



BRUSSELS, 9 November 2020

To:

Heads of Government / Heads of State of the Western Balkans

CC: Virginijus Sinkevičius, EU Commissioner for Environment ; Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement; Frans Timmermans, EU Commissioner for Climate; Kadri Simson, EU Commissioner for Energy

CC: German EU Presidency: Svenja Schulze, Environment Minister, Jens Spahn, Health Minister, Heiko Maas, Foreign Minister; Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

CC: Embassies of Germany in the Western Balkan region, and EU delegations

An ambitious implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans to prevent ill-health and move towards zero pollution

Honourable Heads of Government, Heads of State,

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is the leading not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond, and working for a healthy planet for healthy people.

HEAL welcomes the emphasis the European Union has placed on the green transition in the region for the next decade, as outlined in the [Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#) and the [Guidelines for the implementation of the Green Agenda](#).

From a health perspective, greening the Western Balkans and addressing the unacceptably high pollution in the region is urgent, and will bring many benefits, including reduced rates of cancer, heart and lung disease, and improvement for children's healthy development. Advancing on decarbonisation will also contribute to boosting people's health overall and increasing health resilience, which is a key consideration in preparing for any future pandemic.

In the Western Balkans, health groups have been particularly concerned about the high health costs from coal power generation as the region's dominant form of energy generation.

A recent [HEAL analysis](#) showcases that chronic coal pollution from the region's sixteen outdated power plants is responsible for an estimated 3,900 premature deaths, 8,500 cases of bronchitis in children and other chronic illnesses annually, leading to health costs of up to EUR 11,535 million. Air pollution from energy generation in the Western Balkans not only impacts the health of people in Belgrade, Tuzla or Podgorica, but also those of people living across the European region.

As you're gathering in Sofia this week for the next meeting in the Berlin process, HEAL urges you to support the foreseen adoption of the Guidelines for Implementing the Green Agenda.

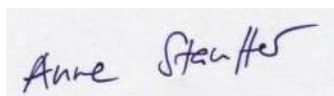
In addition, with a view to strengthen the health of people in region, our alliance of over 90 organisations from the health community calls on you to base the greening process on the following principles and actions:

1. Apply a zero pollution conditionality for all Green Agenda implementation measures and financing.
2. Commit to the updating of the air quality standards to fully reflect the World Health Organization recommendations and latest science.
3. Adopt an ambitious and binding date to phase out coal power generation in the Western Balkans.
4. End public financing for all fossil fuels, including gas. *From a health perspective, gas is not a viable alternative in the energy transition, and investing in it will hamper the swift transition to a decarbonised economy.*

In the next steps for greening the Western Balkans, we recommend that you create national inter-ministerial working groups of environment, health and climate ministries to facilitate the implementation of the Green Agenda and a health-in-all-policies approach. Such inter-ministerial exchanges can also provide guidance on how decarbonisation measures can contribute to reducing inequalities in the region. Exchanges with scientists should be held, to ensure that policies and measures are evidence-based. In addition, a mechanism for regular exchanges with non-governmental health representatives and other civil society actors should also be established.

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans offers unique opportunities for greater health protection and improvement, also as a response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which will cost the Balkan region dearly. HEAL is ready to work with you to identify those measures and investments that will achieve a triple win with protecting health, tackling climate change and reducing pollution.

Yours sincerely,



Anne Stauffer
Director for Strategy and Campaigns
Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)