

# The air pollution is killing us

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Reiterating the importance of addressing air pollution comes well-timed these days, as Western Balkans cities occupy the tops of the lists of the most polluted cities in the world, Sarajevo in particular.

But, we from the region do not need to follow the online air pollution statistics – we, unfortunately, live it. Alarming warnings we are hearing these days, forbidding even to go out or even open the windows to air our homes are not putting our minds at ease. We do have beautiful mountains, but going there to spend our free time, skiing, boarding, or just walking, should come as leisure, not a survival kit.

And that is exactly what people actually do – they take their children out to the mountains over the weekend to try and mitigate negative effects of days spent in the urban fog or closed in their homes. And still, we keep neglecting that the very air we breathe is hazardously polluted. Putting breathing masks during working days and going up to the mountains over the weekend cannot be a solution, especially not a long-term one. As environment and climate change actions are constantly very low on the investments and budgetary allocations of our governments, the true cost of air pollution is health related.

Statistics are merciless. Besides the data we keep on sharing about region's cities being air-pollution leaders, data reads that 26% of all known non-communicable diseases in the region are caused by air pollution. The total number of premature deaths directly attributable to air pollution in the cities is nearly 5.000 a year. Many aging power plants provide cheap energy that comes at a high price for human health - around 21.000 premature deaths annually can be attributed to household air pollution. Transport sector, another huge emitter of CO<sub>2</sub>, is responsible for 7% of all emissions in the region. 13% of all the premature deaths caused by air pollution are traced back to transport.

There are many alarming data and just as many signals in our daily lives that have been present for years now, requiring action. If we start doing something today, sadly but truly, it is overdue.

And still, the citizens' perceptions of urgency are divided. Our latest Balkan Barometer shows that 9 out of 10 people feel that pollution is a problem in their community. Yet, 32% of people do not see themselves willing or able to actively pursue the more environmentally friendly choices in their consumption. The number of businesses that have undertaken some measures to reduce harmful impact on environment has also declined by 13% compared to 2017, and is now at 64%.

So, besides real actions more has to be done to raise awareness among the citizens that each and every one of us, including children, can and should make a difference, not just to reduce air-pollution but other aspects of protecting the environment because all that affects the climate change, which became one of the biggest problems of our time globally. We truly are in this together, whether you like to admit it or not. The small steps also count – saving energy, finding alternative, cleaner solutions to warm not just houses but water too, using cars more rationally, and giving priority to public transportation or bicycle, but also reducing

plastic containers and bags, minding the trash to keep our rivers, mountains, fields, forests clean, properly treat waste, turn to domestic foods, print less...a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

However, national and local governments, as I'm sure aware of the dramatic situation with air pollution throughout the region, would need to step up the game and start with concrete, systematic actions. These include moving away from old, outdated technologies and introducing the new ones, including air quality monitoring sensors, instead of continuing the practices of cheap heating fuels use, at great expense of health of the nations. It is expensive but mandatory if we want to make a difference. But don't take me wrong. I am not the one to offer solutions and I don't have any. What I am sure of is that this level of air pollution is a major threat to our lives.

As for the citizens – their choices are rather limited by their budgets but if it were as systematic move to healthier and more advanced solutions, and maybe followed by incentives to improve air quality (and address climate change in general), citizens would surely know what they want for themselves and their children.

And this is one of our tasks – to keep pushing this agenda in our encounters with the governments of the region, following through what has been done, making sure that the EU Green Deal has its twin in our region, because, as we keep saying climate change does not require Schengen visa – it travels freely across the globe bypassing all human borders. Recently, in presenting the EU Green Deal the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen mentioned specifically the Western Balkans and the need for the region to be a part of this and working closely with it. The awareness rising on the necessity to tackle this issue contributed to this, so we need to keep this up. The fact the EU is so determined to respond to climate challenges obliges us as well, doesn't it? Surely we have to act by showing that lives and wellbeing of our people are equally important to us as are those of EU citizens to the Union. RCC also periodically commissions expert studies on impacts of climate change, specific for the region, so the regional priorities could be easily set, subject to the findings and prognosis in different sectors.

Again, here is where regional cooperation again proves its inevitability – it's all about living together. Let's take Sava River at the north of Bosnia and Herzegovina...it is a natural border between Croatia and BiH or EU and BiH if you wish. If we want the clean water, we have to clean both its banks. The situation is the same with Shkoder Lake between Albania and Montenegro. Nature and its resources as well as citizens health are our shared responsibility. Source of power, if you will and it has to be taken care of jointly.

The RCC has been facilitating regional dialogue on ministerial level for years, making sure that this environment protection and climate change are not put on the margins of our agendas. The 2019 Ministerial 'Let's Go Green' was meant to take place in Tirana in December, the day after the devastating earthquakes that hit Durrës and Tirana – scary symbolic sign. It was postponed and will take place soon – we will keep you informed about the outcomes. Surely, it has to put climate change action more prominently on the regional agenda and not just as a response to natural disasters that remind us from time to time of our vulnerabilities.