

As Sofia prepares to host on Thursday (11 January) the official inauguration of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, Krassen Nikolov warns of one of the biggest problems in Bulgaria – air pollution.

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The air in Sofia during the winter months was never particularly good, but during the first days of 2018, the citizens of the Bulgarian capital remembered the days in which the socialist-era metallurgical giant Kremikovtzi was still working. [Kremikovtzi is a giant metallurgical plant was built near Sofia in the 1950s, despite the fact that there is neither iron nor coal in the region. The real purpose of the plant was to create a workers' class. For several years now the plant has been closed].

Due to the lack of wind on the evening of 5 January the smog descended over the city and the particle levels in some neighborhoods exceeded the norm by nearly 30 times. The situation got back to normal only on 9 January at noon, although for those four days the local government in Sofia did not take any measures. Kindergartens and schools remained open, and directors were not warned not to take the children outside.

The Bulgarian capital is one of the places with the dirtiest air in Europe, and in other cities in the country the situation is also bad.

Less than a year ago, the European Court of Justice sentenced Bulgaria for failing to take measures to improve air quality. The state was found guilty of systematically exceeding daily and annual norms for fine particulate matter.

The European Commission filed the lawsuit in 2015.

Statistics show that from 2007 to 2014 there were repeated exceedances of the acceptable limits for concentrations of fine particulate matter in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, as well as in the North, Southwest and South-Eastern zones.

The court did not impose a fine, but such development remains an option in the future procedure.

The 2017 EU environmental Implementation Review Country Report found that air quality in Bulgaria remains of serious concern. Measurements show that the quality of air in almost the whole country is detrimental to health, and this has significant economic implications for labour productivity and the healthcare system.

The document recalls that Bulgaria has the highest concentrations of fine particulate matter in urban environments among all 28 EU countries. This makes it the country with the highest degree of external costs in the EU related to air pollution. This leads to a loss of

over two million working days and over 11,000 premature deaths per year.

One of the reasons for the heavy Sofia smog is that the capital of Bulgaria is located in a valley and its geographical location is predisposed to temperature inversions in the winter. During the cold months, the temperature at the altitude of 2,000m on the nearby Mount Vitosha is often higher than at 450m in the Sofia plateau.

The reason for the heavy pollution is the low standard of living. Thousands of families heat their homes with solid fuel, mainly wood but also coal. The Roma neighborhoods also burn old tires, plastic waste and other waste. There are many old diesel cars in the city, many of them with cut-off catalyts. Data show that than 200,000 old cars were registered in Bulgaria last year.

The streets in Sofia are not washed regularly, although after the last heavy smog the Sofia Municipality promised to address the problem. This is the other major factor contributing to the build-up of dust.

“Genocide! There is no other definition of what has happened in the last few days in Sofia, which is also the European capital of sport for 2019 and a candidate for the title of Green Capital,” commented the NGO “Spasi Sofia” (Save Sofia), which regularly raises the alarm about the problems of the capital. At the beginning of 2017 a protest was also organised by the inhabitants of the worst affected areas in the western part of the city, which are close to the Roma neighborhoods.

One of the reasons for Sofia residents to start looking at the problem of dirty air is the civil network of AirSofia.info, which uses its own sensors for measuring air pollution. It is a voluntary organisation of hundreds of Sofia residents who have installed sensors at their own expense throughout the city, which gives a full picture of real-time dust particles. This took away the Sofia Municipality’s monopoly on information and made people realise the problem. In the days between 5 and 9 January Airsofia.info sensors showed more air pollution than those of the authorities.

In Sofia there are five official stations for measuring air quality. One of them is in Vitosha, where the air is crystal-clean and there is nothing to measure. Conversely, AirSofia.info operates nearly 200 detectors scattered around the city.

In May 2017, Sofia citizens filed a collective lawsuit against the municipality for the dirty air. Unfortunately, at the end of October 2017, the Sofia City Court closed the case. The judge’s main motive was that citizens “have no proven experience, knowledge and financial resources” to protect their own injured interest and cannot “bear the burden of the court case”. A group of civil organisations are now united under the name “Group for clean air” and are appealing this decision before the higher court.

Guests to Bulgarian Presidency inauguration advised to wear breathing masks

In 1989, the protests accompanying the overthrow of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria began with an environmental movement in Rousse. In this context, air pollution represents one of the risks for the GERB government.

In any case, dear European officials coming for the Bulgarian Presidency, do not forget to buy breathing masks before coming to Sofia, because smog is a constant danger in this city.

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