

At several locations in Serbia, although these are officially areas of nature that are under state protection, potential deposits of precious metals are being explored - with the permission of the competent authorities

Serbia officially has 471 protected areas, whose total area is 678,237 hectares, which is 7.66 percent of the country's territory. However, the boundaries of these areas are not necessarily an obstacle to the exploration of ores and minerals and the potential opening of new mines in protected areas.

According to the data of the Ministry of Mining and Energy, permits for soil exploration have been issued at several locations throughout Serbia, which are characterized as protected. In most cases, it is a search for gold.

If ore deposits are discovered at new locations, it would, along with the existing mines, lead to a significant increase in the territories where ore is mined in Serbia.

The layout of individual polygons where ore exploration is allowed raises several questions. First, how and under what conditions were permits issued for research in areas that are officially characterized as protected areas of nature? Also, the question arises whether this means that, in cases where an ore deposit has been discovered, it will be able to be mined, even though it is a protected area?

All these questions, above all, are for the competent state institutions, from which we have tried to seek answers. However, to several questions addressed to the Ministry of Mining and Energy, only one almost generic answer arrived from that department, in which the procedure for obtaining permits was described in principle, but no concrete answers were given.

"Applied geological research in the Republic of Serbia is carried out in accordance with the Law on Mining and Geological Research," the ministry said.

Where are new mines planned in protected areas?

BIRN obtained the data we publish in this research by "folding" two sets of data, ie two maps. On the first map were all the areas that are under state protection.

After that, based on the data on ore research from the website of the Ministry of Mining and Energy, we took all the locations where the tests are currently being performed. When we "folded" those two maps, we got data in which parts of the protected areas the ore is being tested.

Going from the north of Serbia to the south, the first protected area in parts of which research is being conducted is the Djerdap National Park. Right next to its borders, and even within them, there are several areas where gold and copper research is carried out,

and the area of some is almost 10,000 hectares.

In that part, several companies are involved in the research. These are the companies Tara Gold, Konstantin Resources and Golden Age Resources, registered in Belgrade.

By the way, this whole part of Eastern Serbia, previously recognizable as a mining area, primarily because of Bor and Majdanpek, when viewed as a map of ore exploration, is covered with landfills, ie areas where permits have been issued for these activities.

The borders of the two research areas encroach on the Kučaj Beljanica Nature Park, which is mostly located in the municipality of Despotovac. In the first, gold research is conducted by the company Avala Resources from Belgrade. It is an area of 3,583 hectares, most of which is located within the boundaries of the protected area "Kučaj Beljanica". This part is the area where the Tilva company from Belgrade received a permit for research, part of which also extends over the protected area.

The Stara Planina Nature Park has not been spared from ore research. In this mountain massif, on an area of 4,644 hectares, copper and gold ores are explored, and most of it is located in the nature park. The permit for that was issued to the company Alin Do Exploration, registered in Belgrade.

On the western borders of the Radan Nature Park, there are practically polygons where ore exploration is allowed, but some of them are deep within this protected nature area. In the middle of it, there is a polygon with an area of 2,730 hectares, on which the company Golden Age Resources from Belgrade received a permit for the exploration of gold and copper.

A little further south, on the protected part of Radan, there are two polygons with a total area of almost seven thousand hectares, on which the company Metalfer has a license for exploration of zinc, lead, gold and silver ores. The largest part of the surface of these polygons is within the boundaries of the "Radan" Nature Park.

When it comes to ore exploration, the Golija Nature Park has not remained intact. The 8,629-hectare landfill on which the Rockstone Group from Kać is looking for lead, zinc, copper, gold and antimony largely extends over the mentioned protected area of nature.

Ovčarsko kablarska gorge, which is also, according to the official classification, classified as a protected area, as a landscape of exceptional features, is almost entirely "covered" with a polygon for ore exploration. It is an area with a total area of almost ten thousand hectares, a good part of which is within the protected area. The license for exploration of gold, silver, copper and other metals in this area was obtained by the company Konstantin Resources, registered in Belgrade.

Officially - all by law

BIRN's questions from the Ministry of Mining and Energy say that everything is done according to the law and that before the geological research project is prepared, the applicant is obliged to obtain an act on the conditions for project development and planned geological research, issued by the competent Institute for Nature Protection, and the competent Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage or another competent body. In the written answer of the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia, which was signed by c. d. Director Marina Šibalić states that the competent law "prohibits the exploitation of mineral raw materials in the protection regimes of the first and second degree", while in the protection regime of the third degree the exploitation and primary processing of mineral raw materials are limited, without specifying whether these restrictions apply to ores. Each protected area, in practice, is generally divided into several protection zones, so that in the mentioned cases it is difficult to precisely determine which regimes are in force in the places where ore exploration is allowed. 14 separate units in the first degree of protection, 10 in the second, and the remaining part in the third.

When it comes to the Ovčar-Kablar gorge, a large part of which is a polygon for exploration of several ores, its space is divided into the second and third degree of protection. This means that limited exploitation could still be allowed in parts that are in the third level of protection. A similar case is with other protected areas within which research is conducted.

Preserve rare protected areas

To our question whether the borders of protected areas can be changed for the purpose of ore mining, the Institute answered that they cannot.

"The change of borders is possible only during the revision of the study of protection, after new scientific and professional knowledge about natural, cultural and landscape advantages, and in order to improve and enhance protected areas," the Institute said. Also, this institution states that they are not responsible for controlling the implementation of approved projects in protected areas or for interventions in case of illegal works, but that this is the scope of competent inspections.

"In relation to the issued decisions, certain investors have filed complaints against them. The Institute does not conduct any court disputes related to the mentioned activities ", conclude the Institute for Protected Areas.

Dejan Zagorac, president of the "Eco Center" organization, thinks that it is very bad that there is a possibility of opening new mines in protected areas.

"In any case, I think that these areas should not be used for that purpose, but should remain

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for future generations,” says Zagorac. He states that, depending on the degree of protection, limited exploitation or some other activities are allowed in certain areas. “But, regardless of the legal solutions, I think that protected natural areas should not be used for economic activities. Serbia is already at the bottom in Europe, when it comes to the area of protected areas. At least what we have should be preserved, and the income from protected areas should be based on sustainable tourism “, estimates Zagorac.

Source: birn.rs