

Addressing the air pollution urgency

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LPG can be the alternative energy solution Europe needs to reduce emissions, argues Samuel Maubanc.



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Europe's industrial and political leaders are coming together at the second Clean Air Forum in Bratislava this week.

The new European Commission, led by President Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that a zero-pollution strategy will be an integral part of its ambitious European Green Deal.

Therefore, I think we can all agree that there is no better time than now to discuss the pressing issue of air quality.

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In the EU alone, air pollution causes 400,000 premature deaths and results in billions of euros in health-related costs.

This means that about 2,000 people will die from air pollution between the start of the conference and its conclusion.

The World Health Organisation has rightly labelled air quality as the biggest environmental health risk in Europe, but this sense of urgency still has to be properly translated into EU policy.

Public awareness of air pollution from transport has grown a lot, especially since the Dieselgate scandal, and so new vehicles are indeed becoming cleaner and cleaner.

However, bearing in mind that the average age of vehicles in the EU keeps increasing, it is clear that the EU also needs to do something to quickly curb pollutant emissions from the existing fleet.

There are 250 million cars in Europe today, and they will not be replaced by new cleaner models overnight.

“An important lesson here should be that climate policies and air quality need to complement each other, not create contradictions”

The retrofit of existing vehicles offers a huge potential for saving emissions, either through fuel-switching, e.g. to Autogas (LPG for transport) or other alternative fuels, or through upgrading its exhaust treatment.

Cleaner than conventional fuels, LPG under real-driving conditions results in savings of up to 90 percent of the particulate number (PN) compared to gasoline, and up to 98 percent of nitrogen oxide (NOx) compared to diesel. Can the EU really afford to not tap into that potential now?

Heating is another major source of air pollution. While poor air quality is often associated with cities, pollutant emissions from heating are also problematic in rural areas.

Where the gas grid or district heating are not available, communities and businesses often rely on high-emission fuels.

The heating needs of citizens outside the gas grid in countries like Germany, Belgium or Poland are largely met with heating oil and coal, together representing up to 70 percent of the energy mix.

Meanwhile, other available solutions like LPG produce less greenhouse gases and PM/black carbon.

On top of this, climate policies have also resulted in a new rapid uptake of firewood.

This has dramatically increased air pollutant emissions, with some Member States seeing up to 50 percent of their total particulate emissions coming from wood-burning for heating.

An important lesson here should be that climate policies and air quality need to complement each other, not create contradictions.

What could the EU Zero Pollution Strategy do about it? First, the EU needs to step up its ambition.

The WHO has already set guideline emission limits, but the EU is lagging behind. This needs to be better addressed now.

Secondly, bearing in mind that several Member States are still breaching the EU National Emission Ceiling Directive, the Commission needs to focus on enforcement. This means applying tougher controls on National Air Quality Plans.

Lastly, the Commission must ensure that a strict air pollution impact assessment of the National Energy and Climate Plans is systematically performed.

I look forward to seeing these options discussed at the Clean Air Forum this week.

About the author

Samuel Maubanc is General Manager of Liquid Gas Europe

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