




## **Weekly Briefing**

**Montenegro social briefing:**  
**Another environmental disaster in the most polluted Montenegrin**  
**municipality - the final alarm**  
**Vojin Golubovic**

### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.  
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin  
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

## **Another environmental disaster in the most polluted Montenegrin municipality - the final alarm**

July is another month characterized by environmental issues. However, perhaps this time, environmental protection is the most alarming issue, as the real environmental incident happened in early July. The entire fish stock in the Ćehotina River, which flows through the northern part of Montenegro, has died. To make matters even more dramatic, this incident has occurred in the territory of Pljevlja municipality, which is at the top when it comes to environmental pollution issues. Therefore, this event should not be approached in isolation but in a wider context.

What actually happened? Chemicals and wastewater were spilled into the Vezišnica and Ćehotina rivers, causing damage to wildlife and fish deaths, and it was determined that, after the incident, the Ćehotina River was "dead" in the length of 11 kilometers. This was shown by the results of an analysis of water samples conducted by the Center for Ecotoxicological Research in Podgorica. The fact is that toxic materials have been discharged into the rivers from pipes owned by the Pljevlja Thermoelectric Power Plant, which operates under the main Electric Power company in Montenegro (EPCG). After initial attempts to evaluate the work as sabotage, the company (probably under public pressure) acknowledged responsibility and announced the remediation of all resulting environmental damage (including provision of new fish funds for the rivers). It was determined that the engineer of this company had given an order to open the valve through which the poison had reached the rivers. Also, Montenegrin police have filed criminal charges against the thermal power plant and four responsible persons, including the executive director of power plant. Undoubtedly, a company with a monopoly in Montenegro (EPCG) must take more account of social interests. However, if only this case is considered, then it can be estimated that all institutions responded in a timely manner and the culprit took responsibility. However, this event must be viewed through the prism of long-term events in the municipality of Pljevlja.

Perhaps media attention would not be so focused on the whole event (although it certainly deserves enormous attention) if Pljevlja had not been the most polluted city in Montenegro for years, and according to World Health Organization (WHO) research, this Montenegrin city is

among the ten most polluted cities in Europe. (including as many as five from the Balkans<sup>1</sup>). What is particularly alarming is the fact that since 2010, no measures have been taken to provide cleaner air in the Western Balkans, including Montenegro. The situation with pollution in Pljevlja is alarming especially in the winter months, as air pollution is high due to the large number of individual fireboxes, the specific configuration of the terrain on which the city is located, with the cumulative effect of constant emissions from industry and traffic. This is a decades-long problem of this Montenegrin city. Also, Montenegro is the country where a large number of old used cars (with diesel engines) end up, which has the effect of exacerbating the situation due to the large amount of exhaust gas. Heavy industry also offers major polluters in this municipality: beside mentioned thermo power plant, there is also a coal mine. Therefore, it is not surprising that in Pljevlja pollution measurements show as much as 42 micrograms of PM2.5 particles per cubic meter, which places this city in the top ten for pollution in Europe (WHO results). The latest report by the Montenegrin Environmental Protection Agency on air quality in November last year showed the depth of the problem in Pljevlja. Almost every day the city was polluted with harmful particles, and for only four days those particles were within the permitted limits. The Center for Eco-Toxicological Research recorded in 2018 the largest ever pollution in Pljevlja which is 23 times higher than allowed. During enormous air pollution in Pljevlja, the Institute of Public Health does not recommend outdoor activities. This is particularly relevant for children and youth. What is the consequence of these facts?

Poor economic conditions in this municipality (which shares the fate of less developed municipalities, predominantly in the northern region of Montenegro), with additional environmental problems, have led to significant changes in the demographic structure of the population of Pljevlja in recent years. This change is related to the fact that a large number of people leave Pljevlja because of the desire to find better living conditions. This is especially true for the younger population. This results in a significantly changed age structure, that is, higher participation of the elderly in the total population of this municipality. Also, the municipality recorded a continuous decrease in the total population. The conducted calculations on the basis of Monstat population figures by municipalities allow such a conclusion. Specifically, the population of the municipality of Pljevlja decreased by as much as a quarter compared to 2000, and by 10.5% compared to the last population census data (conducted in 2011). In comparison to the 2017, the population of this municipality (in 2018) decreased by 593, or 2.1%. In addition, the outflow of the younger population further affects the negative

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<sup>1</sup> This is data from a 2016 study, but some data was only available to the Montenegrin public at the end of 2018. According to the survey, air pollution caused the deaths of more than 37,000 people in the Western Balkans, with a population of 23 million. This is six times more than in some developed European countries (like France).

natural increase (the number of deaths is higher than the number of births), which additionally leads to a decrease in the total population. In Montenegro, last year negative natural growth was recorded in 18 municipalities, mostly in the north, and according to the latest Monstat data, Pljevlja is the city with the highest “white plague” rate in 2018.

However, it is not just the emigration of young people that causes the negative birth rate in this municipality. What is characteristic of Pljevlja is also the continuous increase in mortality, which is a consequence of the high pollution and water quality in this municipality. Data from the Institute of Public Health of Montenegro show that the number of people suffering from malignant diseases in Pljevlja is increasing from year to year (with the exception of 2017, when there was a slight fall in the number of such cases). During the last year, over 200 people from Pljevlja became ill with a malignant tumor, which makes up almost 1% of the population of this municipality! At the same time, more and more children have respiratory diseases. It is clear that air pollution is one of the main causes. According to WHO, as many as 22% of deaths in this municipality are caused by air pollution! The Institute of Public Health of Montenegro stated that the annual rate of premature mortality associated with exposure to air pollution in Montenegro is more than 50 times higher than the mortality rate due to fatal road accidents.

It is therefore not surprising that, having all this information on mind, another environmental incident in this municipality is a real “trigger” for the public. Not only environmental NGOs became active, but the citizens of Pljevlja were outraged by latest environmental catastrophe, and demanded prompt reactions from the competent institutions, determination of responsibility and strict sanctions for the one that caused the river poisoning. However, it is not enough that the environmental services of the municipality of Pljevlja, municipal and republic environmental inspectors said few words publicly. This is a situation that should be the final alarm for a longer-term strategy (and implementation of such a strategy) that would make the life of the citizens of Pljevlja a better and more quality, and Pljevlja a more desirable place to live.

Despite the numerous promises, companies are still missing the important investment in environmental protection (despite the fact that a significant sum is officialy planned by each of the main polluters). Also, the municipality needs a heating plant in Pljevlja that would permanently solve the problems in the city, provided that most homes are integrated in the heating network. However, the promise of this remains from elections to elections (probably due to the significant funds that are required for building such plants). But given all of the above, there is no doubt that the cost of the negative effects of pollution is much higher. Hence,

the Government and the largest polluters (including thermoelectric plant, coal mine, etc.) should take responsibility without excuses. Current practice of evading strategic projects that would cut air and water pollution should be stopped.

Perhaps another good example is the other end of Montenegro - the south, where the first eco-friendly public transport (electric) vessels were launched in Boka Bay. The traffic of these ships will contribute to the image of Montenegro as an environmentally recognizable destination, as well as to the relief of road traffic. In any case, Montenegro is not so big country and such contrasts between north and south could be eliminated. There should exist political will for this. But above all, raising awareness of similar issues is crucial for society to thrive.