

Miriam Dalli: We need more ambitious CO2 reduction targets to ensure EU does not endanger its technological leadership

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Interviews

Maltese MEP Miriam Dalli talks maintaining Europe's technological leadership on electric vehicles, emissions reduction, her country's recent tension with the Commission and more.



Miriam Dalli | *Photo credit: Giancarlo Rocconi*

You are working on a report on emission performance standards for new passenger cars and light commercial vehicles. How can policymakers avoid another Dieseldate, and ensure car manufacturers adhere to emissions standards?

The transition to clean mobility requires a systematic approach. We will not be successful if we do not modernise the technologies used, making vehicles more efficient, with varying levels of electrification.

These changes require targeted policy interventions, driven by agreed standards and economic instruments, until the cost of new technologies reaches parity with the existing ones. Experience shows that standards for new cars and vans so far have always been a strong driver for innovation and efficiency in automotive technology.

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During my legislature in the European Parliament, I have worked on real driving emissions (RDE) for nitrogen oxide (NOx) and I am very much aware of the increased gap between type approval and real-world emissions. It is high time to develop an RDE test for CO2.

In the longer term, we need to have a clear understanding of the overall lifecycle emissions of the various fuel types through a common methodology that analyses well-to-tank and tank-to-wheel emissions.

We also need more ambitious CO2 reduction targets and zero- and low-emission vehicles targets to ensure that that EU industry does endanger its technological leadership and lag behind other continents that seek to take the lead.

How confident are you that the EU will achieve its clean air targets? Do you believe these targets are sufficiently ambitious?

The road transport sector contributes about 20 per cent of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions. Light duty vehicles - cars and vans - produce around 15 per cent of the EU's CO2 emissions.

In its proposal, the Commission plans to reduce new car CO2 emissions by about 3.9 per cent per year between 2021 and 2030, compared to about 5 per cent a year set for between 2015 and 2021.

It plans to reduce new van CO2 emission levels by only 3.5 per cent per year between 2020 and 2030, compared to the 5.6 per cent per annum between 2017 and 2020. This would be a regression, rather than build on the existing momentum we have.

I am proposing a more ambitious 2025 interim target of 25 per cent CO2 reduction and 50 per cent CO2 reduction by 2030. Keeping an interim 2025 target is key for the effective and proper realisation of this policy. An ambitious 2025 mandatory target provides clarity and is a clear strong signal for car manufacturers to act.

If the EU wants to meet its obligations under the Paris agreement by 2050 and in line with the effort-sharing regulation by 2030, we cannot allow low targets; it is important that emissions are reduced in the road transport sector too.

Can electric cars be a viable solution to greening Europe's transport sector if they are failing to attract buyers?

Given the right environment, electric and electrified cars will become increasingly popular. Manufacturers state that consumer demand is not there; consumers on the other hand state that the choice is extremely limited and infrastructure is lacking.

This is an area that requires targeted policy intervention. Setting a strong benchmark for the share of zero- and low-emission vehicles (ZLEVs) in the EU fleet, together with strong CO2 target is a prerequisite for a strong home market.

Different analyses clearly show that the total cost of zero-emissions vehicles is likely to converge with that of hybrids and traditional combustion engine vehicles during the next decade.

We also need to have the required infrastructure. The dilemma is, which comes first? I agree that charging infrastructure is a condition for the deployment of zero-emission vehicles and investment needs to be accelerated from today's very low levels.

However, consumer demand however is already there. European car manufacturers are already producing more electric vehicles than are required under the European Commission proposal.

Others have targets in line with what the Commission is suggesting.

I am often told that the targets for electric vehicles that automakers present are global targets. Well, it is very clear to me that what is good for the global market should also apply to the EU market. Our citizens and consumers deserve nothing less.

What more do you think the EU can do to get people to buy and use greener forms of transport, particularly as prices remain high?

Over the next decade, electric cars are expected to become cheaper than petrol and diesel cars. Although battery electric vehicles (BEV) will be more expensive than equivalent internal combustion (ICE) engine vehicles for the next seven to nine years - depending on the segment - the average BEV in the US and Europe will be cheaper than a comparable ICE in all market segments by the end of the 2020s.

Cost reductions are heavily reliant on mass manufacturing, which is why stricter policy measures are vital. By 2024 the average four-year cost of running an electric vehicle should match - at worst - that of a petrol car, if not lower. More recent research, as well as announcements by car manufacturers, seem to indicate that this milestone might be achieved even earlier.

The proposed legislation covers the period starting 2021 to 2030. If we invest the requisite amounts into research and innovation we can ensure that the EU industry remains at the forefront of clean technology innovation while the cost of technology to reduce CO2 emission from cars will reduce over time as economies of scale are achieved.

This is an opportunity for the European industry to tap into a global market for batteries, forecasted to reach €250bn per year by 2025. As soon as we have low-carbon vehicle technologies manufactured in Europe, the economic benefits will be greater for the EU.

This legislation is not about electric vehicles alone; it is about the different technologies including

hybrid, plug-in hybrids, fuel cell technology, battery electric vehicles and efficient internal combustion engines. It is the mix of these different technologies together that can help us reduce emissions for 2025 and 2030.

How is the EU perceived in your country, Malta? Have Maltese views on the EU changed since Brussels started looking into rule of law and corruption allegations?

In March, the European Commission Representation in Malta published the national report of the standards Eurobarometer survey. It showed that respondents in Malta feel very positive about the EU, about Malta's membership of the EU, and what the EU stands for.

The Maltese respondents continue to express a generally more favourable opinion about the EU than respondents in the whole of the 28 member states. For 45 per cent of respondents, the EU has a very positive or fairly positive image, while for eight per cent it conjures up a fairly negative or very negative image.

At the same time, I believe that the majority of the Maltese also feel that the current descriptions of Malta in EU fora do not reflect the Malta they know and live in; the narrative that is being pushed in Brussels is one to which they definitely do not relate.

As keen followers of European politics, the Maltese do not want to see an EU of two weights, two measures adopting different stances with different countries just because Malta happens to be a smaller member state. The government's openness to dialogue with the EU institutions has helped to send out the message to people that we can discuss local matters firmly with EU institutions.

As a former journalist, what is your view on the case surrounding the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia and how it has been handled by Maltese authorities?

As a former journalist, I believe that all journalists should be offered the same level of protection whichever country they operate from. Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder shocked me just as much as the murders of Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. No one in the European Union wants to witness, let alone live alongside, such brutality.

The immediate action taken by the authorities to seek the assistance of international authorities sent a strong message that the Maltese authorities want to resolve this case and three people have already been arraigned and charged with the murder.

While I understand that there are still questions that need to be answered, I hope that the ongoing investigation provides these answers. Pressure should be maintained, but not at the risk of turning this case into a partisan political game and not allowing the relevant authorities to do their work.

How will Brexit's impact on the new EU budget affect Malta, a tiny member state?

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union will leave a gap on the revenue side. The EU will have to do more with less, setting an unprecedented challenge. It is too early to say what the impact on Malta will be, mostly because the negotiations remain at an early stage.

Also, we do not yet have a clear picture on what the UK's relationship with the EU will be post Brexit. In this regard, the UK has already committed to paying its fair share of contribution towards the EU budget in exchange for access and participation in programmes such as ERASMUS+ and Horizon

2020.

The more persistent and pertinent question is how the budget will be financed: will there be new taxes at European level to finance the budget or will the same formula used for previous budgets be retained?

The negotiations on the EU budget for 2020-2027 have started and are expected to be quite complex. Where the EU needs to find a balance is on how to best finance the new priorities, such as migration and climate change issues while maintaining successful programmes that have helped cohesion and convergence among EU member states.

What will be your political priorities for the remainder of this legislature and will you be running in next year's European elections?

My ultimate aim is to continue representing the interests of the Maltese electorate and citizens across the EU to the best of my abilities. Environment, health, social issues, education and job creation are my top priorities.

I am the S&D group coordinator for the environment, public health and food safety committee (ENVI), which means that I will be involved in the negotiations, and in closing off the different ENVI files. I am particularly interested in the 2050 long-term climate strategy, the common agricultural policy, the next multiannual financial framework, the water directive and the plastics strategy.

And of course, there is my own legislative file on CO2 emissions. As for next year's European elections, my plan is to be one of the candidates for Malta. Then I will leave it in the good hands of our constituents to make their choice accordingly.

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