

# HOW DOES THE FAR RIGHT ON TELEGRAM INSTRUMENTALISE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS?

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## KEY POINTS

- ◆ Far-right actors use current social issues such as the Rio Tinto project as entry points for disseminating their ideological narratives;
- ◆ Mobilisation relies on emotional and apocalyptic rhetoric, with occasional implicit normalisation of violence;
- ◆ Environmental protests are not ideologically linked to the far right but are instead subject to external appropriation;
- ◆ This type of discourse results in increased pressure on, and delegitimation of, local environmental activists.



## INTRODUCTION

On 16 July 2024, the Government of Serbia adopted a regulation<sup>1</sup> enabling the continuation of the lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley, developed by the Anglo-Australian company Rio Tinto. The investment had previously been halted under public pressure following the 2021 protests,<sup>2</sup> and the decision to revive it triggered a new wave of discontent across the country. Renewed and intensified public opposition<sup>3</sup> was driven by the perception that government decisions were made non-transparently<sup>4</sup> and without regard for the will and interests of local communities, as well as by deep concerns over potential long-term consequences for the environment, public health, and the survival of communities in the affected area. This combination of political distrust, a sense of injustice, and existential fear created fertile ground for the radicalisation of public discourse and for the involvement of actors seeking to redirect legitimate civic grievances toward extremist interpretations and forms of mobilisation. Although the protests against the Rio Tinto project were nominally focused on environmental protection, their intensity and broad societal visibility attracted significant attention from a range of political actors, including far-right groups.

In this context, Telegram emerges as a key space for tracking such processes,<sup>5</sup> as it enables the rapid dissemination of messages, minimal content moderation, and direct communication with audiences outside traditional media channels. An analysis of posts from seven right-wing Telegram channels – *Bunker*, *BUNT je stanje duha*, *Koridor*, *Narodna patrola*, *Srbska akcija*, *Princip*, and *Vaseljenska* points to a much broader and more layered spectrum of political and ideological narratives. These channels were selected because they represent relevant actors within the Serbian far-right Telegram ecosystem,<sup>6</sup> both in terms of their consistent dissemination of nationalist, anti-Western, pro-Russian, and anti-system narratives, and their visibility, audience engagement, and role within an interconnected network of similar channels. The selection was based on publicly available data from “TGStat”,<sup>7</sup> primarily the number of followers, engagement rates, and posting frequency, as well as the specific function of individual channels in content dissemination and audience mobilisation. It is particularly important to note that some channels, such as “Bunt”, despite exhibiting relatively lower engagement compared to other actors, achieve significant reach due to their large follower base. This means that their messages reach a broader audience, giving them an important role in the diffusion of narratives.

Through a content analysis of posts published by these seven right-wing Telegram channels between 17 July and 28 August 2024, we examine how far-right groups instrumentalise the issue of lithium mining to delegitimise both the government and the opposition, promote anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives, and mobilise citizens around nationalist messaging. The analysis is based on a qualitative reading of posts and the identification of dominant narratives across these channels, drawing on findings from previous research on extremism on Telegram, relevant media sources, and insights gathered through interviews with local environmental activists regarding the impact of such communication on actors on the ground.

Although the analysed period is temporally limited, the issue itself has remained relevant, as the question of lithium extraction and the accompanying protests periodically re-emerge in the public sphere. This recurring dynamic makes it an important case for understanding how contemporary social issues are instrumentalised within a broader political and ideological context. Moreover, the selected timeframe is particularly significant as it coincides with the decision of the Government of Serbia to once again give the green light to lithium exploitation, as well as with the signing of a Memorandum of Strategic Partnership on Sustainable Raw Materials with the European Union.<sup>8</sup> These developments triggered mass protests across the country,<sup>9</sup> while simultaneously opening space for the strengthening of anti-Western and anti-EU narratives, particularly among far-right actors.

## UNITED IN OPPOSITION TO LITHIUM MINING: “YOU CANNOT DIG!”

All analysed groups, regardless of differences in tone and ideology, express strong opposition to the project carried out by Rio Tinto and to lithium mining on the territory of Serbia. While the environmental narrative is dominant, it is often intertwined with elements of conspiracy, religion, and overt xenophobia.

“Vaseljenska” warns that “lithium is a death sentence for all of us,”<sup>10</sup> while “Srbska Akcija” further frames the issue in terms of colonial exploitation.<sup>11</sup> “Bunker” disseminates claims that the Rothschilds own 40% of Rio Tinto,<sup>12</sup> drawing on common conspiracy theories that link global financial elites to the exploitation of natural resources. “Vaseljenska”, on the other hand, suggests that “German funds support the protests, but demand lithium,”<sup>13</sup> thereby attempting to discredit pro-European opposition actors.

The group “Koridor” places particular emphasis on the religious dimension, highlighting that Metropolitan Fotije, as a representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, also opposes lithium mining.<sup>14</sup> “Vaseljenska”, in its effort to avoid direct accusations against the ruling structures, employs more complex technical arguments, such as the lack of mining inspectors and negative experiences from other countries, to reinforce a sense of justified fear.<sup>15</sup> “Srbska Akcija” goes a step further by framing the struggle against Rio Tinto as a national liberation from “globalist occupation.”<sup>16</sup>

## ATTITUDES TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT AND THE OPPOSITION

Attitudes toward the government and the opposition are structured around a stark binary division: domestic traitors versus foreign occupiers. All analysed groups, albeit with varying nuances, portray the authorities as corrupt, subservient, and lacking sovereignty. However, important differences emerge in how this criticism is articulated. While anti-regime actors openly target the top leadership, some groups closer to the authorities, such as “Vaseljenska” and “Princip”, avoid direct accusations against the president and central figures of power, instead redirecting responsibility for controversial decisions onto individuals within the system. “Narodna patrola” stands out for its direct accusations against the regime, referring to the president in derogatory terms and accusing him of collaborating with occupiers: “The regime will defend the enormous sums of money they have stolen.”<sup>17</sup> “Bunt” and “Bunker” also criticize the authorities for “offering us” to Rio Tinto,<sup>18</sup> but using different language and with significantly less intensity. By contrast, “Koridor” maintains distance, rather than directly attacking the government, it shifts the focus toward criticizing the West. In other words, the government may not be ideal, but it must be defended against Western attempts to undermine the state.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, “Vaseljenska” selectively targets individuals within the regime, particularly through accusations of corruption, while maintaining a dominant narrative that “the problem is not the government, but the malicious West.”<sup>20</sup> “Princip”, for its part, largely refrains from criticizing the regime, and lithium mining was not a central topic in its communication during the observed period. Its messaging remains neutral, although it did share posts related to a major protest in Belgrade. In contrast, “Srbska Akcija” adopts an explicitly hostile stance,<sup>21</sup> portraying the government as a servant of colonial powers<sup>22</sup> and calling for a national revolution as the only viable solution.<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to the opposition, all groups share a negative stance and reject the possibility of cooperation. “Bunt” and “Bunker” use the term “so-called opposition,”<sup>24</sup> accusing<sup>25</sup> opposition actors such as “Sviće” of misrepresentation and betrayal. “Koridor” frames opposition-led protests as serving foreign interests.<sup>26</sup> In the rhetoric of “Vaseljenska”, opposition actors and NGOs are portrayed as exten-

sions of the CIA<sup>27</sup> and instruments of destabilisation, alongside initiatives such as “ProGlas”.<sup>28</sup> “Srbska Akcija” consistently advances the claim that the government and the opposition are “two sides of the same coin,”<sup>29</sup> part of the same anti-national system, while presenting itself as the *only genuine alternative*. “Princip”, as in its stance toward the government, maintains an appearance of political neutrality and does not comment on the opposition in this context.

Anti-Western sentiment is present across all groups – the West is framed as the primary source of all problems, whether through economic exploitation (e.g., Rio Tinto), political destabilisation (e.g., CIA/NATO), or other, more indirect forms of influence. Conspiracy theories are widespread, with frequent references to “foreign agents.” Although thematic focuses vary, from environmental issues to Kosovo, the underlying message often remains the same: the system is hostile, and rebellion is the only option left to the people.

## MOBILISATION THROUGH EMOTIONAL RHETORIC AND PANIC AMPLIFICATION

Mobilisation and calls to action represent a central mechanism through which right-wing groups on Telegram seek to channel discontent and transform it into concrete forms of action. However, a clear distinction can be observed among the analysed actors: anti-regime right-wing groups are far more likely to call for more radical and confrontational forms of action, while pro-regime or regime-aligned actors tend to avoid such open confrontation. Instead, they focus on controlling the narrative, delegitimising other protest organisers, and redirecting responsibility toward external actors.

“Vaseljenska” relies on documenting “successful” actions on the ground,<sup>30</sup> while simultaneously delegitimising similar protests organised by what it labels “NGO traitors,”<sup>31</sup> and at times downplaying or relativizing their success.<sup>32</sup> What particularly distinguishes “Vaseljenska” is its inconsistency in positions, as illustrated by the example of the protest in Valjevo, which it initially praised<sup>33</sup> but later reframed as involving foreign intelligence services and anti-Serbian element.<sup>34</sup> “Koridor” and “Princip” channel mobilisation through a religious framework, calling for processions (sr. litije) and gatherings in front of churches, often citing Metropolitan Fotije and other religious officials: “God forbid that Serbia be dug up!”<sup>35</sup> Particularly notable is the approach of “Princip”, which generally avoids direct criticism of the authorities while still calling for protest, framing the issue of mining as an existential and national question that transcends political divisions.<sup>36</sup>

Religious symbols and motifs of “national sacred sites” serve as a bridge between environmental struggle and a broader nationalist ideology. This is most evident in the case of “Srbska Akcija”, which is ideologically the most rigid, as well as in the case of the group “Princip”, which directly links the Jadar project to Kosovo: “The struggle for Jadar is part of the struggle for Kosovo and Metohija!”<sup>37</sup> In addition, well-established narratives of victimhood and heroism play an important role. “Bunker” and “Bunt” seek to construct an image of a small but justice-seeking nation once again fighting against global elites and global capital.<sup>38</sup> Beyond linguistic symbolism, visual messaging also plays a significant role in mobilisation: “Vaseljenska” circulates apocalyptic images of red-coloured water from the Jadar River as a warning of an impending catastrophe of biblical proportions.<sup>39</sup>

Although “Bunt” exhibits a lower intensity of rhetoric and mobilisation messaging compared to some other groups, its significance should not be underestimated. Due to its large number of followers, the content it disseminates has the potential to reach a broader audience, thereby contributing to the normalisation and diffusion of certain narratives, even without high levels of direct engagement.

While explicit calls to violence are almost entirely absent and content that could be subject to sanctions is carefully avoided, violent tendencies are present in more latent forms and are often framed as a necessity and a last line of defence against betrayal and neocolonialism. “Narodna patrola” employs aggressive

and inflammatory rhetoric,<sup>40</sup> while “Srbska Akcija” emphasises the need for “preparation” through the acquisition of military skills<sup>41</sup> and the strengthening of ideological foundations. “Vaseljenska”, on the other hand, appears to play a dual strategy, simultaneously spreading conspiracy theories about a “bloody September”<sup>42</sup> allegedly being prepared by opposition actors and NGOs, even while opposing the Rio Tinto project. What all the analysed groups have in common is that violence is not openly promoted but rather presented as a legitimate method in borderline situations, while an atmosphere is gradually created in which violence can be justified. When individual messages from these groups are interpreted in isolation, this tone may not be immediately apparent, but there is a clear underlying thread leading toward the legitimisation and justification of violence in pursuit of a higher goal.

What is central to this analysis is the attempt to instrumentalise the issue of the Rio Tinto project. The environmental framing serves as a foundation for the dissemination of pre-existing far-right ideological narratives and patterns. One approach relies on existing or newly constructed conspiracy theories, in which the project is linked to global financial elites and colonial capital, often portrayed as being connected to domestic actors who are subsequently antagonised through these narratives. A second method involves presenting the struggle against mining as a moral or even religious mission, while a third approach uses the issue primarily to legitimise extremist action, including calls for a “final confrontation” with Western values. In all cases, opposition to the Rio Tinto project does not hold intrinsic value in itself; rather, it serves as a tool and a pretext for reinforcing existing narratives.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS

These narratives do not remain confined to the level of discourse but have direct consequences for the position of actors on the ground, particularly environmental activists. Findings from field research<sup>43</sup> indicate that local initiatives initially relied primarily on institutional and legal mechanisms, including appeals to competent state bodies, inspections, and local authorities. However, the lack of an adequate response and the consistent disregard shown by institutions led to a gradual radicalisation of their methods, which in later stages came to include road blockades and other forms of civil disobedience.<sup>44</sup>

This pattern is particularly evident in Loznica and surrounding areas, which are located in close proximity to the site designated for mining within the Jadar project. Interviews with local activists clearly indicate that actions involving civil disobedience were seen as last-resort, reactive measures, rather than an initial strategy.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, field research<sup>46</sup> conducted in Valjevo, where mining activities had also been announced, points out to a deep sense of existential threat among local residents. One elderly activist described her willingness to “make a Molotov cocktail,” even though, as she herself noted, she does not know how to make one.<sup>47</sup> This illustrates the level of frustration and the perception of a struggle for survival, particularly among older residents who feel compelled to defend the land on which their families live.

It is important to emphasise that the findings of the field research<sup>48</sup> do not indicate the existence of organisational or ideological links between local environmental initiatives and far-right or pro-Russian groups. On the contrary, the protests are predominantly articulated as local, non-ideological, and focused on environmental protection and livelihoods. Although EU-sceptical or even anti-EU attitudes are present among some participants, these are best understood as a reaction to the absence or limited response of the European Union to government actions and the neglect of demands put forward by environmental and other civic initiatives, rather than as an expression of ideological or organisational alignment with far-right actors. With this in mind, attempts by extremist actors to appropriate or ideologically reshape this issue do not stem from genuine links on the ground, but rather represent an external instrumentalisation.

Such dynamics have direct negative consequences for the activists themselves. Associating legitimate civic initiatives with extremism contributes to their delegitimisation and further increases the pressure they face.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, these narratives create space for authorities to portray protests and their participants as a security risk or threat, thereby narrowing the space for legitimate civic action and public debate.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of communication within public right-wing Telegram groups and channels related to the Rio Tinto project shows that, for most of these actors, environmental protection is not an end in itself. Rather, it is used as a flexible framework for spreading pre-existing extremist narratives and amplifying panic. Environmental issues are instrumentalised to further deepen polarisation within society. Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that these themes are used to normalise a mindset characteristic of a state of emergency, in which violence is relativized and justified, and in some cases even presented as a necessity.

Such dynamics and the misuse of current issues pose a threat for several reasons. Portraying the government, the opposition, civil society, and the media as part of a single “traitorous system” further erodes trust in institutions and tends to delegitimise any form of political action or political pluralism. At the same time, continuous mobilisation through emotional, inflammatory, and even apocalyptic rhetoric creates ideal conditions for radicalisation, as well as for the potential outbreak of violence, particularly when framed as “self-defence of the people.” In addition, the foreign policy implications of such dynamics should not be overlooked, as they further complicate efforts to balance relations between different international actors, given that Western actors are consistently antagonised and Euroscepticism is amplified across these narratives. Taken together, these trends significantly narrow the space for rational debate on strategic issues.

At the same time, it is important to note that such narratives may indirectly benefit the authorities, as they create a basis for delegitimising environmental activists, who can then be portrayed as extremists or even as a security threat. This further constrains the space for legitimate civic engagement.

It is evident that extremism today demonstrates a high degree of adaptability, with extremist groups showing a clear willingness to instrumentalise a wide range of salient issues. This flexibility allows such actors to reach broader audiences, including citizens who do not identify with the far right but share legitimate environmental concerns. In this case, we have seen how opposition to the Rio Tinto project can serve as a vehicle for disseminating anti-Western, conservative, and authoritarian narratives, and in some instances, conspiracy theories.

Given the current political context, recommendations remain necessarily limited and oriented toward a broader strategic framework. International actors, including the European Union, should take greater account of local political and social contexts when promoting large-scale investment projects, particularly in environments characterized by low trust in institutions. Domestic media and civil society organisations have an important role to play in systematically monitoring and exposing disinformation, as well as in identifying how existing extremist narratives are adapted to new issues. Finally, greater institutional transparency and timely communication regarding projects of public importance can help reduce the space for manipulation and the misuse of such topics.

At the same time, competent authorities and security services should devote greater attention to monitoring activities on platforms such as Telegram, even in cases where there are no explicit calls to violence, given that such communication can gradually normalise patterns that may spill over into the physical sphere. In this sense, the timely identification and understanding of implicit patterns of radicalisation become crucial for the prevention of potential security risks.

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