

Since China's Zijin Mining Group acquired Serbia's only copper mining complex in 2018, the company has faced protests over its poor environmental record and accusations that it has been involved in untransparent business deals in the Balkan nation.

In the face of mounting scrutiny, the Chinese mining company has engaged with disaffected communities by **funding and rewarding local sporting teams** in what activists and watchdog groups say is an attempt to repair its tarnished image.

Zijin's latest contribution was a **donation of 300,000 euros** (\$295,000) to Serbia's national women's volleyball team following its October 15 gold medal win at the World Championships in the Netherlands.

"They're trying to show that they are a socially responsible company," Mirko Popovic, the program director for the Regulatory Institute for Renewable Energy and Environment (RERI), a Serbian environmental NGO, told RFE/RL. "[But] our past investigations of Zijin's work in Serbia shows that it is everything but a responsible company."

Zijin has been repeatedly fined by the Serbian authorities for pollution violations over the years. In April 2021, the company was ordered to temporarily **halt work** at its copper mine after it failed to comply with environmental standards and build a wastewater treatment plant nearby.

The recent donation to the volleyball team is not the first time that Zijin has given money to fund sports teams amid the growing environmental concerns and local backlash.

Earlier this month, the company donated 2,500 euros (\$2,465) to a local table tennis club. Last year, it also signed a 17,000-euro (\$16,765) sponsorship deal with the official soccer club in Majdanpek, a town in Serbia's eastern Bor district that is home to Zijin's copper-mining operations. That same year, Zijin donated 153,000 euros (\$150,000) to Serbia's Ministry of Youth and Sports.

"China and Serbia are iron friends, and our bilateral relations have withstood the tests of turbulent times," Zijin said in an October 17 statement that accompanied its donation to the national women's volleyball team. "Volleyball is also one of the most popular sports in China, especially women's volleyball."

Snezana Todorovic, a local environmental activist, told RFE/RL that the recent donation "leaves a bitter taste" in her mouth because it came less than a month after the authorities dismantled a camp built by activists in Majdanpek to stop the expansion of Zijin's mining in the area.

"I think this money is intended to wash away [people's] conscience, so they'll [turn a blind eye]," said Todorovic.

Zijin and the Volleyball Federation of Serbia did not respond to RFE/RL's requests for

comment about the donations.

An Eye On Sports

Serbia and China have rapidly intensified economic and political relations in recent years, with Beijing viewing the Balkan country as a poster child for its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and **growing influence** in Europe.

Chinese state banks have granted billions of dollars in loans to Serbia for construction projects that are mostly conducted by Chinese workers. Serbia has become an export market for Chinese drones, military equipment, and surveillance technology. Chinese companies have also expanded their reach in Serbia, taking over mines, steel mills, and building roads, factories, and railway lines.

China's largest gold miner and one of the country's top copper producers, Zijin acquired its Serbian mining operations in 2018 when it took over Bor's debt-ridden copper-mining and smelting complex in a \$1.26 billion deal. The agreement followed a 2016 deal that saw China's Hesteel acquire a large steel plant in the town of Smederevo in eastern Serbia.

Zijin is not the only Chinese company that has looked to boost its brand in Serbian sports.

The logo of Peak, one of China's leading sportswear and footwear brands, is emblazoned on the national jerseys of Serbia's volleyball and basketball teams. The Chinese company Linglong, which is building a nearly \$1 billion tire factory in Serbia, is the leading sponsor for the country's top soccer league, which has been renamed Linglong Tire Superliga.

Like Zijin, Linglong has also found itself embroiled in scandals over the years for a spotty environmental record and poor labor practices. In 2020, Serbian NGOs revealed that some of the construction work surrounding the tire plant in the town of Zrenjanin had been **done without permits or environmental impact studies**, leading to protests and backlash.

A national scandal also erupted after **poor labor standards** were uncovered at the factory, where hundreds of Vietnamese workers who were hired by a subcontractor lived in makeshift lodgings without electricity, heating, or water and had their passports confiscated.

Environmental Concerns In Serbia

Despite the donations to local sports teams in the region, activists say the alleged efforts by Zijin to repair its reputation will not work.

Ljubica Vukcevic, the lead legal counsel for RERI, an environmental NGO, told RFE/RL that anger and frustration towards Zijin runs deep in the area, especially as pollution and environmental problems mount.

Chinese mining companies are not the only ones to court controversy.

Widespread **protests** erupted in late 2021 in Serbia over plans to build a massive lithium mine that would be developed by the Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto. Following the protests, the Serbian government dropped its plans for the venture.

Activists and watchdogs say that the Serbian government has a weak legal and regulatory system that allows companies to bypass environmental protections and due diligence.

According to the Global Alliance for Health and Pollution, an international monitoring group, Serbia is the **most polluted country** in Europe.

But added concerns have been raised in Serbia about the practices of Chinese companies, which have poor environmental records around the world. There are also fears that Chinese companies may be more willing to take advantage of Serbia's weaker legal protections.

In a recent report, the European Parliament **expressed concerns** over Chinese investments, saying the lack of transparency around impact assessments could lead to mounting environmental problems. Zijin, in its **past statements**, has maintained that it follows Serbian law.

The Dutch advocacy group Just Finance has expressed similar worries. In a May **investigation**, it said that Zijin's investments in Serbia were undertaken "without the necessary environmental and social due diligence," which has led to people abandoning villages near its mining operations.

Since Zijin acquired the copper-mining and smelting complex in Bor, "the lives of the citizens in at least five villages in this area of Serbia have been upended," the group said, Radio Free Europe writes.