

A dozen companies based in Australia, Canada and China, through offshore companies and affiliates in Serbia, control about 90 percent of the territory in which the state has issued permits for ore mining.

Approximately 100 companies registered in our country have state licenses for exploration of ores and metals in Serbia, and the total area on which they perform tests covers 5,673 square kilometers, which is a territory the size of a quarter of Vojvodina.

At first glance, it would be said that this is a business in which the competition is numerous. However, in reality, this business is mostly in the hands of only a dozen companies, mostly foreign, which, through affiliated companies, have exploration rights on approximately 90 percent of the territory where the possibilities for opening mines are being investigated. The turning point for the rise of the ore exploration business in Serbia was 2015, when the Law on Mining and Geological Research was amended. The amendments to the mentioned act, which were adopted by the Assembly of Serbia in December 2015, deprived the local authorities of the authority to issue permits for research, and the decision on that was transferred to the Ministry of Mining.

The new rules have put investors and ore researchers in a much better position, as they “finished” the job at one address in Belgrade. Thus, for example, someone who intended to conduct field research spread over several municipalities no longer had to obtain a permit from each local government separately.

The serious possibility that the mentioned law will be changed was a strong enough signal to potential investors. In the months before the formal adoption of the law, several ore exploration companies were established, and this trend has continued in the coming years, according to data from the Business Registers Agency (APR), which BIRN analyzed.

Of the 30 leading companies in the area where ore is explored, 15 of them have been established since 2015. As of the end of January 2022, those companies had more than a 50 percent share in the total area where ores and minerals are explored in Serbia.

The often mentioned Rio Tinto is not on this list because they passed the research phase even earlier and were practically about to open the mine. There is speculation in the public that some of the companies listed below are “doing business” for Rio Tinto, but for now, everyone has denied those claims.

Network of related companies for ore exploration in Serbia

Who, in fact, are the key players in the ore exploration business in Serbia? Although permits are issued to individual companies that are registered as domestic in the APR, in some cases it is a kind of network of related companies that have the same ultimate owner. BIRN has already mentioned some of these companies in an article on ore exploration in protected areas.

Most of them are companies with foreign management and capital, which mainly comes from Canada, Australia and China.

The formal owners of companies established in Serbia for this activity are in many cases companies based in offshore zones, such as the British Virgin Islands, Malta, Gibraltar and Luxembourg.

Also, what characterizes them is the frequent change of ownership structure and name, so it is not uncommon for an ore exploration company to be founded under one name and owner, and in a few years it will be a company with a completely different name and owner.

In many cases, this type of company was founded by lawyers who were their formal owners and directors for a while, and then the ownership was transferred to companies from abroad.

The following are the top 10 lists of leading companies that control most businesses in Serbia through a network of affiliated companies, as well as the area where ore deposits are searched.

1. Constantine Resources, Australia

Based on data published by the Ministry of Mining on its website, which was further processed and analyzed by BIRN Serbia, “Konstantin Resources” is the company with the largest area where ores are explored. It is an area of 71,089 hectares, which extends to 11 locations from Eastern Serbia, through Sumadija, to the far west of the country.

This company, whose focus is research on gold, silver and copper, was founded in Serbia on August 15, 2017, and in the meantime it has changed its ownership structure. At the time of its establishment, the company “West End Resources PTY LTD” from Australia was registered as its owner. However, in 2019, “Konstantin Resources PTY LTD” was registered as the new owner of the company, which changed its name in Australia and kept the same registration number.

During the registration, Vaughan Scott Wishar was listed as the legal representative and director of “Konstantin Resources” in Serbia, and several companies in the field of ore exploration and mining are connected in Australia. In the last change in the APR, on May 24, 2021, he was deleted as the legal representative of the Serbian branch.

2. Zijin, China

The Chinese mining conglomerate “Zijin” is conducting research in Serbia on a total area of almost 60,000 hectares through four companies owned by it. According to the APR, Zijin could not be directly linked to all these companies, but the ownership of them is confirmed by a document published on the website of the Commission for Protection of Competition. It is a document in which the concentration of capital was decided and in which, among other things, the companies through which “Zijin” operates in Serbia are listed. These are “Balkan Exploration and Mining”, “Serbia Zijin Mining”, “Tilva” and “Serbia Zijin Bor Copper”. “Balkan Exploration and Mining” had exploration permits on an area of 28,722 hectares, and the owner of this firm in the APR was the company “Reservoir Consulting (BVI) Inc”, registered in the British Virgin Islands. This company received permits for ore exploration in

the territory of the city of Belgrade, with a total area of 6,741 hectares. It is about the locality “Babe - Ljuta strana”, which covers the municipalities of Voždovac, Sopot and Barajevo, where the presence of lead, precious and non-ferrous metals was investigated. However, on February 22 this year, the Ministry of Mining announced that “Zijin” had given up on further research at this location.

Serbia Zijin Mining has permits for an exploration area of 18,841 hectares, and its formal owner is the Cukaru Peki BV company, registered in the Netherlands.

“Zijin’s” company “Tilva” has a permit for exploration on an area of 13,498 hectares, and the company of the same name registered in the British Virgin Islands is registered as its owner in APR.

Finally, the 5,267-hectare exploration area is controlled by Serbia Zijin Bor Copper, in which, in addition to Zijin-related companies, the Serbian government has a 36.99 percent stake.

3. Mundoro, Canada

The Canadian company “Mundoro” controls 51,744 hectares of exploration space in Serbia through the companies “Stara Planina Resources” and “Valdor Resources”.

The company “Stara Planina Resources” was founded in 2011, and since 2015 the owner of the company is “Mundoro Middelen B. V”, registered in the Netherlands, based in Canada. Mundoro in Canada also owns Great Mountain Ventures Ltd, which owns Valdor Resources, founded in Serbia in 2020. In all of these companies, both Serbian subsidiaries and in Canada, Teodora Dechev, an investment banker from Canada.

4. Dundee Precious Metals, Canada

Canadian mining giant Dundee Precious Metals operates in Serbia through two companies, which APR states are owned by Dundee Precious Avala SARL, registered in Luxembourg. These are the companies “Dunav Minerals” and “DPM Avala”, which together have licenses for research on about 40,000 hectares. In Serbia, they have investigative spaces at nine locations, from Homolje in Eastern Serbia to the area around Kursumlija, Brus and Medvedja. By the way, these two companies initially operated separately, but later merged, and then they were taken over by “Dundee Precious Metals”.

5. Ibaera Capital, Australia

Ibaera Capital, an Australian investment fund specializing in ore exploration, is present in Serbia through Tara Gold and Zlatna Reka Resources, which together control 37,879 hectares.

“Tara Gold” was founded in 2016, and the company “Eldorado Gold Cooperatief U. A” from the Netherlands was registered as the owner. In the meantime, it became the property of the company “ISIHC Ltd”, registered in Great Britain.

“Golden River Resources” was founded in 2020 and its formal owner is “Betoota Holdings Ltd” from Great Britain. Both companies had the same director, Peder Olsen from Australia,

for some time, and their ownership companies were registered at the same address in London. According to the data from the British business registers, the trail from London continues to the Cayman Islands, where the company “Ibaera Capital Fund GP Ltd” is registered, which also operates in Australia under the same name.

6. Balkan Metal Corp., Canada

The company “Balkan Metal Corp” from Canada in our country conducts ore research on a total area of about 35,000 hectares through the company “Golden Age Resources” registered in Serbia on May 11, 2018. Zoran Bulović is registered as its first owner in APR. However, on April 6, 2022, the company changed its ownership structure, and the company “Balkan Metals Corp” from Vancouver was registered as the new owner in APR.

7. Jadar Lithium Ltd, Australia

The company “Jadar Lithium Ltd” from Australia is present in Serbia through the company “Balkan Research”, which has licenses for research of lithium and boron on an area of 33,692 hectares. It was founded on March 18, 2016, under the name “Nova Centauri Maetals”, and the Australian company of the same name was registered as the owner at that time.

In the meantime, the names and owners have changed. On July 2, 2019, the company changed its name to “Jadar Lithium”, and on September 13, 2021, it was registered under the name “Balkan Research”. At the same time, the owners from Australia changed. The company first passed into the hands of a company called Centralist PTY LTD, which was later taken over by South East Asia Resources and changed its name to Jadar Lithium Ltd ”.

8. Metalfer, Serbia

“Metalfer” is the only company from Serbia that is among the leading companies that explore ores in Serbia. It is a group that gathers several companies engaged in trade, processing and research of ores and metal products, whose headquarters are in Sremska Mitrovica. The company was founded in 2002, and its co-owners are Branko Zečević, Zoran Lojović and Stefan Zečević.

9. Medgold Resources, Canada

The Canadian company “Medgold Resources” is looking for ores through the Serbian branch of “Medgold Research”. It is a company based on the wave of the changed Law on Mining and Geological Research, which controls about 20,000 hectares of exploration space in the municipalities of Trgoviste and Bosilegrad.

They were registered in the APR on January 14, 2016, less than a month after the adoption of the said act. Lawyer Marko Curic is the first owner. As of November 25, 2021, the company is formally owned by the company “Tlamingo Mining” registered in Malta, but it is actually a subsidiary of the Canadian company “Medgold Resources”.

10. Euro Lithium Balkan, Canada

The Canadian company “Euro Lithium Balkan” is researching potential deposits of lithium and pine on an area of almost 19,000 hectares in the vicinity of Valjevo, through a company of the same name registered in Serbia. The company was founded in 2015 under the name “GeoMin Consulting”. In the meantime, it changed its name to “Euro Lithium Balkan” and became the property of the mentioned company from Canada, BIRN writes.