

Serbia's dependence on coal is as strong now as it was before, with between 35 and 40 million tonnes of coal mined in the country each year. The coal that is mined and burned in Serbia is lignite, which is rich in ash and pollutants that survive long after it is burned. Many of the power plants that were built next to coal mines in the fifties, during the Communist industrialisation of the country, still have an oversized role in the industry, at a time when in many European countries coal is being phased out in favour of greener energy. Outside of Serbia, it is likely little known that it was Serbian coal miners that, two decades ago, helped bring about the downfall of strongman president Slobodan Milosevic. The protests that rocked Serbia in September and October 2000 were accompanied by strikes not only by students but miners too, whose refusal to work raised the prospect of the Balkan nation - where 70% of energy is produced in coal-run power plants - having to go without power. Milosevic sent in the army and police to try and frighten the workers from Serbia's Kolubara mine back to work, but they refused to back down. On October 5, Milosevic was ousted in Belgrade and a year later would be arrested on corruption charges.

More than 20 years on, miners at Kolubara are disappointed that despite their role in changing the course of Serbian history, little has changed for them.

"I was expecting that our position in society will improve yearly until we reach the standard of the western countries," said Milan Radovanovic, a miner from Kolubara who took part in the anti-Milosevic protests in 2000.

'The EU needs to push Serbia'

For the workers, that translates into stressful working conditions and severe health risks.

"You know, on average, a miner from Kolubara enjoys his pension for 11 months - then we die," said Radovanovic. "I have worked for 35 years on the coalfield and I did not see an improvement in working conditions so far."

Serbia may have been slow in making the shift away from coal, but it will need to begin moving more quickly if it wants to join the European Union. For mineworkers, this presents a dilemma. While life below ground is unhealthy and often unsafe, it is a wage.

Radovanovic said the government has so far not provided any plan for the miners that could be left without work, nor for the recovery of the abandoned coal fields.

The Serbian Ministry of Mining and Energy did not respond to questions from Euronews, but Radovanovic has an idea of how the transition could be made.

"The same machines that are used to mine coal can be used for the recovery of the land after the mine is closed, someday. The miners would still have a job and the land would be transformed, for the better," he said. "I think that the EU needs to push for that. And

finance it.”

But despite Europe's push towards greener energy in its recently-unveiled European Green Deal - and Serbia's apparent willingness to want to continue the process of joining the bloc - Belgrade has not moved to close down mines, it has rather started to open new ones.

On the other side of the massive Kolubara mine, mining operations are now taking place as close as 40 metres from villagers' homes. Sludge and ash deposits are building up next to villages, damaging homes and creating health problems for villagers. Serbia's ombudsman even ruled in January that families that live near Kolubara need to be moved due to the impact on their health and safety.

“You can not imagine the air, it has a specific smell,” said Ivana Milutinovic, who lives in Rudovci village, close to the mine.

“Everything is covered in coal dust and the noise from the machines never stops,” she said. Milutinovic is currently studying environmental protection at the faculty of mining in Belgrade, and so has both first-hand and academic knowledge of the impact of coal mining in Serbia.

“Most of the people in the area have lung problems. Riverbeds in the area are moved in order to continue mining. There is even a sort of acid rain. That is the price of coal mining,” she said.

According to the Fiscal Council of the Republic of Serbia, the Elektro Industry of Serbia (EIS) - which owns coal power plants and mines - is one of the biggest polluters in Europe. It estimates that three plants in Serbia are among Europe's top polluters and that the country needs to spend at least €800 million to reverse the pollution caused by mines and power plants. Indeed, it is notable that 16 western Balkans coal power plants produce as much SO₂ as 250 plants in Europe.

Friends with benefits

Serbia's dependence on coal - and seeming reluctance to transition away from it - has a lot to do with its relationships outside of Europe, most notably with China.

And although the government defends mining and mining projects because they create jobs, Ioana Ciuta, from Bankwatch, told Euronews that due to Chinese investment - new mines and power plants are financed through state-owned Chinese banks - the projects typically create jobs only for imported Chinese workers and not for Serbs. She added that China's involvement in the projects mean that when it comes to environmental protection, the authorities are happy to look the other way.

“There is the expansion of the Drmno mine which supplies the power plant Kostolac B3,

built with PRC money," she said.

"The environmental impact assessment of this project was never done and although we have requested data from the government, we were never provided with it."

Source: euronews.com