

Balkan countries in Southeast Europe are turning to coal as they try to cope with rising global energy prices, raising fears among environmentalists that countries are waiving their obligations to phase out polluting fossil fuels.

Northern Macedonia, once a leader in attracting investors in renewable energy sources, announced earlier this month that it plans to open two new coal mines to supply thermal power plants.

The energy ministry also said it wanted to buy 3m tonnes of coal from neighboring Kosovo, although no contract has been signed.

“With the beginning of the energy crisis, not only we, but all nations in Europe immediately increased the production of electricity from coal because it is the cheapest and safest (source),” said Vasko Kovacevski, CEO of the state power company Elektrana Severne Makedonija (ESM).

Rising wholesale prices, low stocks and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have led to rising energy prices as many countries struggle to secure supplies.

But environmentalists say turning to coal is not the answer.

“Decarbonization is one of the pillars of the green agenda and we are submitting a plan for a coal mine?” That is unacceptable, “said Nevena Smilevska from the Eco-consciousness environmental group in Skopje.

The new coal mines are Zivojno, near the Bitola power plant in the south, and Gusterica, near the Oslomej plant in the west. Neither the government nor the ESM have said when the mines will open or how much coal they will produce.

Skopje originally planned to phase out coal by 2027, but was postponed until January 2030.

Kosovo, meanwhile, said foreign companies - including German ones - have also inquired about buying coal. Kosovo has the fifth largest lignite deposit in the world, soft coal of relatively low energy value, which leads to particularly toxic pollution during combustion.

Serbia has said it is increasing coal production due to insufficient rainfall needed to operate hydropower plants and will import 500 tonnes of coal a day from Montenegro.

Bosnia, the only Balkan country to export electricity, says it will postpone plans to close coal-fired power plants due to high energy prices and the impact of the war in Ukraine.

Source: reuters.com