

AT A TIME WHEN PEOPLE ALL OVER SERBIA ARE PROTESTING DAY IN AND DAY OUT AGAINST SERBIA'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME, BELGIAN FILM FESTIVAL DOCVILLE PLANS TO SCREEN A BELGIAN FILM PROMOTING LITHIUM MINING, MADE IN DIALOGUE WITH THIS VERY REGIME.

As members of the academic and artistic community we are reaching out to you with serious concerns regarding the inclusion of the film *Not In My Country* in the DOCVILLE film festival programme. The film, which was financed by KU Leuven¹ and hatched by KU Leuven professor Peter Tom Jones, claims to investigate the Serbian population's standpoint on the lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley. A rare example of a lithium mine being developed in a populated, agricultural, and ecologically sensitive area,² the Jadar project³ was initiated by notorious global mining giant Rio Tinto and the Serbian government. The screening of *Not In My Country* coincides with massive peaceful student-led protests^{4,5} against Serbia's authoritarian,^{6,7} corrupt, and lethal regime.⁸ Despite their unprecedented scale, these historic protests still have not received due media attention in Western Europe. Although the film was obviously shot before the current events, its makers must have been aware of the existence of numerous grassroots initiatives throughout Serbia, trying—despite the overwhelming odds—to call a halt to extractivist projects that do not benefit the local population. But in its blind zeal to promote lithium as the sole solution for sustainable green energy in the EU, *Not in My Country* has failed to sincerely engage with the social, environmental and political implications of lithium mining.⁹ We are bewildered as to why a festival like DOCVILLE—which supposedly promulgates author-driven contemporary documentary cinema—would choose to screen this film, which so brazenly advances the agendas of a mining corporation and an autocratic regime, and smothers the voices of those most affected.

Aligning with an authoritarian regime

As we wrote, the release of *Not In My Country* comes at a critical moment, coinciding with student-led protests and university blockades across Serbia, rooted in non-violent methods and calling for corruption-free democratic rule. The movement was sparked by the collapse of a newly restored concrete canopy at a railway station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, which killed 15 people, including children. Just months earlier, the reconstruction had been celebrated with extravagant government fanfare, making the tragedy a glaring symbol of corruption and systemic failure. Initially downplayed by authorities, the incident ignited widespread public outrage, fuelling student-led protests demanding accountability and structural change^{10,11} from the state and its institutions. Meanwhile, president Aleksandar Vučić has increasingly been asserting himself as an autocratic leader, accused of prioritising corporate interests, maintaining ties with organised crime, suppressing democratic movements and silencing dissent. As students face violent

attacks,^{12,13,14} false imprisonment, and are targeted by government officials in the state-controlled media, *Not In My Country* uncritically provides a platform for government representatives to promote their agenda. Along the way, it also omits crucial legal context, including proven irregularities in Rio Tinto's approval process.¹⁵ In a particularly telling scene, Jones visits the imposing Palace of Serbia for a friendly chat with Dubravka Đedović Handanović, Serbia's Minister of Mining and Energy. From their comfortable salmon-coloured armchairs the pair discuss what Jones calls the "very strange protests" against the Jadar project. No mention of state-sponsored violence; the only violence they allude to is attributed to the protestors, thereby discrediting the many peaceful grassroots initiatives that persist throughout Serbia—despite the fear of retaliation from a disproportionately stronger opponent.

Promoting corporate interests

Not only does *Not In My Country* offer itself as a mouthpiece to state propaganda, it also echoes the corporate interests of Rio Tinto, buttressing its strategic lobbying efforts for lithium mining. Lithium extraction follows a pattern of neocolonial economic exploitation,¹⁶ where corporate profits take precedence over the rights and environmental well-being of local communities. *Not In My Country* reinforces a neocolonial and extractivist narrative by masquerading as climate activism. The filmmakers' green energy aspirations are equated with progress and sustainability, which are in turn embodied by lithium, which is then associated with Rio Tinto¹⁷. Must we therefore infer that the refusal of the people of Serbia to allow the plundering and potential destruction of their country's natural resources means that they are simply against sustainable energy and progress? Downplaying the mass opposition of citizens,^{18,19,20} scientists,²¹ and environmental organisations,²² the film delegitimises their environmental and democratic struggle as a "conspiracy theory", fueled by "foreign interference". In a scene introduced by wistful accordion music, Rio Tinto's Country Head for Serbia Marijanti Babić gives Jones a guided tour of the newspaper clippings and printed screenshots adorning the 'fake news wall' in the Rio Tinto information centre in Loznica. It begs the question why Jones chooses to spend disproportionately more time on debunking what he labels an "organised disinformation campaign" than on Rio Tinto's well-documented history of environmental²³ and cultural heritage damage²⁴ and of labour and human rights violations.²⁵ By systematically presenting a one-sided corporate viewpoint, *Not In My Country* ultimately functions as a lobbying tool rather than a documentary: a documercial.²⁶

Reproducing colonial tropes

In order to drive home his pro-industry message, Jones employs textbook strategies of a current affairs documentary programme, while at the same time obscuring his own positionality and the power relations he is entangled in. When we first encounter him in the film, he is sitting behind a desk in a pristine white office, his face turned away from the

camera as he watches Reuters footage of anti-Rio Tinto protests. A female voice-over introduces him as a “climate expert and environmental scientist” - not as the film’s deviser or narrator, but as an observer character. Once his neutrality has been established, from an authoritative scientist he will bloom into the film’s ultimate arbiter of truth. As the voice of reason, his portrayal aligns with that of the Serbian advocates of lithium mining, who are presented as objective, profitable, job-creating, economically successful, bravely warding off Chinese and Russian influence. In stark contrast stand the Serbian citizens who speak out against Rio Tinto and their government. They are framed almost exclusively as uneducated and uninformed ‘peasants’ and pro-Putin conspiracy theorists. Their characterisation reinforces balkanist Western stereotypes of Serbs as violent, simple, unreasonable people, not yet completely embracing civilization²⁷ —read: the EU’s economic agenda. In its construction of a one-sided narrative in which an ‘enlightened’ Western-European expert surveys a supposedly backward land ripe for extraction, *Not in My Country* is eerily reminiscent of 20th-century propaganda films disguised as documentaries that sought to legitimise the extraction of natural resources in colonised territories such as Belgian Congo. Last year, DOCVILLE opened with Johan Grimonprez’s Oscar-nominated Soundtrack to a Coup d’État. The film zooms in on how the Belgian and US governments conspired to assassinate Patrice Lumumba for fear of losing their grip on Congolese uranium. Apparently, DOCVILLE sees nothing wrong with simultaneously giving a platform to Jones’ films which seem to imply that raw materials of ‘foreign’ nations are up for grabs to the ‘civilised’ world. Seeing as, last year, the festival also chose to screen Peter Tom Jones’ previous film, Europe’s Mining Renaissance, despite accusations by dozens of international organisations of aggressive pro-industry greenwashing.²⁸

Documentaries have long been a rare space for giving voice to the silenced and marginalised. Yet, documericals like *Not In My Country* advance the creeping influence of corporations, which are already shaping academia through the hybrid practices of university funding. If we allow this influence to grow unchecked, we risk losing the legitimacy of platforms such as DOCVILLE. We therefore urge all those involved in the film’s creation and distribution to take their responsibility - especially at a time when lithium projects in Portugal are under corruption investigation of the Public Prosecutor’s Office^{29,30} and when German MPs are calling for an immediate moratorium^{31,32} on the German-Serbian lithium agreement.

SIGNATORIES –

Alain Platel, theatre maker

Aernout Mik, artist

Adriana Parente La Selva, theatre maker, researcher at Ghent University

An van Dienderen, filmmaker, lecturer at KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Annelies Van Assche, postdoctoral researcher (Ghent University)

Arkadi Zaides, choreographer, PhD researcher, UAntwerp, UGent, Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Bas Devos, filmmaker, lecturer at KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Davide Paolillo, composer, music theory teacher at Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp – Drama Department

Danielle Van Zuijlen, Kunsthall Gent coordination team / artistic coordinator development

Dragana Radanović, artist, visual storyteller, and researcher at Media Culture & Policy Lab at KU Leuven

Dušica Dražić, artist, curator

Elisa De Schepper, coordinator KASKcinema

Ellen Vermeulen, filmmaker / docent, KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent en RITCS

Florian Bieber, Professor of Southeast European History and Politics, Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

Hilde D'haeyere, Coordinator Master Film, KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Igor Bezinović, filmmaker

Jana Vasiljević, artist and artistic coordinator platform at Kunsthall Gent

Jeanne Laperrouze, political and policy advisor

Jelena Jureša, artist and researcher at KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Jasper Rigole, artist and researcher at KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Johan Grimont, filmmaker, lecturer at KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Jonas Vanderschueren, postdoctoral researcher at Cultural Studies KU Leuven

Julien Chapelle, coordinator SoundImageCulture

Kristien Hens, professor of bioethics

Lena Imeraj, professor/postdoc at Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Lennart Soberon, programmer at KASKcinema/researcher at Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Lora Verheecke, expert on EU lobbying

Louis Mosar, RIPPLE, research in political philosophy and ethics, KU Leuven

Luca Mattei, filmmaker

Lucas Catherine, author

Martina Petrović, artist and artistic coordinator at Hectolitre space, Brussels

Mathilde Villeneuve, artistic director Kunstencentrum BUDA

Max Pinckers, photographer

Michiel De Cleene, artist and researcher

Mladen Bundalo, artist, author and filmmaker

Nina de Vroome, filmmaker, film critic and teacher, KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Nina Henkens, coordinator Kif Kif vzw

Petra Van Brabandt, head of research Sint Lucas Antwerp (in her own name)

Peter Vermeersch, professor of politics, KU Leuven

Pierre-Louis Cassou, film producer

Pieter Boulogne, professor at KU Leuven

Pieter Vermeulen, curator, art critic and teacher, St. Lucas Antwerp / PXL-MAD School of Arts Hasselt

Robbrecht Desmet, filmmaker & post-doctoral researcher

Robin Vanbesien, filmmaker / doctor in the arts at Sint Lucas Antwerp

Rosine Mbakam, filmmaker, researcher at UGent and KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Ruben Demasure, Art Cinema OFFoff Gent

Sibo Kanobana, assistant professor, Open Universiteit

Sofie Benoot, filmmaker, assistant professor at LUCA School of Arts

Srećko Horvat, philosopher, ISSA

Susanne Weck, artist/mediator

Thomas Bellinck, artist and researcher at UGent and KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Thomas Vertongen, docent, KASK & Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent

Walter Zinzen, journalist

¹ Peter Tom Jones, 'Statement about the Documentary "Not In My Country: Serbia's Lithium Dilemma"', *SIMP*, 4 February 2025 <https://kuleuven.sim2.be/statement-about-the-documentary-not-in-my-country-serbias-lithium-dilemma/>

² Dragana Đorđević and others, 'The Influence of Exploration Activities of a Potential Lithium Mine to the Environment in Western Serbia', *Sci Rep*, 14.1 (2024), p. 17090, doi:10.1038/s41598-024-68072-9 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382527180> [The influence of exploration activities of a potential lithium mine to the environment in Western Serbia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382527180)

³ Jovan Rajić and others, 'The Jadar Project, Serbia', *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2025 <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/03/04/jadar-project-serbia-history-context-and-concerns>

⁴ Croatian Radiotelevision, 'Labirint: Student Led Blockade in Serbia', *Labirint*, February 2025 <https://youtu.be/jNgl07JcGOE>

⁵ Ivana Sekularac and others, 'How Serbia's Students Turned Tragedy into a National Movement for Change', *Reuters*, 14 February 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-serbias-students-turned-tragedy-into-national-movement-change-2025-02-14/>

⁶ "A Digital Prison": Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia', *Amnesty International Security Lab*, 16 December 2024 <https://securitylab.amnesty.org/latest/2024/12/a-digital-prison-surveillance-and-the-suppression-of-civil-society-in-serbia/>

⁷ Arthur Neslen, 'Activist Opposed to Rio Tinto Lithium Mine Receives Anonymous Death Threats', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2024, section Business <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/aug/22/activist-serbia-rio-tinto-lithium-mining-environment-death-threats>

⁸ Andi Hoxhaj, 'Serbia is facing its largest-ever protest movement – why is Europe looking away?' *The Conversation*, February 14 2025 <https://theconversation.com/serbia-is-facing-its-largest-ever-protest-movement-why-is-europe-looking-away-249388>

⁹ Florian Bieber, 'Pulling a fast one. The Lithium Deal between Serbia and the EU', *The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)*, 22 July 2024 <https://www.biepag.eu/blog/pulling-a-fast-one-the-lithium-deal-between-serbia-and-the-eu>

¹⁰ Adriana Zaharijević, 'Serbia's Students Are Showing the World How to Restore Democratic Hope', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/06/serbias-students-showing-world-democratic-hope>

¹¹ Iskra Krstić, 'Three Months of Protests against Corruption and State Violence in Serbia – the Emergence of the Largest Student Movement in Europe', *Mašina English*, 3 February 2025 <https://www.masina.rs/eng/three-months-of-protests-against-corruption-and-state-violence-in-serbia-the-emergence-of-the-largest-student-movement-in-europe/>

¹² Mašina, 'Serbian Prime Minister Resigns After Ruling Party's Hooligans Attack Students – Protest Announced at 4 PM', *Mašina English*, 28 January 2025 <https://www.masina.rs/eng/serbian-prime-minister-resigns-after-ruling-partys-hooligans-attack-students-protest-announced-at-4-pm/>

¹³ EWB, 'Serbian PM Miloš Vučević Resigns Following the Latest Violent Attack on Protesting Students', *European Western Balkans*, 28 January 2025 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/01/28/serbian-pm-milos-vucevic-resigns-following-the-latest-violent-attack-on-protesting-students/>

¹⁴ Le Monde, 'Serbian PM's Resignation Fails to Quell Student Protests', 29 January 2025 https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/01/29/serbian-pm-s-resignation-fails-to-quell-student-protests_6737553_4.html

¹⁵ Dina Đorđević, 'Leaked Emails: Rio Tinto Given Environmental Protection Conditions Without Expert Approval', *Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia*, 7 February 2025 <https://www.cins.rs/en/leaked-emails-rio-tinto-given-environmental-protection-conditions-without-expert-approval/>

¹⁶ Igor Todorović, 'RERI: Rio Tinto divides up Jadar lithium project in Serbia to avoid overall environmental assessment', *Balkan Green Energy News*, 10 October 2024 <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/reri-rio-tinto-divides-up-jadar-lithium-project-in-serbia-to-avoid-overall-environmental-assessment/>

¹⁷ Gil Shochat, Priscilla Plamondon Lalancette 'Rio Tinto says it's a green mining giant. Investigation shows environmental gaps from Quebec to the Amazon', *CBC News*, 24 March 2023 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/rio-tinto-quebec-amazon-bauxite-aluminum-1.7153444?fbclid=IwAR1OCR88H4SvKRk5qs4mJxzdCjrFKb9sw7-KME78piU6aOt5q80srYmVkl>

¹⁸ Marton Dunai, 'Serbian Protests Escalate over Proposed Lithium Mine', *Financial Times*, 2 September 2024 <https://www.ft.com/content/a916bcb8-a779-412f-8772-ea0f88f10bd9>

¹⁹ Marko Miletić, 'Both the Profession and the People Have Clearly Said That They Are against Lithium Mining in Serbia', *Mašina English*, 27 June 2024 <https://www.masina.rs/eng/both-the-profession-and-the-people-have-clearly-said-that-they-are-against-lithium-mining-in-serbia/>

²⁰ Jovana Gec, 'Thousands Rally in Serbia Accusing Populist Government of Cracking down on Anti-Lithium Activists', *A. P. News*, 1 September 2024 <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-protest-pressure-activists-lithium-4473cabea150daf875a0f1b19a219e7d>

²¹ 'Otvoreno pismo i zahtevi više od 140 naučnika povodom projekta "Jadar"', *Dnevni list Danas*, 11 February 2025 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/univerziteti-naucnici-i-nastavnici-uputili-otvoreno-pismo-povodom-projekta-jadar/>

²² Planinarski savez Srbije, 'Саопштења поводом потенцијалног ископавања литијума у долини Јадра', February 2025 <https://pss.rs/saopstenja-povodom-potencijalnog-iskopavanja-litijuma-u-dolini-jadra/obavestjenja/2025/>

²³ Melanie Burton, 'Investigation finds Rio Tinto legacy Bougainville mine poses life-threatening risks', *Reuters*, 6 December 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/investigation-finds-rio-tinto-legacy-bougainville-mine-poses-life-threatening-2024-12-06/>

²⁴ Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia, 'Inquiry into the destruction of 46,000 year old caves at the Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara region of Western Australia', *Law Council of Australia* <https://lawcouncil.au/resources/submissions/inquiry-into-the-destruction-of-46-000-year-old-caves-at-the-juukan-gorge-in-the-pilbara-region-of-western-australia>

²⁵ Al Jazeera 'Rio Tinto employees report rise in bullying, sexual assault' *Al Jazeera*, 20 November 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2024/11/20/rio-tinto-employees-report-rise-in-bullying-sexual-assault>

²⁶ To address concerns about *Not In My Country*, the film makers and DOCVILLE festival organisers have planned a post-screening debate on the question of 'ethical mining'. But considering the tendentious nature of the film and the fact that the debate panel following the film's most recent screening prominently featured a representative of Rio Tinto, we cannot help but wonder: is their intention truly to hold a fair and democratic conversation or this is yet another thinly veiled follow-up effort to promote lithium mining to a Belgian audience?

²⁷ In her magnum opus *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova dismantles Western stereotypes of the Balkans as inherently violent and chaotic, exposing these narratives as politically motivated constructs. – Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

²⁸ Luc Vanheerentals, 'Peter Tom Jones Onder Vuur Voor Docu Over Europese Mijnbouw', *De Wereld Morgen*, 10 April 2024 <https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2024/04/10/peter-tom-jones-onder-vuur-voor-docu-over-europese-mijnbouw/>

²⁹ 'Portuguese PM António Costa Resigns amid Corruption Probe', *POLITICO*, 7 November 2023 <https://www.politico.eu/article/portugal-prime-minister-antonio-costa-resigns/>

³⁰ Antonia Zimmermann and Camille Gijs, 'Portugal's Corruption Scandal Spells Trouble for EU's Critical Minerals Hunt', *POLITICO*, 14 November 2023 <https://www.politico.eu/article/portugal-antonio-costa-lithium-scandal-spells-trouble-for-brussels-critical-minerals-hunt/>

³¹ Mašina, 'The German Left Calls for an Immediate Moratorium on the German-Serbian Lithium Agreement', *Mašina English*, 16 December 2024 <https://www.masina.rs/eng/the-german-left-calls-for-an-immediate-moratorium-on-the-german-serbian-lithium-agreement/>

³² 'Abbau für E-Auto-Produktion: „Lithiumkreide gefressen“ – Scharfe Kritik an deutschem Vorgehen in Serbien - WELT', *DIE WELT*, 4 December 2024 <https://www.welt.de/politik/article254732628/Abbau-fuer-E-Auto-Produktion-Lithiumkreide-gefressen-Scharfe-Kritik-an-deutschem-Vorgehen-in-Serbien.html>