

Australian-Serbian actress-turned-activist and campaigner tells BIRN that fighting for better air and healthier soil is more important than taking glamorous Hollywood roles.

Bojana Novakovic is a theatre but also a well-known film and TV actress, starring in popular award-winning movies and series. Currently, she is in the centre of attention for her roles in two series, "Love me", which explores modern intimate partnerships and crime drama "Instinct", where she co-stars with Alan Cumming.

She is also known for her roles in *Burning man*, *Edge of Darkness* with Mel Gibson and many others, and for classics such as the Oscar-winning *I Tonya* and multiple Emmy-awarded series "Shameless" and "Westworld".

But since moving to Australia in 1988, as a seven-year-old, Novakovic, now 41, was not so famous in Serbia until recently. And surprisingly, it is not so much for her acting but for her activism.

Novakovic has become one of the leading faces of Serbia's growing eco-movement, which is currently focused on stopping the controversial lithium mining project of global mining giant Rio Tinto.

"They often ask me why I needed this. I could stay in my safe zone, acting and traveling, but sometimes I am offended by these questions," Novakovic told BIRN in an interview.

"Do I need a reason to care about public health or collective happiness? Why do they need to ask me why I fight for better air and healthier soil in my country?" she asks.

She welcomes the fact that this is one of the rare interviews in which she is asked explicitly about her activism, or "social organizing", as she calls it, not about her acting career and its glamour.

"I would be much more successful commercially if I was not doing this [activism]. When I do an interview, they always want me to talk like about, say, starring with Keanu Reeves, or shooting in an exotic location in Japan, and are dazzled when I say: 'I am in Serbia, coordinating a campaign against the Rio Tinto lithium mining project,'" Novakovic says.

Novakovic has become a main face of the "Mars sa Drine" ["Get off the Drina"] campaign, which opposes the so-called Jadar lithium mine. She claims Rio Tinto has a "horrible reputation" and does not want it in the country

"It is not just a fight against the project, it is a fight for survival. The essence is to preserve what we have in ways that are healthy and not continue over-production and exploitation.

This [project] is just packaged as healthy; it's just marketing and it will not bring anything good to ordinary people," she told BIRN.

From school protests to nationwide campaigns

Novakovic's family has been always political, which has influenced her own social awareness. The fact that they left Yugoslavia just few years before the 1990s wars, which resulted in horrible crimes and the dissolution of a country, was another important factor. "We did not have internet at the time, but we were following the news and my parents made constant calls to Yugoslavia, talking to friends and relatives in order to compare facts and see how they are doing," Novakovic recalls. "I grew up in that kind of environment. There was always talks about politics and news on the TV," she adds.

In the winter of 1996-1997, university students and opposition parties organized a series of peaceful protests in Serbia against the attempted electoral fraud of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Surprisingly, she was also there.

"They say to me, 'You do not know how it was in the Nineties here', and I say: 'I do know, I was there!' she says, laughing: "My dad, I, who was a 15-year-old at the time, and my five-year-old sister came to Belgrade at the protests and practically spent three months on the streets."

However, that was not her first step into activism. The year before, aged only 14, she organized an anti-nuclear protest in Sidney.

"We ended up on the news, like 3,000 students protesting, some schools were locked in order that others would not join us, we gathered in front of the French embassy, it was crazy," Novakovic explains.

Novakovic later on volunteered to work with refugees during her time at college, since refugees and migrants are treated roughly in Australia, she says. As a by then established actress, she also worked in Los Angeles on jail reforms with different associations.

However, the campaign against Rio Tinto project was first time she entered the spotlight as an activist in a "leading role".

"I never looked for it, it just happened," she says. "The Kreni-promeni [Move-Change] organization called, since they'd seen me on a protest against police violence in US, and asked me for tips how to send a petition to the UN," she recalls.

"After that, we organized a huge zoom meeting with activists and many Serbs in the diaspora who wanted to help as well, and realized that this is our struggle, the key issue. Everything just went on after that naturally," she says.

Trump election was a wakeup call

From a young age, she says, her worldview had been linked with "the injustices of the global system", but the year 2016 and Donald Trump's election as President of United States was a

turning point for her, when she became more active.

"When he won the election, I was like: 'How is this possible, what world are we are living in?' That pushed me more to learn about the history and systematic construction of the 'westworld' - about colonialism and the corporate - not political - system in the US," she explains.

Asked why she dislikes Rio Tinto so much, she says that "wherever they go, there make problems for local people", adding that she has worked with some Australian Aborigines who were victims of Rio Tinto misconduct in 2020.

"Also, to be clear, the lithium itself does not solve anything. Lithium will not create an electric car and for batteries you need cobalt ... which comes from Congo, and we all know what is going on there," she says.

"We do not want lithium mined in Serbia, we want those villages to remain green areas with fertile land, where food can be grown and where there are hundreds of species of animals, as there are right now," Novakovic told BIRN.

According to Novakovic, industry needs to adapt and adjust to already existing resources and create a sustainable system of resource extraction.

"The solution is not to save the car industry, but green surfaces and biodiversity. The idea of mining a green area and calling it 'green transition' is absurd; it is crystal clear that profits are behind it all," she insists.

Asked how her activism has affected her acting career, she says that it is tough, but that she was always like this, often refusing roles that could have made her wildly rich and famous.

"My father tried to teach me how to enter more commercial world and make healthier decisions for my career but I never make many compromises. Now I would make them, but I am too old for it," she says, laughing, adding that she once refused a role in a sci-fi movie with Bruce Willis because the director wanted her to be naked.

Asked whether she think the campaigners will tire of the battle, since many powerful actors support the Rio Tinto Serbia project, she says no.

"The ruling [Serbian Progressive] party led by President Aleksandar Vucic } is putting a lot of pressure on us. Vucic is a neo-liberal, the nationalistic stuff is just a pose for voters, and he is ready to sell everything. The company [Rio Tinto] has a lot of money and they are very good at their jobs and creating anxiety - but that will not scare us," Novakovic told BIRN.

"They are very patient - but so are we," she concluded, Balkan Insight writes.