

## **How have historical and contemporary environmental policies shaped Serbia's approach to environmental regulation, and what are the societal and economic implications of these policies?**

**Bojana Drca, 2024**

The project draws on my past work in environmental activism and policy. My background includes founding the "For Air, Water, and Land" initiative through the Projects for Peace Fellowship, conducting independent research on lithium mining in Argentina, and interning at Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These experiences have shaped my understanding of environmental justice and policy, driving my desire to contribute to Serbia's environmental regulation.

The research methodology involved a combination of literature reviews, field observations, and policy analysis. I conducted literature reviews in Serbian libraries and visited museums and historical sites. Moreover, I drew comparisons between historical policy documents and contemporary practices, evaluating how these policies are implemented on the ground. The research also involved engaging with local NGOs, social movements, and governmental bodies to gain practical insights into Serbia's environmental governance. Additionally, I actively participated in the protests against the Rio Tinto lithium mine this summer. This experience offered insights into the government's response, the overwhelming citizen turnout, and the impact of policies on the population.

Serbia's contemporary environmental policies are shaped by its aspirations for European Union (EU) integration. However, the implementation of these policies faces challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of public participation. These issues become bigger with economic pressures, meaning the government prioritizes short-term economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability. While there is a growing awareness and activism around environmental issues, particularly among the youth, the disconnect between policy and practice has led to public disillusionment. Environmental degradation due to entering of mines and factories managed by foreigners who do not follow regulations, particularly in rural areas, continues to affect the quality of life, with marginalized communities bearing the worst of the impacts.

The proposed Rio Tinto lithium mine in the Jadar Valley is a critical case study in examining the failures of Serbia's environmental regulation. Despite the government's initial cancellation of the project due to public opposition in 2022, it was revived under pressure from the EU this year, which views the mine as essential for meeting its climate goals. This decision shows the government's prioritization of foreign economic interests over the environmental and societal well-being of its citizens. Despite Rio Tinto's claims of adhering to safety standards, the project has been widely criticized for its potential to cause significant environmental damage, including water contamination and air pollution.

Historical legacies of weak enforcement, combined with contemporary pressures from foreign investments and geopolitical interests, have led to a regulatory environment that fails to protect the environment and the well-being of local communities. Moving forward, the state should work on increased public participation, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and a greater emphasis on sustainability in economic planning. As I continue my academic and professional journey, this research serves as a crucial steppingstone toward my career in international environmental policy. I will continue to be an active participant and commit to advocating for environmental justice both in Serbia and on the global stage.

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