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Introduction

On March 11, 2024, the Czech Republic utilized its Presidency of the Visegrad Group to organize the **V4+ Environment and Health Conference in Brno**. The conference focused on human exposure to environmental pollution and addressed the challenges that are most relevant to the Central and Eastern Europe region as well as priority actions to tackle them. It was structured around three topics: (i) chemical pollution of ambient and indoor air, (ii) the impact of chemical exposures on child development and health, and (iii) complex urban exposures. Each block consisted of several scientific presentations followed by a panel discussion. The conference was concluded by a high-level multisectoral science-to-policy panel.



The outcomes of the panel discussions were presented to the V4+ Meeting of the Ministers for Environment held on the following day (12 March) in Brno.

Main Recipients of the Policy Brief:

- European Environmental Agency Director and advisor (and former Minister of Environment)
- Ministers of Environment – Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Germany
- State Secretaries – Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland
- Other high-level representatives - Austria

EIRENE's Role

Many members of the EIRENE RI consortium took a central role at the **V4+ Environment and Health Conference** on March 11.

They included:

- Jana Klanova, EIRENE RI Coordinator (RECETOX, Masaryk University)
- Lisa Melymuk (RECETOX, Masaryk University)
- Maria Uhl (Environment Agency Austria)
- Lubica Murinova (Slovak Medical University)
- Martine Vrijheid (ISGlobal)
- Benedikt Warth/Eva Schernhammer (Vienna University)
- Jelle Vlaanderen (Utrecht University)
- David Kocman (Josef Stefan Institute)
- Milena Horvat (Josef Stefan Institute)
- Ondrej Mikes (RECETOX, Masaryk University)



The Policy Brief

The following information was presented at the March 12 Conference.

Introduction

The High-level V4+ Conference on Environment and Health in Central and Eastern Europe was organized in the Masaryk University Bohunice Campus library on 11 March 2024 to serve as a multisectoral platform to discuss CEE challenges and lessons learned but also outlined opportunities and priority actions to tackle identified challenges.

Over 100 participants from nine CEE countries were present, along with high-level representation from the World Health Organization and the European Environment Agency, who are also present in the meeting today.

There was a very fruitful dialogue among prominent researchers, representatives of national ministries, institutions, and authorities with international research consortia and organizations and stakeholders, including civil society and industries.

The conference focused on human exposure to environmental pollution and identified the most pressing challenges relevant to the Central and Eastern Europe region as well as priority actions to tackle them in the fields of (i) chemical pollution of ambient and indoor air, (ii) impact of chemical exposures on child development and health, and (iii) complex urban exposures.

Finally, a high-level multisectoral science-to-policy panel on Safe environment for healthy and resilient communities – a need for enhanced knowledge and strengthened intersectoral collaboration.

The text below features messages from the conference as input into your discussions today.

Outcomes of the V4+ Conference on Environment and Health in Central and Eastern Europe

Identified challenges

- Low visibility of environment and health-related issues specific to the CEE region and their insufficient translation into EU priorities;
- Lack of collaboration between environment and health sectors, missing interdisciplinarity in policy approaches;
- Insufficient cooperation between the CEE countries leading to fragmentation and inefficient use of resources;
- Lack of technical capacities, but also expertise and interdisciplinary training programmes;
- Weak communication to the public also leading to a weak understanding of the general population of environmental and health challenges, lack of compliance, and support for preventive measures.

Steps to be taken

- Formulate jointly regional priorities and strategies (chemicals, climate, and cities pressing jointly on human health);
- Consider potential conflicts of various environmental policies;
- Use ongoing projects (such as PARC - Horizon Europe Partnership for Assessment of Risks from Chemicals, IHEN - International Human Exposome Network) and platforms (SPHERA – Single Planet Health and Environment Research Agenda, WHO Partnerships) to bring the regional priorities forward;
- Secure co-financing of such activities using available financial mechanisms (such as European Cohesion Funds, Horizon Europe Widening, InterReg);
- However, the strategy should go beyond existing projects and programmes and needs to be supported by long-term investments (such as EIRENE – research infrastructure on human exposome research) to build and maintain human cohorts, biomonitoring studies, laboratory capacities, and data interpretation tools;

Pathway to success

- Reinforced collaboration across the environment and health domains (also extended to socioeconomic domain) to tackle current societal challenges (i.e., the impact of the triple environmental crisis on health and society);
- Consolidation and improved sharing of existing data (including research data) to make use of them for informed decisions (no harmonization - no sharing);
- Generation of new region-specific data to fill the gaps (historical, socioeconomic, and cultural differences matter);
- Holistic approaches (considering environmental and socioeconomic factors in addition to genetic) are needed, as well as collaboration and leveraging existing resources across the domains;
- Strengthened uptake of research data by policy (to scan the horizon for emerging challenges, ensure the quality of data, and provide tools to develop adequate policy responses);

Let us talk

- We need to re-establish the trust in science;
- Science-to-policy interface must be established at the national, regional, and international levels to develop the argument;
- Communication with the public is even more important to build literacy among citizens for informed decision-making and/or change the behaviour - lighthouse examples of good practice should be used;
- Education starts at the elementary level, but we need to develop lifetime educational modules also for (public health, clinical science, etc.) professionals;
- Participatory science is a way to develop shared understanding and co-create innovative tools and strategies;
- Living labs should bring together researchers with policymakers, authorities, local businesses, NGOs, and citizens to make a change.

Think big

It has been demonstrated that environmental factors are disproportionately affecting vulnerable and disadvantaged populations such as children and youth. We believe that a broad framework is needed to **protect the physical and mental health of future generations from the adverse effects of combined environmental and social stressors**. Let us suggest a new **CHILD MISSION** for the next European Framework Programme.



https://www.mzp.cz/en/news_20240314_V4-plus-countries-sought-common%20paths-in-environmental-protection

Press Releases

- [Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic](#)
- [RECETOX, Masaryk University](#)

Annex 1: Program of the V4+
Conference on Environment and
Health in Central and Eastern Europe
(March 11, 2024)

V4+ Conference on Environment and Health in Central and Eastern Europe 11 March 2024

Scope and purpose

In the Budapest Declaration adopted at the 7th Ministerial Environment and Health Conference in Budapest (5 – 7 July 2023), the Ministers committed to “accelerate the just transition towards resilient, healthy, equitable and sustainable societies.” The integral part of this declaration is the “Roadmap for Healthier People, a Thriving Planet and a Sustainable Future 2023-2030” describing a set of actions to tackle the most pressing health challenges related to the triple crisis (climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss) for Member States’ consideration. The Roadmap includes a commitment to promote research and innovation addressing environment and health challenges and translating science into policies and actions by organizing national multisectoral policy dialogues and exchanges of experiences among countries.

To contribute to this dialogue, **the Czech Republic intends to utilize its Presidency of the Visegrad Group** to organise the **V4+ Environment and Health Conference to be held on 11 March in Brno**. The conference will focus on human exposure to environmental pollution and will address challenges that are most relevant for the region of Central and Eastern Europe as well as priority actions to tackle them. It will be structured around three topics: (i) chemical pollution of ambient and indoor air, (ii) impact of chemical exposures on child development and health, and (iii) complex urban exposures. Each block will consist of several scientific presentations followed by a panel discussion. The conference will be concluded by a high-level multisectoral science-to-policy panel. The outcomes of the panel discussions will be presented to the **V4+ Meeting of the Ministers for Environment to be held on 12 March**.

The conference will provide a platform for exchanges of knowledge and discussions on potential collaborations towards a healthier and more sustainable CEE region. The meeting is open to scientists, experts from Ministries of Health and Ministries of Environment as well as other entities addressing environmental impacts on human health. In addition to the V4 Group members: Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, we extend our invitation to the experts and policy makers from the following countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Romania and Slovenia. The invited experts will include the leaders of the “Health and Environment Research Agenda for Europe” (HERA project), the Horizon Europe “Partnership for the Assessment of Risks from Chemicals” (PARC), Horizon 2020 project “Human Biomonitoring for Europe” (HBM4EU), “International Human Exposome Network” (IHEN), “The Research Infrastructure for Environmental Exposure Assessment in Europe” (EIRENE), as well as representatives of WHO and national ministries.

08:00 – 09:00

Registration and welcome coffee

09:00 – 09:20

Welcome remarks: moderator Kateřina Šebková

- Vlastimil Válek, Minister of Health of the Czech Republic
- Petr Hladík, Minister of Environment of the Czech Republic
- Francesca Racioppi, Head of the European Centre for Environment and Health (WHO)

09:20 – 09:25

- Jana Klánová, Director of RECETOX centre at MU

09:25 – 09:45

Key-note speech: Martin Scheringer (ETH Zürich, Masaryk University)

Chemicals in the 21st century – what is needed for an effective science-policy interface

09:45 – 11:00

Chemical pollution of ambient

and indoor air in CEE Chair:

Milan Chrenko (European Environmental Agency)

- 09:45 – 10:00 **Gerhard Lammel (Max Planck Institute, MU):** Ambient air pollution
- 10:00 – 10:15 **Lisa Melymuk (MU):** Indoor exposure
- 10:15 – 10:30 **Maria Uhl (Environment Agency Austria):** Microplastic pollution – threat to planetary boundaries
- 10:30 – 11:00 **Panel discussion** (HERA and PARC perspectives): **Manolis Kogevinas (ISGlobal), Tamás Szigeti (NNK, HU), Dorota Jarosinska (CLRTAP/WHO), Bohumil Kotlík (SZU)**

There is a strong commitment in Budapest Declaration to reduce the health impacts of pollution through addressing both established and emerging environmental risk factors. Pollution of air, water and soil, exposure to hazardous chemicals, noise, and other physical risk factors are responsible for a major burden of disease, which still need to be fully estimated. Exposure to different types of pollution poses a multitude of health risks to people throughout the life course, contributes to the burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases, and can lead to both acute episodes and long-term adverse effects. These health impacts include cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, endocrine, immunologic and metabolic disorders, and cancer. While the ambient air pollution has been recognised as a burning problem in many CEE countries, the indoor environment was given much less attention. The EC is currently funding a cluster of research projects dealing with the indoor exposures but it is still an emerging field.

11:00 – 11:30 - Coffee Break

1:30 – 12:45

Environmental determinants of child development and health

Chair: Jana Klánová (Masaryk University)

- 11:30 – 11:45 **Stephan Böse-O'Reilly (Medical University Munich)**
Climate Change and Children's Mental Health
- 11:45 – 12:00 **Kinga Polanska (Institute of Occupational Medicine Łódź)**
Exposure to phthalates, non-phthalate plasticizers and bisphenols and neurodevelopmental outcomes in school age children from Poland
- 12:00 – 12:15 **Lubica Murinova (Slovak Medical University)**
Slovak PCB cohort – 20 years of follow-up
- 12:15 – 12:45 **Panel discussion (IHEN and EIRENE perspectives):
Martine Vrijheid (iGlobal), Marike Kolossa (UBA), Benedikt Warth/Eva Schernhammer (Vienna Uni/ Med Uni), Tamás Pándics (Hungary)**

There is a specific focus on vulnerable population groups such as pregnant women, children and adolescents because chemical exposures can impair children's development and affect their physical and mental health. Longitudinal mother-child cohorts are the only tool to study environmental impacts on child health but they are much less common in the CEE region than in other parts of Europe. EU supports many collaborative projects applying a holistic concept of human exposome to study a complex of environmental factors behind child development and health. They are complemented by the human biomonitoring efforts (such as HBM4EU coordinated from GE).

12:45 – 14:15 - Lunch

14:15-15:30

Urban Environment

Chair: Pavla Svrčinová (Chief Public Health Officer)

- 14:15 – 14:30 **Jelle Vlaanderen (Utrecht University, Expanse Project):**
Maximizing one's health in a modern urban environment
- 14:30 – 14:45 **David Kocman (Jozef Stefan Institute)**
Personal exposure assessment – ICARUS
- 14:45 – 15:00 **Pavel Švec (Czech Healthy Cities)**
Czech Healthy Cities: a platform for supporting health and sustainability, focus on strategic management and participation at local level.
- 15:00 – 15:30 **Panel discussion (HERA, ICARUS, EHEN perspectives):
Milena Horvat (JSI SLO), Ondřej Mikeš (MU), Pavel Švec (Czechia)/Dorota Jarosinska (WHO/UNECE)**

As the majority of Europeans live in cities, we need to pay attention to their interactions with a complex urban environment. People are exposed to a mixture of physical, chemical, environmental and social factors effects of which can be modified by their behaviour and choices (healthy diet, physical exercise). Provision of safe built environments is central

in preventing disease, but sustainable and healthy design, planning and management of built environments can also promote healthy lifestyles and improve population health. European projects on urban exposome and/or healthy cities assess health impacts of various urban exposure factors or strategies to build smart and healthy cities.

15:30 – 16:00 – Coffee Break

16:00 – 17:30

Panel discussion: Safe environment for healthy and resilient communities, building strengthened intersectoral collaboration and knowledge for health and environment Chair: Jiří Lehejček (Deputy Minister of Environment of the Czech Republic)

Addressing the existing and emerging environment and health challenges requires additional, strong joint action, and concrete mechanisms to improve coordination and cooperation, while recognizing that different countries have different environment and health priorities, which reflect country-specific political, economic, social, cultural and natural conditions. To this aim, the seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health launched a new mechanism – the “EHP Partnerships” and the first partnership on human biomonitoring was introduced at the conference.

Panelists: Thomas Jakl (AT), Peter Korytar (EC), Weronika Michalak (HEAL PL), Zsafia Pusztai (WHO)

17:30 – 18:00

Closing remarks (moderator)

20:00 – 22:00

Reception at Brno Observatory

Informal dinner hosted by the Minister of Health and the Minister of the Environment.

12 March 2024

From 09:00

Excursion to the CELSPAC Biobank (optional)

The CELSPAC Biobank is an open-access infrastructure that collects, processes, stores, and subsequently distributes various types of biological samples (e.g., cord blood, blood, milk, urine) derived from population, environmental, bio-monitoring, and clinical studies. The samples are used for basic scientific research and the development of new diagnostic methods. The laboratory information system was developed in cooperation with the Czech national node of the European Biobanks Infrastructure Network (BBMRI) in order to ensure its compatibility with European standards.

Annex 2: Agenda for V4+
Environmental Ministers' Meeting
(March 11-12, 2024)

AGENDA

V4+ ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTERS' MEETING

11-12 March 2024, Brno, Czech Republic

**MONDAY,
11TH OF MARCH 2024**

VENUE

Brno Observatory and Planetarium

ADDRESS

Kraví hora 2, 616 00 Brno

Arrival of the Delegations to Brno

20:00 - 22:00

Evening Reception with Cultural
Program

Hosted by the Minister of the Environment
and by the Minister of Health

Dress Code: Business Casual

**TUESDAY,
12TH OF MARCH 2024**

V E N U E

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

A D D R E S S

MUNI Campus Library, B09 Building, Kamenice 5,
625 00 Brno

8 : 0 0

REGISTRATION

8 : 3 0

OPENING OF THE MEETING

8 : 4 0 - 9 : 0 0

Wrap up of the expert conference
and input for ministers

9 : 0 0 - 1 0 : 1 0

WORKING SESSION I.

Impact of chemical substances to human health –
priorities for a cleaner environment, water, soil,
food and a healthier population

1 0 : 1 0 - 1 0 : 3 0

Coffee break

TUESDAY, 12TH OF MARCH 2024

- 10:30 - 11:40** **WORKING SESSION II.**
Circular economy – greater use of secondary raw materials and products with recycled content
- 11:40** Family photo
- 11:50 - 12:15** Coffee break
- 12:15 - 13:25** **WORKING SESSION III.**
Light pollution – an ever-increasing issue both for the environment and for the human health
- 13:25 - 13:40** **CHAIR SUMMARY**
- 13:40 - 14:00** **CZ V4 PRESIDENCY PRESS BRIEFING**
- 13:40 - 15:00** Buffet lunch
- 15:00 - 17:00** **BIOBANK EXCURSION (optional)**