

Serbian thermal power plants are among Europe's biggest emitters of sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and a public health and economic liability for the whole continent. The plants run by state-owned energy company Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS) have been releasing poisonous emissions six times above the limits set by domestic and international law. Serbian NGO Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI) has filed a legal challenge to stop them. Serbian coal plants have spewed vast amounts of toxic gasses across the entire region for decades, causing hundreds of premature deaths in the Western Balkans and the EU. They are finally in court, thanks to NGO campaigners.

SO₂ is a harmful gas released when burning coal, which contributes to the formation of acid rain and particulate matter (PM), and pose a significant threat to human health and the environment.

When inhaled, SO₂ can cause severe irritation of the nose and throat, coughing and difficulty in breathing. Exposure to high concentrations can also cause a life-threatening accumulation of fluid in the lungs, as well as long-lasting condition like asthma.

SO₂ emissions from EPS plants travel long distances and affect people and nature in Serbia and beyond. Modelling data show that over half of the premature deaths caused by emissions from Western Balkan coal power plants in 2016 occurred in the EU. Although neighbouring countries are the most exposed – 380 of these premature deaths happened in Romania and 370 in Italy – the impacts were felt as far as Germany, France and Spain.

Chronic coal pollution in the Western Balkans also harmed European productivity with an estimated total of 3,047 hospital admissions and over 1.16 million lost working days in the EU and Western Balkan countries in 2016. In the EU alone, the total was 1,418 hospital admissions and over 600,000 lost working days.

Breaching domestic and international law

As a party to the Energy Community, an international organisation which brings together the European Union and its neighbours to create an integrated pan-European energy market, Serbia is legally required to reduce polluting emissions from its thermal power plants below the legal levels set in the National Emission Reduction Plan (NERP). The plan aims to bring emissions from the country's old large combustion plants in line with limits set out in the EU Industrial Emissions Directive by the end of 2027.

However, years after the NERP's emission limits came into effect, Serbia has taken no steps to reduce its fleet's emissions in line with the plan. In 2018 and 2019, ten of EPS's thermal power plants emitted respectively 336,000 and 309,500 tonnes of SO₂ – six times above the NERP's annual limit of 54,000 tonnes.

EPS' Kostolac and Nikola Tesla plants alone emitted more SO₂ than Bulgarian, Czech, French and Polish plants combined.

Jovan Rajić, RERI's Lead Attorney told META:

"The obligation for Serbia to implement the NERP, and for EPS to comply with annual emission ceilings, has been clear and indisputable since January 2018. It would contribute to the reduction of harmful health impact to the citizens of Serbia and the EU as well. This lawsuit is to secure proper implementation of the NERP and to strengthen accountability mechanisms for reduction of pollution from thermal power plants."

Casting a shadow on access talks?

Serbia's difficulties to comply with the NERP ceilings are also concerning for the country's negotiations to access the EU, as the limits set under EU law are significantly stricter. Besides, the country's heavy dependency on coal - over 70% of Serbian electricity comes from poor quality lignite - hinders the efforts to align with the EU's 2030 climate targets. 26 members of the European Parliament warned about the cross-border environmental damage caused by Chinese-financed heavy industry projects in Serbia, including EPS' Kostolac. The MEPs urged the European Commission to remind the Serbian government to respect its national legislation as well as EU rules as pertains to the accession process. Riccardo Nigro, Campaign Coordinator on Coal Combustion and Mines at the European Environmental Bureau, said:

"Air pollution knows no border, and the toxic fumes that come out of Serbian power plants are an European issue. As this year's President of the Energy Community and a candidate to join the EU, Serbia must ensure the Treaty is respected, and hold EPS accountable"

Source: webwire.com