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Periphery in Movement: Struggles Against Extractivist Lithium Mining in Serbia

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Abstract

This article initiates a conversation on how contemporary Eastern European peripheralization and the hegemony of the energy transition impact social struggles, introducing the concept of "Periphery in Movement." Through the examination of Serbia's anti-extractivist movement against the mining corporation Rio Tinto, we ground this concept through three core specificities. The first is the power imbalance positioning the movement in opposition to corporate interests, the European Union, and national elites. The second is the conflictual convergence of civil actors, who have undergone significant ideological and practical transformations from the Yugoslav Wars to the present. The third specificity is the "how" of *Periphery in Movement* and its new political propositionalities and potentials. *Periphery in Movement* expands beyond traditional civil society and social movement studies by addressing struggles at the Eastern European periphery that build propositional and life-preserving resistance.

Introduction

While Eastern Europe was positioned at Europe's periphery during the post-socialist transition, marking its economic dependence and marginality to the core, Serbia today, along with other so-called Western Balkan countries, occupies an external periphery or a periphery of periphery in relation to the European Union (EU; Matković, 2014; Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2021). It navigates between multiple centers of power and capital (EU, Russia, China, and UAE), offering up its land and people for extraction and exploitation. The notion of neocolonialism has been used to articulate this structural position, particularly in the context of the green transition and its exploitative economy, including deregulation of the legal framework in favor of foreign investors and policies of subsidizing them, by giving away land and covering workers' salaries with public funds. Serbia has shifted toward authoritarian governance while simultaneously gravitating toward the center through its self-colonizing aspirations, forming a particular fusion of neocolonialism and authoritarianism of comprador elites. The "transition," originally framed as a path from "socialist totalitarianism" to "capitalist democracy," has unraveled into multiple directions, including green transition, followed by production of perpetual ideological confusion, blurring the nature of the problem and blocking the emergence of more permanent forms of resistance and alternatives.

Much has been written about Eastern European[1] social movements and civil society in recent decades. These traditionally separate fields of study have recently found points of convergence, to talk among other things, about multiple crises (Della Porta, 2020). Within peripheral contradictions, people in struggle navigate different ways to mobilize, at times they are caught in cycles of attempts at resistance, and processes of co-optation, while at others creating openings for practicing new or different proposals for reorganizing society. As new forms of peripheralization take shape, local organizing has begun to transcend existing Western frameworks of civil society into new forms of protecting life. The historically specific forms of civil society, social movements, and life in resistance have been converging and diverging in particular ways in recent struggles in Serbia.

In this article, we propose a new notion inspired by Latin American scholarly efforts *Periphery in Movement* to go beyond conventional frameworks of civil society and social movement studies and contribute to embodied critical approaches by focusing on diversified forms of organizing that construct propositional Eastern European life affirming, anti-extractivist resistance. Using *Periphery in Movement* is a way to name resistance of East European *others* in contemporary European neocolonial context. It emerges in defending life against neocolonial extractivism and

[1]Eastern Europe is both a geographic territory shaped by a complex history and a political project aimed at resisting (self-)marginalization and challenging imagined hierarchies. It seeks to reclaim its place in global processes, along with all the complexities they entail (Alexandrescu et al., 2025). We reject the notion of Central and Eastern Europe as yet another attempt to divide the peripheries by introducing the category of Central Europe, positioning it as closer to the core, unlike the East.

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internal governmentality by comprador elites, through contested alliances among conflictual actors, sometimes generating material disruptions to the project of continuous peripheralization. We offer a framework to advance the understanding of how social movements and civil society actors interact when facing converging goals on the one hand, and diverging incentive structures on the other. This concept is shaped by three defining elements. First, *Periphery in Movement* is fundamentally structured by power imbalances, positioning itself in opposition to corporate interests, the EU and its global rivals, and national elites. Second, it is characterized by the often conflictual convergence of diverse actors, reflecting Serbia's peripheral position in Europe and general ideology that is often perceived as normality. Third, these conflictual encounters at times create temporary and more long-term disruptions, opening space for new political possibilities. Being on the Eastern European periphery sharpens awareness of structural power imbalances, forces diverse civil actors into inventive but conflictual convergences, and generates new territorial and discursive spaces of resistance that prefigure alternatives to the hegemonic order. We thus conceptualize three defining elements as relational and mutually constitutive processes, rather than as separate dimensions: peripheral and structural power imbalances not only form the context of propositionality but actively force heterogeneous actors into convergence. Propositionality and mobilization, in turn, form reconfigurations of power relations, while also enabling new movements and civil actors to emerge on Europe's periphery.

Inspired by attempts to describe Latin American movements as a form of *Society in Movement*, *Periphery in Movement* conceptually and indeed politically contributes to rethinking and overcoming ideological constraints of civil society as a space of struggle and contributes to civil society studies. By integrating insights from political economy, civil society studies, and social movement research, *Periphery in Movement* offers a framework for understanding how struggles in Eastern European peripheral spaces take shape and evolve to create an opening for broader anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles.

When examining struggles in Eastern Europe, we have traditionally been offered Western analytical frameworks. Although there have been attempts to adapt these frameworks to account for the specificities of Eastern European contexts, they have remained largely limited in addressing their propositionality. This has led to framing struggles in the region as merely "lagging behind" Western standards (Bădescu et al., 2004) and marginalizing those struggles that operated outside and against this framework, preventing them from being recognized as propositional (Florea et al., 2022; Polanska et al., forthcoming). This is not solely a problem for Eastern Europe; struggles in the so-called Global South have similarly been subjected to neocolonial interpretations (e.g., Zibechi, 2024). Both Latin America and Eastern Europe have seen organized intellectual efforts to contest this situation. In Eastern Europe, there have been efforts to work in a *triple-embedded way* with a methodology that is simultaneously theoretical, collaborative, and engaged (Polanska et al., forthcoming), whereas in Latin America, scholars who participate in struggles, and accompany them, have worked to develop new approaches that amplify the propositionality of struggles and their liberatory potentials.

In this article, the argument is built through historical-relational and interpretive analysis of struggle trajectories, practices, and public discourse, grounded in long-term engagement with the field. Data collection, using overt participant observations at protests, blockades, and public debates, spans the period from the early emergence of local resistance (2020) through the national mobilizations of 2021–2022 and subsequent transformations of the movement. In addition, we draw on reports produced and published by national and international, state, corporate, and civil sector organizations, as well as existing academic research on country-specific anti-extractivist movements.

This article is structured as follows: First, we articulate our perspective on the *Periphery in Movement*. Next, we provide insights into peripheral context and relations of power looking at Serbia's anti- extractivist movement against the mining corporation Rio Tinto. This is followed by the analysis of the structural and ideological contradictions and power relations reflected by the movement's internal dynamics. Then, we provide the analysis of the *how* in the anti-lithium mining struggle in Serbia, with a focus on blockades and their propositionality. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the main contributions of this article and offering an inside into how know-how within the *Periphery in Movement* has been carried forward.

Eastern European *Periphery in Movement*

The concept of *Periphery in Movement* draws inspiration from efforts to describe Latin American movements that have emerged in resistance to extractivist models of governing and use of land as propositional. It is inspired by attempts to overcome totalizing Western concepts such as social movements and civil society in Latin America, aiming instead to articulate localized, anti-extractivist territorial forms of struggles (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2015; Zibechi, 2024). Our attempt at a theoretical "(semi)peripheral alliance" is grounded in an awareness of significant differences between Eastern European peripherality and Latin American peripherality. While Latin American peripherality has been shaped by a long history of colonialism and neocolonial dependence, Eastern European peripherality is deeply marked by its socialist past, postsocialist transitions, and incorporation into the EU under neoliberal terms. Lithium mining remains concentrated in Latin America's Lithium Triangle but is now expanding into Europe's internal peripheries to shorten supply chains and boost geopolitical independence, although production remains marginal by comparison. This creates distinct political economies of resistance, in Latin America, struggles often emerge from Indigenous and peasant communities defending territories, whereas in Eastern Europe, they are frequently driven by coalitions of local residents, farmers, and activists confronting privatization and corruption. Nevertheless, the aim matches. It is to decolonize knowledge production, to know the struggles from within struggles, and to understand the political impact and propositionality of these struggles. As Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015) puts it, struggles cannot be classified externally by conventional labels imposed by power structures. When struggles explode, they tend to redefine objectives and transform landscapes of what is politically imaginable. Current struggles in Serbia, including anti-mining resistance and student-led blockades, create opportunities to rethink civil society and struggles within and beyond it theoretically, conceptually, and politically. The Western tools in knowledge-making often make reflections unable to see these opportunities and thus prevent narratives about them from becoming rooted in history.

In discussions about struggles in Eastern Europe, civil society has often been used as the primary conceptual framework. Civil society is an institutional and ideological construct, shaped and enabled by a specific historical context in Eastern Europe

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(Gagyi, 2021). The transition from Yugoslav society to civil society as a surrogate for society has been fraught with challenges. The imposition of Western civil society models while neglecting existing grassroots structures was never a smooth process—it has always been a field of struggle. This struggle includes the NGOization of the social and political sphere, shaping both activism and governance in ways that often align with neocolonial logics. Civil society also includes GONGOs, corporate NGOs, and social movements of all kinds, including what Paul Stubbs (2007) refers to as the "bastard child" of civil society, such as spaces formed at the intersection of revolutionary and liberal agendas. Meanwhile, many other formations remain marginalized and deliberately invisibilized within the dominant civil society construct. Stubbs critiques civil society as an "ubleha," an ill-defined, unexamined category that often creates more problems than it solves for grassroots struggles. Ellen Meiksins Wood (2012) similarly sees this vague concept as part of capitalist ideological mystifications, particularly in the way it replaces the notion of socialist society with the catch-all category of civil society. The concept serves many purposes, but one of its primary functions within capitalism remains clear: "civil" society is ultimately bourgeois society. Since our main interest lies in struggles that aim to go beyond capitalist anti-society society, this article engages with these issues also at the level of conceptual frameworks. While there have been attempts to use alternative concepts such as community development, participatory governance, and other frameworks that engage struggles differently (Bunyan, 2014; Stubbs, 2007), remaining within the framework of civil society has ultimately proven to be an obstacle. With our work, we seek to contribute to struggles rather than undermine them, including through the language and concepts we choose to employ.

Civil society is recognized as a main ideational, ideological, and institutional concept of post-socialist transition and its organic career. However, there have also been other approaches looking into different phases of its development in the past three decades in a more historically grounded way (Baća, 2024). The potential problem with this approach is overstretching the notion of civil society and turning it into a fixed container for "society outside society," while detaching diversified struggles from everyday life. It is important to state that we are not rejecting knowledge produced in social movement and civil society fields of study. We suggest reading this knowledge critically to understand the internal horizons of struggles: the dynamics within struggles, their internal conflicts, and, at the same time, to overcome their blind spots.

Social movement studies, on the other hand, steam from the Western specific social raptures, including the use of theoretical categories that subject non-Western geographies to its "superior" social organization measurement categories by filling them with local knowledge (Cox et al., 2017). Social movement studies for a long time ignored Eastern Europe as a site with nothing interesting to say on the topic of social protagonism. In recent times, there have been attempts to decolonize social movement studies by special focus on post-colonial and post-socialist societies (ibid.). There have also been attempts to propose specific theoretical approaches emerging from the experience of the Eastern movements. Looking at Eastern European social movements as a *structural field of contention* is an approach offering a singular way to analyze both progressive and more reactionary responses to crisis (Florea et al., 2022). It allows for tracing of connections between actors even if they are not directly connected. We draw on both critical and noncritical approaches to civil society and social movements to understand conflicts in struggles on the Eastern European periphery. This allows us to develop an approach and analysis that is localized, specific to the Eastern European periphery, grounded in the struggles themselves and read political proposals that usually stay hidden underneath more deterministic approaches to the analysis.

Our addition to critical approaches to Eastern European civil society and social movements is in the aspect of propositionality. In the work of Zibechi (2024) and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015), propositionality appears externally in the creation of counter spaces and internally in transformation of various tactics over time within organizing, and our understanding of propositionality in Eastern European struggles derives from this.

The concept of societies in movement on which we build in Zibechi's work refers to social mobilizations in Latin American that emerge largely outside formal, institutionalized organizations. For Zibechi, transformative change is rooted in the practices of feminists, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and residents of favelas and shantytowns across Latin America, who build egalitarian and collective forms of survival and resistance outside the state and political vanguards. Zibechi emphasizes that these movements presuppose the existence of "multiple societies" within society. The interaction and tension between these coexisting societies produce the conditions for new territorialities and autonomous social practices. This perspective is useful for understanding struggles in Eastern Europe, where movements similarly create counter spaces that challenge dominant political and economic orders, particularly in Serbia, where two parallel societies coexist: one aligned with the authoritarian regime of the ruling party and another in opposition to it.

Analytically, our approach to propositionality also builds on the work of Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015). By examining the popular uprisings in Bolivia from 2000 to 2005 that contested neoliberal policies she places struggles at the core of how social antagonism unfolds within the social body. Her focus is on instability and systemic de-totalization of what exists and the partial reconstruction of new realities, and not on how to inhabit the state apparatus and its institutions. Gutiérrez Aguilar differentiates between the *practical scope of struggle* and its *internal horizon*. Practical scopes of struggle are the ways it works with normality of capitalist life. It includes blocking or changing predetermined rhythms of capitalist accumulation and state-political command in each episode of the collective constellation; while internal horizons point to difficulties, inside tensions between actors that disrupt realization of its potentials. Struggles when they expand and grow redefine their objectives and transform landscapes of what is politically imaginable. In her words, this distinction is important because struggles may sometimes focus on defensive actions while simultaneously developing internally to become profoundly subversive. Seen from Eastern Europe, this distinction helps illuminate how struggles in peripheral and dependent contexts, such as Serbia, simultaneously disrupt neocolonial authoritarian neo-liberal normality while internally forging new conflictual alliances and horizons of interdependent life.

The Eastern European peripherality is implicated in struggles both in peripheral neocolonial extractivism including violent mining projects, and in its struggles as a complex field of contention, neocolonial aspirations and political transformation. The polycrisis has made it evident to people of Serbia that Europe does not seek for its periphery to "catch up," but rather to extract resources and exploit labor power from it. This is why it is crucial to also transform the vocabulary through which we speak, as we attempt to reorient ourselves. The neocolonial West remains implicated in

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all aspects of our struggles; however, we take as our task to expose what is possible within a neo-colony and, equally, what remains impossible precisely because of this positionality. We are not interested in ideological discourses that lead to the acceptance of neocolonial capitalist domination, but rather in those that aim to create a new model of sovereignty and equality through the *seizure of power*, enabling the establishment of new norms and institutions. *Periphery in Movement* offers a decolonial perspective on societal struggles in Eastern European peripheries. This approach overcomes the limitations of Western frameworks by going beyond catching up narratives and compartmentalization of struggles within civil society. Its aim is to expand the scope of struggle to encompass society as a whole beyond the ideological and practical restraints of civil society. We propose an approach that views struggle as a de-totalizing process with practical aims and internal horizons, capable of generating new realities.

Power imbalances within European neocolonial extractivism

During the post- (or anti-) socialist period, Serbia, like other neighboring countries, was placed in a position of predatory dependence on the EU, with a function to satisfy the demand for cheap labor, compensate for declining white demographics, expand financialization, and fortify borders (Vilenica & Mentus, 2025). In addition, Serbia has been subjected to neo-extractivism through the depletion of natural resources and ecocides, effectively making it a sacrificial zone to achieve carbon neutrality and produce green energy (Stepanović, 2022). This "green energy transition" is unfolding within the framework of the EU accession process and is reproducing the structural challenges associated with the accession itself: by necessitating energy market liberalization, accelerating international capital inflows, and promoting renewable energy subsidies, it creates the opportunities for lucrative investments (Đunda, 2023). The energy transition thus completely fails to be a genuine sociotechnical transformation and instead appears merely as box-ticking, allowing national and international institutions to simulate compliance with the established standards while ultimately overlooking the ecological and social injustices and harms. Neo-extractivism is inextricable from land grabbing, granting concessions to explorations and extracting of sub-soil resources, and enclosure of the means of production and natural resources—and is analytically linked to the new geoeconomics or geopolitics of capital (Petrović, 2023; Petrović & Pešić, 2023). The interpretation of land grabbing within the context of neo-extractivism relies on Marx's notion of primitive accumulation of capital, where traditional capitalist models from the colonial period are being modernized, and Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession where predation, fraud, and violence used to acquire resources at minimal cost to maximize their capitalization as quickly as possible are a response to crises in value accumulation (Petrović, 2023).

In this context, Rio Tinto, the world's second-largest mining corporation, emerges as a collateral beneficiary and exploiter. Rio Tinto has been present in Serbia for more than a decade now, particularly in Jadar Valley located in Western Serbia. The consolidated revenue of Rio Tinto from sales in 2021 was almost equal in amount to the total value of the Serbian economy (Rio Tinto, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Rio Tinto's investment in the Jadar lithium project, backed by the Serbian government, aligns with the EU's green agenda, which seeks to secure critical raw materials in peripheral regions for the energy transition, as well as with the needs of military industry. When converted into political power, state support is primarily sustained through corrupt and coerced state authorities. This is primarily reflected in the passage of laws tailored *ad hoc* for the needs of the corporation by the state parliament and the open lobbying for the project by the state's highest-ranking politicians. Although Serbia would be obligated to finance the entire infrastructure of the Project (roads, railway, water supply, gas pipeline, electrical infrastructure, etc.), it would also have to finance the remediation in the case of an ecological disaster (Drakulić et al., 2025).

The regularity in the communicative strategy of the corporation is a highly skillful method reflected in its one-sidedness, it is based on presenting plans to members of the local community without providing any adequate/concrete answers to questions, such as how lithium and boron will be extracted from jadarite and what the chemical composition of the residues deposited in the tailings will be (Krstić, 2020). The manipulative patterns were also evident through corporations' donations to local communities, hospitals, schools, and cultural centers for more than a decade, just to prepare the peaceful ground for their relocation (Đorđević & Sekulić, 2021). Open lobbying and providing counterintuitive and contradictory information by the highest-ranking politicians were frequent. The people were frightened by false claims about a lawsuit the corporation would file against Serbia if the project were abandoned. However, the official halt of the project occurred just before the elections at all levels in 2023, when people were reassured that the possibility of opening the mine had been put to rest. Very quickly it turned out that this was just a fabrication meant to pacify the voters before the elections (which were won by the regime through proven electoral fraud once again). It was clear that it contrasted the reality as Rio Tinto still had offices in Loznica and Gornje Nedeljice, was buying up land, and planning a construction waste dump on a parcel that, after the spatial plan was annulled, was returned to its status as agricultural land. After the ruling of the Constitutional Court, according to which the government decision to abolish the project was allegedly unconstitutional, the implementation of the project formally continued.

Political persecution of activists and journalists opposing the mine eradication, along with the criminalization of protests, became a common tactic used by state authorities. Demonstrators also face physical repression and violence at protests and blockades by various groups. When the protests peaked in mass in November 2021, along with police violence against peaceful demonstrators, attacks with cold weapons such as hammers and clubs by thugs hired by the police were also recorded (Unkovski-Korica, 2021). In several cities, unprosecuted attacks by drivers who ran through blockades, running over peaceful protesters, also occurred. Beyond the protests, activists—often women—were targeted, with public calls for lynching through posters put up along the communities where they lived (Obrenović, 2021). Scientists publishing analyses, such as the economic inefficiency of the potential opening of the mine, received numerous death threats, which were never prosecuted (Ničić, 2024). In addition, last year, a GONGO "Kopaćemo" ("We Will Dig") was announced. This group allegedly opposes the spread of misinformation about the Jadar project and publicly creates lists of "unsuitable" individuals, targeting them as "eco-terrorists," and publishing their photos, personal details, education, jobs, and even sexual orientation in some cases (Matković, 2024). The regime, most often the president, with claims allegedly supported by information from Russian intelligence sources, accused the "West" as the main destabilizing factor in the opening of the mine, even though Western capitalists are the main potential profiteers and pressures of the potential project. EU officials, on the other hand, sporadically condemn the violence at the protests

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but consistently tolerate the brutal autocracy (Piletić, 2024), the "captured state," and infiltrating clientelist networks through corruption in Serbia (Richter & Wunsch, 2020), refusing to oppose their subordinate. The regime then further strengthens the facade of anti-Western populist politics and the narrative of the state being threatened by Western powers.

The *Periphery in Movement* operates under extreme neocolonial power imbalances in Serbia, encompassing all segments of the segmented capitalist anti-society. The peripheralization of Serbia has pushed livelihoods into an extreme survival mode, where environmental degradation and social dispossession define everyday life. The interplay between foreign capital, the EU and its global rivals, national elites, and civil sector co-optation has been revealed through direct confrontation, making Serbia a critical case for understanding how neocolonial extractivist capitalism operates in the EU periphery.

Movement amid peripheral contradictions

Yugoslav society, built on social ownership and self-management, was replaced after 1989 by capitalist relations based on private property (Vilenica et al., 2021). Workers' self-management was erased from mainstream history, despite remaining a historical fact, while civil society was reshaped as a Western tool for "democratization" and "civilizing" the post-socialist periphery. The new paradigm of civil society, or society without society, became prominent as a "unit of measurement" for the advancement of societies, including its struggles and knowledge production, throughout Eastern Europe. However, formations outside this construct have continued to exist.

While the anti-lithium struggle in Serbia has achieved significant victories, its internal dynamics reveal tensions reflecting structural and ideological contradictions and intricate power dynamics shaped by Serbia's peripheral position within Europe. They include the dependent position of civil sector organizations, complex positionality of nationalism and nationalist narratives, rural–urban divides, and the use of expanding environmental awareness to gather political points in parliamentary competition. These dynamics are mainly reflected in uneven access to resources, media visibility, donor support, political legitimacy, and modes of political action. Local communities directly affected by extractivism operate from positions of structural vulnerability and land-based struggle for survival, while professionalized NGOs generally have greater access to resources and to institutional and media channels. Grassroots formations, situated between these poles, may act as mediators but are mainly constrained by limited resources and precarious organizational forms.

While opposition to extractivist mining is a key mobilizing force, the "green agenda" has several faces. The main polarization presented to the public is a conflict between its allegedly civilized, pro-EU liberal facade and its far-right, anti-Western stance, which promotes racial purity and national self-preservation (Kišjuhas, 2021). Receiving funding from foreign donors by professional activists is demonized in Serbia by both the right and the government, labeling recipients as foreign agents, which undermines trust in their work. The problem of nationalism further complicates the movement's internal cohesion, including the extreme aversion of EU-influenced civil society to any mention of ethnic identity. On the left, some opinions that could be heard are that the ecological narrative has been largely co-opted and politicized in an overly right-liberal direction, making it confined to middle-class concerns (Milosavljević, 2024). This perspective obscures the fact that the environmental struggle of local communities in Serbia is fundamentally a fight for survival. These narratives are also reflected in the "urban–rural" divide that exists in Serbia and within this struggle. Although the differences in attitudes between "rural" and "urban" actors on the anti-lithium issue in Serbia remain unexplored, there is evidence of a discursive gap between organizations operating at the national level and based in Belgrade and other large cities and local organizations from rural areas (Petrović, 2023). This can be added to a significant lack of mutual trust and a reluctance to cooperate substantially between grassroots and professional organizations across the country, as indicated in the research by Vukelić et al. (2021). Finally, in the media, it is often stated that green has become the favorite color of the Serbian opposition. Many political actors aiming to participate in parliamentary struggles or gain party points are riding the green wave in Serbia and capitalizing on the anti-lithium movement (Janković, 2022). Such attempts include efforts by smaller opposition actors to unite around these issues, such as the coalition *Moramo!* (We Must!), which brought together groups like *Ne davimo Beograd* (Do not Let Belgrade Drown), *Ekološki ustanak* (Ecological Uprising), and the open civic platform Akcija (Action).

The anti-lithium mining struggle in Serbia articulates a political stance that extends beyond national borders, positioning itself within global struggles against extractivism. At its core, opposing the country's role as a resource periphery for foreign capital, the movement is fundamentally anti-colonial (Đukanović, 2024). The narrative about neocolonialism was actually dominant in online spaces and at street protests during the peak of protests in 2021 (Stepanović, 2025). However, ambiguity of this discourse enables both right- and left-wing interpretations of the concept. The right-wing narrative frames Western actors as colonizers, emphasizing sentiments tied to the preservation of Serbian nature, culture, and local communities. On the other side, the left-wing narrative frames neocolonialism as a transnational issue, driven by international mining profit-oriented interests concerning lithium extraction, and the resulting pollution and ecocide, transcending national boundaries (ibid.).

Anti-lithium mining struggles in Serbia have widely been seen as "ecological struggles." According to Vukelić (2014), Serbia developed an "ecological civil sector" unlike participatory and transactional movements in other more "Westernized" contexts. Instead of strong political engagement, Serbia's dominant environmental organizations focus on service provision, compensating for the state's retreat under neoliberal reforms. Their activities are largely depoliticized, emphasizing technical and administrative tasks, often relying on external funding, which compromises their critical stance. She describes the sector as nonautonomous, apolitical, and lacking activists, reflecting a broader context of a "weak state" and "weak civil society."

This analysis shows that creating civil society at the periphery has never been a smooth process. It has been a crucial element in the EU's external action framework in the domain of "promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law." This created a system of economic coercion and conflicts among differentiated (political) actors outside institutions in Eastern Europe. On one hand, the civil sector served as a vehicle for advancing EU neocolonial interests, acting as both an incubator and a launching platform for "oppositional pro-democratic" political actors and emerging political parties. On the other hand, it functioned as a necessary evil and a disciplining force for poor grassroots movements and leftist actors that are not always obedient. This system constructed a "good-other" of the EU self and not-quite-civil

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society as a "bad-other" of the EU self (Luciani, 2021). This system is designed to produce "civil(ized)" citizens in contrast to the "defective people" from the post-socialist periphery. From within, civil society actors and those engaged in struggle are targeted and discredited as Western agents, while the people are portrayed as ignorant or resistant to progress.

Nevertheless, anti-lithium mining struggles could not be reduced to ecological struggles located in the civil sector. A turning point for land-based struggles in Serbia occurred in 2017 after the solidification of Progressive Party government leaving very little space for political activity (Pavlović, 2024). This moved struggles from institutions to public space. As small hydro plants began to be constructed across multiple locations in Stara Planina in 2017, local residents started organizing collective protests. These demonstrations eventually led to the formation of the movement *Let us Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina* (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022). Initially, the protests emerged as spontaneous reactions from local communities whose way of life was directly threatened. However, with the formation of *Let us Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina* and the *Association of Local Communities of Stara Planina*, these fragmented struggles merged into a more coordinated movement, attracting public attention and support from environmental organizations and experts. Vukelić and Pešić, in their analysis of the discourse used by environmental activists, highlight a shift away from the ecological modernization narrative that had dominated since the early 2000s. They observe the rise of a local environmental movement that moves beyond both the donor-driven professional activism typical of early post-socialist transformation and the depoliticized environmentalism inherited from the socialist era, now incorporating a strong emphasis on environmental justice. This struggle brought to the fore the idea that Serbia should resist becoming an "eco-colony" of the EU and a source of natural resources for the EUs green transition. These changes created a new framework for (environmental) struggles to come.

The "how" of *Periphery in Movement* and its proposition

The resistance to lithium mining in Serbia did not emerge with the discovery of jadarite but developed gradually as communities faced increasing pressure and threats to their livelihoods. During the early stages of the proposed mining project, many local residents, unaware that their land was located near the planned tailings, permitted sample drilling on their properties, which led to visible crop damages. In autumn 2020, land classifications in the Jadar Valley were changed from agricultural to building land without residents' knowledge, jeopardizing farmers' livelihoods. According to the Centre for Investigative Journalism Serbia (Đorđević & Sekulić, 2021), Rio Tinto covered the tax costs for this reclassification despite not owning the land. Blockades began in late 2020 and escalated in 2021 (during which the struggle was made more difficult due to the pandemic's gathering restrictions), particularly after the Loznica government amended its spatial plan in July to align with the Jadar Project, prompting hundreds to protest (Đukanović, 2022). This reclassification has more than doubled the taxes that landowners will pay and has raised concerns about the possibility of using the land for agricultural purposes (Đorđević & Sekulić, 2021). As a result, some residents, often uninformed about their rights, started moving away, whereas others continue to face ongoing pressures, such as threats of forced expropriation (Piletić, 2024). Moreover, the corporation employed a strategy of de-roofing the acquired houses, marking them with the red and white tape exclaiming "No entry" wraps and "Private Property" signs, with installed cameras that record any attempt of trespassing (Đukanović, 2022).

By October 2021, the Association of Ecological Organisations of Serbia was officially formed, uniting six communities (Gornje Nedeljice, Valjevo, Pranjani, Jagodina, Rekovac, and Dobrinja) facing lithium exploration across different parts of the country. The alliance was formed in collaboration with the ecological campaign team *Marš sa Drine*. This grassroots mobilization transformed localized protests into a coordinated national resistance in collaboration with other actors including ecological organizations in other parts of the country.

The greatest burden is borne by the residents of profitable land who refused to sell their homes and agricultural land despite pressure and disinformation from the state and the company. They continue to live on their land daily, resisting ongoing attempts to displace them. In this way, they effectively blocked the land from corporate use. One of the first collective actions was physically stopping Balkan Mining and Minerals company from drilling exploratory holes by blocking the road (Nikić, 2021). Blockades proved to be a highly successful tactic several years earlier, in the case of the aforementioned struggle against hydropower plants on Stara Planina. There, local roads were primarily blocked to prevent investors from accessing the construction sites and commencing work, until their building permit expired (Cvijović et al., 2021). In much the same way, once trust in the purported benefits of the project had already been largely lost, residents of the Jadar valley self-organized to notify one another about mobilization in the field when company vehicles appeared, with the aim of setting up blockades to prevent the company from conducting site investigations.

At the local level, blockades also had an anti-domicide character. Their goal was to physically prevent the illegal demolition of houses, primarily in Gornje Nedeljice, on multiple occasions, carried out by local residents and solidarity activists. Although Rio Tinto acquired ownership of these houses by using economic power —offering significantly above-market prices for houses and land, as well as separate bonuses for quick sales and covering of transport and moving costs of sellers—the demolitions were attempted without proper permits.

Blocking the highway in the capital and other largest cities, roads and bridges across the country, and even border crossings is one of the main tactics of anti-lithium struggles in Serbia (Petrović & Pešić, 2023). The immediate cause of mass traffic blockades across the whole country—which also marked the peak of the movement's mobilization in late 2021, was caused by amendments to the Law on Referendum, which abolished the 50% threshold required for a successful referendum, and the Law on Expropriation, which enabled authorities to, through expedited procedures, expropriate private properties if it is deemed in the "public" interest (Đukanović, 2022; Stuehlen & Anderl, 2024).

The largest blockade, which took place in early December 2021, included more than 50 cities across the country. The main railway stations, highways, and bridges in the capital Belgrade were blocked, as well as other major railways and key state roads in other cities, which ended with the intervention of the gendarmerie and arrests—even after the protests had ended. Since then, multiple blockades continued for weeks always happening on Saturdays at 2 PM at different locations nationally and internationally. Blockades began with a public call from the organization *Kreni-Promeni*, which had already been mobilizing against the public broadcaster RTS for airing a Rio Tinto advertisement, while refusing to

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broadcast an anti-mining ad. Initially, coordination was partly managed by SOAS (*Savez ekoloških organizacija Srbije* — Association of Environmental Organizations of Serbia), but soon, various actors from across Serbia started organizing blockades in a decentralized manner. These included independent activists, local NGOs, right-wing organizations, opposition parties and movements, scientists, actors, and other activists.

In July 2022 alone, more than 50 blockades and protests against the Jadar project organized by various, mostly local initiatives took place across Serbia. The demands varied—some called for a 20-year moratorium on lithium and boron exploitation, the annulment of the regulation on the Spatial Plan of Special Purpose Areas (a key legal basis for opening the mine), and full public access to all documents and agreements related to the project. Other demands included adherence to the Serbian Constitution and laws, stricter control and sanctioning of environmental polluters and ecosystem devastators, as well as integrating environmental protection into planning and strategic documents. Additional demands involved active waste management, air quality planning, sustainable development, and the adoption of a National Energy and Climate Plan focused on transitioning to renewable energy sources.

The anti-lithium mining struggle grew stronger by the wave of student rebellion starting in November 2024. Serbia's largest ongoing student rebellion, marked by university occupations and road blockades, has become, in the last months, a significant catalyst for broader mobilization of people in Serbia. The protests initially erupted in Belgrade and Novi Sad, demanding political and criminal accountability for the deaths of 16 people in the Novi Sad train station canopy collapse last November. As the movement gained momentum, while broadening their set of demands, students organized blockades of major roads across the country, repeating this strategy developed by the ecological struggles. University blockades operate through direct democratic plenums, which have begun spreading beyond universities to cultural institutions and even municipal assemblies. The anti-lithium mining struggle supports student demands[2] while ensuring that business as usual does not resume in their own communities. Several additional mechanisms are strikingly characteristic as inherited from the struggles against small hydropower plants, later applied in the anti-lithium mobilization and the student-led movement. These include horizontal decision-making within small action groups that are autonomous yet interconnected; frequent actions, from small to large in scale, that continuously sustain public attention and mobilize broader audiences; and the building of alliances with other local communities, workers, scientists, and other organizations and public figures.

Throughout history, blockades have been a powerful tool of resistance (Chua & Bosworth, 2023). In Serbia, profitable land was defended by remaining in place, roads were obstructed, and institutions were shut down to resist deregulation of the legal framework and resist systemic and corporate violence. Blocades are thus a way of overall economic and political disruption. By the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, in solidarity with the student movement, people began blocking whatever they could, from roads to municipalities, as part of a broader push toward a general strike and more direct forms of democracy. The most recent by-product of student movement are small-scale horizontal assemblies across the country (Zbor), where the community members directly decide on political issues affecting their local area. Across the country, blockades are being used on a mass scale as means of opening up a space to imagine a future in which people and their livelihoods are not on sale. The sudden eruption of blockades across Serbia reflects a growing realization: to enact significant change and save lives at the periphery of the periphery of the EU. The idea that "everything must stop" was first articulated during the anti-lithium mining blockades in 2021, later reinterpreted in 2023 as a response to the regime's election slogan "Serbia Must Not Stop," and eventually became a widely used slogan of the student-led movement. This political proposal was operationalized through processes of alignment and mass mobilization, despite peripheral divides.

Conclusion

In this article, we introduce the concept of *Periphery in Movement*, to move beyond traditional frameworks of civil society and social movement studies. By examining the anti-lithium mining movement in Serbia, focused on the struggle against Rio Tinto's *Jadar* project, we explore both its contradictions, power dynamics, and its propositional forms of resistance. Power imbalance within European neocolonial extractivism creates contradictions and power imbalance within social movement itself. For decades, this has been creating frictions that have weakened the movements. Under the regime of extractivism, temporary convergences within differences have become possible through the shared commitment to oppose the politics of death at the level of minimal common ground. We may conclude that the anti-lithium mining movement in Serbia is not merely a reaction to environmental destruction—it is a political proposal rooted in survival and suspension. It asserts the right to exist outside the dictates of extractivist capitalism, rejecting the framing of resource exploitation as inevitable, at least temporarily.

The central argument of this article emphasizes the need for a more grounded and historical approach to studying social movements in Eastern Europe, situated within a broader and more nuanced context of state–society relations, one that is able to recognize the organizational and political transformations of Eastern European movements. The *Periphery in Movement* provides a framework to rethink struggles in Eastern Europe beyond Western analytical approaches, and in dialogue with Latin American theoretical innovations, foregrounding power relations at Europe's diversified peripheries, the internal contradictions and power dynamics shaped by this positionality, and the propositional dimensions of these struggles.

The *Periphery in Movement* encompasses struggles that intersect, build on one another, and learn from each other. As anti-lithium mining movement in Serbia incorporated tactics and organizational logics developed during the anti-hydroelectric campaign, which were later adopted by the student-led movement, it is indicative how lessons learned in one context of contestation can circulate between struggles that share overlapping grievances yet operate within distinct socio-political arenas. Using the concept further opens up several interconnected research directions. Challenging narratives of European exceptionalism and reframing post-socialist transformations as part of a wider history of neocolonial restructuring, it supports decolonial readings of Eastern European struggles that situate them within global hierarchies of capital and power. It also invites movement genealogy studies that trace how repertoires of organizing and contention circulate across peripheral spaces, and finally, it encourages ethnographic attention to the conflictual processes through which movements are constituted, focusing on internal convergence and fracture rather than presuming idealized cohesion.

[2]And vice versa, which is mainly evident in the occasional organization of joint marches and protests.

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The anti-lithium movement in Serbia illustrates how *Periphery in Movement* operates under double peripheral dependency, confronting the logic of neo-extractivist capitalism through resistance to Rio Tinto's project and state complicity. This decentralized, multiscalar struggle shows how localized resistance can challenge systemic extraction and generate new political horizons. Emerging from a local struggle, as awareness grew about the project's potential environmental devastation and the deregulation of laws to facilitate profitable mining infrastructure, it has united people and become a catalyst for broader resistance against widespread corruption and corporate neocolonialism across the country, while also planting the seeds for new struggles on the peripheries that are yet to come.

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