

Brussels, 29th April 2021

To: Ursula von der Leyen, President, European Commission
Cc: Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice President, European Green Deal
Margaritis Schinas, Vice President, Promoting our European Way of Life

Subject: Call to urgently develop the Green Pillar of the European Health Union for a Healthy Recovery from the Pandemic

Dear President von der Leyen,

We, representatives of the undersigned organisations, are writing to you to express our grave concerns regarding the lack of coherence between the European Health Union proposals and the European Green Deal's zero pollution ambition, especially in the area of transport. We urgently call on you to make the two initiatives truly linked and coherent by including the relevant European Green Deal initiatives under the coverage of the [European Health Union](#) as a 'Green Pillar' to both meet the climate goals of the Paris Agreement and ensure a healthy recovery from the pandemic.

Our community welcomed your [first state of the Union speech](#), in which you declared that *'For me, it is crystal clear – we need to build a stronger European Health Union'*, followed by the launch of [the European Health Union \(EHU\)](#) transforming this political programme into policy. Yet, the European Health Union proposals still follow a biomedical approach, with only a promise that the link to the European Green Deal will be elaborated.

We also welcomed Europe's ambition to reach net zero emissions by 2050 and fulfil the EU's obligations under the Paris Agreement. However, despite the expected rise in health impacts of the climate crisis from wildfire, heatwaves, droughts, floodings, foreign pathogens, or new infectious diseases such as COVID-19, the potential health benefits of action on climate change are still not streamlined through the European Green Deal. Health scientists are calling for such synergies in their recent publication: *'[Bounce back better](#) : Sustainable Strategies for a Healthy Recovery from the Pandemic'*.

Air pollution is a public health and climate emergency. A new solid body of evidence on the adverse health effects of air pollution emerged over the last decade. It shows that air pollution is far more harmful and lethal than was calculated in the 2005 World Health Organization Global Air Quality Guidelines, which are up for revision this year. [Evidence continues to show](#) that there is no safe level below which air pollution is not harmful to human health. It also demonstrates that the current European legislation does not sufficiently protect people's health, while air pollution affects disproportionately vulnerable population groups.

Clean air policies and climate change adaptation and mitigation need to include multiple sectors of society such as energy, mobility and transport, and agriculture. Moreover, technological progress means that much lower emissions are already achievable. For instance, to improve air quality in Europe and achieve the European Green Deal's 'Zero Pollution' ambition, reduction and elimination of pollutant emissions from road transport is an urgent priority.

The EU is in the process of presenting proposals to deliver this ambition, the "Fit for 55" package, revised CO₂ targets for cars and vans, new emission standards (EURO 7) and strategies on Zero Pollution and Smart and Sustainable mobility. Member States need more incentives to enable the technological transition that will lead to realisation of the European Green Deal. The health impacts should alone justify the effective phase-out of new diesel and petrol cars and vans in the European Union [no later than 2035!](#)

Today, more than ever, leadership and political courage is needed to provide long-term health benefits and protect the planet. We are convinced that more focus on health is needed in actions to protect the climate, and vice-versa.

Binding the European Health Union and the European Green Deal together offers an opportunity to take advantage of the changes forced by COVID-19 and to develop policies to leap forward to a healthier future!

Dr Milka Sokolović
Director General
European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)

Prof. Zorana J. Andersen,
Chair, Environment and Health Committee,
European Respiratory Society (ERS),

On behalf of the following, signing organisations:

AGE Platform Europe
Associazione Apnoici Italiani
Austrian Lung Union
Brazilian Thoracic Society
Bulgarian Association for Patients' Defense
Dutch Thoracic Society
EU-IPFF
Eurochild
European Academy of Paediatrics (EAP/UEMS-SP)
European Heart Network (EHN)
European Institute of Women's Health
European Kidney Health Alliance
European Lung Foundation
European Medical Students Association (EMSA)
European Oncology Nursing Society (EONS)

European Specialist Nurses Organisation
European Society of Hypertension
Health Care Without Harm Europe
Hungarian Alliance of Patients Organisation
Institute for Health and Environment - Slovenia
International Diabetes Federation Europe
International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA)
International Society of Doctors for the Environment Italy, Associazione Medici per
l'Ambiente
Latvian Society of Lung Physicians
PHA Europe
Respire - French Association Against Air Pollution
Romanian Health Observatory
Polish Society for Health Programs
Platform for Support of Health of Disadvantaged Groups – Slovakia
Respiriamo Insieme APS
Transport and Environment
Turkish Thoracic Society