

Air quality in the Western Balkans has again become a hot topic with some towns in the region registering among the worst polluted on the planet. Pljevlja in northern Montenegro on Tuesday was ranked in the top 10 most polluted places in the world by IQAir, a popular real-time air quality information platform.

Montenegro's Agency for Environmental Protection said Pljevlja had a PM 2.5 particles concentration that was almost 13 times higher than the World Health Organization WHO quality guideline value. Agency official Gordana Djukanovic said on Tuesday that severe air pollution was also registered in the capital Podgorica, Niksic and Bijelo Polje.

"Due to the temperature inversion, the warmer layer above the towns doesn't let the colder air escape, so polluting substances remain trapped and concentrations in certain parts of the day are really high. We urge citizens to avoid physical activities outdoors and stay at home until the situation improves," Djukanovic told the media.

North Macedonia's capital Skopje on Wednesday was ranked the 19th most polluted place on earth on IQAir, with an air quality index of 153 US AQI and a PM 2.5 particles concentration that was 11.8 times the WHO guideline value, not that much better than Pljevlja. Skopje has remained enveloped in thick fog and smog since late December, while authorities urge people to stay indoors and wear masks when outside.

Kosovo's capital Pristina has also endured a difficult festive period in terms of air quality. On January 3, the US Embassy's Air Quality Monitor flagged the air as "dangerous", while a day before it was deemed "unhealthy". Despite calls by environmental organizations to intervene, the government has not banned heating with coal this winter, unwilling to further raise people's energy costs amid an energy crisis that the authorities are struggling to handle.

Since January 1, the AQI index in Bosnia's capital Sarajevo has been between 168 and 186 out of 500, marking air quality in Sarajevo as unhealthy for the public. Before New Year's Eve, the city administration imposed the first level of preparedness, banning all vehicles with Euro 2 and lower emission standards from driving, but this measure was then revoked. Besides Sarajevo, cities and towns like Sokolac, Tuzla, Zenica and Kakanj are also heavily polluted.

The Serbian capital Belgrade on Wednesday had an index of 111 US AQI and a PM 2.5 concentration that was 7.9 times the WHO guidelines - which is considered unhealthy for vulnerable groups.

However, at least nine towns and cities in Serbia on Wednesday were in the red zone, with over 150 US AQI - which is considered unhealthy for all groups. Serbia's National Ecological Association, NTA, warned that more than 95 percent of the population of Serbia

Alarming levels of air pollution are being registered in several Western Balkan countries

lives in zones where the average annual concentration of PM 2.5 particles, the most dangerous for human health, exceed the level recommended by the WHO, Balkan Insight reports.