Scientists and experts must lead the energy transition – they accept its necessity faster than how the political will is being created, said Professor Nikola Rajaković from the School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Belgrade and the President of the Association of Energy Sector Specialists and Power Engineers of Serbia. Speaking at a roundtable on how to accelerate the energy transition in the region and Serbia, he stressed low costs and the speed of construction made photovoltaic technology superior and that the existing coal-fueled thermal power plants in Serbia are obsolete and with an incredibly strong impact on the environment.

Parallel to the pressure from the European Union on Western Balkan countries to pursue energy transition toward cleaner sources, the academic communities and professionals from the sector contributed to the acknowledgement that the transformation has already started and that it must pick up speed, Rajaković said. He added many locations in open-cast coal mines are "practically ideal" for solar power plants alongside the possibility to build wind farms and large batteries for storing energy.

CO2 tax to cost region dearly

"We can't allow coal areas to become big losers. They should offer chances for prospective jobs, in the digitalization segment, as young people must move forward," according to the professor. The evolution in professions can make workers in the coal sector the winners of the transition, he said.

As transportation and heating in Serbia and the region shift to electricity and if the industry expands, more power production capacity will be required, he asserted at the event, organized by the association and the SDEWES Centre, and pointed to the "economic logic" for a coal phaseout.

Solar power plants are built in just 18 to 24 months and they have the smallest environmental impact, he added. "An inadequate decarbonization is expensive and a late one is too expensive," Rajaković said and characterized the interest of investors for wind power plants and photovoltaic units as "substantially growing." He stressed the EU's planned carbon border adjustment mechanism, essentially a CO2 tax, would cost the region dearly if serious measures aren't implemented here.

Still no strategic direction for energy transition in BiH

Professor at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Tuzla and Chairman of the RESET Regional Center for Sustainable Energy Transition Mirza Kušljugić underscored there is no more debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina on whether to work on energy transition

but at what speed. However, in his opinion, it's not clear whether the politicians truly made up their minds about it and it is questionable if they are aware what commitments they made in the Sofia Declaration.

"Coal has no future" and decarbonization is the immediate future from the energy point of view while BiH still plans to build thermal power plants with a combined capacity of more than 1 GW, Kušljugić says. Experts from all sectors have the responsibility to prove that changes are more cost effective than to continue to generate power from coal, he stressed.

Kušljugić highlighted the fact that BiH has the weakest productivity in the coal sector in the region and noted that it is the most dependent on exports of electricity produced from the fossil fuel. The national energy and climate plan is still a work in progress and the relevant task forces will soon start developing the draft, but they lack a strategic direction, in his words.

The country must opt for a coal phaseout, even if it doesn't initially declare a date, and a just energy transition for the workers in the said segment is the most important factor, Kušljugić said.

New green power plants are cheaper than the reconstruction of coal units

The participants at the roundtable agreed the process is imminent due to the situation in the market as well as the upcoming CO2 tax and the inevitable introduction of pricing of the greenhouse gas. They also said interconnections, trading in surplus electricity and, generally, a much more intensive cooperation within the region are necessary for the energy transition.

The professors and other speakers pointed to prosumers, the households that will produce own electricity from solar panels, as an important factor that would help gather public support. They concluded that it is incomparably more expensive to implement environmental protection measures in coal-fired thermal power plants than it is to build renewable energy units.

The participants pointed to the fact that mostly foreign consultants are working on strategies for the states and the region. They don't have sufficient knowledge of the situation and domestic forces must be brought on board as otherwise the results will be thin, they said.

Unreal strategies would lead to failure

President of the Association of Energy Sector Specialists and Power Engineers Milun Babić, also a member of the Academy of Engineering Sciences of Serbia, said strategic documents

must realistically address the possibilities for the system or that new and radical changes would become necessary. Such a scenario will lead to “stress, failure and the loss of energy,” he asserted.

If Serbia and the region don’t join the European Green Deal, the air will remain polluted and affect health and productivity, on top of the consequences of lagging behind the surrounding regions’ development and in European integration, Babić said. He listed some twenty laws in Serbia that need to be changed and added several new ones that are necessary.

In line with the views of the other participants, he stressed the market is driving the changes, and offered the view that the business environment shouldn’t be dictated from above but that the most successful enterprises need the room to grow.

Coal is already uncompetitive

“When wind blows in Europe, coal in the Western Balkans shuts down,” said Neven Duić from the Zagreb Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture and the SDEWES International Centre for Sustainable Development of Energy, Water and Environment Systems. As his interlocutors, he highlighted the pressure from the EU to pursue decarbonization and said those who don’t give up coal would have no access to funds.

Additionally, amid the integration of the power markets, sometimes it is already cheaper to buy electricity from abroad than to produce own power from coal, Duić underscored and pointed to research results indicating Serbia would be a power importer in 2030 unless it focuses on sustainable sources. Decarbonization and energy transition will switch to a much higher gear as soon as CO2 emissions are priced, he said.

Aleksandar Dedinec, an energy and climate planning expert from the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, showed the statistics for Northern Macedonia that register a decline in electricity imports and greenhouse gas emissions in the past several years together with the changes in energy.

He stressed coal mines are getting depleted and that international financial institutions and the EU don’t back new projects in the sector. Northern Macedonia simply hasn’t many options, Dedinec asserted and said the country leans on the construction of wind and solar power plants and the two large hydroelectric units that are planned.

There is also space on the demand side to improve the situation as energy efficiency measures bring savings equivalent to three times more than in power production, he noted.

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