

Despite mounting concerns of the negative environmental and social impacts of coal, Serbian authorities are possessed by their quest for the black gold. Instead of phasing out coal power plants and mines, Serbia plans to build nearly three gigawatts of coal-fired capacity. Stronger ties with the EU should pave the way to a fairer, cleaner and more efficient energy future.

Every second light bulb in Serbia is lit with electricity produced from coal mined in the Kolubara complex. Located 60km south of Belgrade in Lazarevac, it spans over vast 600 square kilometres - an area twice the size of Malta. Kolubara is one of the biggest coal mines in Europe; during the last decade it produced 29 million tonnes of lignite per year on average, feeding three thermal power plants in the vicinity.

The country is therefore heavily reliant on coal. But at the same time, it is very vulnerable to climate change. In May 2014, Serbia was hit with unprecedented floods, the worst recorded in the last 120 years. The impacts were devastating: over 80 people lost their lives, and infrastructure was badly damaged all throughout the country. The floods have exposed how vulnerable and insecure its highly centralized, coal-based energy system is. The Kolubara mining complex was one of the most affected areas. Open pit mines with all the machinery were completely inundated, disrupting production of coal for several months.

The three power plants in the region were also at a great risk of flooding. Their future was hanging on a balance. If it was not for outstanding citizens' engagement in the defense of power plants, Serbia could have lost more than half of its domestic electricity production, practically overnight.

'Serbia is now at crossroads, says Dragana Mileusnic from Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe. "It seeks EU membership and the EU accession requires aligning environmental and climate policies with the EU ones, which prompt limiting pollution from burning coal. They stimulate transition towards renewable energy system, where coal has no place. Serbia should also embrace a renewable energy future. However, contrary to the requirements of its EU accession, it plans away of new coal investments.'

This year constitutes a golden opportunity to start this energy transition, thanks to a reform of the Energy Community Treaty, which brings the Balkans and the EU in a joint legal framework dealing with energy and associated issues. If the EU pushes for strong measures to be included in the revised Treaty, Serbia should be able to adopt the Union's climate and environmental standards more quickly.

European and Balkan NGOs, such as CAN Europe, CEE Bankwatch Network, Client Earth, Health and Environment Alliance, and CEKOR and Fractal from Serbia engage in the reform to ensure that its results are ambitious enough to encourage Serbia to drop its dirty energy

development plans. As a result of their endeavors, the reform proposals called for a strict rules on really implementing the reforms, and further improving environmental laws with six extra set of rules.

Recently, Serbia's reliance on coal has only been escalating. Elektroprivreda Srbija (EPS), the state energy company which operates the Kolubara mining complex, announced its plans to build two additional plants of around 750 MW each to utilize the mine: Kolubara B with Italy's Edison and Nikola Tesla B3 possibly with a Chinese consortium. These plans to build new capacities were confirmed by a proposal for Energy Strategy of Serbia up to 2025, adopted by the government in May this year. For the last decade, the company has been expanding the mine basin towards the settlements, with financial support from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), international bank officially committed to tackling climate change.

'The EBRD has supported the Kolubara mining complex for around fifteen years now, but its development impacts are far from clear,' according to Ioana Ciuta, Energy Coordinator at CEE Bankwatch Network,

organization monitoring international financial institutions. 'The bank cherrypicks certain parts of the mining operations to support but uses technocratic excuses to avoid difficult issues like resettlement.

As a result people in settlements like Vreoci have only seen their lives get worse since the EBRD's involvement began.'

Hundreds of households were expropriated under murky arrangements, which violated human and property rights of the inhabitants. Residents were under enormous pressure to accept inadequate financial compensation. The value of their property was often underestimated. They could either accept the offers and get paid or refuse and receive half of the offer and be advised to go to court, which could become a very costly and lengthy procedure.

The Centre for ecology and sustainable development CEKOR has for years supported local communities and grassroots NGOs from the Kolubara mining basins in their struggles against the negative environmental and social consequences of destructive energy and mining projects in Serbia.

'We have been strengthening their demands for improvements to their living conditions, the protection of rights and in their quest for energy systems to become a vehicle for green, sustainable development,' says Zvezdan Kalmar, energy coordinator for CEKOR. 'In this context, the extent to which the rights of local communities are upheld has become an

indicator for the sustainability of the energy system and of a new, strategic direction for a decentralised system designed in the public interest to genuinely account for all external costs.'

Worst of all, the resettlements have been happening too slowly and people have been waiting for years for the compensation offers. The excavations and overburden wastes creep towards people's doorsteps. In

2013, a hill nearby one of the local villages Junkovac started sliding down towards it, because of the pressure put on it by overburden from two minefields that was illegally dumped in the vicinity. A dozen of

houses completely collapsed and a road has been swallowed by the landslide. Living on the edge of a mine is full of stress, uncertainty and hardship. Impacts of mining include tremors which lead to cracked

houses and blocked roads, and devastating pollution of air and water which causes chronic diseases, cancer, shorter life expectancy.

The residents would prefer to flee their ripped houses and start building their lives elsewhere. Unfortunately, the offers did not arrive at all, compensations were inadequate or proposed relocation sites were not chosen with the consent of the communities. Thus, hundreds of people live in limbo, while their livelihoods are being destroyed.

So despite floods, local and European pressure, Serbia is still very far from getting rid of its addiction to coal, or even thinking about the huge potential for renewables in terms of biomass, wind and solar installations. The fight continues - and the rains will come back.

Source; coalmap.eu