

Air pollution originates from many sources and it is well known that in the Balkan region, coal, auto emissions and household heating are most common sources of pollution. Due to outdated coal plants, smoke-emitting cars and faulty industries the Western Balkans has become a pollution hotspot in Europe.

“The Western Balkan countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia are facing pollution from outdated coal power plants, old, inefficient and plants that are sub-standard, a highly polluting diesel and petrol car fleet and many household heating systems powered by fossil fuels and wood,” Srdjan Kukolj, health and energy adviser for the Balkan region to the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), a European non-profit organization, told Anadolu Agency, referring to the severe air pollution problems in the region which triggered street protests last month, mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Air pollution normally originates from a combination of sources, like everywhere in the world, but Kukolj said pollution stemming from coal use, car emissions and household heating are historically the most common in the Balkans.

“Countries in this region do not have a strong response to air pollution due to the lack of ambitious clean air strategies,” he stressed, adding air pollution is a major threat to public health, especially to vulnerable segments of the population such as children, the elderly and the sick.

Because there is a close link between climate change and air pollution as they come from the same sources, including fossil fuels in transport, energy production and industrial processes, he said the region is experiencing huge health, environmental and economic consequences because of the inadequate response.

“On the other hand, human and health losses are the biggest challenge for governments in mitigating the effects of climate change because of its magnitude,” he said.

Touching on the possible worst-case scenario for the Western Balkans if the problem cannot be resolved, he said the burden of pollution-related diseases and costs caused by air pollution are already too high.

To effect a solution, Kukolj suggested air pollution from all sources in the region should be reduced to its lowest possible levels to significantly reduce its effects on public health and the environment.

“The European Union laws, the landmark Paris Climate Agreement, the Energy Community Treaty and the World Health Organization recommendations are the starting points for creating a greener and healthier Western Balkans,” he said.

Mentioning the importance of shifting to sustainable and clean energy for the region, he highlighted that the transition plan would be an “incredible” opportunity to improve the life standard in the region.

“Decarbonizing our societies and way of life — be it in transport, buildings, energy or food systems — is entirely possible and will make the Western Balkans a healthier, increasingly prosperous and more sustainable place.”

Long-term impact much more dangerous

The effects of air pollution can be acute, but the long-term impact of pollution is much more dangerous and can lead to serious illnesses, pulmonologist Tanja Radosavljevic told Anadolu Agency.

She stressed that the effects of air pollution can be severe, especially if it is mixed with fog, as it creates sulfuric and nitric acid which can irritate the eyes, nose and throat and trigger coughing.

She warned, however, that the long-term effects of pollution are much more dangerous because they are constituents of particulate matter (PM), including PM 10 and PM 2.5 particles, which are parts of soot and dust that can consist of heavy metals.

“They reach the lungs and can pass into the bloodstream, which over a number of years can lead to serious lung diseases such as asthma and lung cancer, most often detected at a late stage,” she said.

Long-term consequences of air pollution can also include heart disease, leading to heart attacks, cardiac arrhythmia, heart failure and strokes, as well as Alzheimer’s disease.

Radosavljevic advised that when air pollution is high, everyone outside should wear protective, nano masks, or spend less time outdoors.

“It is necessary to know that when the pollution level is high, children, pregnant women and the elderly are not advised to go outside,” she added.

She went on to say that people should not jog or run outside and car engines should be switched off at least at traffic lights.

“This issue needs to be addressed systematically. Thermal power plants are serious pollutants, where everyone needs to stick to turning on the filters when needed, which is unfortunately not the case, and state-level strategies are needed to address this,” she added.

Source: aa.com.tr