

Emissions of sulfur dioxide, a toxic gas that produces acid rain, have been cut severely following Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007. They have dropped from over 800 kt to about 100 per year. In 2019 however, the European Commission referred Bulgaria to the EU Court of Justice over the remaining sulfur dioxide emissions. Experts warn that new European rules over the next few years will be near untenable for Bulgaria's aging coal power plants.

At Bulgaria's largest industrial site, four power plants are housed on a mammoth, 240 square km plot.

One of the plants is only ten years old and was built after the fall of communism. It was conceived with emission control in mind. Cleaner coal, however, doesn't come cheap. The power plant was completed in 2011 and cost 1,3 billion euros. One of the three main systems is flue-gas desulfurisation technology, which aims to recycle toxic sulfur dioxide emissions.

Over the past years, the older power plants have been pressured by the ever-increasing price of the cap and trade system within the EU. Prices spiked from 5 to 25 euros/tonne in 2018. And this has put the publicly-owned Maritza Iztok 2 power plant on its knees. It now has hundreds of millions of euros of debt, while producing expensive electricity that is becoming hard to sell.

The Maritza Iztok 2 power plant is massive in size. In the winter, it can produce up to half of all the electricity in Bulgaria. It is also one of the largest polluters in the EU. That is also the reason why closing it down or even modernizing it has been such a sensitive subject.

According to labour unions, more than 100 000 people are economically dependent on the power plant. The ministry of energy is seeking to prolong its life at least until 2050.

Source: euronews.com