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COALITION AGAINST THE MINING PANDEMIC

Europe Regional Synthesis Report





Collective research and advocacy on the intersection of mining and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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About the cover photo

Portela da Cruz, place of environmental importance where the Serra do Cando and Serra do Suído meet, both threatened by mining and wind exploitation. Photo by Elena Buch.

About the coalition

The Coalition Against the Mining Pandemic works in global solidarity with communities, Indigenous Peoples, and workers to respond to mining abuses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We work as a consensus-based coalition conducting collective research and advocacy on the intersection of mining and the COVID-19 pandemic.

About this report

This report explores, through research and a series of first-hand accounts, how extractive industries have sought to benefit from the Covid-19 pandemic, advancing mining agendas and shrinking civic space. Key themes are presented throughout case studies in Turkey, Northern Ireland, and Spain.

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ACRONYMS

AKP - Turkish Justice and Development Party
EIA - Environmental Impact Assessment
GPO - Greencastle People's Office
PSNI - Police Service of Northern Ireland
RMG - Recursos Minerales de Galicia SA
RRP - COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience Plans
SAMCA - Sociedad Minera Catalano Aragonesa
SLO - Social Licence to Operate

Executive Summary

This report presents three case studies from Europe that reveal how mining companies and some European governments have sought to use the COVID-19 pandemic to shrink civic space and further their extractive activities. The report investigates gold mining projects both in the Mount Ida region of Turkey and the Sperrin Mountains in Northern Ireland, as well as a planned lithium extraction project in Galicia, Spain.

These case studies reveal that mining companies and supportive European governments are advancing a discourse that connects Europe's economic recovery from COVID-19 with a vision for green growth and a green transition predicated on the large-scale expansion of mining for 'critical' minerals and metals within Europe's borders.

This planned 'on-shoring' of mining into Europe is causing widespread civil dissent and unrest among communities, like those in Mount Ida, the Sperrins, and Galicia, whose lands and neighbourhoods are at risk of becoming extractive sacrifice zones.

In response, there have been clear moves by mining corporations and supportive European governments to repress and silence this growing opposition to mining under the guise of enforcing COVID-19 public health measures. The circumstances of the pandemic have also provided the extractive sector with opportunities to advance their interests by exploiting hardship that communities and individuals have faced during this time.

Despite these challenges, land and water defenders across Europe have demonstrated adaptability and considerable resilience to maintain their resistance to unwanted extractive projects during the pandemic. They continue to challenge the industry's greenwashing and so-called 'social licence to operate' in their home territories, as well as the industry's expansion across Europe as a whole.



Photo: Greencastle People's Office. Credit: Greencastle People's Office [Facebook page](#).

Introduction

Europe is not immune to the multiple intersecting crises we face globally. Ecological disaster, social inequalities, and the COVID-19 health crisis are converging. COVID-19 has exemplified our fragility to crisis and demonstrated once again that governments and corporations will use widespread suffering as an opportunity to profit. Impacts continue to materialise in line with existing inequalities and the pandemic has further entrenched and exacerbated power asymmetries, particularly between large corporations and small, rural communities. As the UN Secretary General commented in 2021: “while we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris” (Oxfam, 2021).

The mining sector in Europe is no exception from these trends. Despite mining companies’ and governments’ constant reference to the EU’s high regulatory standards, in Europe we are witnessing dangerous and substandard mining practices. The pursuit of extractive capitalism is persistent, prioritising economic gain over environmental, health, and community considerations. Despite liberal greenwashing, the fact remains that the EU and corporations have chosen to increase extractive activities known cause detrimental impacts to human and ecological health in the middle of a global health crisis.

An Essential Industry?

Throughout the pandemic, some industries have been granted ‘essential’ status in order to help carry society through crisis. Whereas the logic for doing this is clear in the case of, for example, healthcare or transportation, the decision by some European

governments to class mining as an essential industry, or to turn a blind eye to their continued operations, is questionable to say the least.

In several European jurisdictions, mining companies enjoying the benefit of essential status have also benefitted from the brutal policing of land and water defenders whose ongoing protests have been criminalised under the very COVID-19 restrictions mining companies have been exempted from.

Greenwashing: COVID-19 and the Green Recovery

In the current climate, where societal hardship, economic recovery, and the ‘green transition’ intersect, mining companies have identified an opportunity to exploit. The EU increasingly associates Europe’s economic recovery from COVID-19 with the nascent European Green Deal. The EU Green Deal is claimed to be “our lifeline out of the COVID-19 pandemic” (European Commission, 2019) and a way to “build back better”, cutting CO2 emissions as well as boosting the economy (Evans & Gabbatiss, 2020). The EU’s National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) “aim to mitigate the economic and social impact of the pandemic while building a more sustainable and cohesive Europe-wide economy” (Vivid Economics, 2021). 37% of the Europe NRRP funded by the next generation EU is to be targeted at the green and ecological transition (Sabato, Mandelli & Vanhercke, 2021).

These intersecting Green Deal and COVID-19 recovery plans anticipate and incentivise an increase in the extraction of copper, lithium, and other minerals the EU deems critical for the green transition. This has allowed the extractive sector to greenwash projects

that cause health, environmental, and societal concerns, and pursue mining expansion in Europe.

Even gold exploration companies are including green and COVID-19 recovery discourses in their PR campaigns. The Institute of Geologists of Ireland (IGI) list gold as critical to the green economy, but the justifications for doing so are inadequate. Just 12% produced goes to industry demand whilst the rest goes to adornments and bank vaults (Sullivan, 2021). While gold's green credentials are questionable, the instability of currency during the COVID-19 crisis means that gold has increasingly become a safe haven for investment, increasing in value and demand, and thus also in attractiveness for the extractive sector.

Social Licence to Operate, Repression and Shrinking Civic Space

The pandemic has provided mining companies with new opportunities to manufacture a 'social licence to operate' (SLO) through PR campaigns and carefully placed donations, exploiting people at a time of hardship and vulnerability. Cynical attempts to advance extractive business interests are disguised as social philanthropy. Pandemic-related PR moves help conjure a positive public image and it is much "harder to criticise a mining company in the act of doing good" (Transparency International, 2020).

Increased government powers during the pandemic have, in some cases, led to a dangerous stifling of democratic rights and the shrinking of physical civic space. Across Europe, land and water defenders have repeatedly been fined and criminalised for seeking to protect the environment by resisting mining projects. COVID-19 regulations have been used as justification for criminalisation and repression of citizens, even when protests or events have been legitimate, safe, and carried out in line with current health restrictions. In some cases, the use of excessive and disproportionate force to break up protests has gone

unquestioned, claiming the imposition of health restrictions. A trend is apparent here, these measures are often "used to undermine protest movements which had gained both momentum and experience in the previous years" (Frontline Defenders, 2020). Restrictions designed to protect public health are being misused in service of powerful extractive interests.

The inability to gather in large numbers has diminished the 'people power' of traditional protests and networks. A move towards online networks and events deepens inequality and limits accessibility to knowledge and participation. Limited accessibility to online communications has left people disconnected when physical events are halted. Areas impacted by mining are often rural areas with limited or poor internet connection, presenting further challenges for land and water defenders.

Despite these practical and systemic challenges, the case studies shared in this report evidence that frontline communities have found brave and innovative ways to continue fighting for their health, environment, and livelihoods. This report is dedicated to them.

Mount Ida, Turkey

Companies:

Alamos Gold, Doğu Biga Mining, and Cengiz İnşaat

Activity:

Gold mining

Violations:

Illegal deforestation, violation of licencing period, manufacturing social licence to operate, repression and criminalisation of defenders

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated demand and exploration for gold across Turkey. At the same time, the Turkish Government's pandemic measures have been used to shrink civic space and suppress protests. One prominent example of these dynamics comes from the region of Mount Ida (Kazdağı), which sits between the provinces of Balıkesir and Çanakkale in north-western Turkey. The companies involved here are Canada-based Alamos Gold, and their Turkish subcontractor Doğu Biga Mining, along with Cengiz İnşaat, a Turkish company with close ties to Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) currently in government. An estimated 79% of the Mount Ida region is subjected to mining licence (MacDonald, 2020). The repression and criminalisation of protesters resisting destructive activities is prevalent in the area.

The extensive deforestation of the Mount Ida region by Alamos Gold has sparked widespread opposition to the mine. Alamos Gold claims to be "committed to the principles of sustainable development", one of which being "environmental management" (Alamos Gold, 2021). However, in 2019 information emerged that the company had felled 195,000 trees, in comparison to the felling of approximately 45,000 trees previously approved in the company's Environmental Impact Assessment (Bianet, 2019). After the release of photographs depicting widespread deforestation in July 2019, public anger

began to rise, followed swiftly by protests and solidarity campaigns. Local people stepped up their resistance to the mine in order to protect biodiversity hotspots, historical and cultural sites, and to prevent contamination of soil and water affecting nearby communities. Despite mounting opposition, political support for the project was demonstrated when calls for the cancellation of the project were rejected in the Turkish parliament. More recent figures suggest that Alamos Gold's deforestation activities are even more widespread than previously thought. The company has allegedly felled nearly 350,000 trees from their mining operations in the Mount Ida region (Bianet, 2021).



Photo: Land defenders at the protest camp in Kaz mountains. Credit: [Her Yer Kazdağları](#)

Another source of controversy in Alamos Gold's attempt to mine in Mount Ida lies in the fact that the company's mining licence for the region expired on 13th October 2019. Despite this, the company has so far refused to withdraw from the area, whilst maintaining fences and security around the mining site. The General Manager of East Biga Mining, Alamos Gold's Turkish branch, said: "We are not going anywhere from the Ida Mountains, we have a licence for 60 years, we will extract the mine underground as promised to the republic of Turkey" (Bianet, 2021).

Opposition to the project has continued to grow as the company shows a progressively greater disregard for Turkish law, the environment, and the concerns of local people. For the duration of the pandemic, protests and resistance have continued despite increased repression.

Extractive Politics

The Turkish government has used the pandemic as an opportunity to step up environmentally destructive projects. In a press conference titled 'Ecological Destruction in Turkey during the COVID-19 Pandemic', Şebnem Korur Fincancı spoke to this pattern, saying: "seeing the global outbreak as an opportunity, governments do not have any concerns about attacking the ecosystem more deeply" (Bianet, 2021).

Dr. Ahmet Soysal notes that those viewing the environment solely as an object of exploitation want to "continue their plunder faster and more cruelly by benefitting from the extraordinary conditions of this period" (Bianet, 2021).

The interests of the mining companies and the government in Turkey are closely aligned. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), holds close associations with mining companies operating across the country. Economically, the uncertainties sparked

by the pandemic have led to a rise of gold globally as a financial safe haven (Sonmez, 2020), a trend particularly seen in Turkey. Exploiting this situation, companies and government alike have been particularly keen to expand their gold exploration and extraction.

Amid this extractive climate, a new Turkish Green Party was launched during the pandemic in September 2020, aiming to highlight climate and environmental concerns. Citing complications due to COVID-19, the legal standing of the party was delayed, despite the successful establishment of other political parties during this period. Some political commentators believe this delay is due to the fact that the goals of the Green Party do not align with the extractive and destructive nature of the development that the government are pursuing. Economic gain is being placed ahead of climatic concerns, and Koray Doğan, a spokesperson for the party, states that "they would like to design the politics to their benefit" (Soylu, 2021).



Photo: Cheques that were given to villagers by Cengiz Holding. Credit: [Her Yer Kazdağları](#)

Economic Hardships

Extractive companies in Turkey have sought to exploit the severe financial hardships caused by the pandemic. Cengiz İnşaat exploited this environment and threatened villagers with the expropriation of land in Kazdağları. Following this threat, the company attempted to gain a social licence to operate, distributing shopping checks worth 150 liras (GBP 11.42) to the villagers, as well as food parcels and tablets to children during Ramadan (Artı Gerçek, 2021). Unequal dynamics are at play with the imposition of restrictions. Even during lockdowns, no restrictions were enforced to prevent company employees going into villages to either threaten or give 'gifts' to local people.

Turkey's 'Law on Reducing the Effects of the New Coronavirus Pandemic on Economic and Social Life' was introduced in April 2020. The first phase of financial aid provided was around 1000 TL, around GBP 83, and was not made available to all citizens. In May 2021, another round of support was made available, this time of 1100 TL, or around GBP 90. Despite such insignificant levels of aid, the support could only be applied for once and the measure helped companies like Cengiz İnşaat to exploit social deprivation with a demonstration of philanthropy.

Repression and Criminalisation of Defenders

The pandemic has provided new opportunities for mining companies and the government to shrink the civic space of citizens who have been defending Mount Ida from mining since July 2019. Measures designed to protect people from the COVID-19 virus have been manipulated to silence, repress, and criminalise protesters. The pandemic has been used to restrict some fundamental rights and freedoms, and the "increasing continuation of environmental destruction takes place right at this point, as an

opportunity as life becomes more difficult and stagnant" (İklim Adaleti, 2020).

One defender from Mount Ida recalled a clear example of the contradiction, hypocrisy, and inconsistency related to the implementation of pandemic measures. On 25th July 2020, on the one-year anniversary of the watch camp set up near the mine site by local people, defenders organised a press release in the city centre in order to denounce Alamos Gold and its subcontractor's continuing presence in the mine site. Just two hours prior to the press release, the region's governor made a sudden change to pandemic rules, forbidding all actions, demonstrations, and marches in the city centre (Personal Communication). The governor's change in lockdown measures lasted less than one week, until 31st July, before a return to previous measures was announced. The nature and timing of this enhanced lockdown raises legitimate questions about whether rule-changes were introduced to protect public health, or in an effort to control resistance and shrink civic space.

On the grounds outlined in the governor's ban, on 25th July the police detained numerous people



Photo: The first anniversary protests of Alamos Gold where community members were arrested due to pandemic measures. Credit: [Her Yer Kazdağları](#)

with reports of ill-treatment (Gazete Duvar, 2020). Speaking about the repression from this day, one community member recalls: “they only gathered, and within the fifth minute the police arrived, there were many videos where my friends were taken by the throat on the ground, and 16 of our friends got arrested that day” (Personal Communication).

There have been numerous other instances of violence against protestors during the pandemic. The unique circumstances of the pandemic have enabled this repression, justified with reference to enforcing local lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions. In September 2020, for example, Gendarmerie, an armed security force in Turkey, raided the Mount Ida watch camp in Kazdağları. The official reason given for this raid was that the protestors’ watch camp was violating COVID-19 restrictions. Excessive force was used, disproportionate to the alleged accusation.

One environmental defender who was present at the watch camp on the day of the raid cited their experience as follows:

“The gendarmes surrounded the camp at around 06.30-07.00 in the morning while our friends were sleeping in their tents. There were four of our friends staying in two tents in the guard area. They saw nearly 100 gendarmes in front of them without realizing what they were. They didn’t allow them to have conversations or even go to the toilet. They also cut off their phone and internet access by using a jammer” (Akdemir, 2020).

Substantial fines have been handed out to local protestors for alleged breaches of pandemic restrictions. In the challenging economic climate in which people find themselves during the pandemic, these fines are a significant psychological and financial deterrent for people considering participation in protests. For example, members of the Kazdağı Association for Protecting Natural and Cultural

Heritage have faced numerous arrests and fines for their opposition, with one member receiving three 10,000 liras (GBP 840) fines for her involvement (MacDonald, 2020). As a reference point, this fine is more than 10 times larger than the amount of initial state financial aid (GBP 83) given to select citizens during the pandemic.

Despite arrests, fines, and legal repression, the determination of local protestors prevails, with one defender stating: “the region is completely under the occupation of miners at distances of 10-15 kilometres in air distance. We cannot enter the fields due to coronavirus restrictions. We’ve been fined many times. However, our struggle will continue until the Ida Mountains are liberated” (Pişkin, 2021).



Photo: Local women from the EIA meeting day of Cengiz Holding. Credit: [Her Yer Kazdağları](#)

The Sperrins, Northern Ireland

Companies:

Dalradian Resources

Activity:

Gold and silver mining

Violations:

Attempts to manufacture a social licence to operate, greenwashing, alleged corporate policing, coercive public consultation

Context

For some years Northern Ireland has been identified as a hotspot for European mining that is 'open for business'. At present, prospecting licences have been issued for 25% of Northern Ireland, with predictions stating that this figure could rise significantly (Sullivan, 2021). Dalradian Resources, a private Canadian mining company, has been prominent in this push for exploitation. The company is exploring six licence areas totalling over 122,000 hectares covering land in County Tyrone and Londonderry (The Gaia Foundation, 2018). The Curraghinalt project, Dalradian's flagship planned underground gold mine in Tyrone, is estimated to be the seventh largest in the world. Dalradian's prospecting licence for the project area expired in 2019, and the application for renewal has not yet been granted. Despite this, the company continues to be active in the area. One member of the community notes that "even though they haven't yet received the permission, they're continuing on and acting as though they have!" (Personal Communication).

The existing and potential impacts of the project, should it start production, are far-reaching: waste dumps of chemical-filled discarded rock, toxic dust from crushed rock, pollution, along with the discharge of heavy metals into protected rivers. Dalradian's planned waste storage area could lie just 1km away

from the village of Greencastle's primary school, and within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, near the confluence of two streams that are home to endangered species including otters, salmon, and freshwater pearl mussels.

The impacts of the mine on the local environment, along with the health and livelihoods of people are a cause for serious concern not only for people living in Greencastle, but far beyond. Intentions for expansion are clear, Dalradian Resources CEO Patrick Anderson has stated, "We are not just looking at a single gold mine here... We think we are looking at a gold camp – a gold-mining district" (Wilson, 2015).



Photo: Protest sign against the proposed mine. Credit: Greencastle People's Office [Facebook page](#).

Social Licence to Operate

During the pandemic, Dalradian has sought to increase its 'social licence to operate' and burnish its image as a responsible company through COVID-related cash donations and PR stunts. There has been clear exploitation of the hardship facing the community with the aim of minimising opposition.

On 4th May 2020, Dalradian publicly donated £50,000 to Marie Curie, a charity working with terminally ill cancer patients (Rhoades, 2020). A photograph of Marie Curie staff posing with a large cheque from Dalradian was circulated on social media as part of what can accurately be described as a PR stunt. Dalradian exploited the opportunity of a charity in need as a way to heighten their image and minimise criticism. Opposition groups have highlighted the hypocrisy of a gold mining company donating money to a charity of this nature, whilst planning the expansion of an industry known to pose carcinogenic and other health risks for local communities.

Dalradian also donated four iPads to a local hospital to enable people at the end of their lives to speak to their relatives. Further, the company made a donation of 150 litres of hand sanitiser, along with a 'thank you' card addressed to health-care professionals in Northern Ireland.

While publicly making these pandemic-related donations, a member of the Greencastle community noted that Dalradian's mine staff were "still out taking water samples and continuing their work, with no protective equipment or social distancing" (Personal Communication).

Considering the inherent contradictions present in Dalradian's choice of donations, the fact that these donations were made in a highly public manner, and the tokenistic levels of giving involved for a company valued at \$437 million Canadian dollars in 2018

(around GBP 276 million; Dyer, 2018), community platforms opposed to the mine have called out Dalradian's 'philanthropy' as a cynical attempt to secure a social licence to operate.

Green Discourses and Job Creation

Given the instability of the job market and the extent of job losses during the pandemic, Dalradian's promises of employment have been welcomed by the Northern Irish Government.

In 2021, Dalradian stated that "the end of lockdown offers an opening to build real prosperity for Tyrone... by creating a new industry – one that will deliver hundreds of jobs and long-term advantages for local families and businesses" (The Irish News, 2021). In this climate, the promise of jobs can be tempting for some in the community. Standard claims that mining will contribute "major positive economic and social impacts" are now complemented by language that frames the mining industry as delivering these benefits "just when we need them the most" (The Irish News, 2021).

Copper has emerged as one of the most sought-after critical minerals worldwide due to strong demand from green transition industries and technologies. Though first proposed as a gold and silver mine, during the pandemic Dalradian has begun to present Curraghinalt as a copper producing project. However, no mention of extracting copper was made in Dalradian's initial planning application (Personal Communication).

Seeking to capitalise on the increasing association of the green transition with COVID-19 recovery, Dalradian has stated that "copper is an essential element in the production of electric cars, silver for solar panels, gold is used in our energy network" and made claims about the benefit of mining these metals in a newspaper advertisement in 2020 (BBC, 2021).

They claimed that Dalradian's Northern Irish mining activities would help the nation make the transition to clean energy through renewable technologies.

The company has not been entirely successful in its greenwashing efforts. Complaints made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) over Dalradian's newspaper advertisement led to Dalradian being reprimanded. The ASA found that Dalradian's advertisement was misleading, as the company has no control over where the gold, silver and copper produced in Northern Ireland would be

used and found no evidence that it would be used in the renewable energy industry (ASA, 2021).

The evolution of Dalradian's discourse and PR during the pandemic clearly signal the company's intention to create a rhetorical link between so-called critical metals mining and a green recovery from COVID-19. In this way, the pandemic has offered the Northern Irish Government and Dalradian new tools to greenwash destructive policies and projects. However, community vigilance continues to challenge this greenwashing.



Photo: Local community members at the Greencastle People's Office. Credit: Greencastle People's Office [Facebook page](#).

Community Resistance

The Greencastle People's Office (GPO), a resistance camp near the entrance of Dalradian's project site, is the beating heart of local people's resistance to the project. It has now been maintained for nearly four years with banners stating: "We are not afraid. This is our land. This is our home. We will die for it" (Baraniuk, 2020).

Despite the togetherness exemplified by the GPO, COVID-19 has presented local communities with numerous challenges of connection and communication with a wider movement. To help overcome these challenges and strengthen resistance in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, activists formed Communities Against the Injustice of Mining (CAIM) in February 2021. CAIM is a network of various community groups, coming together to "represent vocalisation and strengthening of connections" (Sullivan, 2021) between communities defending lands, waters, and livelihoods from mining.

As well as taking this proactive step, local community platforms like Save Our Sperrins have maintained their visibility in resistance through online webinars, public meetings, and protests. For example, in August 2021 community members walked from the GPO to the Irish legislature in Dublin, carrying the message "Ireland is not for sale", to deliver a letter for the Irish Government expressing their dissatisfaction with the current situation (Starkey, 2021). In August 2020, a "socially distanced white line protest" was organised, demonstrating against the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and what has been described as "corporate policing" (O'Cearnaigh, 2020). Local people opposed to Dalradian's mine accuse the PSNI of refusing to take action, despite solid evidence, against supporters of the mine who have carried out multiple verbal and physical assaults on vocal opponents of mining. Meanwhile, individuals opposing the mine have been heavily policed and

criminalised for infractions as minor as cutting a cable tie. When, for example, local people have gathered to protest outside Dalradian's site perimeter, these same officers "respond post haste and in numbers" to defend the mining company (O'Cearnaigh, 2020). The proportionality and impartiality of response is of deep concern for the local people.

Public Consultation

Ongoing bureaucratic processes continued or started during the pandemic have severely inhibited the ability of members of the public to take part in consultations regarding Dalradian's proposed mine.

Public consultations have been moved online, with responses to be submitted by email. Access to relevant paperwork requires the public to download documents online. These measures effectively exclude many from actively participating in consultation processes. The Sperrin Mountains where Dalradian hopes to operate is a largely rural area, and many people have limited or poor internet access. Accessibility of information has therefore been greatly reduced, despite the topic holding great importance for the community. Local people were informed that they could apply for paper copies of consultation documents, however some have reported that the paperwork did not arrive at their addresses within the required time-frame for submitting responses.

At a national level, during the pandemic Northern Ireland's Government decided to enact a new Mineral Development Act. No public consultation meetings about this act were organised or held in communities that currently host mining sites or are being targeted for future extractive projects. A limited number of informational events, all in a webinar format, were held, but those citizens who were able to participate were not permitted to speak as part of these events and so had limited opportunity to express any opposition.

Insufficient consultation processes have become a feature of the pandemic and these processes have effectively stifled the ability of Northern Irish citizens to participate in decisions directly affecting them and the future of their lands and waters. Both Northern Ireland's Government and Dalradian Resources appear to have identified and cynically capitalised on this situation.

Despite continued oppression and the new challenges associated with the pandemic, resistance in Greencastle, the Sperrins and across Northern Ireland continues. More than 40,000 objections to the project have been submitted to planning authorities at the time of writing (Planning Portal, 2021). This fierce and widespread resistance has forced governmental authorities to call in Dalradian's project for a public inquiry. The inquiry should bring greater transparency and balance to the decision-making process about the mine's future. This in itself is testament to the resilience of the local people.



Photo: Walking protest opposing the mine.
Credit: Greencastle People's Office [Facebook page](#).

Galicia, Spain

Companies:

Recursos Minerales de Galicia SA

Activity:

Lithium mining

Violations:

Greenwashing, shrinking civic space

Context

In 2020, lithium was added to the EU's revised Critical Raw Materials list (European Commission, 2020). The mineral is a vital ingredient in the production of current electric battery technologies, including those used in electronic vehicles. Demand is soaring, and the EU is seeking to secure greater domestic supply

of the metal as supply chain issues have highlighted the fragility and uncertainty of importing key materials from abroad. As a result, European nations with identifiable lithium reserves, such as Spain, are increasingly focal points for mining exploration.

Recursos Minerales de Galicia SA (RMG), a subsidiary of the Sociedad Minera Catalano Aragonesa (SAMCA) business group, is currently pursuing lithium extraction in Galicia, north-western Spain. The company's proposed Alberta I project would, if realised, affect an area totalling 1,700 hectares and span five municipalities - Avion, Beariz, A Lama, Cerdedo-Cotobade, and Forcarei.

In an attempt to avoid having to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and to expedite the process of upgrading their exploration licence to an exploitation development licence, the company initially sought to present 'Alberta I' as an initial project that would affect a much smaller area. This artificial fragmentation has caused controversy early on in the lifecycle of the project.

RMG's attempt to pursue mine site development without an EIA was met with the threat of prosecution by concerned public servants. Under internal and external pressure, the Galician Xunta (regional government) has so far denied the company an exploitation licence, citing a negative report by the Miño-Sil Hydrographic Confederation (ContraMINAcción, 2021).



Photo: Meeting Cerdedo 8.5.21: Conference "Impactos of mining" within the V meeting "ContraMINAcción. Network against destructive mining in Galiza." Council of Cerdedo. Credit: Elena Buch

A neighbourhood community group named SOS Suído-Seixo mobilised during the pandemic in response to RMG's mining plans, with the aim of accessing and sharing accurate information about the mining project with the communities that would be most affected. Other regional and national networks have been working towards the resistance of the mine, including ContraMINAcción and Ecologistas en Acción. Community resistance has been maintained throughout the pandemic, despite numerous attempts by RMG and the Galician Xunta to shut down dissent under the guise of COVID-19.

Greenwashing the Economic Recovery

Galicia's Xunta has framed lithium extraction as economically beneficial to the region, defending the mining sector as an "ally" (Galicia Confidencial, 2021), as has a new industry-led PR project promoting sustainable mining for a green post-COVID-19 economic recovery (Minaría Sostible de Galicia, 2021). Galicia's Xunta has also emphasised the necessity of "making society see that the extractive sector is fundamental for the key sectors of the Galician economy" (Minaría Sostible de Galicia, 2021). These narratives in the context of COVID-19 and economic hardship help facilitate the growing desire to increase mineral exploration and exploitation in Galicia.

These pro-mining discourses have crossed national boundaries with COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP) in both Spain and Portugal both envisioning an agglomeration of lithium extraction. The Portuguese RRP proposes a line of lithium and battery manufacturing intended to be carried out between the Portuguese and Spanish governments (Lusa, 2021).

In the context of COVID-19 and associated micro and macro-economic hardships, these pro-mining corporate and governmental narratives represent

clearly articulated, widely coordinated attempts to silence community opposition and coerce social acceptance of a destructive industry.

Shrinking Civic Space

As can be observed elsewhere in Europe, the pandemic has provided the Galician Xunta with opportunities to shrink the ability of Galician citizens to protest and have their say in the future of their lands and waters.

In July 2020, an informational talk about the potential harms of mining expansion in Galicia took place in Doade, a settlement in the municipality of Beariz. In response, the Mayor of Beariz called the Guardia Civil, Spain's military police, encouraging intervention in an attempt to intimidate those gathered to learn about mining impacts. Finding no legal infractions had been committed by meeting organisers and attendees, the Guardia Civil did not break up the meeting, stating that "they did not observe any offence or punishable action being committed" (Faro de Vigo, 2020). Despite this, Beariz's Mayor subsequently sent pictures of attendees from the meeting to members of the mining lobby in Galicia, who released a press statement framing those opposing the Alberta I Project as enemies of public health, accusing them of putting people's lives at risk by gathering.

At another public event in October 2020, the City Council of A Lama attempted to use COVID-19 regulations to sanction a concerned community member. As part of the event, local people organised to go to the town hall to file objections to the Alberta I mining project. Approximately 20-30 people were present, entering the town hall one by one as requested. Whilst waiting outside for their turn to enter, those present were socially distanced and wearing face masks as dictated by COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. The Guardia Civil arrived, took the identity of one person prior to

leaving, but expressed no concerns about the legality of the event or perceived non-compliance with pandemic restrictions. Despite this, almost one year later, the City Council of A Lama began a process sanctioning a member of SOS Suído-Seixo, stating that this individual had failed to comply with pandemic restrictions. This person was issued a fine of 100 euros.

It is a basic democratic right to submit objections towards an environmentally damaging project, and this activity is required to be carried out in person. One member of SOS Suído-Seixo later described this sanction as an "attempt to intimidate and punish the social movement to defend the territory, it is an unjustified violation of fundamental rights and public environmental participation" (Piñeiro, 2021). In relation to this event, SOS Suído-Seixo clearly articulated their concern at this arbitrary attempt to criminalise a member of their group: "we want to make visible our deep rejection of this attempt to criminalise a fair fight in defence of the territory, and for the misrepresentation and use of a health alert situation to curb and punish social mobilisation arising from neighbourhood opposition" (Pontevedra Vida, 2021).

Despite attempts on the part of local government actors to utilise police forces, fines, and pandemic restrictions to quell dissent, SOS Suído-Seixo is continuing its work to spread information about the mining situation in the region. In doing so, this community platform is fighting for the right to participate in democratic processes in an informed and transparent way. As one member of SOS Suído-Seixo puts it: "communities have a right to say no and will enforce it regardless of greenwashing, corruption and repression" (Rhoades, 2021).



Photo left: Council of A Lama. Credit: SOS Suído Seixo, A Lama 16.10.21



Photo above: Meeting Cerdedo 8.5.21: Conference "Impactos of mining" within the V meeting "Contram-inacción. Network against destructive mining in Galiza". Council of Cerdedo. Photo by SOS Suído Seixo

Conclusion

Across Europe, mining corporations and facilitative governments have leveraged COVID-19 restrictions and hardships to marginalise opposition, whilst greenwashing and advancing their destructive activities. Corporate interests are continually placed above the environment, health, and interests of communities.

Companies and governments have found a new way to greenwash the mining sector by linking Europe's plans for a mining-heavy green transition with the need for economic recovery from COVID-19. Dalradian's efforts to re-brand its Curraghinalt gold and silver project as a silver-copper-gold mine essential for green technologies, is a clear example of this shift in discourse. Likewise, in Galicia lithium extraction has been framed as both essential for the green technologies of the future and to the Xunta's economic recovery plans. But, as the ASA's ruling against Dalradian's newspaper advertisements shows, these companies categorically cannot demonstrate that the minerals and metals they mine will contribute to green and low-carbon technologies and infrastructure. The greenwashing discourse developed by pro-mining actors during COVID-19 is a clear strategy aiming to frame mining companies as public-minded saviours in the eyes of wider society, even as they pursue business-as-usual.

In Northern Ireland and Turkey, mining companies have also taken more direct routes to manufacture a social licence to operate in affected communities. As many in these communities were suffering social isolation and loss of earnings due to the pandemic, mining companies offered promises of future employment (Dalradian) as well as direct financial support (Cengiz İnşaat). These seemingly philanthropic acts have

been called out by local community platforms as an attempt to capitalise on people's pandemic struggles.

Despite the diverse political contexts of Spain, Northern Ireland and Turkey, governments in all three nations have attempted to use pandemic restrictions to shut down public meetings and protests. Fines, uneven policing, and the criminalisation of protest can be observed in all three nations. Official justifications made on the basis of pandemic restrictions are also cross-cutting. In some cases, bureaucratic measures have also been put in place that, whether by design or through incompetence, prevent citizens from participating in direct democratic exercises, such as public consultations.

All three case studies presented in this report demonstrate the increasing challenges that land and water defenders face in their struggles against unwanted, destructive extractive projects. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties, with reduced opportunities for mobilisation, limited access to information and a surge in repression of protest.

Despite these challenges, land and water defenders continue to resist projects that will be detrimental to their health, environment, and livelihoods, and which threaten to re-entrench mining extractivism in Europe in a paradoxical attempt to 'go green'.

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