

Just 16 outdated coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans are producing as much toxic pollution as all 250 EU coal plants combined. That's the finding of a new report that shows how enormous amounts of air pollution are harming the health of people in the region and neighbouring EU countries.

The 'Chronic Coal' report by groups including the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) urges the EU to adopt a stricter stance on air pollution issues in the Western Balkans.

The region's coal fleet dates back to the Communist era and the Western Balkan's 16 "*old, inefficient and substandard*" power plants emit more sulphur dioxide (SO₂), and almost as much hazardous particulate matter, as their 250 counterparts in the EU, the report shows. Every year, they are responsible for 3,900 premature deaths, 8,500 cases of bronchitis in children and thousands of cases of other chronic illness.

Alongside the region's coal-burning countries Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina, bordering EU member states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Italy bear the biggest health cost burden. The report shows that in 2016, half of the number of premature deaths caused by emissions from Western Balkan coal power plants occurred in the EU.

Vlatka Matkovic Puljic, senior officer at HEAL and lead author of the report said:

"Air pollution knows no borders and is still an invisible killer in Europe"

The report argues that decarbonisation of the Western Balkans power sector is urgent both for the region and the EU to ensure adequate climate action, less air pollution, better health for the citizens and better productivity.

Health campaigners say that while a coal phase-out in the Western Balkans is urgent, regional governments still plan to increase their lignite coal plants' capacity.

Funding for new coal plants has been provided by Chinese banks, including a \$608 million loan by EximBank to the Serbian government that was signed in 2014. The report argues this will continue to aggravate the region's dependency on poor quality fossil fuels and increase health risks for the people living in south and South Eastern Europe.

To face the lack of political will in the region the Director of the Energy Community Secretariat, Janez Kopač, advocates the introduction of strict economic incentives within the Energy Community to stop investments in lignite coal plants and encourage the region's path toward energy transition.

At the launch of the Chronic Coal report in Brussels Kopač said that the polluter pays principle should be applied and that Western Balkan plants should be included in the EU's Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) for carbon emissions. He also called for the introduction of

innovative financial mechanisms for increasing investments in renewables.

For Puljic:

"It is high time for policy-makers to step up efforts to clean up the air and decarbonise the power sector in the South-eastern European region."

Given the scale of the problem, the EU must prioritise the implementation of pollution control and air quality legislation as part of negotiations over future membership of the Union, the report argues.

The report was published with the support of the 'Europe Beyond Coal' campaign, which brings together health and environmental NGOs calling for an acceleration of Europe's coal phase out.

Source: meta-eeb-org.cdn.ampproject.org