

COP25: Nicolás González Casares "Setting new ambitions"

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Interviews

Spanish Socialist MEP Nicolás González Casares, a member of Parliament's delegation to next month's COP25, tells Rajnish Singh about his hopes and ambitions for the keenly-awaited climate conference.



Photo credit: Giancarlo Rocconi

With COP25 switching from Santiago to Madrid, what does hosting the climate change conference in Spain mean for your country and people?

First of all, we can only regret the situation in Chile and hope for a resolution. It is a pity they haven't been able to hold COP25 after their huge organisational effort.

I have to say I had no doubt that, given the circumstances, Spain was going to offer to host it for two reasons: first, because our country and its government have demonstrated a firm commitment in the fight against climate change.

This is demonstrated by the fact that the European Commission considers Spain as having presented the most ambitious of the 2030 Horizon energy and climate plans of all Member States; second, because of the desire and political drive to quickly offer a way out to a sister country like Chile.

Both our Ecological Transition Minister Teresa Ribera and President Pedro Sánchez are correct to promote holding COP25 in Madrid.

It is an organisational challenge to prepare it in barely a month, but I am sure that with cooperation from Chile it will be a success.

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In your view, how important is COP25 in ensuring the completion of the Paris Agreement work programme, especially in relation to measuring emission reductions?

It is important because we are faced with a COP prior to the first revision of the Nationally Determined Contributions and it will be necessary for countries to increase the ambition of the Contributions which are currently insufficient as indicated by the Talanoa Dialogues, in order to achieve the Paris goals.

At Katowice COP24 there was progress in the technical framework necessary to put the Paris Agreement into operation in an international context. COP24 can be considered a relative success. Now it is important to complement implementation of Article 6 which permits cooperative approaches for mitigation of emissions through market mechanisms.

Our European emission allowance market may be considered by other countries as a global mechanism for modulating the price of CO₂ and reducing emissions.

But the major importance, given the absence of the US, lies in achieving a multilateral consensus and commitments by major emitting countries like China, India and Russia.

As a member of the parliament's delegation to COP25, what do you believe should be the eu's key priorities in the negotiations?

I am grateful to the European Parliament and to my group, the S&D, for this opportunity. I was clear, as a new MEP, that I wanted to focus my work on these matters because they are subjects which are important to me.

That said, in Madrid we have to demonstrate to the world that Europe provides leadership in the fight against climate change. In Parliament we will table an ambitious resolution which defends, amongst other things, the reduction of CO₂ emissions by 55 percent by 2030 and neutrality in 2050.

I am from Galicia, a region in which the need for support along the decarbonisation path is a patent reality.

The role of energy is decisive and our delegation will emphasise support for energy efficiency and renewables and the abolition of fossil fuels subsidies.

We will also work to convince developed countries of the need to increase the contribution to the Adaptation Fund. Poverty makes populations affected by climate change more vulnerable.

In addition, we will have to talk about the planet's forests. They not only have to be preserved and even increased, but we must also think about their biodiversity and health. An industrial forestry cultivation is not a forest.

With President Trump formally notifying the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Climate Agreement, how will this negatively impact the fight against climate change? Can the EU replace the US as a global leader in tackling the climate crisis?

With his scepticism, President Trump demonstrates little sensitivity and great ignorance. When he won the election, he announced his intention to pull the United States out of the Paris Agreement and now he is carrying out his threat.

But the world now is not what it was; the commitment of other nations has not been reduced but rather reinforced, with the EU at the forefront.

We must wait to see what happens next year in the US elections but, for now, Democratic Party candidates like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders completely disagree with Trump's Paris decision.

From the ethical, social and economic point of view, the fight against climate change is an obligation to which the European Union is committed.

In the face of the climate change challenge, this commitment is not temporary but existential.

Greta Thunberg and extinction rebellion in the UK are calling for more drastic changes in societal behaviour. How realistic is it for the EU and Member States to make these adjustments?

Among the things which most strengthen the fight against climate change is the commitment and demand of the young, particularly in Europe.

Greta Thunberg has amplified that voice. Parliament is conscious of those aspirations and has converted the fight against climate change into one of its leitmotifs. We all add up.

What we as public representatives must do is face up to the political crisis with ambition and realism and watch out, above all, for those who are most affected or who are going to be affected by the ecological transition.

These include people from the regions most dependent on carbon-based industries. There can be no climate fight without social backing and, therefore, as an S&D member, I consider social justice as crucial.

'Do not leave anybody to their fate' is not a slogan but should be the cornerstone of environmental policy if we want to demonstrate true commitment.

The EU also has to start promoting more sustainable lifestyles that are easier to adopt for young people. As citizens we must also act individually, addressing issues such as consumption, waste and mobility.

"Among the things which most strengthen the fight against climate change is the commitment and demand of the young, particularly in Europe"

Apart from the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which other challenges do you foresee in reaching a deal at COP25 that is more ambitious in terms of implementing Paris and enhancing climate action across all aspects of society?

Attitudes like that of Brazil's President Bolsonaro and the stance adopted by Trump complicate progress in the greater climate ambition. This compels us to cooperate more intensely with other countries.

We have to combat the scepticism against climate change and explain the measures which are being taken because, socially, they can be misunderstood.

The yellow vest movement in France and protests in Ecuador start from social discontent but share, as a common denominator, concern about increases in fuel taxes.

Another challenge can be found closer to home and the EU must show its leadership by increasing its contributions in a way compatible with the 1.5°C global warming target.

Climate neutrality by the middle of the century is also pending approval by Council. But we must not forget that Europe only represents nine percent of emissions and 7 percent of the world's population.

With sufficient commitment we can lead, influence and serve as an example to the rest of the world.

We have to demonstrate that a just transition is not only beneficial climatically but also makes sense from the economic and technological point of view as this will increase the potential for society's well-being.

I believe in the potential of the European Green Deal as an engine for progress of our societies.

Transport has seen a big increase in emissions so, given that trade relies on transport, what more would you like to see the new Commission do to reduce emissions in this sector?

The transport sector is responsible for a quarter of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions and little progress has been made in clean energies penetration.

We cannot continue this way if we want to achieve climate neutrality in 2050. Transport decarbonisation is a must.

Mobility of people and goods is going to undergo a major change in the EU in the coming years and electrification and digitalisation are going to be key.

Promoting low-emission zones in cities not only preserves health but changes citizens' perception, strengthening ecological commitment.

I would also highlight the need to tackle the EU directive on taxation of energy products. In sectors

like aviation, it makes no sense flying less than 500- 600 km when there are alternatives like the train.

So, it is possible to act from the taxation point of view. The proposal to introduce maritime transport in the EU ETS is also interesting. In the short term and with regard to overland mobility solutions exist to reduce emissions by renewing an aged fleet.

We must also support electric mobility and develop an extensive recharging infrastructure. But, looking ahead, we should also consider other decarbonised energy vectors like hydrogen, especially in those areas that electromobility cannot reach. Revision of the Fuel Quality Directive will play an important role in this.

With so many different pressures on the EU MFF budget, how realistic is it to expect that Europe not only transforms into a climate-neutral economy, but also maintains support for sustainable development in other countries?

What's not realistic is expecting otherwise. Over recent years, the European Union has demonstrated that it is possible to grow while greenhouse gas emissions are reduced - that is to say, uncoupling economic growth and energy intensity.

In fact, between 1990 and 2018, emissions fell by 23 percent while the economy grew by 61 percent. Committing to the sustainable development of other countries is not only an ethical matter but also of strategic interest.

Climate refugees and migrants already exist and the climate crisis is global and interdependent. It knows neither walls nor borders. In another respect, I would like to stress a sentimental matter which is to do with human nature and its relationship with the landscapes and beauty of our planet.

We will become poorer as humans without seeing snow in winter on the mountains, witnessing lifeless oceans or observing great forests turn into deserts.

Many of the greatest moments of happiness for human being are associated with their experiences in nature.

My appeal is this: let us not deprive those born after us of that opportunity. That should be our mandate.



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