

Various factors affect the level of pollution, and one of the biggest polluters is individual furnaces. As many as 50 percent of the citizens of Nis use a wood stove during the heating season. The city heating plant heats with gas, but some schools and institutions still have boiler rooms that heat with fuel oil and coal.

For Nis residents, but also for many others in Serbia, protective masks did not come with the corona virus. Some have worn them before, in the winter. Every year at that time, in Nis and other cities in Serbia, such as Belgrade, Bor or Pancevo, citizens pray for a solution to the problem of air pollution.

Some even manage for cleaner air, at least in their four walls. Vladimir Milošević from Nis, for example, bought an air purifier: "When the heating season starts, the stench becomes unbearable. My brother also bought it, and he is very satisfied. "The most important thing is to have that HEPA 13 filter that 'kills' 2.5 micron particles, which are the most harmful to health and which they say are carcinogenic," Milošević explains.

At the top of the list by the number of deaths due to pollution

Due to the high price of heating, many residents of Nis have switched off from district heating, so only 30% of households use the services of Toplana. In addition to traffic, which is also a great source of pollution, the doctor's recommendation to ventilate the premises often is not in place in Nis - especially in the evening, when smog descends on the city in a valley without wind.

It is precisely these reasons that the European Commission has identified as the main causes of pollution, as a common problem for the entire Balkans. An official report from the European Union's Environmental Protection Agency states that out of eight deaths in Europe, one is related to environmental pollution.

The countries with the highest percentage of deaths due to pollution are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Montenegro and Serbia, the report said. On the other hand, the number of premature deaths caused by air pollution in the EU is decreasing, but, according to Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevicius, although in constant decline, the number of premature deaths is still high.

In winter - twice as many patients

"Pollution in a chronic duration can really cause certain diseases. It cannot directly condition them, but pollution and the existence of already present diseases can also worsen their condition, "pulmonologist Dr. Tanja Pejčić told DW. That is why doctors advise such patients not to leave the house, if they do not have to.

“In a city like Nis, which is located in a valley where there is no wind to blow that smog or fog, those who have asthma, bronchitis or obstructive pulmonary disease are the first to be bothered,” says Dr. Pejcic, adding that in the winter months occurs twice as many patients complaining of respiratory problems.

Currently, our interlocutor adds studies from Denmark and Spain to the current report of the EU Environmental Protection Agency. According to her, the Danish study showed that in cities that are polluted, there are 3.7 percent more lung cancers than those that are not polluted. A Spanish study noted that in that country, 290,000 children get bronchitis more in polluted areas than in unpolluted environments, and when it comes to adults, 25,000 more. Also, 500,000 more asthma attacks are in polluted cities than in unpolluted ones.

Waiting for the Air Quality Plan

Although our respiratory system is designed to absorb the harmful effects, chronic exposure is still very problematic, says Dr. Tanja Pejcic. “If you imagine that our lungs are a portal between the non-sterile environment around us and the lungs where there is already a sterile environment, all that structure in between is made to try to absorb it, to filter, to retain particles, to cough or sneeze. let’s get it out of the airways. But, when the particles are small enough, when there are a large number of them and when it lasts and lasts, that is, chronic exposure, that is what is very harmful to people “, explains Dr. Pejcic. The most harmful are nitrogen monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and similar gases.

Measurements of air quality in Nis have been performed for years, and between 2017 and 2019, they showed that these particles are present in the air that citizens breathe. That is why the city council for environmental protection, Sonja Milojkovic, recently announced on a regional television that the plan is to connect a larger number of institutions to gas stations, as well as that the city is obliged to develop an air quality plan that will reduce pollution. However, the city has been obliged to do that for years, and the air in Nis was classified in the third category in 2017: excessively polluted.

Factories can work and be environmentally friendly

Pulmonologist Dr. Tanja Pejcic sees the solution in a large number of parks and green areas, but also in system solutions, such as the use of appropriate filters in industry. One of the most famous air pollutants in Serbia is the company Zidjin, which in 2018 bought the former RTB Bor. Bor citizens organized several protests last year in which they claimed that the pollution was greater than the arrival of a Chinese investor.

According to CINS, after the arrival of the inspection of the Ministry of Environmental

Protection, which determined that the concentration of SO₂ was as much as 8.3 times higher than allowed, a court procedure was initiated. The Commercial Court in Zajecar fined the company 450,000 dinars for pollution in 2019 and in January 2020, but both sides filed appeals. The decision is now before the Commercial Court of Appeal in Belgrade. Unlike the Chinese company Zidjin, the Serbian company Tigar Pirot is a good example that the production of rubber shoes and chemical equipment can be done ecologically. "Despite the fact that rubber manufacturing belongs to the sector of dirty technology, no hazardous waste is generated in our factory," claims the general director of the factory, Vladimir Ilic. "Our power plant used to use fuel oil and coal, but we were among the first to switch to gas. And as for the materials we work with, it is natural rubber, we do not have dangerous materials. "Our laboratories test all the materials that are part of the composition, and the waste that eventually appears, is disposed of in an adequate way, so it does not end up in nature," says Ilic.

While the city of Nis has been "planning" the Air Quality Plan for years, and industrial plants generally still do not introduce filters that purify industrial waste, Environment Commissioner Sinkevicius announces a Green Agreement with the Western Balkans that will address the problems facing countries.

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