

The European Court of Justice (CJEU) confirmed yesterday that Bulgaria breached EU rules on air pollution because of failure to address sulphur dioxide (SO₂) pollution from super-polluting coal plants.

The law in question is the Ambient Air Quality Directive.

Environmental organisations have hailed the ruling, saying that it should be a wake-up call for the Bulgarian authorities.

The court confirmed that people in the entire southeastern region of the country have lived in a highly polluting environment for years, due to illegal levels of SO₂ pollution emanating from four large coal plants in the region – Brikel, and the three plants that make up the Maritsa Iztok complex. In 2021, after the Court started considering this case, a fifth coal plant was reopened in the region after years of inactivity.

SO₂ pollution contributes to serious respiratory disorders and other major health issues, especially for vulnerable groups including children, elderly people and people with pre-existing respiratory conditions.

Meglana Antonova, campaigner at Greenpeace Bulgaria, said: “The decision is a breath of fresh air for the people living in the region. Toxic sulphur dioxide pollution caused by coal burning has to end. The government is propping up old coal-fired power plants but the price is being paid by public health and taxpayers’ money. In the current context, it’s clear that fossil fuels are not the answer – we should turn to people-powered renewables that let us breathe clean air and be energy independent.”

Justine Schoenfeld-Quinn, lawyer at environmental law charity ClientEarth, said: “Court rulings like this one are powerful. The law is there to protect people and this ruling – as well as regulatory changes like the stricter EU law on industrial pollution – should serve as a wake-up call for the Bulgarian government. Ministers should see the writing on the wall and start transitioning the country away from coal once and for all.”

Following this judgment, if the Bulgarian government doesn’t take steps to remedy the situation, the EU Commission can start a new procedure to demand the imposition of fines, Client Earth writes.