



Doctors and patient groups launch Unmask My City initiative to clean up Sofia's air

Brussels, 31 May 2018 - A coalition of nine doctor and health organisations¹ has today joined the global [Unmask My City initiative](#), calling for greater urgency in achieving clean air in Sofia. The Bulgarian capital is [one of the most polluted cities](#) in the whole European Union (EU).

Air quality is not only poor in Bulgaria's capital - air pollution leads to significant health impacts all over the country. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Bulgaria has the [third highest mortality rate](#) (per 100.000 population) from air pollution in the world, after North Korea and Bosnia and Herzegovina, eating up the equivalent of [29.5% of the country's GDP](#) through reduced productivity and costs of treating the diseases caused.

Dr. Alexander Simidchiev, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Association Air for Health stated: *"As a lung expert, I am very concerned about the poor air quality in Sofia. Polluted air can affect lung development in children, cause or worsen asthma, allergic disorders and the lung disease COPD that means permanent narrowing of the airways, not to forget lung cancer. It is dangerous for every single person to ignore the pollution problem - we must act now for better air quality now and we will see immediate short term benefits for our health as well as save our children and grandchildren a lot of future trouble."*

The poor air quality in Bulgaria means the country has been in continuous breach of EU air quality standards. In 2017, Bulgaria was the first country to be sentenced by the EU Court of Justice to take action to improve air, and the country is still facing potential high fines.

Vlatka Matkovic Puljic, Senior Policy Officer for Health and Energy at the Health and Environment Alliance explained: *"Air pollution is the top environmental health concern in Bulgaria and in the EU as we saw earlier this month with the European Commission referring six countries that show high and permanent levels of air pollution in their cities to the European Court of Justice. Health groups are concerned that the Bulgarian government is not walking the talk on clean air. While policy-makers proclaimed air quality a priority for the current EU presidency, they are at the same time working to allow more air pollution, not less. I hope that many more doctors, patients and health experts will join the clean air efforts and prompt the government to act."*

¹Partners of the campaign:

Health and Environment Alliance
Association Air for Health
National Patient Organization
Association of Medical Students in Bulgaria
Student Council of the Medical University
Faculty of Public Health
Bulgarian Society of Allergology
Bulgarian Physicians Union
National Association of General Practitioners in Bulgaria



Through the Unmask My City initiative doctors and health groups are calling for concrete and tangible solutions for the citizens of Sofia and Bulgaria, including:

- Comply with legally binding EU air quality standards.
- Establish air quality standards (limit values) for PM10 and PM2.5 in accordance with recommendations of the World Health Organization.
- Health professionals should become engaged on air quality including on policy changes, inform the public on health risks due to air pollution and alert their patients when air pollution exceeds EU or WHO guidelines.
- Move away from coal energy to renewable energy sources and promote energy savings. Prioritise energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.
- Promote renewable energy systems for household heating and transitioning away from fossil fuel use.
- Put strict emissions standards for vehicles in urban zones; and implement the “polluter pays” principle with sanctions for those not sticking to the rules.
- Make active travel including walking and cycling and sustainable public transport the backbone of city transport policies.

Learn more about the Unmask My City here <http://unmaskmycity.org/>

Notes:

Exposure to polluted air causes heart and lung disease, cancer, and a range of other health impacts; poor air quality has now also been established as a possible risk factor for obesity and diabetes. People living in cities, those already suffering from disease (asthma, COPD, heart conditions, etc), children, and those economically deprived are particularly at risk from the harm of polluted air.

New findings illustrate the particular risk for children’s healthy development. For example, recent research found babies born to mothers exposed to component of air pollution called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), were at greater risk of hyperactivity disorder. Other studies show preterm birth or lower birth weight as an outcome of exposure to air pollution.²

The main sources of small particle pollution (PM2.5) in Bulgaria are household burning of fossil fuels or biomass, and transport. Production of electricity by burning of coal in thermal power plants and other industrial processes also contribute to PM pollution. Coal plants are responsible for almost all of the country’s sulfur-dioxide and the majority of nitrogen-oxides emissions. They are contributing to the formation of smog and acid rain.

Read more about air quality and EU laws and requirements on the subject [here](#)

² HEAL’s eight demands for clean air in the European Region https://www.env-health.org/IMG/pdf/180212_heal_8_demands_for_clean_air_in_euro_region_final.pdf



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Testimonials :

Silvia Velikova

Silvia is a well-known Bulgarian journalist from Bulgarian National radio, mother of 4 children.

We need to stop taking clean air for granted because we don't actually know what it's like to breathe pure and clean air. Clean air is something we need to cherish, and we have to make an effort to ensure its quality and healthiness. We have to do this not only for us, but also and especially for our children, and the future generations.

Dr. Alexander Simidchiev

Dr. Alexander Simidchiev is a pulmonologist who for more than three decades has dedicated himself to the cause of lung health. He is one of the leading experts in pulmonary function diagnostics in Bulgaria. Currently he is Chairman of the Executive Board of the Association Air for Health

As a lung expert, I am very concerned about the poor air quality in Sofia. Polluted air can affect lung development in children, cause or worsen asthma, allergic disorders and the lung disease COPD that means permanent narrowing of the airways, not to forget lung cancer. It is dangerous for every single person to ignore the pollution problem - we must act now for better air quality now and we will see immediate short term benefits for our health as well as save our children and grandchildren a lot of future trouble.

Dr. Rada Markova

In September 2012 Dr. Rada Markova became one of the founders and medical director of First Children's Advisory Clinic in Sofia.

Air is one of the most unique assets of our planet Earth, thanks to which we are alive. It is unique for both the young and the old, both for the poor and for the rich. Children are particularly vulnerable to atmospheric pollution because they are still developing and growing.

Academic Professor Dr. Bogdan Petrunov

Academic Professor Dr. Bogdan Petrunov is a full member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and one of the leading authorities in the field of immunology and allergology in Bulgaria. He is the founder of the first allergy laboratory in Bulgaria to develop specific diagnostics and immunotherapeutics for the diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases.

According to the WHO, Bulgaria is in one of the leading positions worldwide when it comes to deaths attributed to air pollution. This is not only a healthcare issue, it is a colossal social and financial problem that society needs to understand and try to overcome in all possible ways.

Valentin Petkov

Valentin Petkov is a fitness guru and multiple times European and world champion of bodybuilding.

I do a lot of biking in the city. I recently started to use a mask with a dust and chemical filter. Since I use it, my blood count and biochemistry, especially the liver function, have improved. I think the air pollution problem is something that concerns us all and has direct effects on our bodies and health.





Anna Borisova

Mother of boy Mateiy who is suffering from bronchial asthma

Me and my family, we live in the suburbs. In the winter, most of the households where we live heat with coal and wood. My 4-year old son is suffering from bronchial asthma. During windless days the air becomes so full of smoke, we can hardly go outside our house. Due to the poor air quality my son's asthma gets worse and his attacks increase.

Most of our family friends with children have to always keep a nebulizer at home - it is so obvious that respiratory tract diseases are the most common diseases among small children and babies.

In my opinion the problem could be easily solved. The municipalities in some regions like ours could financially stimulate households to use more effective and more eco-friendly heating systems. In my household for example, we use pellets which make no smoke and have less negative effects on the air quality. The traffic is also a huge problem even in our far-from-the-city area. Most of the cars are more than 20-years old with no catalytic converters. That is also a great part of the pollution source.

We all dream to live a healthy life and to see our children grow healthy and happy - and it would be such an easy and yet big step for the authorities to help us create and breathe better air by promoting more effective and eco-friendly heating and by reducing the traffic.

Ivan Mihailov

A patient with bronchial asthma. The poor air quality makes his asthma worse, which puts him at higher risk of an asthma attack and lead him to the choice to become one of the cofounders of Air and Health Association.

The poor air quality makes my asthma worse and gives me more attacks. That is why I choose to become one of the cofounders of Air and Health Association.

We are really struggling to survive in Sofia.

When the air quality is poor we are wear masks in Sofia. When the air quality is extremely poor – we have to find our way to get out of the city. I'm escaping the city every winter.

Luckily, we have Vitosha Mountain so close. Areas at very high attitude give us the chance to breathe the cleanest air possible. But unfortunately, when I go up in the mountain, I go alone. My family stays in the city.

