The public health hazard posed by the approximately 2,000 rubbish dumps currently operating across the country has been grossly underestimated. This is the conclusion of a report released following the fire at the Tagarades landfill, east of Thessaloniki, which recently burned trash for more than a week.

Researchers at the Democritus University found dangerous levels of dioxin pollution in milk and poultry coming from the area around Tagarades. The authorities immediately ordered the collection and destruction of milk produced in farms located up to 4 kilometers around the specific dumpsite. At the same time, they imposed a ban on the consumption of poultry meat and eggs from the same region and called for the inspection of olive trees and soil.

The threat, therefore, does not just lie in the Third World standard of our rubbish dumps, or the unbearable stench and diseases arising from the pollution they create, but also in their cancerous effects - it takes one tiny iota of dioxin to cause cancer. The state has a duty to take drastic measures to wipe out the bane of the country’s landfills.

This is not an easy task. The problem is not a lack of alternative solutions from a technological point of view. The technology exists. Corrupt local authorities, however, have made landfills an arena in which to play out political and economic interests.

By sacrificing the good health of their residents, some mayors, the capos of landfills, have found a lever to blackmail the central government for more funds, which they invest, in part, in projects that will ensure their re-election. Accomplices to this crime against public health are the responsible ministers, who, instead of promoting alternative solutions, prefer shady practices, which they cover up for their own political interests.

The political leadership must remove these festering political cells before very real cancers begin taking their toll.