

According to a report published by CEE Bankwatch Network, air pollution from coal plants in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro affects not only people in their own countries but also those in neighboring EU countries, particularly in Romania, Hungary and Greece.

The Large Combustion Plants Directive – an EU directive to reduce emissions of dangerous substances, adapted for countries parties to the Energy Community Treaty – legally requires these countries to rein in air pollution from their power plants since 2018. Yet, as the report finds, in 2020, the Western Balkans’ 18 coal plants emitted two and half times as much sulfur dioxide (SO₂) as all 221 coal power plants in the EU combined.

In the three years since air pollution limits became obligatory under the Energy Community Treaty, coal-fired power plants in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo have been emitting SO₂ at levels that are at least six times the legal limit.

In Serbia alone, coal plants that are subject to the National Emissions Reduction Plan emitted in 2020 more SO₂ than the entire EU coal power plant fleet.

The same year, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s TPP Ugljevik was the region’s worst polluter, single-handedly breaching the combined SO₂ ceiling for all four countries. The unit, just like Serbia’s Kostolac B, has a desulfurization system fitted, but it has not been put in operation. Worse still, an additional 700 MW of new lignite capacity is still planned at the TPP Ugljevik.

All four countries with National Emission Reduction Plans – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia – are currently facing dispute settlement cases for failing to comply with the pollution limits in the Plans in 2018 and 2019. Another dispute settlement case was opened against Montenegro in April 2021 after TPP Pljevlja continued operating beyond its 20,000 hours quota under the Large Combustion Plants Directive’s limited lifetime derogation.

According to the report, the electricity generated by these coal plants and traded with the EU in 2020, although making up a tiny fraction of EU electricity consumption, produced as much SO₂ as half of the EU’s coal power plants combined. When the EU trades electricity with Western Balkan countries, it bears both the impacts and part of the responsibility for the resulting out-of-control air pollution. The EU must also help countries in the Western Balkans to move beyond coal by taxing fossil-fuel based electricity imports and ensuring effective enforcement of the Energy Community Treaty.

Energy Coordinator for the Western Balkans at CEE Bankwatch Network Ioana Ciuta concluded that Western Balkan Governments cannot dream of EU membership while ignoring pollution control rules. To avoid this kind of flagrant non-compliance, enforcement of the Energy Community Treaty must be made a priority. The European Commission and EU Governments must introduce effective penalties.