

The European Union plans to shut down all coal-fired power plants by 2050 at the latest, thus significantly reducing pollution. Serbia, which does not have such a long-term plan and, according to experts, “has energy shortages in the winter”, is preparing to increase the use of energy from renewable sources to 27% by 2025, but also to open new surface coal mines. Do you remember the thick smog that covered many cities in Serbia last winter – the media then talked about harmful particles, the largest percentage of which, according to reports from the Environmental Protection Agency, come from thermal power plants where coal is used and from individual furnaces. Last year’s research by the European Union’s Environmental Protection Agency on the health consequences of environmental pollution marked Serbia and several other Balkan countries as black spots in Europe.

What does it mean when the air pollution is in purple

As one of the priorities of the Ministry of Mining and Energy, the line minister Zorana Mihajlović announced the realization of energy security of Serbia, emphasizing the importance of respecting European norms in that area. All this is happening while the procedure that the European Energy Community initiated against Serbia at the beginning of this year is in progress due to the incomplete implementation of the Directive on large combustion plants – which are coal-fired power plants in Serbia – and excessive pollution.

Why does Serbia use so much coal?

One of the reasons is the obsolescence of the energy system – the idea that the environment should be protected is newer than the plants from which Serbia received more than half of its energy. About 70 percent of the electricity produced by the Electric Power Industry of Serbia comes from thermal power plants, according to the Energy Balance of the Republic of Serbia for 2019. It is a process that starts with coal and ends with lighted light bulbs in warm homes. The reason this percentage is so high is that most of our electricity generation system was built in the last century, when countries relied mostly on coal and the potential of large rivers, energy expert Nebojsa Arsenijevic explains to the BBC in Serbian. At the time, he added, technologies for producing electricity from solar, wind and other renewable energy sources were not commercially available.

“In Europe, ecology, in the way we think about it today, has been talked about for the last twenty years, and in our country it is probably even shorter,” Arsenijevic points out. He reminds that “the largest electric power facilities in Serbia were built about half a century ago.”

Arsenijevic notes that there is still a widespread opinion in Serbia that “electricity from coal

is the cheapest", but points out that this is a consequence of "socio-historical circumstances that are unrepeatable", when Yugoslav state companies had access to resources under "very favorable conditions". In addition, he notes, at that time, it was "far simpler and cheaper to expropriate the land needed to build the largest power facilities."

"Today, it would be very difficult and economically unprofitable to build a completely new thermal power plant in Serbia, especially a private one," says Arsenijevic.

Serbia is obliged to apply the provisions of the European Directive on large combustion plants, which has committed itself to gradually reduce emissions, as well as to close thermal power plants, which are large pollutants, and in which there is no sense in investing.

"In the next 10-15 years, Serbia will have to find a way to compensate for the production of electricity from over 4,000 megawatts of thermal power plants, for which it needs to build over 10,000 megawatts of solar, wind or hydro power plants."

"The necessary investments, having in mind the current costs of technology, amount to more than 10 billion dollars," Arsenijevic explains.

There is no doubt, he points out, that this implies efforts in the sphere of social policy, because "a large number of people work in the coal mining sector who need to be provided with alternative jobs."

The countries in the European Union have already gone through this energy transition and have successfully resolved these social issues.

"My impression is that there is an awareness in Serbia of the need for these changes to happen," Arsenijevic concluded.

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