

# BALKANS UNITED FOR CLEAN AIR

UJEDINJEN BALKAN  
ZA ČIST ZRAK  
ОБЕДИНЕТ БАЛКАН  
ЗА ЧИСТ ВОЗДУХ



BALLKANI I BASHKUAR  
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## WHAT IS POLLUTED AIR DOING TO US IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

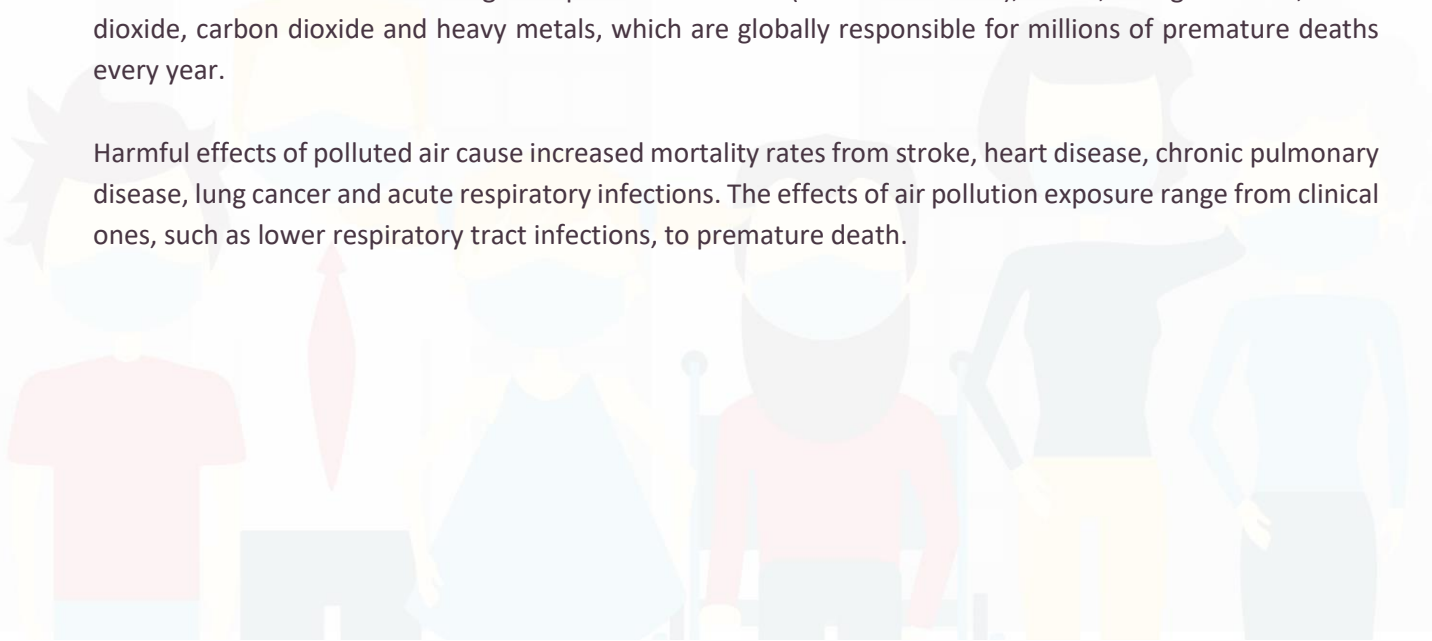
### AIR POLLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON MORTALITY RATES AND THE HEALTH OF WESTERN BALKANS CITIZENS

Breathing polluted air leads to increased mortality, shorter life expectancy and a higher rate of chronic diseases. At the same time, healthcare expenses paid by the Western Balkans citizens are increasing. Air pollution also causes a growing number of working days lost, along with the number of hospital days. Air pollution reduction is a public health measure which would directly help improve the citizens' quality of life and health and, indirectly, lower mortality rates.

Poor air quality in the Western Balkans places the region at the top of Europe's most polluted areas and causes a growing decline of public health. The region's countries are particularly jeopardized because air pollution combined with a lower level of economic development, poverty and subpar healthcare systems, adds up to create a lethal situation.

Some of the main sources of air pollution in the Western Balkans include the use of coal for energy production, combustion of coal and wood in residential and commercial facilities, industry emissions, waste combustion, agriculture and construction activities, transport vehicles, and diesel generators. These sources are also the main locations of origin for particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), ozone, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide and heavy metals, which are globally responsible for millions of premature deaths every year.

Harmful effects of polluted air cause increased mortality rates from stroke, heart disease, chronic pulmonary disease, lung cancer and acute respiratory infections. The effects of air pollution exposure range from clinical ones, such as lower respiratory tract infections, to premature death.



Apart from that, Western Balkans is among the regions most affected by the impact of climate change. During the last decades, a significant increase in heat waves has been documented – today, their number has approximately doubled compared with the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Warmer weather conditions suit the formation of ozone, one of the main pollutants during the warmer part of the year. Also, it has been indicated that warmer weather and higher carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere contribute to longer vegetation and pollination periods. This causes higher pollen concentrations in the air, which can have negative effects on persons with allergies, as well as asthma patients.

### **Who is paying for the consequences of air pollution?**

The consequences of inhaling poor-quality air is paid by all of us, with certain social groups being more vulnerable to it.

The price of air pollution is paid in human lives. According to World Health Organization's data for 2016, there have been around 13,500 premature deaths in our region, as a consequence of the worst air quality in all of Europe. According to estimates by the European Environment Agency from 2012, air pollution in Western Balkan countries has led to 22,670 premature deaths attributable to excessive particulate matter (PM2.5) pollution; 1,060 due to excessive ozone (O3) pollution; and 1,670 deaths due to excessive nitrogen dioxide (NO2) pollution.

The Joint Research Centre of the Evropske unije states that air pollution, on average, contributes between 4% and 19% of the total premature mortality rates, and decreases life expectancy by 0.4-1.3 years in countries of the Western Balkans.

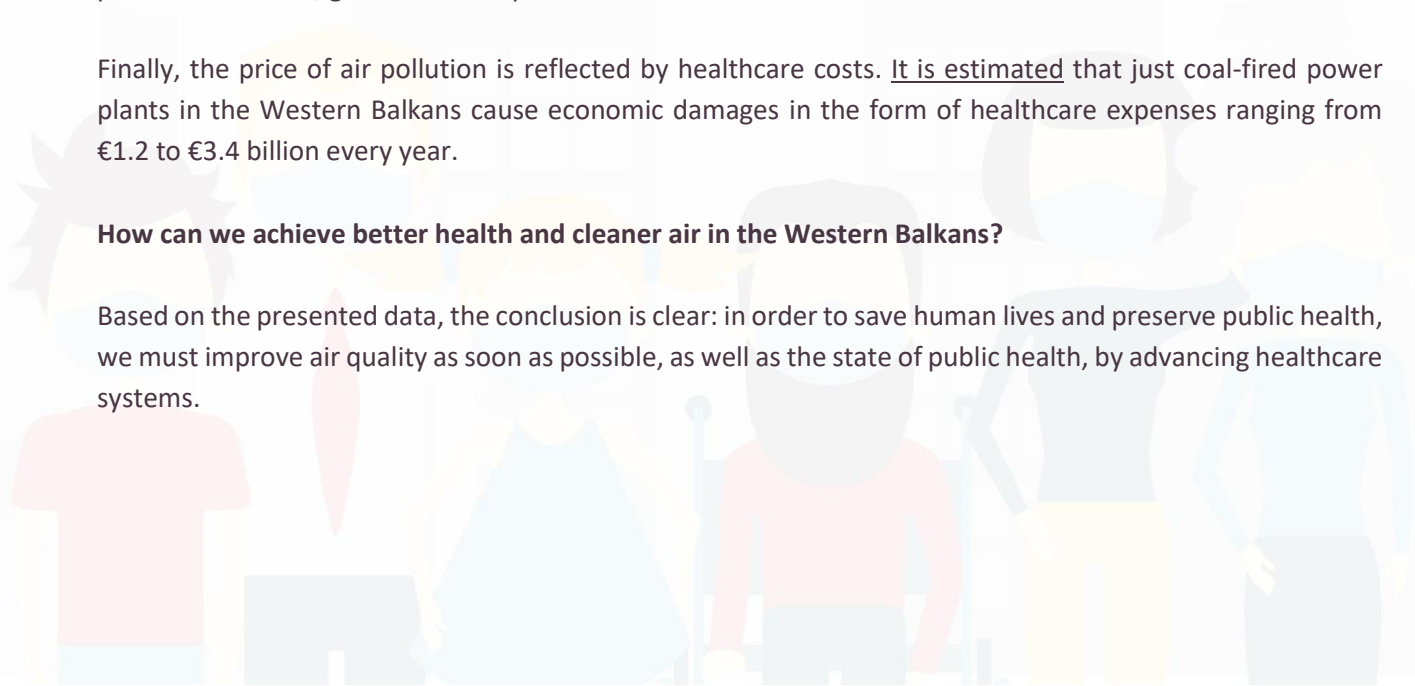
Air pollution has a bigger effect on shortening the lives of the elderly population and children under the age of five, which is particularly the case in low-income countries. On a global level, around 75% of deaths caused by air pollution occur in people older than 60. In December, these facts have been confirmed in court for the first time. Namely, a British court admitted medical evidence that showed that a 9-year old girl had died from air pollution.

Persons of a lower socioeconomic status are often more exposed to air pollution since they tend to live in areas of high-intensity traffic and close to pollution sources, such as power plants and industrial facilities. In addition, in most cases poor people work "dirty" jobs which implies professional exposure to fumes, particulate matter, gases and heavy metals.

Finally, the price of air pollution is reflected by healthcare costs. It is estimated that just coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans cause economic damages in the form of healthcare expenses ranging from €1.2 to €3.4 billion every year.

### **How can we achieve better health and cleaner air in the Western Balkans?**

Based on the presented data, the conclusion is clear: in order to save human lives and preserve public health, we must improve air quality as soon as possible, as well as the state of public health, by advancing healthcare systems.



It is necessary to define the reduction of air pollution as a national, regional and international priority, and integrate it in state and city development planning processes. However, most importantly, these measures must not remain a dead letter, and adequate resources must be provided for their implementation. Therefore, Western Balkan countries would have to increase their national and local budgets for air pollution control and set priorities which aim to reduce the impact of pollutant emissions on the population and the environment.

In order to advance oversight of polluters and improve air quality, multisectoral partnerships need to be established at local, national and regional levels. The prevention of noncommunicable diseases which come as a result of poor air quality should be made an integral part of environmental policy priorities. In addition, this must be accompanied by measures to address climate change, which increasingly influences almost all aspects of life.

Finally, the reduction of mortality rates, prolonging life expectancy and lessening the healthcare costs of breathing polluted air, also requires bottom-up citizens' action. Namely, the air pollution issue – one that knows no borders between Western Balkans states – can only be resolved in a solidary fashion, at a regional level.

In order to preserve and prolong human lives together, join us in the Western Balkan citizens' solidary struggle and become a part of the "Balkans United for Clean Air" campaign: <https://docs.google.com/forms/u/1/d/e/1FAIpQLSeaCh6mDG28WY6-QLEj7ldvAutF6Ki0WPcVaJLjW6NNy2gKw/viewform>

Find out more about the "Balkans United for Clean Air" campaign on: <https://www.balkangreenfoundation.org/uploads/files/2021/January/20/English1611131274.pdf>

