

EU accession for Western Balkans countries must go hand in hand with environmental and climate action, writes Dragana Mileusnic.

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Countries of the Western Balkans seeking to join the EU have made almost no progress on aligning their environmental and climate policies with the EU principles. In fact, they are diminishing prospects of their EU membership by supporting environmentally and socially damaging coal investments.

The Western Balkans countries have many obstacles to overcome on their way to EU membership. They need to get their economies on track, deal with corruption and sort out numerous bilateral issues. With accession prospects driving reforms, they are slowly transforming to become better functioning states.

One thing that the governments of these countries often neglect in a muddle of political disputes is the adoption of EU environmental and climate policies. This is one of the most demanding chapters of accession negotiations, accounting for about a third of total legislation that needs to be transposed. It is, by far, also the most costly one to implement: a conservative estimate says that Serbia alone will spend €10,5 billion on it. This is roughly one fourth of the Serbian GDP.

Meeting the environmental standards of the EU is not only a challenge, but also an opportunity. Data shows that every euro invested in reaching EU environmental standards brings €17 in environmental and health benefits. Limiting pollution not only pays off and is a prerequisite for accession, but most importantly, it also saves lives.

Still, governments of Western Balkan countries constantly delay reforms of their environmental and energy sectors. NGOs warn that the situation is actually getting worse, particularly when it comes to pollution from intensive industries, such as coal power plants. Just last month, Serbia extended the industry's right to heavily pollute air, soil and water till the end of 2020, instead of 2015. Earlier this year, the country also decided to go ahead with a loan of about €600 million from China, for a new coal power plant unit called Kostolac B3. This is now one of the most advanced projects in a wave of new coal power plants planned in the Balkans. If realised, they will all have devastating climate, environmental and social impacts.

Coal has no place in our future energy mix. In the EU coal is already in decline because of stringent pollution standards and rapid development of renewable energy. As a result, major energy companies such as Germany's largest utility E.ON, decide to concentrate on clean energy solutions that make most financial sense for the future. Should not the Balkans learn

from mistakes of investing in coal made by others instead of taking this lesson on their own? The good news is that the EU institutions are no longer silent on this. The European Parliament sent a clear message to the Western Balkan countries. EU accession needs to go hand in hand with environmental improvements and climate action, as stated in parliamentary resolutions adopted in March. MEPs called the countries to revise their plans in the energy sector and for Serbia to prevent state aid to coal.

Chairs of the Western Balkans delegations in the European Parliament went even further. They addressed a letter to Vice-President Šefčovič and Commissioner Arias Cañete, asking for equal environmental standards for the Balkans so that the region does not become a dumping ground for dirty energy projects. This should be ensured through a proper reform of the Energy Community Treaty which brings the Balkans and the EU in a joint legal framework dealing with energy and associated issues.

It is evident that tackling environmental problems in the Balkans needs to start now. Otherwise, it will take years until the countries fulfill the conditions for the EU membership. source; euroactiv.com