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RESISTANCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN MINING COMMUNITIES: EXPERIENCES FROM BOR AND MAJDANPEK (SERBIA)

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Abstract:
Extracting resources without considering the needs of the local community and adequate environmental protection can deepen existing inequalities between social groups, creating opportunities for ecological conflicts. This, in turn, gives rise to various forms of activism opposing the exclusion of individuals and social groups from decision-making processes related to the management of natural resources. The first part of the paper explores the concepts of participatory, professional, and transactional activism. Additionally, the theoretical framework includes the concepts of environmental distribution conflicts and mining conflicts. These concepts will be illustrated through an analysis of mining areas in Eastern Serbia, firstly by providing a contextual overview of broader local community engagement in Bor and Majdanpek based on the analysis of secondary sources, and secondly by analyzing the results of a survey conducted with the residents of Bor and Majdanpek between July and September 2024 (N=300). In the concluding section, based on the contextual analysis and empirical findings, the sources of motivation and types of citizen engagement in Bor and Majdanpek are interpreted in relation to different conceptualizations of activism that may lead to social conflict expressed through collective action resisting mining activities.

Key words: **activism, mining, conflict, local community, Serbia.**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of countries on the (semi)periphery of the global capitalist system (Wallerstein, 1976) largely depends on the inflow of foreign direct investments (FDI) in

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the mineral extraction sector. This trend is driven by low production costs (primarily lower labor costs), the deregulation of land ownership, and the misalignment of environmental standards in peripheral countries with the regulations characteristic of core countries in the global economic system. The growing demand for energy, natural resources, minerals, metals, and agricultural products makes it increasingly difficult to reconcile various societal needs regarding land, one of the most crucial environmental factors alongside air and water.

Recently, the concept of neo-extractivism has emerged, referring to processes that restrict the rights of local landowners in order to facilitate profit accumulation by national governments and private (often transnational) corporations. The term describes the methods of dispossessing these landowners to extract value from natural resources in peripheral countries or regions during the postcolonial phase of capitalist development (Borras and Franco, 2013; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014; Petrović, 2023; Petrović and Pešić, 2023). Some of the key features of neo-extractivism include: (1) monopolization of resource extraction, where profits are privatized and costs externalized; (2) close ties between the state and private capital (national or international); (3) generated value that is not directed toward the local population negatively affected by extractive activities, nor to those (individuals or institutions) who may have a legal right to a share of the profits (Petrović, 2023, Ye *et al*., 2019).

Mineral resource exploitation without considering local development needs, environmental protection, and improvements in the quality of life of local communities, can exacerbate existing inequalities between different social groups (Manojlović and Kabanga, 2023). This, in turn, creates opportunities for the emergence of environmental conflicts at various levels of intensity and, consequently, different forms of activism that oppose the exclusion of individuals and social groups from decision-making processes related to the management of natural resources.

In academic literature, the aforementioned social issue is approached from different perspectives, with two particularly influential interpretations – the developmental and critical perspectives. The developmental perspective emphasizes the economic benefits for less developed countries, highlighting the role of FDI and increased employment opportunities for local communities. In contrast, the critical perspective focuses on the negative consequences of transnational capital involvement in these countries. Transnational companies often overlook local interests when exploiting mineral resources, leading to significant environmental problems (deforestation, air pollution, disruption of aquatic ecosystems, ecological imbalance, etc.) and adverse social consequences (forced displacement, inadequate compensation for expropriated land, weak institutional engagement, restrictions on landowners' rights, etc.) (Petovar, 1983; Terminski, 2013; Petovar, 2015; Oliveira *et al*., 2021; Petrović, 2023; Petrović *et al*., 2024).

Serbia exemplifies a semi-peripheral country within the global economic system, where economic growth heavily depends on FDI, including controversial mining projects that threaten to transform landscapes into so-called sacrifice zones (Scott and Smith, 2017). These processes, particularly prominent in recent years, have contributed to the emergence of new pro-environmental social movements. Given Serbia's intensified mineral exploitation, anti-mining movements have begun to take shape, resisting the extraction of certain metals. Conflicts among stakeholders over land use further fuel grassroots activism and community engagement.

The first part of this paper explores the concepts of participatory, professional (Della Porta and Dianni, 2006), and transactional activism (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007). Another

key theoretical framework is the concept of ecological distribution conflicts, closely linked to environmental equity and environmental justice, which gained prominence in the U.S. during the 1980s (Pulido, 1996). Examining those conflicts through these lenses provides a deeper understanding of civil disobedience, protests, and activism aimed at achieving a fairer distribution of benefits and harms associated with land use (Pellow and Guo, 2018). Finally, this framework includes a specific category of environmental conflicts – mining conflicts.

These concepts are illustrated through the analysis of mining areas in Eastern Serbia, firstly by providing a contextual overview of broader community engagement in Bor and Majdanpek, based on secondary sources, and secondly by analyzing the results of a survey conducted with residents of Bor and Majdanpek between July and September 2024. In the concluding section, based on both contextual analysis and empirical findings, the study interprets the sources of motivation and types of citizen engagement in Bor and Majdanpek, linking them to different forms of activism that may lead to social conflict and collective resistance to mining operations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Professional, transactional, and participatory activism

Professional activism refers to the work of specialized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on specific issues, such as environmental protection. This form of activism dominates post-socialist Eastern European countries, including Serbia, where the civil sector in environmental protection has developed within the context of European integration and Europeanization (Vukelić *et al*., 2021). Professional environmental organizations primarily rely on project-based funding, which ties their activities to donor policies and project cycles. Because of this, their work is often referred to as "project-based activism".

The core activities of professional NGOs revolve around expert analyses of environmental issues and public policy advocacy. As a result, their work is highly bureaucratic, governed by special regulations, and more oriented toward international institutions than local communities (Vukelić *et al.,* 2021). This phenomenon, often called the "NGO-ization of resistance", describes how grassroots opposition is co-opted and neutralized through institutionalized civil society organizations (Roy, 2014). Since NGOs act as intermediaries between the state and citizens through institutional channels, their role frequently leads to the depoliticization of environmental activism, diminishing the impact of legitimate political resistance. Many citizens perceive professional activism as part of "big government" – distant, bureaucratic, and non-transparent (Bosso, 1999 p. 70). Consequently, this approach has slowed the development of participatory environmental activism in post-socialist countries (Vukelić *et al*., 2021).

Transactional activism refers to the collaboration between non-governmental actors and their connections with political parties, state institutions, and officials. These relationships are built on the exchange of information, resources, and joint projects (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007, as cited in Vukelić *et al*., 2021). Such "lateral" connections emerge for two main reasons: (1) Civil society organizations often struggle to establish meaningful relationships with citizens and local communities, prompting them to form partnerships with other organizations instead; (2) International donor programs promoting civil society capacity-building require NGOs to collaborate with public, private, and civil sector institutions (Petrović, 2020). Petrova and Tarrow (2007), who

coined the term “transactional activism”, use it to describe environmental movements across Eastern Europe.

Participatory activism is typically associated with bottom-up citizen mobilization and numerous grassroots initiatives, a defining characteristic of environmental movements in Western Europe. However, over the past decade, various forms of self-organization and everyday activism have also emerged in Eastern European countries. Unlike professional activism, these movements seek independence from public, private, and civil sector institutions. Instead, they engage at the local level through direct collective action and confrontation. While “participation” is often used to describe public involvement in institutionalized decision-making structures, in this context, it refers to mass citizen mobilization within a social movement, including extra-institutional forms of engagement in the public sphere.

Participatory activism reflects the growing popularity of alternative political participation, driven by a “crisis of representation”. As traditional political institutions become more professionalized and centralized, the connection between citizens and political parties weakens, reducing the latter’s ability to represent public interests (Vukelić and Stanojević, 2012). As with many concepts borrowed from the West, it is worth questioning whether the term “participatory activism” accurately describes environmental engagement in Serbia. Only in recent years have environmental movements in Serbia begun to exhibit characteristics of large-scale social movements through mass mobilization (Petrović, 2020). Recently, grassroots resistance has intensified against the construction of small hydropower plants, waste landfills, and both existing and planned mining projects, in both rural and urban areas. These localized resistance efforts resemble participatory activism in form, yet they often involve small social groups and sporadic actions with limited impact. This raises the question of whether the term is appropriate, as it typically refers to large-scale citizen mobilization and widespread grassroots movements.

The challenges of cooperation between professional and grassroots organizations are best understood through the continuum of professional and participatory social movement types. Rather than viewing them as opposing approaches, they can be seen as complementary poles along a spectrum of activism models.

Recent research on environmental activism in Serbia suggests that the relationship between grassroots environmental initiatives and professional organizations is weakening. This is due, partly, to the structural constraints of professional organizations and, in part, to activists’ growing distrust of their agendas (Vukelić *et al*., 2021).

2.2. Ecological distributional conflicts

While the concepts of professional and participatory activism are commonly used in sociological literature to discuss the emergence and development of the environmental movement in Serbia and Eastern European countries, the concept of ecological distribution conflict (EDC) originates from economic theory, in an attempt to explain the forms of local community resistance to mining projects worldwide (Martinez-Alier and O’Connor, 1996). The term is often used interchangeably with similar notions of environmental or socio-environmental conflicts. Ecological distributional conflict refers to social conflicts that arise as a result of “*unequal distribution of environmental benefits*, such as access to natural resources, fertile land, or ecosystem services, as well as *unequal distribution of environmental burdens*, such as pollution or exposure to waste” (Scheidel *et al*., 2018). Not only are distributional aspects (who gets what environmental benefits

and burdens) present in EDC, but also other problems are considered, such as procedural issues or recognition of different values and worldviews (Schlosberg, 2004; Scheidel *et al*., 2018).

Like any social conflict, EDC involves a gap between the interests, values, and norms advocated by individuals or social groups, which leads to antagonism and a struggle for power. Unlike economic conflicts, which usually revolve around material concerns such as wages, prices, and profits, EDC are more complex because they involve deep differences in values and beliefs, making it harder to reach a solution that satisfies everyone. For example, in the decision-making process regarding the fate of a project related to the use of a natural resource, several values need to be considered: market and monetary values, the territorial rights of indigenous local communities, environmental values, traditional ways of life, etc.

2.2.1. Mining conflicts

The literature also uses the broader term "mining conflicts" (Urkidi and Walter, 2011), referring to various social conflicts caused by mining activities (Martínez-Alier, 2001; Conde and Le Billon, 2017; Scheidel *et al*., 2018). The causes of conflicts over environmental distribution are seen within capitalism, particularly neoliberalism, which, driven by the imperative of economic growth, leads to the expansion of natural resource exploitation. Through the extractive industry, this results in social and environmental injustices and weakens civil society, making it harder to resist unwanted projects. Several specific causes of mining conflicts have been identified, including: the socio-environmental impacts on land, water, and local livelihoods; the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes; distrust in mining companies; and inadequate compensation for environmental damage and for the economic losses suffered by households engaged in activities that conflict with mining, such as agriculture. However, it should be noted that not all local communities resist mining companies and authorities (Conde and Le Billon, 2017). The emergence of conflicts against mining depends on various factors: the perceived threat to traditional ways of life, the timing of that perceived threat, local contextual factors, the location of the potential mine, the reputation of the company, the type of ore (uranium, lithium, copper, etc.), access to reliable information, and so on (Eerola, 2024). It is believed that the involvement of environmental NGOs and government institutions as regulators is crucial in preventing mining conflicts (Lodhia and Hess, 2014). Mining companies, through the mediation of NGOs and authorities, should act in accordance with the principles of corporate responsibility and take into account the social and environmental consequences of their activities. Finally, a mining conflict does not necessarily lead to confrontational behavior among the involved actors; it can even foster cooperation. Of course, achieving this is not easy, but more importantly, it is essential to "maintain the form of cooperation achieved" (Vuković, 2008: 243).

Activism and conflicts in mining regions are closely influenced by the shifting governance dynamics tied to the EU integration process, and Serbia's potential EU accession could significantly reshape this landscape. As early as 2012, when Serbia was granted EU candidate status, it had already committed to the liberalization of land sales by allowing foreigners to freely purchase agricultural land, which provoked resistance among farmers and the broader public (Petrović, 2023).

Drawing from the experiences of post-socialist EU member states like Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania (Kenarov, 2012; Sotirov *et al.*, 2015; Chiodi and Epis, 2022; Proctor, 2022;

Szabo *et al.*, 2022), several key shifts may influence activism and Social Licence to Operate (SLO) dynamics in Serbia: (1) stricter environmental and participation standards could provide activists with stronger legal tools and procedural rights; (2) greater transparency and accountability of institutions could enable communities to more effectively challenge mining projects; (3) increased funding and institutional support for civil society could enhance the capacity of NGOs to mobilize, advocate, and participate in governance; (4) changing legitimacy frameworks, since SLO is dynamic and culturally embedded, EU norms may conflict with Serbia's centralized governance structures, triggering both resistance and adaptation. Proctor (2022) contends that SLO may avert various problems tied to ''protests, boycotts, social media storms and attacks on the reputation of key stakeholders, which can stop mining operations.'' Although SLO was academically defined for the first time a quarter century ago (Joyce and Thomson, 2000), this concept is still vague, with no clear criteria or measurability (Bice and Moffat, 2014).

On the other hand, the EU green transition policies could drive new conflicts and enhance existing ones, as pressure to secure critical raw materials may intensify mining activity in candidate countries like Serbia. In Europe, as Proctor (2022, p.19) states, ''we are facing a paradoxical situation where demand is high and exploration resources are available, but societal and political reluctance hinders entrepreneurship and investment in the exploration/extractive sector''. Some authors suggest that new conflicts may arise due to the changing power relations between the state, investors and civil society organizations. If Serbia progresses on its path towards EU membership, NGOs are expected to strengthen their lobbying capacity, which could result in growth of conflict (Proctor and MacCallum, 2020). This adds complexity to the activist landscape, potentially placing local communities at odds with both national and EU-level priorities. The EU simultaneously promotes extractivist projects in its periphery, strengthens civil society, and enables transnational networking among local movements that oppose corporate power and unresponsive political regimes (Petrović, 2023).

3. LOCAL ENGAGEMENT AND RESISTANCE TO MINING IN THE CITY OF BOR AND THE MAJDANPEK MUNICIPALITY

The region that includes today's city of Bor and the municipality of Majdanpek has a long history of mining activities, with traces dating back to ancient times, whereas exploitation was industrialized at the beginning of the 20th century (Janković, 1990; Özdemir *et al.*, 2024). Due to their rich deposits of copper and precious metals, these areas have attracted significant interest in recent decades from the scientific community, as well as from government authorities and foreign investors (Petrović *et al*., 2024). The expansion of the Bor-Majdanpek mining basin has led to a major transformation of the area, affecting both the natural environment and the socio-economic sphere of life. While the opening of mines in the region has created jobs and spurred economic growth, this activity has also reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of the area (Stojmenović, 2024a).

The population in villages near the mines (e.g., Krivelj, Oštrelj, Slatina) has faced numerous negative consequences induced by mining activities, including landscape changes and degradation, air, water, and soil pollution, altered river courses, damage to roads, private property, and buildings, reduced agricultural yields, noise, dust, land contamination from tailings, forced displacement, and increased health risks for both people and animals (Urošević *et al.*, 2018; Jovanović, 2019; Maričić *et al.,* 2022; Nikoletić, 2023; Petrović *et al*., 2024; Stojmenović, 2024b). It is therefore no surprise that many authors refer to Bor and Majdanpek as an "environmental black spot" (Krstić, 2022).

Local strategies for resisting mining activities are varied and depend on the specific context of each country, but generally include protests, blockades, occasional violence, complaints, public campaigns, street demonstrations, and the building of support networks through scientific research and legal actions (Leonard, 2020). Here, we provide a brief overview of some forms of local engagement in Bor and Majdanpek aimed at addressing the negative impacts of mining. We focus on the period after 2018 because it marks the convergence of several key factors: (1) following a period of relatively low production, the residents of Bor began reporting serious air pollution issues, which they associated with the takeover of the mine by a new owner in late 2018; (2) this change triggered a rapid expansion of mining activities in both Bor and Majdanpek, prompting complaints from local farmers and landowners that their properties were taken without fair compensation or transparent relocation plans; and (3) although not directly related to Bor or Majdanpek, the national debate surrounding lithium mining and broader mining practices in 2021 has significantly shaped local public sentiment against mining in general.

Due to insufficient public information, lack of transparency regarding mining expansion plans, and the exclusion of citizens from the decision-making process, the local population has organized itself in opposition to the expansion of mining activities and their consequences. In 2022, residents from several villages around Bor protested for days by blocking roads in the city to draw attention to the uncontrolled spread of mining activities (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022). The local movement "Borani se pitaju" ("Borani have a say") has been actively involved in efforts to combat air pollution caused by heavy metals and has organized protests in Bor since 2019 (Jovanović, 2019; Popović, 2024).

The residents of Slatina and Krivelj villages have also been protesting for years against the expansion of mining activities and plans for collective resettlement, blocking access roads to their villages (Bor 030, 2021; Za Media, 2024). Reactions to resettlement vary, ranging from formal and informal participation methods to round-the-clock road blockades aimed at drawing attention to issues such as coercion during land expropriation, low compensation rates, and so on (Petrović *et al*., 2024; Stojmenović, 2024b).

On several occasions, there have been more direct confrontations between the local population and representatives of the mining company, including physical clashes with private security personnel. One notable example of such resistance in Majdanpek was the activism of the citizens' association "Ne Damo/NU DAU", which organized an activist camp on Starica Mountain in 2022. This association has three representatives in the city council, where they previously unsuccessfully tried to prevent the blasting of the mountain with the support of the "Ekološki ustanak" ("Ecological Uprising"), a part of the political party "Zajedno" (Krstić, 2022).

Starica Mountain, aside from being an important symbol for Majdanpek, serves as a hydrogeological water collector for the entire region and a barrier separating the town from the copper mine (Krstić, 2022). In June 2022, without any prior notice, a mining company detonated rocks on one of the mountain peaks. The company later claimed it was an emergency measure to prevent the collapse of rocks onto the city. However, the locals feared this was an excuse to expand the mine toward the city, and they felt threatened by the explosions, especially when rocks fell above unprotected residential buildings. This prompted some residents and supporters of the "Ne Damo" association to organize an activist camp on a ridge of Starica Mountain, where they stayed for three and a half months, attempting to prevent further mining of the mountain.

The protest ended when the mining company's private security violently destroyed the activist camp and physically removed the activists from the land. Some activists were arrested, and there were cases of police brutality during their detention (Krstić, 2022). Several mountain peaks were subsequently destroyed. Although the company attempted to legally sanction the activists through lawsuits, the court ruled in their favor, as the land where the camp was organized was public property (Krstić, 2023). While the activists won the legal battle, the damage had already been done. Some experts believe that the destruction of the peaks of Starica Mountain caused the draining of the nearby Zaton Lake and resulted in a shortage of drinking water in Majdanpek (Opačić, 2024).

4. SURVEY RESULTS

The aim of this analysis is to identify the key concerns of the local population in Bor and Majdanpek, as well as the expectations from key stakeholders in addressing issues caused by mining activities. Additionally, it seeks to assess the extent to which residents are engaged and participate in various community activities.

The survey was conducted between August and September 2024 using a random sampling method and focusing on urban and rural communities directly affected by mining. The sample was designed to ensure the representativeness of the population in the City of Bor and the Municipality of Majdanpek based on key sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, and education level (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey sample by gender, place of residence, and education (Source: Authors)

GENDER (%)	
Male	47.3
Female	52.7
PLACE OF RESIDENCE (%)	
Bor, urban local communities	53.4
Bor, rural local communities	23.2
Majdanpek, urban local communities	13.4
Majdanpek, rural local communities	10.1
EDUCATION (%)	
No formal education or incomplete primary school	6.4
Primary school	15.2
Secondary school	57.6
Higher school	7.4
University degree	8.4
Master, Magisterium, Doctorate	5.0

The survey revealed that the local population of Bor and Majdanpek identifies the most pressing issues in their communities as environmental problems (39.1%), followed by issues related to displacement due to the spread of mining activities (19.4%), population decline (16.7%), and municipal issues (15.3%). There is no statistically significant correlation between the recognition of these problems and the respondents' gender, age, or education level. However, a statistically significant correlation ($\chi^2(1) = 72.184$, $p < 0.001$) was found in relation to the place of residence. Both the urban and rural populations of Bor recognize environmental problems as the primary community issues.

As expected, communal problems were more often identified in rural areas than in urban ones within the municipality of Majdanpek.

Respondents were asked to rate the contributions of the major actors in addressing problems caused by mining activities (Table 2). The local population rates the contributions of almost all stakeholders (except local activism) in addressing problems caused by mining activities as very poor. Respondents believe that the European Union (84.8%), experts and the scientific community (81.5%), and private companies (80.5%) contribute the least (a small or no contribution). The contribution of the state (73.5%), local government (75.5%), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (77.4%) is also rated poorly. Local activism was rated somewhat better compared to other stakeholders, but even here, 62.0% of respondents felt there was little or no contribution.

Table 2. Evaluation matrix of the contributions of the major actors in addressing problems caused by mining activities (Source: Authors)

	No contribution (%)	Small contribution (%)	Neither small nor large contribution (%)	Large contribution (%)	Very large contribution (%)
1. State	52.0	21.5	15.1	7.7	3.7
2. Local government	56.0	19.5	16.8	6.0	1.7
3. Private companies	59.6	20.5	15.5	3.4	1.0
4. NGOs	64.0	13.4	16.2	3.7	2.7
5. Experts and scientific community	67.0	14.5	14.8	3.0	0.7
6. European Union	66.9	17.9	11.8	3.4	0.0
7. Citizens – local activism	34.9	27.8	22.0	12.6	2.7

Although greater contributions from citizens were expected compared to other actors in addressing these issues, more than half of the respondents (51.7%) were unaware of any activities undertaken by citizens to improve life quality in the city over the past five years. Among those who were aware of such efforts, the most commonly mentioned activities were protests (17.8%), including demonstrations against Rio Tinto, air pollution, displacement, lack of parking, road blockages in Krivelj, and illegal construction in Bor. A smaller percentage mentioned resolving local issues such as improving parks and green spaces, fountains, playgrounds, sports fields, streets, renovating schools, addressing heating problems, cleaning waste, cleaning rivers, lakes, the city pool, organizing humanitarian action, supporting residents during the COVID-19 pandemic, activities by the non-governmental sector, and raising awareness about corruption in the city. Involvement in participatory processes was hardly mentioned; only 1.7% of respondents referred to public hearings, neighborhood meetings, addressing the local community, municipal authorities or the mayor, or petition signing. Of all respondents, only 24.3% took part in any participatory activity.

To better understand who participates in local community activities, we analyzed the relationships between respondents' demographic characteristics and their involvement using correlation methods. The analysis revealed a statistically significant association between gender and participation ($\chi^2(1) = 5.862$, $p = 0.015$), indicating that men are more likely to be involved than women. Although the Chi-square test did not reveal a statistically significant relationship between age and education, we present the profile of active participants based on a descriptive analysis. Men made up a greater share of the active group (59.7%) compared to women (40.3%). The most active participants were

aged 45–65 (36.6%), followed by those aged 27–44 (29.6%). The least active groups were individuals over 65 (15.5%) and the youngest respondents aged 18–26 (18.3%). Regarding education, those with secondary school education were the most engaged (64.8%), followed by respondents with higher or vocational education (15.5%). The least engaged were individuals with only primary education (11.3%) and those with a master's, magisterium, or doctoral degree (8.4%).

The local population shows a low level of formal membership in various organizations (Table 3). Over 90% of the local population is not a member of any of the organizations listed here: youth organizations, religious organizations, animal protection organizations, environmental, and humanitarian organizations. The results are somewhat different when it comes to political parties, but even in this domain, 83.3% of respondents are not members of any party. Among the few active members of all the listed organizations, there are more men (58.7%) than women (41.3%). The highest number of active members are in the 45-65 age group (50%), followed by the 27-44 age group (23.9%), while the youngest (18-26) and the oldest (over 65) are equally represented (13%). The largest percentage of active members in organizations comprises those employed on a permanent contract (40%), which can be interpreted as either having a lower fear of job loss or as a condition for employment. In terms of education, 21.7% of respondents with incomplete or completed primary education are active, 58.7% with secondary education, 10.9% with higher and vocational education, and 10.7% with a master's degree, magisterium, or a doctorate.

Table 3. Membership of the local population in organizations (Source: Authors)

	Active member (%)	Inactive member (%)	Not a member (%)
Youth organizations/student councils	1.9	0.8	97.3
Animal protection organizations	2.3	3.7	94.0
Environmental organizations	4.0	2.0	94.0
Church or other religious organizations	2.7	5.0	92.3
Humanitarian organizations	5.4	3.7	90.9
Political parties	6.6	9.8	83.6

Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of participants' responses to the question about how often they engage in the listed activities. The question was formulated using a Likert-type frequency scale with response options including: never, rarely, occasionally, frequently and always. Although Likert-type scales yield ordinal data, it is common in social sciences to treat them as interval-level data when using aggregated measures like the mean, particularly when multiple items are combined into an index. This approach has been widely supported in methodological literature (Carifio and Perla, 2008; Norman, 2010). However, we relied on descriptive statistics to ensure a more accurate interpretation of the data and to avoid the potential imprecision associated with using the mean on ordinal scales.

The local population participates the least in public discussions on proposed laws, strategies, or action plans, with 88.0% of respondents indicating they have never or rarely participated in such activities. This is followed by participation in activist and political protests, while the highest level of participation is seen in voting during political elections. Voting in elections was reported as frequent or always by 84% of respondents, making it the only activity to stand out among all of those listed. After voting, participation in humanitarian action and signing petitions follow. However, overall,

excluding voting, all listed activities show a low frequency of participation by the local population, with only a small percentage participating frequently or always.

Table 4. Local Population Participation in Bor and Majdanpek (Source: Authors)

	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Occasionally (%)	Frequently (%)	Always (%)
Public debate on a draft law/strategy/action plan	75.4	12.6	7.2	3.8	1.0
Activist protest	71.2	11.5	6.4	6.4	4.5
Political protest	63.5	11.1	12.5	6.8	6.1
Volunteer action	50.0	26.4	17.2	4.1	2.3
Local community activity	51.5	24.7	13.6	7.1	3.1
Engagement on social media	56.4	13.2	17.6	6.7	6.1
Signing a petition	43.2	17.9	20.9	11.5	6.5
Humanitarian action	17.8	25.3	35.7	11.4	9.8
Voting in political elections	6.5	2.4	7.1	8.5	75.5

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the survey results showed that the local population is very aware of the negative consequences of mining activities, especially the environmental ones. In addition to the quantitative data confirming this, the surveyors' field reports highlighted that citizens felt the need to further "complain" about air pollution and the deterioration of their daily lives. They vividly described their experiences, such as wiping dust off the lawn every morning, being unable to have an orchard, having to wear masks in their own yards a few years ago, and washing their cars only to find them covered in dust again within 15-20 minutes, among other examples.

It is legitimate to question why, despite such widespread awareness and exposure to the negative effects of mining activities, the population shows a low level of participation in activities important to the local community and low membership in various organizations. The opposing conclusions of Akmentiņa (2020) – highlighting a positive trend in citizen democracy – and UN-Habitat (2023) – noting a global rise in public mistrust toward governments – may also be reflected in the behavior of residents in Bor and Majdanpek. Our findings can also be interpreted in light of the low expectations that the local population has of most actors with regard to solving the problems caused by mining activities. The distrust of citizens in institutions is not specific to mining areas in Serbia. These results align with findings from a study conducted by the Institute for Sociological Research in 2014 (see more in: Petrović, 2014),[2] which highlighted the widespread distrust towards all actors, particularly regarding the professionalization of NGOs in post-socialist Serbia (Petrović, 2014). These findings confirm citizens' distrust of professional activism, which, as mentioned, has contributed to the slow development of participatory environmental activism in post-socialist countries (Vukelić *et al*., 2021). The analysis also revealed the absence of "anti-mining activism".

Distrust toward mining exists on a global scale as well. Due to a lack of trust in both the mining company and the state, citizens are also discouraged from participating in formal decision-making processes (Conde, 2017). This lack of trust may be a key reason why citizen engagement often takes the form of protests and demonstrations rather than

[2] Citizens in medium-sized cities were asked about their expectations from the aforementioned actors in solving general issues within the local community.

formal participation. Community participation is widely recognized as crucial for building trust between mining companies and local communities, especially in the process of obtaining a social licence to operate (SLO) (Milanez *et al.*, 2021; Tuulentie *et al.*, 2019; Zanini *et al.*, 2023). Participation is important for both pragmatic and normative reasons. Pragmatically, it helps improve acceptance of decisions, and it enhances the likelihood of successful implementation (Nadin *et al.*, 2021), facilitates knowledge sharing among stakeholders (Akmentiņa, 2020; Everingham *et al.*, 2020), and increases environmental awareness, which can lead to higher environmental protection standards (Jay *et al.*, 2007). Normatively, involving participants in decision-making promotes more just and democratic development (Halachmi and Holzer, 2010; Nadin *et al.*, 2021). Public involvement, particularly in the early stages of mining projects (André *et al.*, 2006), provides mining companies with an opportunity to build trust among local communities, ultimately leading to a SLO (Kokko *et al.*, 2015).

Therefore, distrust may be one of the reasons citizens perceive participatory activism as the only viable form of engagement, "from the bottom up", considering the pronounced distrust towards all actors except the citizens themselves. Participatory activism inherently implies a push for independence from public, private, and civil sector institutions. At the same time, the activities in which citizens participated indicate local self-organization.

There is a chance that the potential for participatory activism is greater than what the survey results suggest, since field reports from pollsters noted that citizens, especially those employed in the mine, are afraid of losing their jobs. This fear may have made them respond more cautiously to questions about activism, despite the anonymity guaranteed by their participation in the survey. Fear and marginalization often prevent individuals and communities from engaging in formal decision-making processes, particularly in contexts shaped by historical repression or ongoing power imbalances. As Gaventa (2006) argues, power structures – both visible and invisible – determine whether people feel safe or entitled to participate. In many cases, marginalized groups avoid participation due to fear of retribution, past experiences of exclusion, or the belief that their involvement will not lead to meaningful change. Foucault (1980) emphasizes that power is not only held by governments but also diffused through institutions and social norms, leading individuals to internalize their marginalization and believe they lack the knowledge or legitimacy to engage in formal processes. Cornwall (2004) further highlights that participatory processes are often shaped by elite interests, hence, leaving people feeling tokenized or manipulated. In repressive settings, fear of violence and retaliation can discourage participation, as individuals avoid engagement to protect themselves from potential harm (Arendt, 1970). Also, authoritarian regimes use symbolic compliance to prevent genuine participation, with citizens often opting out of public forums to avoid punishment (Wedeen, 1999). Finally, in contexts of rigid control, marginalized individuals often shift to informal, subversive forms of resistance, bypassing formal participation because of the perceived dangers or futility of engaging with official channels (Bayat, 2010).

The contextual analysis of the mining areas of Bor and Majdanpek, based on secondary sources, showed similar results. The residents of Bor, Majdanpek, and surrounding villages primarily participate in activities organized by local activist groups and citizens' associations. Through collective, continuous, and direct actions, they create grassroots groups, which are close to the participatory type of activism. Since these are smaller social groups rather than mass civic mobilizations characteristic of participatory activism, we consider the term "activist groups" to be more appropriate for interpreting local

engagement, rather than the concept of a social movement. The activities of local groups are mainly focused on resisting the proposed expansion of mining operations, through participation in protests, road blockades, and blocking a mountain peak, in the case of the several-months-long activist campaign at Starica Mountain.

These direct collective actions correspond to the conflict-based concept of "ecological distribution conflicts". However, since they are primarily directed not against the mining activities themselves but rather against the harmful environmental consequences of mining, it is difficult to describe them as "anti-mining" activism. Further research should focus on the deeper motivations for resistance, as well as the perspectives of the local population regarding the emerging broader anti-mining ecological movement in Serbia, particularly present in the Šumadija and Western Serbia regions. The experiences of activist groups from Bor and Majdanpek may prove important in organizing resistance strategies to other projects, contributing to the development and strengthening of the grassroots ecological movement in Serbia.

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