INFORMATION RELEASE

Cleaner air would offer major health benefits in the Balkans

Brussels, 15 December 2014 – Three briefings released today highlight the heavy toll on health resulting from exposure to poor air quality in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro. (1)

Highly polluted air in many Balkan countries causes particularly serious health effects in this region. Despite having a population of only seven million people, Bulgaria is ranked number one in terms of the annual premature deaths due to this cause in Europe. Bulgaria's more than 11,000 premature deaths due to poor air quality can be compared with 4,000 deaths in Switzerland, a country with a similar sized population.

In second place, 10,000 deaths in Serbia and Montenegro are due to polluted air, with populations of seven million and 620,000 respectively. Romania ranks third, Poland ranks fourth and Hungary sixth. (2)

While the effects of poor air quality on respiratory and cardiovascular disease are well known, latest scientific findings compound the risks to children's health. For example, evidence is growing that maternal exposure to air pollution is contributing to a greater risk of her baby being born with low birth weight or pre-term. Other studies point to the risk of maternal exposure leading to the development of chronic diseases in her child later in life, including obesity, diabetes and hormone-related cancers, such as of the breast, prostate and testes.

Poor air quality stems from many sources, such as industrial processes, transport, or agriculture; but air pollution from energy generation and use, including coal power plants is of particular concern in the Balkans. Figures from HEAL's report "The Unpaid Health Bill, How coal power plants make us sick" show 18,200 premature deaths each year in Europe result from exposure to air pollution associated with coal-fired power plants. (3) Approximately 2,000 of these deaths occur in Bulgaria and another 2,000 in Serbia, a total of 22% taking place in these two countries alone.(4)

History has shown rapid improvements in public health following stronger regulation to improve air quality. For example, the ban on coal burning in Dublin, Ireland in the 1990s resulted in an 8% reduction in total mortality in the city as well as reductions of 13% in respiratory disease and 7% in cardiovascular disease.

During the past year, the national debate on energy decisions in Germany and Poland has included a discussion of the impact of poor air pollution on health and the harm from coal power generation in particular. (5) The new briefings recommend that medical professionals in Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro systematically consider environmental factors when diagnosing patients, check and inform on the air quality situation, and engage in policy developments on energy choices. (1)

"We would like to see doctors and other health professionals highlighting the costs to health of coal and encouraging national decision makers to take these costs into account in energy decisions," says Vlatka Matkovic Puljic, HEAL's Project Coordinator on Energy and Health, for South and Central Eastern European countries. "Choosing to build new coal power plants would be detrimental to efforts aimed at tackling chronic disease and protecting children's health."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. Three briefings in HEAL series on Air Quality

- **Air Pollution and Health in Bulgaria: Facts, Figures and Recommendations**
  English http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_bulgaria_eng.pdf
  Bulgarian http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_bulgaria_bgversion.pdf

- **Air Pollution and Health in Montenegro: Facts, Figures and Recommendations**
  English http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_mng_eng.pdf
  Montenegrin http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_mngversion.pdf

- **Air Pollution and Health in Serbia: Facts, Figures and Recommendations**
  English http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_serbia_eng.pdf
  Serbian *http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_serbian_version.pdf*

2. Chart showing annual total deaths from exposure to air quality in European countries (Measured in terms of exposure to PM2.5 (particulate matter smaller than 2.5 micrometers) and ozone, the two most harmful pollutants).

Country	Deaths from chronic PM2.5 and ozone exposure	RANK of mortality rate*
Bulgaria	11787	1
Serbia and Montenegro	10777	2
Romania	25121	3
Poland	44764	4
Greece	12905	5
Hungary	11343	6
Italy	66070	7
Croatia	3854	8
Belgium	9610	9
Czech Republic	9152	10
Lithuania	2653	11
Slovakia	4452	12
Germany	65207	13
Latvia	1652	14
Slovenia	1451	15
Austria	5481	16
Netherlands	10826	17
Cyprus	529	18
Luxembourg	324	19
France	41114	20
Portugal	6647	21
Estonia	797	22
Denmark	3165	23
Switzerland	4392	24
Spain	25926	25
Malta	227	26
United Kingdom	31389	27
Finland	1965	28
Sweden	3128	29

Ireland	1387	30
Norway	956	31

* **Rank of mortality rate is calculated as the number of deaths per population (Number of deaths from chronic PM2.5 and ozone exposure / Estimated 2010 midyear population) * 100,000)**

Sources:
For the data on premature deaths: Cost-benefit Analysis of Final Policy Scenarios for the EU Clean Air Package. October 2014. p. 48-49 http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/pdf/TSAP%20CBA.pdf
For the data on EU population: Eurostat: Population change – Demographic balance and crude rates at national level: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-data/database

3. The Unpaid Health Bill, How coal power plants make us sick, HEAL, March 2013 http://www.env-health.org/news/latest-news/article/the-unpaid-health-bill-how-coal

4. Data on health impacts and financial burden from coal power generation

Bulgaria: Approximately 2,000 Bulgarians die every year because of air pollution due to coal power plants. More than 920 people in Bulgaria suffer from chronic bronchitis cases and 600 are hospitalised due to respiratory or cardiovascular symptoms. Costs associated with these deaths and ill-health due to exposure to fumes from coal power plants are estimated at up to €4.6 billion per year.

Serbia: Approximately 2,000 Serbians die every year because of air pollution due to coal power plants. More than 1,000 people in Serbia suffer cases of chronic bronchitis cases and 600 are hospitalised due to respiratory or cardiovascular symptoms. Costs associated with these deaths and ill-health are estimated to at up to €4.98 billion per year.

Montenegro: No separate data.

5. HEAL Annual Review 2013, Climate and Energy, page 11, http://www.env-health.org/resources/publications/article/annual-review-2013

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