

Many European countries fail to meet air quality standards

Many European countries are failing to comply with international and European standards on air quality. Moreover, many governments have failed to take effective action to improve air quality and hence to protect their citizens' health. These are two of the findings of a joint audit performed by 15 European audit offices. Only Estonia was found to be in compliance with all the relevant EU standards.

Alongside national audit offices from 14 European countries, the Israeli national audit office and the European Court of Auditors also took part in the audit, the aim of which was to ascertain whether the governments of the countries in question were taking action to improve the air quality.

Wide discrepancies

The joint audit uncovered wide discrepancies between the 15 countries covered by the audit. At one end of the scale was Estonia, which was found to comply with all the relevant standards. At the other end were countries that the European Commission recently brought before the European Court of Justice on account of their continued failure to meet the limit values.

National audit offices taking part in the audit

EU member state	Prospective EU member state	European country	Others
Bulgaria	Albania	Georgia	Israel
Estonia	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Kosovo ¹	European Court of Auditors
Hungary		Moldova	
Netherlands		Switzerland	
Poland			
Romania			
Slovakia			
Spain			

The joint audit report is based on national audits performed in all the participating countries, plus an EU-wide audit.

EU Directive

In 2008, the European Union set limit values for a large number of air pollutants. The main pollutants are particulates (produced by energy consumption and traffic), nitrogen oxides (traffic) and sulphur dioxide (coal combustion). Under the terms of the Directive in question, the member states were obliged to analyse the air quality in their countries, report the results to the European Environment Agency, and draw up plans for improving the air quality where they exceeded the relevant limit values. The European Commission is empowered to take action if member states fail

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

to comply with the Directive. If all else fails, the Commission is entitled to institute proceedings at the European Court of Justice.

Premature deaths

Of all types of environmental pollution, air pollution is the single largest health risk in the world. In a report published in September 2018, the European Court of Auditors wrote that air pollution was the cause of 400,000 premature deaths in the EU every year and that measures taken by the EU to combat the problem had not had the desired effect. The worldwide effects of air pollution have also been analysed. During the first international conference on air pollution and health held in the autumn of 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that one in every nine deaths in the world was caused by air pollution.