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# The slow labor of contestation. Environmental injustice in Băicoi, Romania

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines environmental injustice in a semi-rural, post-socialist community through a case study of Băicoi, Romania. Based on ethnographic research, it shows how waste infrastructures, weak regulation, and institutional neglect produced environmental marginality through accumulation by contamination. We introduce the concept of *slow labor of contestation* to capture residents' layered civic efforts – monitoring, complaint filing, protest participation, procedural engagement, and legal action – through which they confront prolonged harm. The analysis reveals how environmental knowledge was systematically dismissed, generating intertwined procedural and epistemic injustice in post-socialist waste governance.

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Environmental justice; epistemic injustice; waste infrastructures; accumulation by contamination; slow labor of contestation; Romania


## Introduction

'The children woke up during the night and vomited in the house because of the smell,' Emil (M, 45 July 2024) told us during an interview in the summer of 2024, recalling the moment he realized his neighborhood had become toxic. He had grown up in southern Ploiești, Romania's primary oil refining hub, in a working-class neighborhood marked by chronic air pollution, overcrowding, and noise. 'I knew I couldn't raise a family in a place like that,' he recalled. After graduating university in 2005, he began looking for land outside the city. A family contact pointed him toward a plot in Țintea, a neighborhood in Băicoi, a small town about 20 kilometers from Ploiești. By 2009, he had built a house and moved in with his family, seeking cleaner air and more space. Convinced by the area's potential, he even encouraged friends to join. But in 2015, everything changed during a birthday barbecue, when a foul stench drove the guests indoors.

Initially attributed to nearby farms or an old dump, the odor was eventually traced to a newly opened landfill operated by Vitalia,<sup>1</sup> near the poultry farm. In 2015, the facility expanded when Vitalia leased part of the site to Demeco, which introduced hazardous waste storage. Băicoi thus became a destination for toxic waste from across the country (Radu and Chirea 2023a). At first acting alone, Emil began filing complaints and confronting local and county authorities. He met resistance, opacity and denial. Soon, together with other neighbors, also recently moved to Băicoi, he founded a local environmental NGO and became one of the most active voices in a civic campaign that lasted nearly a decade.

Environmental injustice in Băicoi can be understood through the interplay of three processes: accumulation by contamination (D'Alisa and Demaria 2024), forms of procedural and epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Walker 2012), and sustained civic responses that we conceptualize as slow labor of contestation. Examining this case contributes to environmental justice debates by showing how environmental harm and resistance unfold in semi-rural post-socialist settings where marginality is not pre-given but actively produced through toxic infrastructures and regimes of neglect. Historically shaped by oil extraction and industrial pollution, Băicoi's integration into national waste circuits extended a longer legacy of environmental disposability.

While environmental justice scholarship has often foregrounded race and poverty as key axes of environmental inequality, a growing body of work shows that environmental injustice also affects communities shaped by other forms of marginality, including territorial peripherality, industrial legacies, and class-based vulnerability. In many post-industrial and semi-rural areas across post-socialist countries, working-class

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residents are treated as inherently expendable, their concerns systematically dismissed, and their suffering normalized (Kideckel 2010, 28). Recent environmental justice scholarship has increasingly adopted intersectional perspectives that examine how environmental harm emerges through multiple overlapping forms of inequality rather than a single axis of marginalization (Jampel 2018; Malin and Ryder 2018). These studies highlight how environmental injustice is shaped not only by race or poverty but also by gender, disability, institutional power, and spatial marginality. Building on these insights, our contribution brings attention to the vulnerability of semi-rural, working-class populations in post-socialist contexts, where marginality is not pre-given but actively produced through toxic infrastructures and regimes of neglect.

To analyze how residents responded to these conditions, we develop the concept of *slow labor of contestation* as the political and epistemic counterpart of Nixon's (2011) notion of slow violence. If slow violence captures the gradual and often invisible nature of toxic harm, slow labor of contestation refers to the equally protracted and often unrecognized civic work through which affected communities document pollution, file complaints, pursue legal action, mobilize neighbors, engage the media, and sustain protest over long periods of institutional neglect. Unlike nationally visible protest movements, resistance in Băicoi remained largely localized, incremental, and exhausting.

We use semi-structured interviews with locals from Băicoi to illustrate that this marginalization is not only political but also epistemic. Residents' accounts of smell, illness, and environmental degradation were regularly dismissed as subjective, irrational, or unscientific in a typical 'demonization' of contestation (Velicu 2015). Despite being rooted in years of embodied knowledge and slow observations (Davies 2022), these testimonies were routinely sidelined in regulatory processes and consultations. This reflects a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Walker 2012), whereby residents are denied recognition as legitimate knowers simply because they fall outside dominant regimes of expertise and of 'the power structures and politics that sustain the uneven geographies of pollution' (Davies 2022, 414). As such, the slow labor of contestation is also a cognitive and affective struggle for recognition.

This article examines how environmental injustice is produced and contested in a semi-rural post-socialist context shaped by waste infrastructures and regulatory practices. By focusing on these intertwined processes – accumulation by contamination and slow labor of contestation – this article sheds light on how environmental injustice operates within semi-rural spaces of Eastern Europe that are neither impoverished nor racially excluded, yet rendered disposable through infrastructural and epistemic neglect and injustice. The case of Băicoi thus situates environmental justice within broader debates on disposability, knowledge, and governance in post-socialist contexts.

### Environmental injustice, accumulation by contamination, and slow violence

Recent environmental justice scholarship has explored the interplay between infrastructural dispossession, slow violence, and forms of sustained environmental contestation. Rather than treating environmental justice as a unified theory, we engage it as a heterogeneous field concerned with unequal exposure to harm, institutional recognition, and epistemic injustice. Building on foundational environmental justice frameworks (Bullard 1990; Pellow 2000; Schlosberg 2007, 2013; Walker 2012), scholars have examined how environmental harm reflects and reinforces social and spatial inequality. Bullard linked racialized zoning and toxic exposure, while Schlosberg conceptualized justice across distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions, and Walker emphasized spatial and institutional aspects of injustice. Together, these perspectives highlight how processes of spatial designation, infrastructural neglect, and regulatory inaction can produce forms of environmental marginality.

Related scholarship on dispossession by contamination (Leifsen 2017; Nygren 2025) and toxic governance (Davies 2022; Frederiksen and Himley 2020) shows how pollution becomes a mechanism for managing peripheral spaces, not through direct displacement, but through erosion of environmental security and political responsiveness. Comparative research further documents how slow violence, layered degradation, and environmental suffering unfold in extractive landscapes shaped by mining and oil exploitation (Heikkinen, Nygren, and Custodio 2023; Nygren and Rabelo Avalos 2025). Marginality here is not always a static condition, but a governed outcome, produced through what Frederiksen and Himley (2020) call tactics of dispossession: strategic inaction, bureaucratic delay, and superficial compliance that enable pollution to persist while diffusing responsibility.

To understand how pollution becomes entrenched in such spaces, we draw on D'Alisa and Demaria's (2024) concept of accumulation by contamination, which builds on Kapp's (1953) ecological critique of cost externalization and Harvey's (2003) notion of accumulation by dispossession. Building on these insights, this framework understands pollution not as an accident of development but as an intrinsic feature of capitalist metabolism, a systemic strategy for offloading environmental costs and transforming peripheral towns into sacrifice zones that absorb the residues of industrial prosperity elsewhere (Ipsen and McMillan Lequieu 2024). In this sense, it also aligns with Armiero's (2021) understanding of waste as a political technology that produces 'wasted lives' and zones of disposability. These perspectives show that marginality does not simply happen on its own, but is actively produced through how authorities govern, through inaction, neglect, and the simulation of compliance, allowing some communities to be rendered disposable in the pursuit of cost minimization. Similar dynamics have been documented in contexts of failing oil infrastructures, where technical breakdowns generate chronic toxicity and everyday exposure (Landa 2016).

From this perspective, 'accumulation by contamination' reveals how marginality is actually produced by strategic inaction, calculated neglect, and superficial compliance. Alongside the material harms, residents in Băicoi faced institutional and epistemic marginalization. Although many had stable incomes and social integration, their civic actions, including formal complaints, documentation, and public mobilization, were routinely dismissed by authorities as emotional, anecdotal, or unscientific. Exclusion from deliberations and procedures constitutes a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Walker 2012), where individuals are denied credibility and inclusion in governance due to their non-expert status. This also aligns with Schlosberg and Carruthers (2010), who link environmental justice to collective capacities for recognition and participation.

This denial did not silence residents but reshaped resistance. Building on Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, which captures the gradual and often invisible character of environmental harm, we introduce the concept of slow labor of contestation as its civic and epistemic counterpart. If slow violence describes the temporal unfolding of environmental harm, slow labor of contestation refers to the cumulative work through which affected residents document pollution, file complaints, pursue legal action, mobilize neighbors, engage the media, and organize protests over long periods of institutional neglect. Recent scholarship has highlighted the temporal labor involved in sustaining environmental activism over extended periods (Ahmann 2018; Cousins 2023), whereas our concept foregrounds the procedural and institutional work through which residents engage regulatory authorities and bureaucratic systems over time. Unlike nationally visible environmental conflicts such as Roșia Montană (Soare and Tufiş 2020) and Pungești (Vesalon and Crețan 2015), these forms of civic labor often remain localized yet persistent.

This framework is complemented by post-socialist waste and disposability studies. Gille's (2007) concept of waste regimes shows how socialist and post-socialist institutions govern waste through selective neglect, while Dillon's (2013) concept of waste formations highlights how infrastructures embed inequality into socio-ecological relations. In Central and Eastern Europe, these dynamics are amplified by post-socialist governance (Filčák and Škobla 2019; Kronenberg et al. 2020; Petrescu-Mag et al. 2016; Velicu and Kaika 2017), where privatization, regulatory weakness, and selective planning deepen injustice. In Romania, these processes also enabled transboundary waste flows and regulatory bypass (Favarin and Aziani 2020; Giardi 2015).

Finally, our approach also considers the role of social position in shaping both harm and resistance. In sum, the article theorizes how accumulation by contamination, epistemic injustice, and slow labor of contestation intersect in semi-rural contexts. Environmental injustice emerges here not as a product of poverty or race alone, but as a governed outcome sustained through regulatory indifference, dispersed accountability, and the systematic invisibilization of local civic labor.

### Fieldwork and analytical approach

We adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore how residents of Țintea neighborhood (Băicoi) experienced and resisted environmental harms associated with local waste infrastructures. Our methodological approach followed a general interview guide developed within the ECOJUST project, designed to investigate key environmental justice dimensions: socio-demographic characteristics, identity, perceived and lived distress, hazards, and harms; perceptions of social and environmental justice; and participation in decision-making, community engagement, and trust in institutions.

The guide we used included open-ended questions encouraging respondents to describe their experiences, perceptions, and difficulties related to social and environmental issues affecting their lives. As we learned more from the community we further adapted the questions to reflect local realities specific to Băicoi, asking broad questions about waste-related events and exploring more specific aspects of the conflict only with participants who were willing to openly discuss these topics. Before conducting our fieldwork, we monitored 4 local news outlets that covered environmental issues in Prahova County, including Baicoi, from 2018 to 2023. Relevant articles were selected by accessing media archives or by performing Boolean searches using keywords such as protests, fire, landfill, etc. From the initial 90 news items, we created a preliminary timeline of protests and environmental incidents related to the Baicoi landfill. After the fieldwork was completed and the interviews were processed, additional and specific media monitoring activities were carried out to double-check certain timelines or key events mentioned by the interviewees.

After receiving ethical approval from our university's Ethics Committee, in line with institutional and national guidelines for research with human participants, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with 27 participants in Băicoi between April 2024 and April 2025, including 15 women and 12 men aged 25 to 80. Participants included residents and homeowners from Băicoi, members of local NGOs and businesses, and representatives of local public institutions, including the town administration. One participant was an external expert specializing in environmental protests. All respondents gave written or verbal informed consent. Interviews were carried out over four field visits, mostly in people's courtyards or homes, with some taking place in shared community spaces or offices. To ensure confidentiality, all names were anonymised and identifying details removed, and all data were stored securely on the university server.

Fieldwork began with an exploratory visit, during which we contacted the local administration, presented the project's main goals, We had informal discussions and interviews with representatives of local institutions such as schools and social services, a local entrepreneur engaged in environmental services,<sup>2</sup> and a founding member of the NGO Eco Natura. These interviews helped us pilot and adapt the interview guide and provided important insights into the local waste management landscape, development strategies, and the broader socio-political context.

Tensions escalated during our second visit in the summer of 2024, when the local administration's hostility increased, culminating in a threatening phone call to a team member. Such reactions also reflect broader patterns documented in post-socialist governance, where local authorities may respond defensively to environmental scrutiny and civic mobilization. Following the municipality's refusal to collaborate, the prohibition imposed on municipal employees to engage with us, and a formal complaint sent to our university regarding our interest in the environmental conflict, we prioritized safety and confidentiality and shifted toward short visits in the Țintea area as a precautionary strategy to minimize potential risks for participants and avoid drawing unwanted attention to ongoing community activism. We therefore focused on residents directly involved in or closely following the protests, although some ultimately declined participation out of fear of repercussions.

Initial contacts were facilitated by Eco Natura members, and then we used snowball sampling to reach a socially diverse group of participants and as many protest participants as possible. Additionally, the NGO granted us access to their digital archive – documents, correspondence, petitions, legal and multimedia materials related to the conflict, involving key institutions, organizations and companies, as well as files documenting court cases, protests, and relevant legislation. We used these materials to cross-check and triangulate the interview data, enhancing the credibility and depth of our findings.

The coding structure was manually developed, ensuring it reflected the research objectives and the contextual specificities of the Băicoi case study. To support the analysis of interview data, we utilized NotebookLM, an AI-assisted tool, only after the manual coding framework was established. The tool was used only on anonymized texts to cluster passages around predefined themes, complementing manual interpretation by helping identify overlooked patterns or thematic overlaps. While the AI facilitated thematic coding and pattern identification, all analyses were manually reviewed to ensure accuracy, contextual integrity, and adherence to qualitative research standards. The initial coding framework was developed deductively from the interview guide and key topics identified in the literature (e.g. perceptions of environmental risk, adaptation strategies, and community engagement). This framework was refined inductively as new themes emerged during analysis.

### *Case background: Băicoi between industrial legacy and environmental conflict*

Though Băicoi is officially a town, our field observations, as well as interviews, reveal that parts of it, especially Țintea neighbourhood, retain a distinctly rural character, with widespread subsistence gardening and small-scale animal husbandry. Sheep graze on nearby hills, including areas close to oil wells, illustrating an ongoing entanglement of industrial and agrarian landscapes in a postsocialist context. Băicoi is not among the towns that experienced severe industrial decline in the post-communist era. Unlike nearby Plopeni, it only underwent a low level of deindustrialization and retained much of its industrial base (Mitrică 2008). The broader economic restructuring of the 1990s and 2000s, including privatization, automation, and the expansion of less labor-intensive sectors, gradually reduced the availability of industrial jobs (Ban 2015; Ban and Buciu 2025). Persistently low wages and limited local employment encouraged younger residents to migrate, contributing to population decline and demographic aging. At the same time, Băicoi began to attract new residents, many of them retirees or commuters employed in Ploiești's industrial sector. Several interviewees had relocated to Țintea in search of more affordable housing and cleaner air, reflecting broader aspirations for a healthier semi-rural life away from the industrial pollution of nearby Ploiești. Many residents worked as shop workers, teachers, pensioners, or in blue- and white-collar occupations, some commuting daily, others employed locally. Despite a degree of economic stability among many households, this social profile did not shield the town from becoming a site for toxic infrastructures. Its semi-rural character, industrial legacy, and proximity to major industrial hubs made Băicoi particularly exposed to environmental pressures and weak regulatory oversight.

While these features shaped both Băicoi's residential appeal and its perceived suitability for industrial infrastructure, the town gradually became a site of environmental controversy. For over a decade, residents have opposed the operation and expansion of a privately managed landfill, which they accuse of generating toxic odors, degrading local ecosystems, and exposing the community to long-term health risks. The timeline below summarizes the key developments in the waste conflict between 2010 and 2024.

Year	Key Events	Community Response	Institutional Response
2011	Vitalia opens landfill for non-hazardous industrial waste near former municipal dump in Țintea.	Initial skepticism but some residents welcomed the formalization of dumping practices.	Municipality grants concession; weak oversight.
2014–2015	Expansion to include hazardous waste under Demeco & Ecowell lease. Stronger odors and health concerns emerge.	Residents begin voicing complaints. Formation of local NGO Eco Natura.	Authorities minimize the issue; claim operations are compliant.
2016–2019	Persistent odor and pollution reports. Landfill fires. First protest in 2016. Two major public protests in 2018. Local NGO commissions independent air monitoring in 2019.	Petitions, protests, legal action. Daily picket in late 2019. Collaboration with national NGOs.	Environmental Guard fines Vitalia (150,000 RON), and later, in 2020 it orders a temporary suspension after fire and hydrogen sulfide overlimit incidents.
2020–2021	Vitalia operations suspended temporarily; resumes in 2021. Continued odor incidents and fire outbreaks.	Shift to informal vigilance. Ongoing complaints and digital monitoring via Facebook/WhatsApp.	More responsive tone from company; EPA remains opaque. Enforcement sporadic.
2022–2023	June 2022: major fire (1.5 ha, RO-ALERT). 2023: EPA issues permit for expansion (cells 3 and 4) despite community opposition.	Community complaints. Public consultation sees strong opposition. NGO pressures EPA to limit waste types.	Permit issued for expansion. Minimal institutional accountability for previous violations.
2024–2025	Odor episodes continue. Further fires in 2024.	Ongoing monitoring. Growing emotional fatigue and disengagement. Increased concern about potential permit renewals.	No major new actions; perceived institutional inaction and ongoing mistrust.

We analyze the case through three interrelated themes that emerged from our fieldwork, illuminating how environmental injustice was produced, experienced, and contested in Băicoi.

### *Producing environmental marginality: waste regimes and the slow violence of infrastructure*

We endured it unknowingly, because people didn't know the cause. There was a smell, but no one knew where it was coming from. That's how it was in the beginning. (Virgil 80+, pensioner, April 2025)

Before any officially registered waste facility opened, Țintea neighborhood was already affected by the lingering pollution of a former municipal dump. According to residents, this landfill, active during the late socialist period and into the early 2000s, received household waste from Băicoi and nearby areas, operating

without proper environmental safeguards. Though widely believed to have been closed before 2010, no formal announcement or rehabilitation process was communicated to the public. Media (Radu and Chirea 2023a, 2023b) suggest that the site continued to emit odors even after its presumed closure. When Vitalia opened a new landfill nearby in 2011, many locals assumed it was simply a reactivation of the old dump. In reality, this represented a significant shift, from a neglected municipal dump to a formally licensed platform for industrial waste and marked the beginning of Băicoi's integration into national circuits of industrial and, later, hazardous waste.

Although the site was authorized to accept only non-hazardous materials (such as concrete rubble, ash, soil, and construction residues), residents quickly reported strong and persistent odors indicating other substances. While skepticism existed from the outset, some locals initially welcomed the creation of a legal dumping ground for construction debris, given the absence of proper disposal infrastructure for such waste in the area.

Several interviewees noted that early odors, felt only by people in some areas of Țintea, were often blamed on the old dump, complicating efforts to establish a clear timeline of pollution and responsibility. This spatial and institutional ambiguity delayed public awareness and made it harder to challenge the new facility. Initially, blame shifted between the old dump and a nearby poultry farm; under protest pressure, Vitalia later pointed to OMV-Petrom oil wells to diffuse responsibility and complicate attribution.

Local authorities also facilitated the landfill's expansion. Interviews and media suggest the municipality not only granted concessions but also encouraged residents to sell nearby plots. Some interviewees recall direct pressure from the mayor, who warned holdouts they might lose their land. Others described interference from county officials and politically connected businessmen, implying a mix of political and intelligence influence. This reflects Harvey's (2003) concept of accumulation by dispossession, where institutions enable the transfer of land and value from communities to private interests.

I think it was in the fall of 2012 when those smells started to appear, but we didn't know what it was. They kept telling us it was from the chickens, or from who knows what, that they were doing some routine cleaning or waste removal over there. But the smells didn't quite match. I said, I don't know if it's from chickens, because I grew up in the countryside, with chickens, pigs at my grandparents', and cows. - Mara (W, 58, July 2024)

The shift from confusion to awareness is evident in both interviews and media reports (Radu and Chirea 2023a, 2023b), which show how early discomfort was normalized, delaying mobilization and allowing toxic infrastructure to take root. Complaints were sporadic, and the issue failed to gain broader traction. Only in 2015, when the facility expanded to include hazardous waste under a lease to Demeco and later to Ecowell, two Vitalia partners, did the intensified odors spark sustained civic response. While the Prahova Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) claims that the process of informing the public about the authorization of Demeco's activities complied with legal requirements, Emil, who was monitoring the authorities at the time, states that the public was not informed at all.

Initially, Emil acted alone, contacting the EPA, City Hall, and Environmental Guard. 'They kept things hidden, saying there's nothing going on, trying to make us give up,' he recalled. When informal outreach failed, he began submitting formal complaints. Seeking more impact, he asked neighbors to co-sign them, discovering others were taking similar action. These efforts converged into the creation of a local NGO, marking a shift from individual concern to collective resistance. Emil's background in chemistry helped him recognize the risks early and interpret technical responses critically. Neighbors trusted his knowledge and saw him as someone who could challenge vague official statements and communicate effectively with authorities. Emil's case illustrates the early contours of what we conceptualize as *slow labor of contestation*, a gradual shift from isolated distress to collective civic resistance, sustained through repeated acts of complaint, monitoring, and persuasion.

In an initial phase, residents launched petitions and collective complaints addressed to local and national institutions, including the Environmental Guard, Băicoi City Hall, the EPA, and the Public Health Directorate. In 2015 alone, several formal complaints were submitted regarding odor episodes, suspected illegal activities at the landfill, and health concerns. That same year, on October 9, residents from the Băicoi-Țintea area actively participated in a public consultation regarding a new environmental permit requested by SC Ecowell Solutions SRL and unanimously opposed the opening of this new operation on the same waste platform.

As part of these early efforts, residents also gathered over 600 signatures from affected individuals in the neighborhood and engaged in grassroots communication to explain the issue and encourage participation. A key role was played by two women: a retired resident living near the landfill and a saleswoman at the neighborhood's only shop, whose daily interactions enabled wide outreach. These initiatives exemplified the slow, community-based labor of contestation that preceded and laid the groundwork for more visible protest actions. However, the lack of institutional response or meaningful change in the wake of these actions ultimately led to the escalation of civic frustration and the decision to organize public demonstrations. As community efforts intensified and formal channels failed, this labor transitioned into more visible forms of collective mobilization, which we explore in the following section.

### ***'Nature is ours, not your dump!': the slow labor of contestation***

The problem shouldn't be seen only from a local perspective, as in, it smells and we're the ones dying from respiratory illnesses. I see it as an issue affecting at least two counties. With the infiltration. Most likely, those substances won't remain confined to the landfill. - Tudor (M, 36, farmer, July 2024)

Between 2016 and 2019, Băicoi witnessed its most sustained and intense wave of civic mobilization against the landfill operated by Vitalia. This period stands out for the frequency, scale, and determination of local resistance. The first protest occurred in March 2016, when approximately 200 people marched from the town center to the landfill, carrying banners that read 'Nature is ours, not your dump!' (Dimache 2018; Radio România Actualități 2016). The slogan 'Nature is ours, not your dump!', written on banners during protests in Băicoi, encapsulates a powerful territorial claim central to the mobilization of Țința residents. It evokes the 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) dynamic identified in environmental justice literature, most notably in Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie* (Bullard 1990), where communities protest the vicinity of environmental hazards near their homes. Yet the Băicoi case expands this frame, as residents not only opposed proximity to pollution but defended their right to a healthy semi-rural life, shaped by aspirations for clean air and refuge from Ploiești's industrial emissions.

Resistance in this period challenged this dynamic and asserted rights to health, recognition, and environmental control. Public mobilization reached a peak in 2018, marking the most visible and widely reported phase of the protests. That year saw two major demonstrations: one on September 23, and another on October 28, when the Environmental Guard brought a mobile lab to the site in response to mounting public pressure. Together, these protests drew an estimated 150–200 participants, including the town's mayor, and represented the height of public visibility and institutional engagement. Coverage by ProTV emphasized both the scale of citizen turnout and the rare intervention by authorities, which resulted in fines totaling 150,000 RON and an official request to suspend the landfill's operating license.

In 2019, the movement evolved into a more evidence-driven form of activism. A major fire at the landfill on March 8, followed by the EPA's confirmation on March 22 of hydrogen sulfide levels reaching four times the legal limit, significantly heightened public alarm. That same year, Eco Natura commissioned independent air quality measurements near the landfill. The results revealed hydrogen sulfide concentrations up to 20 times above the legal threshold, and on certain mornings, even exceeding the limit by more than 260 times (Digi24 2019; Radu and Chirea 2023a, 2023b). These findings not only validated what residents had long suspected and claimed: that they were living in an acutely toxic environment, but was also part of their epistemic resistance. Participants emphasized the daily discomfort and health risks caused by the odors, with one protester quoted in national media saying: 'The smell is unbearable even a kilometer away' (Digi24 2019).

Although the landfill's activity was officially suspended for 30 days, residents soon observed that trucks were still arriving. This prompted widespread frustration and renewed mobilization. Protesters received insider information, including photos, from someone working at the site, confirming ongoing operations despite the suspension order. These revelations catalyzed one of the most determined protest actions in Băicoi's recent history: a prolonged, 18 days picketing at the landfill entrance, in the summer of 2019. This period of persistent mobilization and evidence-based advocacy played a decisive role in prompting the February 2020 suspension of Vitalia's operations by the EPA.

In addition to local mobilizing actions, demonstrators traveled to Ploiești and Bucharest to deliver petitions and confront regional and national authorities, driven by the lack of accountability and response from local institutions. While the EPA had at least organized a few meetings where residents could voice concerns, the Environmental Guard was notably absent. Protesters recalled waiting for nearly four hours at the Guard's office in Ploiești without being received by anyone, an emblematic episode that underscored institutional indifference.

The intensive and slow labour to hold environmental authorities accountable for controlling and remedying the harmful effects of the landfill is reflected in the 60 reports and complaints that the community, represented by EcoNatura, submitted between 2016 and 2019. This sustained grassroots civic effort was complemented by a change in the strategy of contestation in 2019, when the EcoNatura became involved, as an intervener, in two administrative litigations brought by the EPA against the Vitalia company. Available documents and interview accounts confirm partial victories, such as the revocation of permits for specific waste categories. Although not leading to complete shutdown, this period marked the apex of organized resistance, characterized by intensified pressure, territorial and institutional escalation, and the consolidation of a localized environmental movement.

The protest movement in Băicoi brought together a diverse coalition whose backgrounds shaped both its trajectory and its tactics: long-time residents, recent arrivals from nearby urban centers (including working-class individuals, corporate employees, and pensioners) women (especially mothers) who emerged as key organizers, retirees with time and deep-rooted community ties, small local business operators, and a local farmer whose land was directly impacted by the landfill's proximity. Urban newcomers contributed technical knowledge and institutional fluency, while older residents and pensioners provided persistence, moral authority, and a sense of historical continuity.

Women played a central role in Băicoi's environmental protests, both alongside the NGO and as grassroots mobilizers. Many of the most active were mothers, whose concerns for their families' health drove their involvement. Their caregiving roles lent moral authority, allowing them to frame environmental harm as an issue of survival and justice. Key figures included a retired woman near the landfill who led petition efforts and a local entrepreneur whose business connected her to a broad network. She extended outreach beyond Țința, helping raise awareness and mobilize wider participation. Other women managed information-sharing, signature gathering, monitored landfill activity, or documented violations. Some, including Emil's wife, a teacher and outspoken activist who faced harassment, allegedly by individuals tied to Vitalia.

This unpaid, often risky work sustained the protests and exemplifies the slow labor of contestation: ongoing, everyday resistance despite institutional and corporate neglect. Mara recounted, 'I even took my child with me to Bucharest, to the Environmental Guard,' showing how caregiving and activism intertwined. Others tracked odor levels, observed impacts on gardens and poultry, and shared findings. While women's involvement provided moral authority to the movement, it also reflected broader gendered divisions of labor, as caregiving responsibilities and domestic roles often positioned women and retirees closer to the affected environment and enabled them to monitor pollution in their everyday routines. This pattern also points to wider inequalities in the organization of work and care, which often make working-age men less available for sustained participation in environmental activism. Through these activities, domestic care was transformed into environmental vigilance and political agency, reshaping local civic engagement. Their activism also reflects global patterns in environmental justice struggles, where women, particularly in working-class and semi-rural communities, often play leading roles in resistance, drawing legitimacy from caregiving responsibilities (Batliwala 2010; Longest, Adams, and Shriver 2022; Malin and Ryder 2018; Wong 2020).

Together, this diverse alliance forged a place-based form of collective environmental action that cut across generational, gender, and occupational lines. This form of locally embedded environmental activism resonates with recent findings from other Romanian rural contexts, where place-based alliances between long-term residents and more mobile or professionally trained actors have been shown to sustain protracted struggles against extractive and polluting industries (Ștefănescu, Alexandrescu, and Meltzer 2025). Digital tools, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, played a major infrastructural role in the mobilization effort in Băicoi. They functioned not only as channels for disseminating real-time information, such as odor episodes, fires, or landfill activity, but also as spaces for civic coordination and emotional support. Facebook enabled the creation of neighborhood-based groups that became essential for organizing protests, collecting signatures

for petitions, and circulating complaint templates. WhatsApp facilitated rapid communication and informal mobilization. These platforms helped bridge social and generational divides, enabling the emergence of a distributed, community-led monitoring system that compensated for institutional inaction and amplified residents' voices in public and media arenas.

### *Community vigilance, institutional distrust and epistemic injustice (2020–2024)*

Then they said in that meeting that they had bought a very expensive spray, and that they constantly apply it around the landfill to neutralize the odors. And Emil. asked: 'But those smells, that spray, isn't that toxic too?' - Olivia (W, 68, pensioner, April 2025)

After 2019, civic mobilization in Băicoi shifted from street protests into community vigilance and environmental monitoring. Though demonstrations ceased that year, a state of alert persisted, driven by residents' deepening mistrust in authorities and renewed environmental incidents, such as persistent odors and repeated landfill fires. The suspension of Vitalia's operations in February 2020 was perceived as a temporary victory, but the company's resumption of activity in 2021 reawakened public concern and frustration. In this phase, local activism took on more informal and decentralized forms: residents continued submitting complaints, tracking odor events, and sharing updates in community networks. This shift toward complaint-based monitoring and procedural engagement reflects patterns observed in other environmental justice struggles, where regulatory arenas become the primary terrain of contestation in the absence of mass protest (Adams et al. 2017). Although no new protests emerged, the community insisted to be involved in the public consultations organized in 2023, in connection with the proposed expansion of the landfill (cells 3 and 4). According to Romanian laws that transpose Aarhus Convention principles on transparency and public participation, environmental authorities and private companies must organize public consultations in the first phase of authorization procedures. Yet the assertive presence and preparedness of residents, shaped by years of contestation, made these meetings more substantive and confrontational than routine procedural compliance would typically generate

Many participants viewed these consultations as symbolic or merely procedural, arguing that decisions had already been made and that the process lacked transparency. Nevertheless, the dynamics they generated, marked by confrontation, detailed questions, and skepticism, contrasted with the institutional indifference observed in 2016.

During these public consultations, Vitalia representatives attempted to defuse community concerns by promising to plant trees as a buffer zone, framing it as an ecological mitigation measure. However, residents reacted with skepticism, recalling similar promises made in the past and questioning their actual environmental impact. When directly asked what would happen if such afforestation failed to reduce the pollution experienced by those living near the landfill, company representatives reportedly suggested that the only viable solution would be to relocate the homes, a response that further deepened mistrust and underscored the perceived disregard for local well-being.

As part of its public response to mounting complaints about odors, Vitalia claimed to use deodorizing sprays at the landfill site, a measure widely dismissed by residents as superficial, masking rather than addressing the underlying pollution. In interviews, community members described the sprays as ineffective and emblematic of the company's broader strategy of mitigation.

Residents also noted a shift in the company's public-facing strategy: the previously confrontational and dismissive company representative was replaced, and subsequent interactions with Vitalia staff became more polite and diplomatic. While some interpreted this as a sign of institutional learning, others viewed it as a calculated adjustment in tone, aimed at deflecting criticism without addressing the root causes of community grievances.

This post-2019 period thus represents a move from visible protest to quieter yet persistent forms of resistance and a refusal to normalize toxic exposure. Facebook and WhatsApp continued to serve as vital platforms for sustaining environmental vigilance. These digital tools enabled residents to maintain a form of distributed environmental monitoring. Facebook groups remained active as spaces for sharing odor alerts, visual evidence of landfill activity, or updates on institutional proceedings, while WhatsApp facilitated rapid communication among trusted networks, particularly during moments of heightened concern such as the

2022 and 2024 landfill fires. In the absence of sustained media coverage or institutional responsiveness, social media became an alternative infrastructure for civic presence, maintaining visibility, reinforcing community memory, and preserving the collective sense of environmental injustice. Importantly, these platforms supported a shift from protest to persistent, informal oversight, allowing citizens to exert pressure even in the absence of formal action.

Although resistance in Băicoi remained centered in Țintea, Eco Natura faced early attempts to discredit it. Authorities and the waste operator questioned the group's legitimacy, highlighting that its leaders were not born locally and accusing them of political motives or ties to companies like OMV-Petrom. Over time, however, the group earned recognition in the community as legitimate environmental advocates. To show their concerns extended beyond Vitalia, Eco Natura took up other environmental issues. In 2020, they opposed a proposed fertilizer plant elsewhere in town, warning of health risks. Their objections delayed permitting, and they later joined a legal case against the company (which they ultimately lost). This incurred financial strain and caution about future lawsuits. The concerns raised were later validated: the facility caused severe odor pollution, triggering local protests.

By this stage, many residents oscillated between ongoing vigilance and emotional fatigue. Years of grassroots effort had produced some partial victories, yet these gains felt tenuous, constantly threatened by new permits, administrative opacity, and legal loopholes. The imbalance between an under-resourced community and powerful corporate actors, backed by permissive institutions, deepened feelings of vulnerability and frustration. Interviewees voiced growing resignation and fear that hard-won gains could quickly be undone. Mistrust in institutions intensified as regulatory agencies, nominally tasked with environmental protection, came to be seen not just as ineffective, but as complicit in enabling harm.

## Discussion

Located just 20 km from Ploiești, Băicoi became a peri-urban zone exposed to industrial externalities while remaining politically peripheral. This positioning made the town particularly vulnerable to what D'Alisa and Demaria (2024) conceptualize as accumulation by contamination, through which toxic burdens are externalized onto politically peripheral communities via weak regulation and permissive governance. In Băicoi, pollution did not emerge as an accident of development, but through weak regulation, legal loopholes, and permissive governance that enabled hazardous waste processing near residential areas.

Here, class and location intersected to generate a form of vulnerability distinct from extreme poverty or racialized exclusion. Decades of oil exploitation and waste management normalized pollution and reinforced the town's treatment as a suitable site for dumping. This dynamic reflects Dillon's (2013) waste formations and Armiero's (2021) Wasteocene, through which exposure becomes normalized and places rendered disposable. The transformation of Țintea from a semi-rural neighborhood into a node within national waste circuits further illustrates how places and populations are rendered disposable within what Armiero (2021) conceptualizes as the Wasteocene. In this sense, the Băicoi landfill became part of broader waste management circuits through which waste generated in urban and industrial centers is displaced to politically and regulatorily peripheral localities.

These material dynamics were sustained through what Frederiksen and Himley (2020) describe as tactics of dispossession: institutional ambiguity, bureaucratic delay, and the diffusion of responsibility. In Băicoi, overlapping infrastructures, shifting narratives of blame, and fragmented enforcement allowed pollution to persist as an ambient and unresolved condition. Residents' sustained complaints and civic pressure did not eliminate contamination but compelled the company to adopt partial adjustments or simulate compliance to preserve legitimacy. Even when sanctions were imposed, they remained reactive and failed to generate structural change. This pattern resembles dynamics observed in long-term 'fenceline' communities characterized by chronic contamination and sustained civic vigilance (Adams et al. 2017).

Environmental injustice in Băicoi thus operated through intertwined material and epistemic processes. Pollution was not merely tolerated but actively governed through strategic neglect and partial gestures of recognition. Residents' lived knowledge of odors, symptoms, and environmental change was repeatedly questioned or dismissed, revealing a deep crisis of procedural and epistemic justice. Encounters with authorities, such as being asked 'How do you know it smells?', exposed how credibility was systematically withdrawn from affected residents despite years of embodied observation and documentation. These

dynamics illustrate both epistemic and procedural injustice (Fricker 2007; Schlosberg 2007; Walker 2012), as public consultations functioned largely as empty proceduralism. Scholarship on waste infrastructure siting has shown how mechanisms of community engagement may function as strategies for managing dissent and securing local consent (P. Harvey and Knox 2015; Saraç-Lesavre 2020). In Băicoi, however, engagement procedures largely operated as empty formalities that questioned residents' credibility rather than incorporating their concerns. Across these conditions, resistance took the form of a layered and cumulative civic effort. Gendered labor, intergenerational alliances, community vigilance, and sustained procedural engagement structured this response. Unlike rapid or spectacular mobilization, resistance unfolded across routine, affective, legal, organizational, and embodied registers: monitoring, caregiving, petitioning, protest participation, legal action and confronting authorities in public consultations, simply to make their experiences institutionally legible.

This resistance did not target environmental protection alone. It also articulated demands for recognition, transparency, procedural inclusion, and accountability in a context of enduring institutional failure. Women, especially mothers and pensioners, played a central role in sustaining this civic labor, transforming care work into political action. Men with technical or professional backgrounds often engaged in legal and administrative struggles. Digital platforms functioned as infrastructures of vigilance and memory, enabling decentralized monitoring in the absence of institutional trust.

After 2019, resistance shifted from visible protest to quieter forms of vigilance and procedural engagement. Although demonstrations ceased, residents continued to document incidents, track odors, and confront new permitting attempts. This phase highlights how everyday monitoring and procedural persistence became modes of both resistance and survival under conditions of exhaustion and deep mistrust in regulatory institutions.

Ultimately, the Băicoi case shows how environmental injustice is reproduced through the convergence of waste formations, tactics of dispossession, and epistemic exclusion, while also illustrating how civic resistance, fragmented, exhausting, and only partially effective, remains central to challenging the normalization of harm.

## Conclusions

This article contributes to the environmental justice scholarship by showing how semi-rural and peri-urban communities can become sites of sustained environmental injustice even in the absence of extreme poverty or racialized exclusion. Through the case of Băicoi, Romania, we demonstrate that injustice emerges not primarily from material deprivation, but from the infrastructural and spatial reclassification of certain towns as suitable for contamination and disposal. Proximity to industrial Ploiești and political peripherality facilitated Băicoi's integration into national waste circuits while simultaneously rendering it environmentally disposable.

By mobilizing the concept of accumulation by contamination (D'Alisa and Demaria 2024), this article reframes waste infrastructures as instruments for the systematic externalization of environmental costs onto populations with limited political leverage, rather than as neutral technical systems. The analysis shows how pollution in Băicoi was governed through weak oversight, legal loopholes, bureaucratic delay, and partial enforcement, producing a regime of reactive rather than structural regulation.

The article further advances environmental justice debates by empirically documenting how environmental injustice operates simultaneously at material and epistemic levels. Residents' sensory knowledge of odors, illness, and environmental change was repeatedly questioned or dismissed, revealing the entanglement of procedural exclusion and epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Walker 2012). Public consultations, although formally required, often functioned as empty proceduralism, where participation rarely translated into meaningful influence.

Conceptually, the study extends work on waste formations (Dillon 2013) and the Wasteocene (Armiero 2021) by showing how waste infrastructures normalize exposure and actively produce 'wasted places' and populations in post-socialist contexts. At the same time, it introduces slow labor of contestation as a framework for understanding prolonged, low-visibility forms of civic engagement centered on monitoring, documentation, complaints, legal action, and informal organizing, forms of resistance that mirror the temporality of harm described by Nixon's (2011) slow violence.

Finally, the case highlights the central role of gendered and intergenerational labor and of digital platforms in sustaining long-term environmental resistance. While partial victories were achieved, the broader governance regime remained tilted toward corporate interests, showing how environmental injustice is reproduced through intertwined material, institutional, and epistemic processes, even as communities continue to contest the normalization of harm.

## Notes

1. Vitalia Mediu is one of Romania's leading waste-management companies, with a network of non-hazardous waste treatment and ecological landfill facilities across multiple counties. In Prahova, their operations include the Valea lui Dan site in Băicoi and the ecological landfill in Boldești-Scăeni. Beyond Prahova, they also run a CMID (Municipal Integrated Waste Center) facility in Tarpiu, Bistrița-Năsăud. The company handles the full municipal and industrial waste cycle, collection, sorting, recovery, treatment, and disposal, and, notably, in Prahova also co-generates energy from landfill gas via its Boldești-Scăeni site.
2. We interviewed a manager from a local waste management firm operating in Băicoi since around 2016. The company handles the collection, sorting, and pre-treatment of waste, mainly plastics and industrial materials, for energy recovery, including some toxic waste. Much of it is sent to cement factories across Romania as alternative fuel. The representative confirmed that some hazardous waste ends up in specialized landfills like the one in Băicoi, and their company has sent material there. This overlap positions Băicoi as a key site in Romania's waste infrastructure, combining recycling, treatment, and disposal. Unlike the landfill operator, however, this firm is generally viewed positively by residents, who point to the absence of odors or conflict as evidence of more responsible practices.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Valer Simion Cosma**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Claudia Șerbănuță**: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ionuț Codreanu**: Data curation, Investigation; **Oana Rusu**: Investigation.

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