia. At the first larger gathering against lithium mining in Loznica, held on June 28 this year, an activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Adi Selman from the group "Karton Revolucija", delivered a speech. Few days later, another activist of this group, Nedim Musić, was [banned from entering Serbia](#), on July 12, with the explanation that there was a "negative security risk assessment". This activist did not have similar problems before, nor was he informed that his entry into Serbia was prohibited. This method, first applied to Russian citizens in Serbia, is slowly starting to be applied to opposition politicians and human rights activists from Serbia. Thus, in August 2022, Zdravko Ponoš, a candidate in the presidential elections of that year, [was detained with his family](#) for several hours at the border when entering Serbia. He was prohibited from entering the country until, as he was told, members of the Security Information Agency (BIA) interviewed him. After more than an hour and a half, he was informed that BIA was not interested in his case. Lawyer [Čedomir Kokanović](#) was detained at the border with Hungary on his way to Ukraine this year in July. Two human rights activists were detained at border crossings on several occasions this year.

Unlawful Investigations into CSOs Resume After a Four-Year Halt

In a sensationalist special broadcast announced with great fanfare and held on August 20, 2024, which later continued daily, the editor-in-chief of the tabloid "Informer" targeted over 40 civil society organizations and activists. By highlighting their donors and grant amounts received, Vučićević described them as foreign mercenaries directly funded from abroad to organize environmental protests in Serbia. In this prime-time smear campaign, a special segment of the show was dedicated to Civic Initiatives, presenting full names of employees, their salaries, photographs of certain employees, and the association's bank transactions. Although he claimed these were publicly available data, they could only have been obtained through illegal means from relevant institutions holding these data.

Before *Informer* published its data, key state officials had already hinted at the forthcoming release of specific investigation details. President Aleksandar Vučić mentioned the overall sum of foreign funds allegedly used to destabilize Serbia, while National Bank Governor Jorgovanka Tabaković said that "our investigation has uncovered" the data appears later in the "own research" of *Informer*. Nebojša Bakarec, a SNS member of parliament, pointed to specific projects and NGOs funded by these foreign sources. These officials effectively announced the investigation data that *Informer* would later reveal in detail. The smear campaign launched by *Informer* is based on sensitive data that could not be obtained lawfully.

During the live program, *Informer* published four graphs alleging that these organizations participated in illicit activities, including money laundering.

The four graphs presented in the campaign each serve a distinct purpose: the first graph displays funding sources for environmental NGOs from January 2023 to February 2024, highlighting foreign donors to suggest that these organizations are undermining Serbia's sovereignty. The second graph combines data from the earlier investigation period of early 2021 to mid-2022, suggesting a continuous pattern of foreign-backed misconduct among NGOs.

The third graph focuses on Civic Initiatives, showing financial transactions from January to August 2024, implying that recent foreign funding is being misused for destabilizing activities. The fourth graph provides a general overview of NGO funding in 2024, reinforcing the narrative of widespread foreign influence across the sector. Together, these graphs are used to paint a picture of ongoing foreign intervention in Serbia through NGO activities. On the graphs, a total of thirty-nine organizations and 11 donors are displayed, including the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

The data used by *Informer* to support these claims includes detailed bank transactions, such as individual deposits and withdrawals, employee salaries, and payments to third-party services. Despite the claim by *Informer's* editor, Dragan Vučićević, that all the published data is publicly available, the level of detail clearly suggests that this information was obtained directly from bank statements. Legal entities' bank statements are not publicly accessible, which raises significant concerns about the source of this information. Given that the governor of the National Bank of Serbia, Jorgovanka Tabaković, has already publicly participated in this campaign and said, it is highly likely that these details were either provided by the Anti-Money Laundering Unit (AMLU) or the National Bank itself. This is not the first time that we have witnessed the disclosure of confidential data by institutions about the financial transactions of non-governmental organizations.

Four years have passed since the "List" affair, when anti-money laundering legislation was abused to pressure civil society in Serbia. On July 13, 2020, the Anti-Money Laundering Unit (AMLU) sent a list of CSOs to all commercial banks in Serbia stating that each of listed CSOs is under suspicion and investigation for money laundering and financing terrorism. The official request was to submit the information and accompanying documentation concerning all bank accounts and financial transactions undertaken by 57 CSOs, media and individuals. The request included demands for information about the turnover on all local and foreign currency accounts, as well as the identity of the payer and recipient for each transaction in the period beginning with January 1, 2019, and ending with the date of receipt of the request. The AMLU also demanded information about safety deposit boxes in the possession of the 57 entities on the list. The public was only made aware of the AMLU's sanctions two weeks later, on July 27, in the form of unofficial information sent by a whistleblower from one of the banks to broadcaster Newsmax Adria. Per the obtained document, the list consisted of thirty-seven legal entities and 20 individuals from media and civil society whose only immediately perceptible common denominator remains their critical stance towards the government. The information from AMLU was sent to the tabloids and used for a smearing campaign.

Organizations that were on the list filed criminal charges, which were dismissed by the Prosecutor Office. The affair “finished” by the admission of the AMLU Director that they did send the requests, which did not have any suspicion but wanted to use the information for making a new national risk assessment document. He said that “they did not have a lawful way to seek for this information” so they wrote to banks that CSOs and individuals are under suspicion. Nobody was held responsible for this unlawful investigation into CSOs.

Four years later, more classified information is being released again, this time publicly on television, endangering the targeted organizations and individuals employed by them. The campaign is visually and rhetorically intensified using large, prominently displayed graphs that are even bigger than the presenter himself. This visual strategy is designed to overwhelm the audience with authoritative data, giving the impression of thorough and irrefutable evidence against the targeted organizations. The inclusion of a graph covering the period of the previous AMLU investigations in 2020 and 2021 is particularly noteworthy, as it attempts to create a false sense of continuity and suggest that these organizations have been persistently engaged in questionable activities over an extended period. Likewise, the presentation of data from early 2021 to mid-2022 suggests that the same information from previous investigations is still being used in the current campaign. This implies that the authorities are not just creating a fake sense of continuity but are reusing data from past unlawful investigations.

This ongoing campaign is far more serious than previous efforts, not only because it delves into the minutiae of financial transactions but also because it publicly discloses the names, salaries, and images of employees, along with baseless accusations of money laundering. For instance, *Informer* falsely labeled a legitimate payment to an auditing firm as money laundering. This escalation reflects a dangerous disregard for legal norms and international recommendations.

The current situation is an obvious continuation, yet a much more severe extension, of the unlawful investigations into CSOs that began four years ago during the "List" affair. Despite international condemnation and clear guidelines provided by international bodies like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which declared such investigations baseless, Serbian authorities have not only failed to heed these recommendations but have also intensified their attacks on civil society. FATF's intervention in 2020 highlighted that the state has no right to conduct such controls without a well-founded suspicion of involvement in terrorist financing, which was absent in all cases during the "List" affair. Furthermore, UN experts expressed concerns that the state was abusing its powers to obtain information on critics of government actions.

This campaign flagrantly disregards the conclusions and recommendations from international actors, who have consistently emphasized that the non-profit sector should only be involved in risk assessment processes on a voluntary basis, and not through the abuse of authority by institutions like the AMLU. The participation of international bodies led to more concrete outcomes compared to domestic institutions, exposing the state's insincerity when it previously invited civil society to engage in the preparation of the National Vulnerability Assessment of the Non-Profit Sector to Terrorism Financing.

Alienating Allies: State Uses Mining Interests to Justify Repression of Civil Society

Lithium is globally recognized as a critical component in the production of batteries, especially for electric vehicles and renewable energy storage. This has led to increased interest from international companies and western governments in securing lithium resources. Serbia, possessing lithium reserves, has attracted attention from multinational corporations and foreign governments eager to invest in its mining sector. This support often translates into diplomatic backing from foreign embassies and international governmental organizations.

The government frames any criticism or advocacy work related to governance, rights, or environmental protection as inherently oppositional to its pro-lithium stance. This narrative is used to justify a crackdown on freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, with arrests and media attacks not only on those directly involved in anti-lithium protests but on all organizations and individuals perceived as challenging the government's agenda. The result is a climate where any form of dissent is linked to anti-national activities, effectively isolating, and discrediting civil society actors across the board. Because the lithium mining projects align with the interests of foreign investors and governments, embassies and international organizations are often reluctant to criticize the Serbian government's actions against environmental and other activists (if the government connects them to anti-lithium protests). Their priority often lies in maintaining stable relations with Serbia to ensure the success of these investments.

Thus, the Serbian government has successfully leveraged the West's support for lithium extraction while simultaneously using Russian-style tactics to attack protests that, at their core, are against corruption, the lack of rule of law, and the current regime. This dual strategy allows the government to secure support from the West for economic reasons while also aligning with Russia and China politically, effectively winning favor from both sides. The western international community's focus on economic interests, such as lithium mining, too often takes precedence over human rights or environmental concerns, which the state then leverages to continue its smear campaigns and arrests with minimal external interference.

The Critical Role of Western Support for Civil Society Under State Repression

In the context of Serbia's growing authoritarianism and the state's use of mining interests to justify repression, the support from Western democracies becomes even more critical. This support is not just about upholding democratic values; it is about countering a regime that is increasingly isolating civil society by labeling any dissent as anti-national or anti-development.

Western democracies have a pivotal role in ensuring that civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists continue to have the resources, protection, and international backing necessary to challenge governmental overreach. The Serbian government's alignment with Russian and Chinese interests, particularly in the context of lithium mining, has created a hostile environment for those who oppose these projects or advocate for transparency and human rights.

The growing frustration among protesters toward Western governments, perceived as indifferent or even complicit in the repression, poses a significant risk to this critical support. If Western democracies fail to address the concerns of these movements—especially regarding issues of corruption, basic freedoms, and the environmental impact of mining projects—they risk losing the trust of those they aim to support. This alienation could lead to a weakening of civil society's resolve and an erosion of the moral authority that Western nations have historically leveraged in promoting democracy and human rights.

Support from the West helps to mitigate the effects of this repression by providing financial aid, diplomatic pressure, and a platform for activists to voice their concerns. It also serves as a counterbalance to the narrative pushed by the Serbian government, which portrays protests and civil society actions as foreign-influenced attempts to destabilize the country.

Without sustained support from Western democracies, there is a real risk that the Serbian government will continue to intensify its crackdown on civil society, using economic interests as a pretext to silence opposition. The backing from the West is therefore not only a matter of principle but a necessary measure to ensure that democratic forces in Serbia can survive and continue their essential work.

To maintain their influence and ensure that their support remains effective, Western governments must recalibrate their approach. This means not only providing resources and diplomatic backing but also engaging directly with the concerns of local activists and civil society. A more nuanced and responsive engagement is necessary—one that acknowledges the complexities of the situation and does not dismiss the legitimate grievances of the people. By doing so, Western democracies can reinforce their commitment to democratic values and help fortify civil society against the encroaching authoritarianism in Serbia.

A resolute Western commitment to democratic values is the most effective defense against the growing influence of Russia and China, whose interests align with undermining these very principles in Serbia.

Annex 1: Environmental Protests in Serbia - Pressures on Environmental Activists

Three years ago, [mass environmental protests](#) began to take place in Serbia, and the occasion was the adoption of the Law on Expropriation and the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative, as well as the announced arrival of the company "Rio Tinto" and the exploitation of lithium. Citizens are convinced that the adoption of the two laws was related to the enabling of the "Jadar" project, a project related to lithium mining. [Blockades of major roads](#) throughout Serbia followed, including the blockade of the Gazela Bridge and the highway in Belgrade on November 27, 2021. Numerous cases of clashes with the police were recorded at the protests. The protests continued in the following months, and on January 20, 2022, the Prime Minister at the time, and today the President of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, announced that the [Government had canceled the decree](#) on the Spatial Plan of the Special Purpose Area for the Implementation of the Project for the Exploitation and Processing of Jadarite Ore, as well as that all administrative acts related to the company "Rio Tinto" and its daughter company "Rio Sava" were annulled. Then, in their public appearances, high-ranking representatives of the government claimed that "the Jadar project is cancelled". However, many feared that the adoption of the Regulation actually served to calm the citizens right before the [presidential and parliamentary elections](#) in 2022, where Aleksandar Vučić won again in the first round of the presidential elections, and his Serbian Progressive Party won by far the most votes in the parliamentary elections.

Two years later, the fears and doubts of environmental activists proved to be justified, and the story of Rio Tinto revived again. The debate on the "Jadar" project was returned to the public after the last elections held on June 2, 2024, with the statement of President Vučić that the mine "[could be opened by 2028](#)". Such an announcement caused the anger of citizens throughout Serbia who oppose this project, which could leave unfathomable harmful consequences for the environment. A number of experts have pointed to the dangers of drought in the summer and flooding in the winter due to the huge amount of water the mine would draw, and in addition the toxic cocktail of chemicals used to extract lithium from the ground is also capable of infiltrating nearby rivers, streams and water supplies. The damage would be suffered by the local community, biodiversity would be threatened, and [research has shown](#) that the company's exploratory drilling has already polluted the environment. Also, information was presented to the public that the economic benefit of the mine, which the government emphasizes in the first plan, would be significantly less compared to the possibility of earning from agriculture in this fertile area in the west of Serbia. [Academicians](#) of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) also pointed out the potential environmental risks of this project.

At the same time as the revival of the “Rio Tinto” company project, an organized campaign targeting environmental activists fighting for the preservation of the environment also began. Environmental activists are led by people from Gornje Nedeljice, a place located on the site where the opening of the mine is planned. Members of the "Ne damo Jadar" association were the first to be attacked. Association activists Zlatko Kokanović and Nebojša Petković started receiving [threats](#) shortly after the president publicly accused them of taking money from “Rio Tinto”. The president labeled environmental activists as "mercenaries who work against the interests of Serbia". Serbia's interests include clean rivers, forests, mountains, clean air and soil, and it is precisely these that are being defended by all the citizens who have been fighting against the plans of the company "Rio Tinto" for three years now, whose reputation at the world level is notorious for the consequences they have left on nature and community health and due to violation of labor rights. However, pro-regime tabloids have been spreading lies and falsehoods about the activists for weeks.

Shortly after the announcement of the return of the Jadar project, citizens across the country began protesting and blocking railways. At the protest assembly, held on June 28 [in Loznica](#), environmental activists announced that they would radicalize the protests against "Rio Tinto". Seven activists of the "Ne damo Jadar" association were [detained during the blockade](#) of the Loznica-Zvornik railway on July 7, 2024. Activists are accused of obstructing officials in their work, and of assaulting an official, although the [videos](#) show a larger number of policemen surrounding and arresting activists. Arrested activists were released after a hearing, and [criminal charges](#) were filed against them, and they will defend themselves from freedom. At the aforementioned meeting in Loznica, an activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Adi Selman from the group "Karton Revolucija", which also deals with environmental issues in its work, also spoke. Another activist of this group, Nedim Musić, was [banned from entering Serbia](#) on July 12 with the explanation that there is a "negative security risk assessment". It is indicative that the ban comes not long after his colleague's participation in an environmental protest in Serbia.

After the rally in Loznica, protests began to take place in cities and towns across the country. A large gathering was announced for August 10 in Belgrade, and days before that gathering, the government began to show its impatience and intention to discourage citizens from participating in environmental protests. They started with bringing activists to the police stations, the Security and Information Agency for interviews, sending tax inspections, but also public targeting of activists by high-ranking government officials. Before the "There will be no mining" protest itself took place, the police arrested four people from Subotica, for allegedly planning to attack the police, causing violence and disorder at the protest in Belgrade.

Two days before the big protest in Belgrade, two young activists were detained for informational interviews after they gave speeches at environmental protests in cities in Serbia. These arrests were just preparation for what would happen later. The activist of the "Sviće" group, [Ivan Bjelić, was detained](#) by the police in Gornji Milanovac, where he first came to give a statement because he was verbally attacked by a man at the protest. After giving the statement, Bjelić was detained at the police station because, as they informed him, a search warrant was issued for him due to a post on Instagram in which he "informed people that the Constitutional Court declared the government decree on stopping the Jadar project unconstitutional." The activist was released from the police after an hour and a half. In Novi Sad, inspectors brought the activist of the group "Stav", Branislav Đorđević, to an [informative interview](#), a day after he spoke at a protest against the opening of the mine. Other public authorities also exerted pressure on young activists. Thus, an inspection was sent to the address of the company of Nikola Ristić, an activist of the "Sviće" group. Ristić was previously the target of an organized tabloid smear campaign. It is particularly worrisome that the highest state officials are also involved in the targeting. Serbian [Prime Minister Miloš Vučević insulted Mila Pajić](#), an activist of the "Stav" group, in a post on the X platform, accusing her of working to "destroy the state" and "bringing out the worst at the expense of the Serbian people and our fatherland". This violent language most directly threatens the safety of the student, who, due to her activism in various fields (transitional justice, dealing with the past, student activism), was repeatedly exposed to physical attacks. [The Youth Initiative for Human Rights](#), where the activist is employed, issued a statement condemning this rhetoric used by the Prime Minister. Citizens who are usually apolitical are increasingly taking part in the protests Rio Tinto, which shows the importance of the topic of citizens' health and environmental protection, which has led to greater engagement of people in socio-political life. Therefore, it is obvious that the goal of the authorities is to discourage citizens from further involvement in this matter. On the situation with the attacks on activists, the ["Three Freedoms" Platform](#), which gathers a large number of organizations that deal with human rights, also spoke out. In the announcement, they called on the authorities to stop the practice of punishing activists.

The peak of pressure occurred after a large protest in Belgrade, where several tens of thousands of citizens gathered. On the day of the protest, the activists of the "Ne damo Jadar" association, Zlatko Kokanović and Nebojša Petković, were invited to an [informational interview](#) at the Security Information Agency, where they were warned that they would bear the consequences in case of blockades. After the meeting, the citizens went on a protest walk through the streets of Belgrade, and in the end they blocked the railway stations Prokop and Novi Beograd. A large number of members of the [special police dispersed the citizens](#) who blocked the tracks early on Sunday morning, and this action passed peacefully and without incident. However, the day after the protest, [three young activists were arrested](#), not because of the blockades, but because of the alleged attack on an employee of the pro-regime media "Informer". Namely, during the blockade of the Prokop Railway Station, the crowd booed an employee of "Informer" who was filming the protest and provoked the participants. Young activists placed banners and a sandwich in front of her, which she tried to remove. Although it is possible to see what really happened on [the video](#), the prosecutor's office expressly condemned the activists for the crime of "insulting and attacking the journalist", although it is clear that she was the one who physically attacked the activists.

The pro-regime television and tabloid "Informer" is known for its campaigns against political opponents of the Serbian Progressive Party, and this media has for years been among the record holders in the number of published fake news. The activists were sentenced to prison: Ivan Bjelić to 40 days, and Nikola Ristić and Jevđenije Julijan Dimitrijević to 30 days. Because of the express condemnation of the activists, citizens gathered in front of the police department, but also the Government of Serbia. The activists were taken to prison on the same day, but after strong public pressure, [they were released](#) on Tuesday, August 13, when the verdict was overturned based on the accepted appeal of the lawyers of the convicted, but the case is not over and will go to regular proceedings. The prison terms for the alleged attack are only the result of a days-long campaign against environmental activists. Unlike the activists, the person who [drove his car into the gathered citizens](#) at the protest, [seriously injuring](#) one man and two other people, has not yet been identified, although eyewitnesses have given statements about the car's license plate number. Days after the protest in Belgrade, environmental activists from all over Serbia were invited to informative talks. ["Local Front" activist Mihailo Kolović was detained](#) in Belgrade when 6 plainclothes policemen came to pick him up. The reason for the detention was only communicated to him at the station. He was told that he was being detained because of the incident in Novi Sad that happened on August 10, although Mihailo was not even in Novi Sad that day. He was released the same day. [Branko Ivković was interrogated](#) by the police in Valjevo, where he was charged with the criminal offense of causing panic and disorder. [Dragan Simović](#) from Srednja Dobrinja was also questioned due to his participation in the protest of environmental organizations. The speaker at the protest in Užice [was detained for 30 days](#) for allegedly calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order. He was [released from custody](#) after two days, but the case against him has not been closed. Three activists of the "Kreni-promeni" movement [were detained](#) because they unfurled a banner reading "you will not dig" in front of the city assembly at the reception of athletes, winners of Olympic medals. As the reason for detaining the activists, the police stated that it was done because they were holding a banner that was not in accordance with the event. [The Minister of Internal Affairs](#) announced criminal charges against the participants of the blockades, the Prime Minister called the protesting citizens a ["broken gang"](#), and the construction minister ["hooligans"](#).

In the weeks after the protest in Belgrade, activists continued to face detention. Most of them are charged with the crime of "endangering the constitutional order or security of Serbia, calling or inciting to change its constitutional order by force, overthrowing the highest state authorities or representatives of those authorities." According to the Criminal Code, a sentence of 6 months to 5 years is prescribed for this crime. Activists are now being detained because of posts on social media where they express their opposition to the project of the company "Rio Tinto". It is not clear in what way freedom of expression represents a threat to the constitutional order. On Saturday, August 17, the police searched the apartment and [detained the activist](#) Zorana Crnojević. She was detained for being the administrator of the "Activism" group, even though she did not participate in the organization of environmental protests because she is 5 months pregnant. The ["Čuvari/ke vatre"](#) organization announced that a total of three administrators of their "Activism" group were detained, that their phones were confiscated and their apartments were searched. They are accused of "preparing acts against the constitutional order and security of Serbia" and "calling for a violent change of the constitutional order."

On Saturday, August 17, the Directorate of Criminal Police conducted a search and detained four activists of "[Eko straža](#)". "Forcible overthrow of the constitutional order" was cited as the basis for detention in this case as well. Civic initiatives also have informal information from activists on the ground about the arrest of three more people, for posting pictures against "Rio Tinto" and for posts against lithium mining. Due to environmental activism, several activists of opposition parties and movements were detained. Activist and councilor of the "[Ekološki ustanak](#)" from Vranje, Dragan Antić, was detained and his apartment was searched. The activist's lawyer announced that he was charged with "calling for a violent change in the constitutional order". By the way, Antić is a high school geography teacher with 21 years of work experience, but SNS is asking for a review of his "suitability for work" and they are demanding that the educational inspectorate react. Detention and apartment search happened to another activist of the "Ekološki ustanak" - Zoran Tešić from Vrbas. [Democratic Party activist](#) Milica Randelović was detained and detained at the airport before leaving for vacation. Later, her apartment was also searched, and the police suspected her of the criminal offense of "calling for a violent change in the constitutional order". Directorate of Criminal Police officers told her they needed to discuss her social media activities. According to Civic Initiatives records, more than 30 people were detained or arrested in connection with environmental protests. They are charged with the serious crime of "violent overthrow of the constitutional order", and they are being detained because of the critical views they expressed via social media. The criminal law is misused to limit freedom of expression, but also of assembly, because the purpose of arrests is to intimidate citizens from further participation in the protests announced by the organizers.

A huge number of people who are interested in this topic and took to the streets to oppose the "Rio Tinto" project clearly worried the government, which decided to deal with environmental activists by all means, and the arrests and detentions are aimed only at intimidation and suppression of further protests. The arrest of activists is an attack on all citizens of Serbia and on basic freedoms in our country, and they reflect an authoritarian regime that does not hesitate to use increasingly repressive methods to suppress them. The environment in which environmental activists operate is increasingly unsafe, and their activities are directly affected by pressures.

Annex 2: Overview of Statistics, Charges and Practices

The data presented here, according to the records of Civic Initiatives, highlights the scope of these actions, the charges brought against activists, and the potentially unlawful nature of these interventions. This is not an exhaustive list, as the data was collected in real-time during the events and while this report was being prepared.

Summary of Cases

- Total Number of Cases: 33
- Total Number of Individuals Affected: 31
- Total Number of Cities Involved: 17

The data indicates a widespread geographical impact, with activists from 17 different cities across Serbia being targeted. This suggests a coordinated effort to suppress activism across the country, not limited to any specific region.

Common Charges

The charges brought against activists vary but reveal a common pattern of accusations that may be politically motivated. The most frequent charges include:

- Calling for Violent Change of the Constitutional Order: Many cases have been documented, with activists saying of incitement through social media or public statements.
- Disturbing Public Order and Peace: These charges are often vague and used as a general pretext for arresting activists.
- Obstructing Police Work and Assaulting Police Officers: These charges are serious and often used to intimidate activists.

In all instances, these charges are disproportionate to the actions of the activists, raising concerns about the misuse of legal mechanisms to suppress dissent.

Unlawful Causes of Arrests

Several cases exhibit potentially unlawful practices, which include:

- Confiscation of Phones and Unwarranted Searches: Activists frequently reported having their phones confiscated and homes searched without clear legal justification. These actions often occurred without proper warrants or due process, contributing to a climate of fear and repression.
- Detention for Social Media Activities: A significant number of activists were detained for their online activities, particularly posts on social media. They were accused of inciting panic or spreading fear among the population, charges that are difficult to substantiate and appear to be aimed at silencing dissent.

- Political Pressure and Intimidation: In some instances, activists faced additional forms of intimidation, such as calls from ruling party members for threatening with inspections. Some of them were subjected to tax inspections of the companies they owned and similar. This suggests a broader strategy of political repression extending beyond legal actions.

Annex 3: Media Sources Referenced in the "Media Campaign Against 'Pro-Western' NGOs"

1. Kinesko ministarstvo spoljnih poslova (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202408/t20240809_11468618.html

2. Politika on U.S. Sponsorship of Protests

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/627928/Americki-NED-sponsorisao-proteste-protiv-srpske-vlade>

Original: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/627928/Americki-NED-sponsorisao-proteste-protiv-srpske-vlade>

3. B92 Report on Chinese Ministry's Claims

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.b92.net/info/politika/49623/zvanicni-izvestaj-narodne-republike-kine-otkrio-sokantne-detanje-iza-protesta-opozicije-stajala-amerika/vest>

Original: <https://www.b92.net/info/politika/49623/zvanicni-izvestaj-narodne-republike-kine-otkrio-sokantne-detanje-iza-protesta-opozicije-stajala-amerika/vest>

4. Glas javnosti on U.S. Involvement

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/vesti/svet/kinezi-otkrivaju-evo-ko-finansira-objene-rezolucije-o-svetu>

Original: <https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/vesti/svet/kinezi-otkrivaju-evo-ko-finansira-objene-rezolucije-o-svetu>

5. Kurir Report on Chinese Ministry's Accusations

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/4425636/kina-ned-naziva-belim-rukavicama-americke-vlade>

Original: <https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/4425636/kina-ned-naziva-belim-rukavicama-americke-vlade>

6. Alo's Coverage of Chinese Report

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/943556/kako-americka-organizacija-pokusava-da-srusi-vlast-u-srbiji-kinesko-ministarstvo-spoljnih-poslova-sve-obelodanilo/vest>

Original: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/943556/kako-americka-organizacija-pokusava-da-srusi-vlast-u-srbiji-kinesko-ministarstvo-spoljnih-poslova-sve-obelodanilo/vest>

7. Novosti's Analysis of the Chinese Report

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/politika/1399688/narodna-republika-kina-otkriva-detajlnoj-analizi-iza-protesta-srbiji-prosle-godine-stajala-direktno-amerika>

Original: <https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/politika/1399688/narodna-republika-kina-otkriva-detajlnoj-analizi-iza-protesta-srbiji-prosle-godine-stajala-direktno-amerika>

8. Informer on Daniel Server's Statements

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/935849/danijel-server-aleksandar-vucic>

Original: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/935849/danijel-server-aleksandar-vucic>

9. RT's Report on NGO Financing in Serbia

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://lat.rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/105317-nvo-novac-placanje-inostranstvo-narodna-banka-evidencija/>

Original: <https://lat.rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/105317-nvo-novac-placanje-inostranstvo-narodna-banka-evidencija>

10. Informer on Financing Protests in Serbia

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/936097/finasiranje-protesti-stranci#gallery-27584-2>

Original: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/936097/finasiranje-protesti-stranci#gallery-27584-2>

11. Informer on NGO Financing and Analysis

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/936361/finansiranje-rusenja-srbije>

Original: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/936361/finansiranje-rusenja-srbije>

12. Informer TV Program on NGOs

Google Translated Link:

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=sr&tl=en&u=https://informer.rs/tv/live-tv/936481/opozicija-protesti-dilas-nvo-zapad>

Original: <https://informer.rs/tv/live-tv/936481/opozicija-protesti-dilas-nvo-zapad>