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ENTANGLED MASCULINITIES – MASCULINITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL CRISES

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Navigating Green Nationalism and Neoliberal Colonialism

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Essay

ZORANA ANTONIJEVIĆ

**Constructing Ecological Masculinities on the Semiperiphery:
Navigating Green Nationalism and Neoliberal Colonialism**

1. Introduction

This text is written at a time of great hardship for citizens of Serbia, who have spent more than eight months protesting in the streets against the autocratic and kleptocratic regime of Aleksandar Vučić. Since November 1, 2024, when the roof of the recently reconstructed railway station in my hometown of Novi Sad collapsed and killed 16 people, the political protests have been ongoing (Knežević 2025). The main demands of the student and civil movements are the fight against corruption and clientelism (Maksimovic/Popovic 2025), which have permeated all aspects of society – so deeply, in fact, that one can no longer speak merely of a captured state but of a dissolved one.

At first glance, the topic of these protests may appear to have little to do with the subject of this essay. However, that tragedy marked the moment when the metaphor of the ‘boiling frog’ – popularised by Al Gore in the film *An Inconvenient Truth*¹ – ceased to be a metaphor. It became a description of collective life in a society where one crisis quietly gives way to the next, until the threshold of tolerance is long surpassed.

In this sense, the question at the heart of this essay arises almost naturally: are we witnessing a specific form of ecological – or anti-ecological – masculinity in Serbia, or are we observing a deeper structural nexus between patriarchy and predatory capitalism? In that sense, this essay offers a critical reflection on whether existing typologies of masculinity

– from hegemonic and complicit (Connell 2005; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005) to industrial/ breadwinner and ecological typologies (Hultman/Pulé 2018) – truly provide an adequate framework for understanding what has unfolded in Serbia over the past 10 years; or whether other concepts and theories might be more appropriate.

Thus, this essay takes its orientation from the concept of the *semiperiphery*, developed by late feminist theorist Marina Blagojevic Hughson. Then, I turn to Jeff Hearn's concept of transpatriarchies (2009) to capture the interplay among global neoliberal elites, local political actors, and the gendered power networks that bind them. The case through which these concepts become most tangible is the Jadar Project – a proposed lithium mining operation led by Rio Tinto, supported at various points by the Serbian government, and endorsed by segments of European political leadership. The protests against this project reveal the limits of existing typologies of masculinity, while the need for conceptual re-evaluation becomes clearer.

This essay is also, inevitably, written in the absence of Marina Blagojević Hughson, whose intellectual courage and generosity continue to shape our understanding of semiperipheral masculinities.

2. Gender regimes and semiperiphery

The concept of the semiperiphery, as explained by Hughson in her numerous texts on this topic (Blagojević 2009, 2013; Blagojević-Hughson/Bobić 2014; Hughson 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020; Hughson/Avlijaš 2024),² is used in a sense that goes beyond the original application of the term in Wallerstein's world-systems theory (Hughson 2020: 65). As Hughson defines it, semiperiphery has primarily been shaped by the experiences of postsocialist countries that have undergone neoliberal economic restructuring, social stratification, and dramatic demographic shifts (lower birth rates, migration, ageing workforce) (Blagojević-Hughson/Bobić 2014). For all the countries of the former socialist bloc, as well as those that emerged from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, these processes – often equated with (economic, political, and cultural) 'transition' – have also been closely linked to European integration.

Semiperiphery also “do[es] not fit into the binary conceptual map of the developed Global North versus the developing Global South” (Hughson/Avlijaš 2024: 107). Its (neo)colonialism is defined by the interests of the national neoliberal elite, which exploits domestic human and natural resources for its own benefit, not merely for the benefit of colonial ‘rulers’.

Blagojević (2013) describes gender regimes in the semiperiphery as hybrid systems that combine modern, globally induced equality frameworks with deeply rooted patriarchal and clientelist structures. These regimes are neither entirely traditional nor straightforwardly modern. Instead, they operate through ideologies and practices where high rates of female education and political participation (Gender Gap Report 2025: 321) coexist with powerful mechanisms of exclusion and exploitation, both in the private and public spheres. Even more, women in the semiperiphery are frequently mobilised as symbolic carriers of modernity yet denied full political and economic agency. As a result, gender policies may appear progressive on paper, but in practice remain under-resourced, selectively implemented, or co-opted by elite interests.

Blagojević explains this hybridity with concepts of structural specificities: *catching up* and *de-development* (2013). The attempt to *catch up* with the centre comes at a high cost: dismantling public systems that previously guaranteed universal access to education, healthcare, employment, and housing – in effect, meaning *de-development*. De-development is not simply going back, but actually reshaping the pre-existing gender regime, leading to its *re-traditionalisation* and *re-patriarchalisation* (Blagojević 2013). It manifests itself in extreme levels of violence against women, calls to return them to traditional family roles, and the strengthening of anti-gender discourses (Zaharijević/Antonijević 2024). A clear example of this is the mass involvement of women in ecological movements – not as leaders, but as helpers in the background (providing care for male leaders and giving organisational support) (Interview 01, 8.8.2025).

In this context, gender equality is often instrumentalised – that is, used performatively in alignment with EU and international obligations – while substantive transformation remains limited or is even going backwards (Zaharijević/Antonijević 2024). In sum, the semiperiphery offers a unique vantage point for understanding the tension between gender

normativity and gender performativity, which underscores the importance of analysing semiperipheral spaces not as derivative or transitional, but as sites of complex structural entanglements.

Drawing on that, Hughson (2015, 2018) introduces the concept of *hybrid forms of masculinity* that blend progressive and traditional elements, mediated by these structural contradictions. Unlike liberal gender regimes – where the dominant symbolic order typically aligns women with nature and men with culture – the semiperipheral context produces an almost inverse configuration. In Serbia, masculinity is associated with nature, instinct, tradition, the Balkans, authenticity, rurality, warriorhood, and sexual power, while femininity becomes linked to culture, rationality, modernity, the West, technology, artificiality, urbanity, care, and dependency (Hughson 2015, 2017, 2018). These are not merely gendered contrasts but deeply geopolitical ones, mapping long-standing tensions between the Balkans and Europe (Todorova 1997), between tradition and modernity, and between authenticity and imitation. In that sense, masculinity is shaped not only in relation to women but also in relation to the ‘centre’ – namely, the West and the European Union as symbolic centres of normative modernity.

This dialectic of resistance and attraction to the centre is a key component of the semiperipheral crisis of masculinity (Blagojević 2013), which transition, wars and re-traditionalisation have further intensified. It has placed men in a paradoxical position: simultaneously aspiring to and excluded from the global model of masculine hegemony. Thus, the typology of masculinities developed by Connell (2005; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005) cannot fully capture this complexity: while ideologically pressured to assume the role of ‘breadwinners’, the real economic conditions make this increasingly difficult (Hughson 2020). This creates a specific tension between ideological power and material vulnerability, where men are simultaneously carriers of patriarchal values and victims of their disintegration. In this sense, *green nationalism* can be understood as a compensatory project that seeks to reassert national and gender hierarchies through the moral language of protection, nature, and sovereignty.

Hughson (2018) introduces an important distinction between *ontological presence* and *discursive absence* to highlight the paradoxical status of both men and semiperipheral societies themselves within the global

order of knowledge and power. Men in the semiperiphery, and the semi-peripheral positions themselves (such as the Balkan countries), possess real, material presence in social structures – they are ontologically present. This means they actively participate in reproducing institutions, local hierarchies, political elites, and economic relations, often as holders of power at the national level. However, despite this presence, they are discursively absent from global narratives and academic theoretical models that shape our understanding of social inequalities. Men from the semiperiphery rarely appear as a distinct analytical category in feminist, postcolonial, or development studies. Similarly, semiperipheral societies remain marginalised within global epistemology, as “neither one nor the other” (Blagojević 2013: 164).

This is when Jeff Hearn’s concept of *transpatriarchies* (2009) becomes particularly useful for analysing how power is maintained and gendered across transnational and informal domains. Transpatriarchies refer to transnational systems of male-dominated power that operate both within and beyond formal institutions, often through opaque, interest-driven networks. These formations enable elite men, both on a global and local level, to sustain authority while evading responsibility for social and ecological harm. The Jadar Project thus exemplifies how transnational neoliberal governance reproduces patriarchal power, not only through institutional means, but also through informal, often clientelist, transpatriarchal arrangements. This dual structure, linking formal authority with informal male domination, helps explain how global narratives of sustainability and green transition are appropriated and distorted within semiperipheral contexts to serve the interests of transnational male elites and their local (male) clients (Hughson 2018).

3. The Jadar project: colonial problems in the semiperiphery

The planned mining project in the Jadar Valley involves the removal and relocation of entire villages within the proposed exploitation zone. Its location, near a tributary of the Drina River, poses a high risk of polluting fertile land and underground waters. At the same time, the production process itself would lead to the release of large amounts of carbon

dioxide. Despite these concerns, the Serbian government pushed the project forward with an authoritarian energy, while lacking transparency regarding its phases. For example, although environmental impact assessments were legally required, they were conducted in a non-transparent manner, with critical data omitted or misrepresented. Simultaneously, citizens' rights, including the right to participate in public consultations and to protect property ownership, were restricted or reinterpreted to facilitate project approval.

The protests against the 'Jadar project' (since 2021) are just part of a series of mass environmental protests in Serbia over the last decade, driven by the combination of formal deregulation and widespread informal practices that have effectively undermined environmental protections. Simultaneously, the Serbian Progressive Party has gained power on a declaratory mantra that 'the fight against corruption', 'clean energy', and 'sustainability' (in the sense that these terms hold in global and EU governance) are at the centre of its political and European agenda. This mantra is not only symbolic but also connected to unlimited access to EU and UN funds for the green (energy) transition.

Parallel to these processes runs the application of privatisation models such as waterways (small hydropower plants), contributing to further and irreversible soil pollution (e.g., extensive copper and gold production in Bor and a tyre factory in the most fertile part of the Vojvodina plain) but also to the loss of essential means of livelihood for farmers whose lands are bought out for geological exploration carried out by Rio Tinto.

The voices of affected local communities have been systematically marginalised in the absence of any serious public debate on the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of such development models. Not only have local farming communities been excluded, but knowledge produced in local scientific institutions and research laboratories has also been ignored and silenced. The devastation of natural and social resources becomes a structural aspect of postsocialist transformation – justified by narratives of efficiency, modernisation, and sustainability but, in fact, driven by the logic of extractive capitalism (Hughson/Avlijaš 2024).

The most recent example of how 'transition' is legitimised through the expropriation of public resources via privatisation is reflected in the amendments to the Law on the Management of Enterprises Owned by the

Republic of Serbia (2023). According to the Law, public companies such as *Srbijašume* (Serbian woods) and *Srbijavode* (Serbian waters) are being transformed into limited liability companies (LLCs). Although the state formally retains ownership, the shift in legal form has prompted serious concerns among civil society actors and environmental experts. The transformation process is characterised by a lack of transparency and meaningful public consultation, raising questions about the democratic legitimacy of decisions concerning strategic natural resources (Trasparentnost Srbija 2025). By assigning natural resources market value, their social value as public goods has effectively been erased.

Such situations raise key questions about the justice of development policies promoted by international organisations, yet implemented by local actors, and about who has the institutional power to define what constitutes the ‘public interest.’ At the same time, the gap between the declarative goals of climate justice and their local implementation is growing, and natural resources are being instrumentalised for the benefit of the few (Hughson/Avlijaš 2024).

On the other hand, the gender aspects of ecological protests are undeniable. Not only are women participating en masse, but some of them are under considerable pressure, be that in terms of lawsuits, as well as verbal and even physical attacks. Protests against the construction of small hydropower plants, the conversion of Fruška Gora National Park into private property owned by a few tycoons, the destruction of the Novi Sad floodplain, and urban environmental protests in 2023 (focussed on river-bank defence in Belgrade) showed a different pattern. Here, professional women – architects, urban planners, and environmental scientists – often took public leadership roles, speaking at rallies and pursuing legal action. This urban setting appears to have facilitated greater visibility for women, possibly because expertise and technical knowledge, rather than political confrontation, framed the activism. However, from the earliest anti-small hydropower plant protests in 2017, in villages such as Rakita, Temska, and Topli Do, it was predominantly rural women who guarded the protest sites, maintained a constant presence, and provided essential logistical and moral support (Interview 01, 8.8.2025).

These consistent patterns in traditional gender roles were often grounded in gendered narratives of protecting family livelihoods, commu-

nity well-being, and intergenerational survival – frames that proved effective in mobilising solidarity beyond the local context. While such women played indispensable roles, the movement's public face was typically male (ibid.). This reflects entrenched gender norms in Serbia, where political legitimacy in public protests is often ascribed to men.

Although certain women, local activists, and scientists played a key role in articulating the moral case of the Rio Tinto lithium mine protests (2021-2022), male leaders dominated representation through mass mobilisations and televised events. Beyond representation analysis of public protest speeches, television appearances, interviews, and posts on the social media platform X reveals a battle of competing narratives, two of which are of particular interest to this text. The first narrative presents the project's economic potential and its importance to the EU's green agenda. This narrative, which portrays lithium extraction as economically viable and environmentally controlled, is supported by the Serbian Government, Rio Tinto (through its subsidiary Rio Sava), and certain EU officials and member states (especially Germany). The second narrative comes from environmental activists, opposition parties, and social movements. It emphasises not only concerns about the project's environmental sustainability and its threat to public health and citizens' well-being (including neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina), but also the region's cultural heritage: "central to this discourse is the concept of patriotism, interpreted through various ideological lenses" (Stepanović 2025: 755).

The research analysing hashtags (ibid.) as key tools for shaping and disseminating messages in the digital sphere identifies several groups of narratives that emphasise the international environmental significance of the protests against the Jadar project. The hashtags in English are aimed at an international audience: #EyesOnSerbia, #StandWithSerbia, #YesToLifeNoToMining, #EnvironmentalJustice, #ExtinctionRebellion, and #StopExploitation. For example, by using terms such as #Neocolonialism, protest narratives link lithium mining to broader global patterns of exploitation and domination, suggesting that Serbia is being treated as a new colony (ibid.).

Hashtags in Serbian reflect a broader spectrum of narratives emphasising patriotism, sovereignty, and anti-colonial struggle #NeDamoJadar (We don't give Jadar"), #SrbijaNijeNaProdaju ("Serbia is not for sale"), and

#RioTintoMarsSaDrine (“Rio Tinto go away from Drina”) (ibid.). These slogans also appear on protest banners, in speeches, and on television appearances of male protesters and leaders. Their meanings rely on historical and emotional codes from Serbian collective memory, including allusions to songs from World War I.

Hashtags such as #Kosovojesrbija (“Kosovo is Serbia”), #NATO, and #NATObombardovanje (“NATO bombing”), seemingly unrelated to ecological issues, are closely tied to constructions of Serbian masculinity based on nationalist and anti-Western frameworks. ‘Kosovo is Serbia’ is a well-known nationalist narrative in the discourse of both far-right political actors and the ruling nomenklatura. It connects national sovereignty over natural resources to the battle for Kosovo, which unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2017, in the final act of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. At the same time, narratives alluding to the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia are used to fuel anti-Western sentiment and expand the critique of mining projects to a broader context of Western political domination. For example, at a protest held in Loznica against lithium mining in 2024 (N1 2024), just before the collapse of the train station canopy in Novi Sad, one of the prominent male figures of the anti-Rio Tinto protests, and also a university professor, structured his speech around the sacred significance of the land in the Pocerina region, where many Serbian soldiers lost their lives in the Battle of Cer (World War I). He stated that all those who are fighting to protect this land carry a deep spiritual connection and strength that will not allow anyone to usurp that space. He included in his speech verses from a poem given to him earlier that day by a taxi driver in Belgrade:

“Everything’s ready to cash in fast,
For the public good – good for Rio Tinto.
My friend up high, stay far from Jadar,
Neither with you to Europe,
Nor into your progressive jaws.”³

He concluded with: “Dear people, brothers and sisters, we will not give up Kosovo and Metohija, we will not give up Jadar, nor a single Serbian

field, village, or municipality. Long live the fight until victory!” (NI 2024). Through the rhetoric of the Kosovo myth, which marked the beginning of Yugoslavia’s disintegration and the wars of the 1990s, as well as through anti-Western and militaristic narratives, various green nationalists find ways to express their views on the lithium project – showing how a single ecological issue becomes a site of right-wing political articulation and a struggle for both symbolic and actual sovereignty. On the other hand, very few scientific/rational voices about the actual economic gains and the environmental and social losses for Serbia are heard, and they mostly come from female scientists and a few left-oriented male activists.

These narratives confirm the Serbian matrix of gender oppositions: masculinity is associated with nature, tradition, the Balkans, rurality, and warriorhood, while femininity is constructed through associations with culture, rationality, modernity, technology, and urbanity (Hughson 2015). This structure produces specific political configurations in which the struggle for natural resources is symbolically coded as masculine and patriotic. At the same time, the rational critique of extractive capitalism and its consequences remain marginalised. For this reason, the ‘Jadar project’ becomes a place where the interests of transnational neoliberal elites and their local male elite clients intersect with a specific form of green nationalism that is at the same time anti-Western.

4. Reframing ecological masculinities from the semiperiphery

At one point, massive environmental protests halted the Jadar lithium project and delayed the passage of new mining laws. However, the victory was brief. Soon afterwards, the European Union – one of Serbia’s key political and economic partners – declared the project to be of ‘strategic importance,’ undermining the trust of those who had looked to the EU for transparency and accountability. Despite strong local resistance, Rio Tinto continued its activities, confident that the project would eventually move forward.

These events bring me back to the question of whether existing typologies of masculinity can explain the current state of (anti)ecological men

and masculinity in Serbia today. Instead of fitting neatly into Connell's or Hultman and Pulé's typologies, anti-lithium protests reveal the workings of *transpatriarchal* structures that operate across borders – male-dominated alliances of elites bound by shared interests, informal power, and control over resources. What distinguishes these networks from conventional power structures is the systemic reliance on informal, interest-driven practices that often operate outside formal rules and institutional frameworks (Hughson 2018). Although such behaviour is formally incompatible with institutional norms, it is often tolerated in weakly institutionalised contexts, creating a 'grey zone' of governance in which informality is normalised. Through these mechanisms, (trans)national male elites strengthen their positions and legitimise decision-making processes, often under the guise of global priorities such as sustainability or political "stability" (Bieber 2020: 98-105).

The semiperipheral perspective on masculinity reveals it to be a battleground of tension, where men are placed as defenders of authenticity and national identity; however, their power remains fragile, upheld by the very hierarchies that marginalise them. The contradictions inherent in this stance are evident in ecological struggles, where the defence of land and nature can function both as a language of protection and as a reaffirmation of patriarchal order. It is precisely this hybridity that exposes the more profound logic of the semiperipheral condition and demonstrates how ecological and political crises are intertwined with the crisis of masculinity itself. By situating these discussions within the wider context of semiperipheral experiences, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on masculinity, environment, and the socio-political challenges in Serbia and beyond.

- 1 The film came out in 2006 and can be watched here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzQoGeLVLhk.
- 2 Blagojević, Blagojević Hughson, and Hughson refer to the same person: Marina (Blagojević) Hughson.
- 3 A play on words on the name of the Progressive Serbian Party, headed by Aleksandar Vučić.

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Interviews

Interview 01: Marta Szpala, 8.8.2025, online.

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