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Environmental Ambassadors for Sustainable Development

Reflection paper on air quality data for Serbia

2020

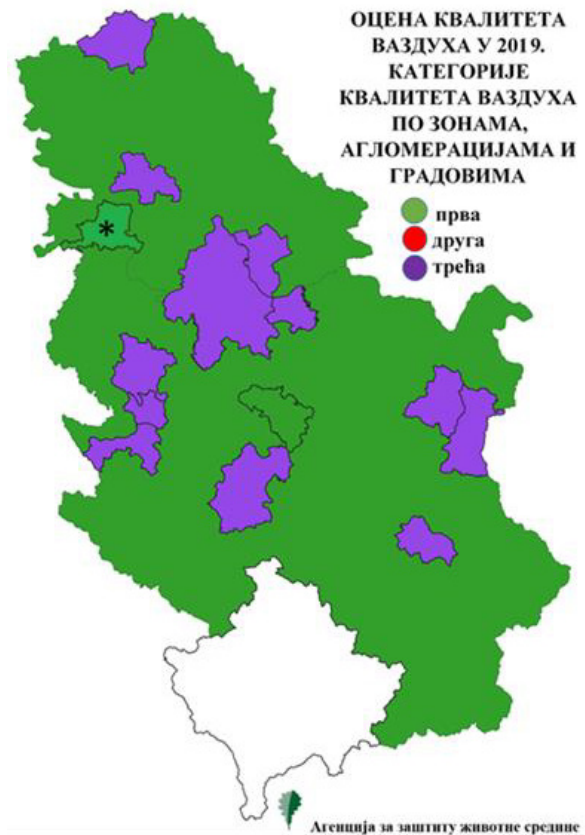
Environmental Ambassadors for Sustainable Development (EASD) Reflection paper on air quality data for Serbia

Air pollution in Serbia in general

Premature deaths as a result of air quality and poor air quality constitute a major economic loss; United Nations experts estimated in their 2015 report for the year 2010 that the costs **for the state of Serbia due to this reason are 33% of gross domestic product annually, while the costs of sick leave are about 325 million euros each year.** According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) for 2016, **the number of premature deaths in the Republic of Serbia is 6592, and it is estimated that from the impact of indoor (household air pollution) air quality 4823 people died in 2016.**

End of October 2019 EEA data for air quality show that region is among most polluted in Europe.

Implementation of IPA 2012 projects “Establishment of an integrated environmental monitoring system for air and water quality”, namely “Supply of ICT equipment and software for Air Quality Monitoring System” has enabled the Environmental Protection Agency of the Republic of Serbia, the competent national institution for monitoring air quality to present on its web site in real time a comprehensive overview of the data of automatic air quality monitoring in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.



Air quality in Serbia in 2019. – purple regions are with the worst air quality (3rd category)

Source: Serbian Environmental Protection Agency, 2020

In 2020, Serbian Environmental Protection Agency, issued the official, well documented, report on air quality in Serbia in 2019¹, noted related existing problems.

This heightened public interest in poor air quality is a good opportunity to recall **the conclusions of the conference “Environment to Europe -EnE19 conference on air quality in Serbia”**, held on June 4, 2019 in

¹ http://www.sepa.gov.rs/download/izv/Vazdub_2019.pdf

Belgrade, and co-organized by the EASD and Serbian Chamber of Commerce (<http://ambassadors-env.com/en/2019/06/07/4822/>). At the same time, the conference represented the official UN event marking the World Environment Day and the European Sustainable Development Week (ESDW) in the Republic of Serbia.

The aim of this conference was to draw attention of the general public to extremely topical environmental issues and the need for their continued resolution, **with particular reference to the severely impaired air quality throughout our entire country, which is a first-class environmental protection issue.**

Activities to improve air must be focused locally while at the same time thinking globally, changing the focus of action toward major factors that directly affect air pollution, such as the thermal energy capacities used for heating, individual fireplaces and traffic. The economy is a key factor of society changes and if we want to change the conditions we live in for the better, we need to change technologies and apply those that contribute to reducing environmental pollution.

Conference/Roundtable showed and pointed out to the problem faced by many cities in Serbia, the problem of air pollution, which is now most pronounced in Valjevo, Niš, Užice, Belgrade, Smederevo, but which is actually the problem of the entire Serbia that must be solved in a synchronized and systematic manner; this calls for cross-sectoral work to address the reduction of air pollution to be implemented throughout the country and **requires the following:**

- **Reducing the combustion of solid fuels for domestic heating and cooking, reducing the risks associated with operating industrial sites.** The Ministry of Environment is taking an operational approach to improving the environment, providing incentives to local self-governments to address these issues and to act to improve the air quality in their local communities. "The Ministry must turn to practical concrete measures, which means that from now on, not only in the Ministry budget, but also in the local self-government budgets, funds must be allocated to shut down at least a few individual fireplaces each year in each city and to switch to cleaner sources." Local self-governments must plan within their budgets the funds to shut down individual boiler rooms and to implement measures to improve traffic.

- **Improvement of the air quality management and monitoring network** to achieve effective control and management of air quality in urban areas, zones and agglomerations.

- **Afforestation actions** are the best way to change the environment for the better.

The participants of the Conference, through their presentations and discussion, highlighted various aspects of air pollution problems and proposed the possible solutions.

The roundtable was an opportunity for representatives of state institutions, local self-governments, civil sector, as well as for representatives of professional, consulting, educational and scientific institutions to highlight important issues, as well as the importance of raising the level of knowledge about how small

changes in everyday life can reduce the burden of nature and environment pollution, but also the burden to health of present and future generations.

Today, more than year after the Conference, we are fully aware of the importance of the aforementioned conclusions reached jointly by all stakeholders in order to contribute to solving the problem in the coming period.

2020 COVID19 circumstances and air quality

In many ways the 2020 COVID19 crisis is unique learning experiment.

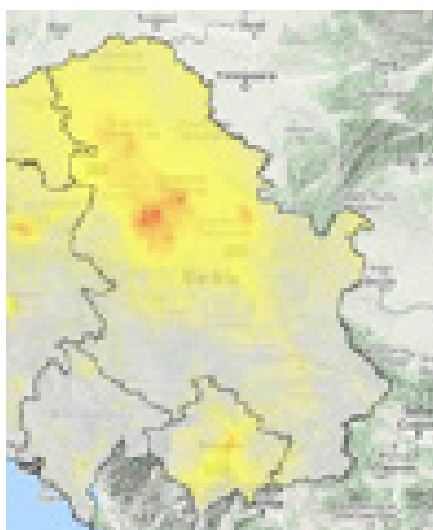
The lockdown and related measures implemented by many countries to stop the spread of COVID19 have led to a sudden decrease in economic activities, including a drop-in road transport in

many cities. To assess how this has affected concentrations of air pollution, the European Environmental Agency has developed a viewer that tracks the weekly and monthly average concentrations of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5})². Also, different sources indicate that those living in more polluted areas are far more likely to die from coronavirus³.

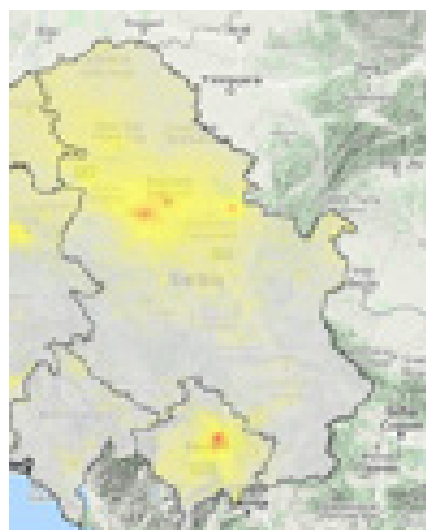
Knowledge about COVID19 will gradually improve the understanding of possible scenarios and countermeasures also in Western Balkan⁴ and Serbia.

For Serbia, the consequence of COVID19 air quality changes is not so “big difference picture”. Some data for Serbia is presented below.

But it seems that pollution may once again be on the rise and **possibly air pollution is returning to pre-COVID19 level**⁵.



2019, March 15 - April 30



2020, March 15 - April 30

Air Pollution Reductions due to COVID-19 Lockdown Mobility Restrictions observed through remote sensing approaches; Source: European Space Agency (ESA) data from Copernicus Sentinel-5P and World Bank analysis (May 2020).

² <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/air-quality-and-covid19/air-quality-and-covid19>

³ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/air-quality-and-covid19/air-quality-and-covid19>

⁴ *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report 17/2020: The economic and social impact of COVID-19 – Air pollution challenges*, World Bank Group (2020). Available at: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>

⁵ *The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air*

Extract from Politika Daily interview with Françoise Jacob, UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia - COVID - 19 - A UN Perspective

It seems to be the crucial moment to address climate change more decisively as they are interlinked on many levels with health and the emerge of the virus. However, there is a risk that countries, even the most developed ones, will abandon green programs in the fight for economic recovery. How can we prevent this?

The health of our planet plays an important role in the spread of COVID type diseases. The continued erosion of our ecosystems and excessive consumption have brought us uncomfortably close to “reservoir hosts”. We need to invest in managing natural resources and land differently. We have seen amazing drops in air pollution and carbon emission around the world, in a record time. But COVID-19 does not provide a silver lining for the environment. Without fundamental shifts in global energy production, this temporary reduction in emissions would not translate into a sustained, long-term trend. We cannot postpone climate action, because climate change is not on hold. 2020 remains critical for making progress on the climate emergency and halting biodiversity loss. The crisis is also a reminder that environmental pollution kills millions of people every year. **In Serbia, the most urgent need in that respect is to address the air pollution in large cities such as Belgrade, which peaked again in the early days of the epidemic. Awareness on climate change**

and pollution has grown around the world, so authorities and the private sector now have a fantastic opportunity to lead fundamental changes in how our economies are powered and shaped, how we rethink mobility in urban areas, and how we manage critical natural reserves such as the larger rivers crossing Serbia.

Extract from interview with Prof dr Andjelka Mihajlov, Environmental Ambassadors for Sustainable Development Honorable President and Member of UNEP Network of Women Ministers and Leaders for the Environment (in 2002 as the Minister for the Protection of Natural Resources and Environment, and from 2004 until now as the Environmental Ambassador) on Serbia and some COVID19 response

1. How has Serbia been affected by and responded to COVID19?

Europe becomes epicenter of the pandemic on 13 March 2020. Just a few days before, on March 10, the Government of Serbia approved Decision on declaring COVID-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus a contagious disease, and imposed the related measures in accordance the Law on contagious disease, followed by on March 15, declaration of a State of Emergency (a State of Emergency was released on May 6, but measures against spreading disease remain). It is difficult when say how much is country affected when we know that as of 19 May 2020, 190683 individuals were tested of which there have been 10733 confirmed cases, 4904 recoveries and

- we are deeply saddened by the 234 deaths in Serbia. So far, the imposed measures flatter the epidemic curve. However, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is with an unprecedented scale and still uncertain consequences. This include multidimension consequences of lockdowns and after lockdowns of number of people stayed at home (age 65+ all the time) and social distancing, but also ongoing arguing on erosion/ violation of some human rights and the fragility of the rule of law. Response is still challenging process (for example, 2020 Serbia Parliamentary Elections was relaunched for June 21 2020). I have to mention that the most affected are medical workers and socially and economically marginalized people.

2. Have you observed any problem regarding protection of the environment during epidemic of COVID19 in Serbia?

Yes. Unlikely to the number of European Union countries (in Italy, NO₂ pollution, mainly from traffic fumes, has dropped sharply during the COVID19 outbreak), **NO2 emission COVID 19 trends in Serbia, as a candidate country to EU membership, show just small reduction in 2020** (leading to conclusion that the causes are different). **The main sources of air pollution in Serbia include the energy sector (thermal power plants, district heating plants and individual household heating), the transport sector (an old vehicle fleet), waste dump sites and industrial activities (oil refineries, the chemical industry, mining and metal processing and the construction industry).**

It was slow respond to explain to citizens incident (for PM10) of huge Saharan dust load over Balkans resulted of pollution increase. Transparency on environmental related decisions during the national lockdown is very low. **It is realistic concern, that after a State of Emergency is released, the pollution will keep track "business as usual"**. It is also citizens disappointment with fact that recent European Union Zagreb Declaration failed to address the environment and nature as key elements for building a stronger and sustainable future in candidate countries, although EU member countries have The European Green Deal policy in place.

Although, in pre-COVID19 time, environmental issues were not among governmental priorities in Serbia, my concern is a (high) chance that the crisis is/will be used as an argument for relaxing enforcement of environmental legislation.

3. What was response to the registered problem?

The crisis discourse was and is opportunity for raising awareness on nature and pollution. However, work, including NGOs work is partially slowed down, and adaptation to situation was mandatory. E-mail and Zoom world become the only mean of communication, limited response to mainly letters and messages from civil society to decision makers, surveys, petitions and research. To mention, that it is the big risk of shrinking space for civil society and CSOs are widely concerned about future funding.

4. What are you doing to continue the work during the lock-down?

Group of NGOs urged the Government to postpone any decision making that is not immediately relevant to the health and safety of the people, for which meaningful transparency and participation cannot be secured.

5. What message do you have for citizens, CSO community and Eco-schools network in Serbia, when it comes to the Nexus women-environmental protection-sustainable development during the time of COVID19?

As uncertainty regarding the economic, environmental and social challenges facing citizens in Serbia continued to rise. Lockdowns, social distancing and other restrictions have left 65+ age, women and girls vulnerable to a growing shadow pandemic of domestic and other types of violence and unemployment. Many people are losing jobs. Some research states, that the greatest burden but also the greatest

risk during the COVID-19 crisis was borne by women: they accounted for as many as 86 percent of employees on the first line of infection. Increased workload in the household and care for family members also remained with women (in 70% of households), who performed these jobs predominantly even before the crisis. We have to fight for gender rights and recognition all the time.

In my view, recommendation for post-pandemic Serbia development, should be lesson learned by flattening the epidemic curve, and to switch from (high) speed economic development goals (“business as usual”) to the (high) quality development, sustainable one. We have to fight for environment and low-carbon development, to be among country priorities. Momentum after the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 is a good moment not to remain deaf to the messages sent to us by the planet.

**EASD (Environmental Ambassadors for Sustainable Development)
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