

While the race was originally planned around the perimeter of the Bitola coal power facility in Novaci, North Macedonia, the competition is now being held virtually due to government restrictions on organising sporting events.

Bitola is one of 16 coal power plants in the Western Balkans that together emit as much sulphur dioxide and dust pollution as the entire fleet of coal plants in the European Union. In 2016, these 16 plants were responsible for an estimated 3 900 premature deaths and 8 000 cases of bronchitis in children and other chronic illnesses. 65 runners from 13 countries and three continents raced inaugural Lung Run, a first-of-its-kind trail marathon that will measure air pollution from coal power plants in the Balkans and beyond.

Participants in the Lung Run were fitted with pollution exposure sensors to gather information about air-borne particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, and nitrous oxides caused by exhaust gasses released near coal mine facilities.

But the extent of the problem is not well known because little official information is produced or reported. Governments do not regularly monitor pollution levels, and in cases where monitoring is done, little to no information is made available to the public.

The Lung Run will address this gap both by collecting air pollution data and as well using the registration fees to purchase pollution sensors for the Novaci municipality. Self-exposure monitoring devices will also be distributed to runners and used to track pollution in Croatia and Romania and as well in the northern Bohemian mining region of Czechia.

Ioana Ciuta, energy co-ordinator for CEE Bankwatch Network and Lung Run co-organiser, said, "Nowhere in the world is safe from air pollution as long as there is coal power. The Western Balkans stand out in every global measure of dust and sulphur dioxide emissions. Not only are the countries not making efforts to reduce these harmful pollutants, but two – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – are actively pushing for more coal units. Better awareness about the scale of the problem and pressure from various stakeholders are two things that can prevent the region's stifling coal addiction."

Davor Pehchevski, Balkan air pollution campaign co-ordinator for CEE Bankwatch Network and Lung Run co-organiser, said, "Living near a coal power plant means living in pollution. It is imperative that locals know exactly what they are breathing. It is their right to know. A permanent solution to lack of awareness is needed, which is why we're donating sensors from this race to Novaci."

Source: bankwatch.org