

Air pollution from coal-fired power plants kills thousands in European Union

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The pollution is predominantly from plants on the EU's southeastern border [File: Piotr Malecki/Bloomberg]

Brussels, September 8 (RHC)-- Pollution from coal-fired power stations on the European Union's southeastern border are estimated to have caused thousands of deaths in the region due to breaches of

legally-binding limits on harmful emissions.

The 18 coal plants operating in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro were responsible for 19,000 deaths over the past three years, according to projections in a report by CEE Bankwatch Network and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air. More than half of those deaths were estimated to be within the EU.

The power stations produced 2.5 times as much harmful sulfur dioxide emissions as all of the 221 coal stations in the EU combined last year, the report said. In the three years since EU air-pollution limits became obligatory to non-EU Balkan countries, the Western Balkans emitted sulfur dioxide at levels that were at least six times the legal limit.

“These 18 coal plants in the Western Balkans are still wreaking havoc in the region and beyond,” said Pippa Gallop, southeast Europe energy adviser at CEE Bankwatch Network in a briefing. “Western Balkan governments bear primary responsibility for this state of affairs, but we also do want to see the EU stepping up action on this issue.”

The report’s projections were modeled using World Health Organization recommendations for the health impact of pollution, while high-resolution population data from censuses and NASA was used to estimate exposure.

Europe is facing soaring gas and electricity prices, which damps the incentive to turn off less-efficient and more environmentally-harmful means of production. The EU imports 8% of the electricity produced by the coal plants in the Western Balkans.

The report’s authors commended the EU’s proposed carbon border levy for including electricity imports, though said it should go further by linking funding to pollution and even including emissions in reports that pave the way for accession to the bloc.

“The EU has really got the message about no coal and it’s been increasingly vocal to the countries to stop building new plants and to phase out coal,” Gallop said. “But we’re missing some more short-term measures, which could make a difference to this actual pollution until those coal plants are closed.”

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