

With Belgrade and the Bosnian capital Sarajevo outstripping Delhi and Beijing in pollution rankings this winter, Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vucic, said it was evidence of the country's economic development and rising standards - "the air is worse by as much as our standard is higher," he told reporters.

Every year, thousands of people die prematurely in Serbia due to the quality of the air they breathe. Yet the country is still in breach of obligations to control harmful emissions from its coal-fired power plants.

In mid-January, an international energy body working to extend the European Union's internal energy market rules and principles to the bloc's neighbours, wrote to Serbia over the country's failure to adopt a national strategy to reduce harmful emissions from its power plants.

The letter, opening a so-called 'dispute settlement procedure' against Serbia, was well-timed; residents of the capital, Belgrade, were choking on some of the most polluted air in the world.

Experts, however, say that while several factors account for the rising levels of air pollution, one of the biggest culprits for dangerously high levels of sulphur, nitrogen oxide and dust particles in the air is a network of coal-fired power plants that provide 70 per cent of electricity consumed in Serbia.

Of 16 large combustion plants, only three comply with national emissions standards, according to Dirk Buschle, deputy director of the Vienna-based Energy Community, the body that took Serbia to task in January.

In 2018, sulphur emissions from burning coal were more than six times the national ceiling, according to Bankwatch, a network of environmental NGOs in central and eastern Europe. The Global Alliance on Health and Pollution says Serbia has the highest rate of pollution-related deaths in Europe at 175 per 100,000 people, while according to the World Health Organisation, WHO, more than 6,500 people die prematurely in Serbia every year due to the poor quality of the air they breathe.

Serbia's failure to cut emissions from its power plants is proving fatal, and plans to increase the grid's reliance on coal only threaten to make it worse.

Source: balkaninsight.com