

Montenegro, Speeding up investments in a sustainable district heating system powered by solar energy will save lives

Inhaling the air in **Pljevlja, Montenegro**, can threaten your health. Since December, extremely harmful [air pollution](#) in Pljevlja caused by the burning of coal in the thermal power plant and individual furnaces has lasted for at least 33 days, with concentrations of PM10 particulate matter up to 12 times higher than the amount allowed in one day. And while Pljevlja records hazardous concentrations of pollution this heating season, the authorities are announcing and implementing ineffective measures that cannot significantly improve **air quality**.

Last week, the [government of Montenegro](#) announced that it would undertake urgent and long-term measures, such as reducing electricity bills in winter months and establishing a coal-based district **heating project in Pljevlja**, supposedly in the public interest. However, some of these measures could be better, and others are simply counterproductive.

To address pollution caused by coal-based heating in Pljevlja, the only correct, feasible and long-term solution is developing a single heating system powered by diversified renewable energy sources. This is also confirmed by a report on the identification and analysis of potential sustainable solutions for heating in Pljevlja, which was prepared by Planenergi, an independent expert organisation for district heating from Denmark. The government should urgently help Pljevlja and other such municipalities in Montenegro to design and develop complex district heating projects in micro-grids based on solar and other sustainable renewable sources, with the support of seasonal storage and heat pumps.

To develop clean heating systems, some governments in **Western Balkan countries** help cities by obtaining technical assistance and finance. They do this through a combination of their own budget allocations, funds from the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), bilateral donations and loans from banks such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Germany's KfW Bankengruppe, and others. Thus, in December 2022, the government of Kosovo secured a financing package worth EUR 80 million from these funds, partially for the construction of a 30 megawatt (MW) [solar power plant](#) and cleaner heating for 38,000 citizens of Pristina, thereby providing a cheap and sustainable solution to help reduce the city's chronic pollution, as well as improve energy security for citizens in the future.

Furthermore, the EBRD's **Renewable District Energy in the Western Balkans (ReDEWeB)** programme has provided technical assistance for developing heating projects based on solar energy and large heat pump technology for more than 20 cities in the Western Balkans, including Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Sarajevo. These are easily available resources that the region's forward-thinking governments are already using widely. At the same time, Montenegro still does not have a single district heating project on its list of

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priority projects.

There will inevitably need to be some kind of heating system in Pljevlja. But dangerously and irresponsibly declaring the municipality's existing heating project to be a matter of public interest could entrench decades of coal burning in Pljevlja, causing even more terminal illnesses among citizens, creating economic difficulties, and jeopardizing the achievement of Montenegro's climate goals.

There is no time to lose. The government and the municipality should embark on a detailed heating project free of fossil fuels and request the largest possible amount of non-refundable aid from the WBIF. This would ensure the timely inclusion of clean heating in Pljevlja's system of networks, whose construction is expected to begin soon.

With respect to short-term measures, there needs to be clarification on what effect is expected from the proposed electricity subsidies if it is known that most households are heated with coal and pellets and consequently do not have adequate electric heating devices.

A heating project based on coal cannot be a long-term, sustainable solution when it is clear that the use of coal globally will end in the near future, either for economic or environmental reasons.

Investments in renewable energy sources are becoming increasingly intensive, and all these investments are developing at an accelerated rate. The main reason for this is the price competitiveness of renewable sources. Of course, there are also all the harmful effects of burning coal on people's health and the climate crisis.

With this in mind, CEE Bankwatch Network and Eco-team Montenegro call on the government of Montenegro to finally abandon these old-fashioned approaches that endanger citizens' health and prolong the agony of Pljevlja's dependence on coal. Instead, they should use the available resources to develop modern heating systems that will provide what's really needed: clean air and long-term sustainability, Bankwatch writes.