

Air pollution and environmental protection have become central topics in Serbia's political life. In autumn and winter, pollution in the southeastern European country is so bad it can be seen, smelt and even tasted. Is there a solution to the burning issue?

Serbia's air pollution stems from a range of sources, from coal-fired power plants, inefficient heating devices and networks to combustion in uncontrolled landfills. The most critical period is during the heating season - from mid-October to mid-April. Over the past 30 days, according to data from the IQ Air application, Belgrade was among the top polluted cities in the world several times. It is the only European city with such high emissions of particulate matter (PM) - also known as particle pollution - a complex mixture of air-borne particles and liquid droplets composed of acids, ammonium, water, black carbon, organic chemicals, metals, and soil crustal material.

Some estimates show that around 11,000 people a year prematurely die as a consequence of the prolonged exposure to air pollution in Serbia. The authorities are not serious about implementing the existing laws on the environmental protection. Indeed, Serbia has adopted legislation but is doing nothing, or very little, to ensure its consistent implementation. As a result, the Balkan nation continues facing enormous pollution - a problem that has a direct impact on lives of millions of people.

On November 13 hundreds of environmental protesters took to the streets of Belgrade to urge the Serbian government to start applying the law against the biggest polluters. They demanded authorities take action to improve air quality. If the government does not take any concrete steps to reduce the level of air pollution, eco-activists threaten to radicalize their protests.

Another problem for the Serbian population is that there is not enough pressure from the European Union on the Serbian government to resolve the pollution issue. Rumors are flying that the country is importing and burning toxic waste from the EU. If true, that explains Brussels' relatively ambivalent position regarding the environmental situation in Serbia. Moreover, other foreign actors - namely China - are believed to be responsible for air pollution in the southeastern European nation.

Bor, in eastern Serbia, is one of the most polluted cities in the country. Serbian environmental organizations accuse the Chinese mining company Zijin of being responsible for a dramatic ecological situation in the city. Local environmental activists in Smederevo - situated on the right bank of the Danube, about 45 kilometers (28 miles) downstream of Belgrade - claim that a steel mill owned by Chinese company HBIS is responsible for an "environmental catastrophe" in the region. But given that Serbia has been heavily deindustrialized following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it is not very probable

that industry is a major cause of pollution in the Balkan state. It is believed that dirty air mainly comes from heating, both private and public.

Some experts argue that the lignite - a very low quality coal used to produce electricity - is the main source of air pollution in Serbia. Reports suggest that Serbian coal power plants are among the most deadly in Europe, pumping out more sulphur dioxide than all the 221 coal power plants in the EU put together. Given that installed capacity of lignite power plants in Serbia represents 68 percent of the total installed capacity of Electric Power Industry of Serbia - the only company in the country which manages electricity generation - it is entirely possible that lignite has a significant impact on air pollution. It is, therefore, not surprising that Serbian power plants are the most polluting in Europe.

But power plants produce electricity throughout the year, and winter and autumn in Serbia are known for extremely high levels of pollution - mainly from suspended particles PM2.5 and PM10. During the summer and the spring time the air quality is not that polluted. Given that heating plants all over the country still use fuel-oil, it is very likely that this liquid petroleum product contributes to the "environmental catastrophe" in many Serbian cities. The air in the Balkan country is classified as "clean" mostly in cities and towns that do not have continuous monitoring of the fine dust. But in reality, not even high mountains are safe from pollution. The concentration of fine dust PM10 and PM2.5 in almost all parts of Serbia is constantly very high, and meteorological factors such as lack of wind or rain during the autumn and winter months often lead to large accumulations of haze, smog and other poisonous air contaminants.

Although the Serbian government has prepared a draft air protection program for the period 2022-2030, with an action plan for addressing air pollution, unless seriously pressured either by the public or by foreign actors, Belgrade is unlikely to start implementing the environmental protection laws anytime soon, if at all, Global Comment writes.