

Coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans are costing Europe billions of euros each year in health terms, a new study shows.

A study released on Tuesday says coal-fired power plants in the Balkans cost people and governments in Europe as much as 8.5 billion euros a year in health terms and the Balkan region alone 1.2 to 3.4 billion euros.

"We have been collecting data about the situation in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia and their impact on the health of their citizens, as well as the impact they [coal plants] produce for the rest of Europe," Vlatka Matkovic Puljic, project coordinator for South-East Europe at the Health and Environmental Alliance, HEAL, which published the report, said on Tuesday in Sarajevo.

"Atmospheric pollution produced by a country doesn't stop at the [national] borders," she added.

According to Matkovic Puljic, health costs were calculated by adding all costs that can be related to air pollution from coal-fired plants, which is responsible for much respiratory and cardiovascular disease.

"Our calculations encompass the economic costs of premature deaths, hospital treatments, medications and lost working days," Matkovic Puljic explained.

According to the report, coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans are responsible for 7,181 premature deaths per year in Europe and have a dramatic impact on health costs for the whole of the continent.

Plants in Serbia alone cause damage worth 4.1 billion euro. Those in Bosnia are responsible for costs of 3.1 billion euros. The figures for Macedonia are 720 million, Kosovo 352 million, and Montenegro 257 million euros.

Seven of the 10 most polluting coal power plants in Europe are in the Balkans, the report reads, adding that despite the worrying impact that these plants have on the health, governments in the region are planning to install 24 new projects in the near future.

Bosnia, which contributes more than a third of the total health costs, has the most polluting coal plant in Europe, in Ugljevik.

Although public opinion in Bosnia is increasingly worried about the levels of atmospheric pollution, local experts complain that obtaining clear data on the issue is still difficult and that authorities do not have a strategy to address the issue.

"Unfortunately, nobody is producing any official study on this topic," Zehra Dizdarevic, a lung doctor from Bosnia who participated in the conference, told BIRN on Tuesday.

"Nobody is interested in such a topic, since there is currently no institution that would be held accountable for the huge air pollution in our country," she explained.

During the press conference, Dizdarevic said it was essential to create a strategy to reduce health risks from air pollution and protect people in the region.

"We need to create a strategy to solve this problem and inform our public," Dizdarevic said, noting that "even distributing air masks against pollution has proven difficult in the past."

source: balkaninsight.com