

# Is an EU-wide ban on petrol and diesel cars imminent?

Blog post by Practice Lead Ermenegilda Boccabella and Associate Charlotte Roberts, 14 October 2020

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A decision is imminent on whether the UK will bring forward its phase-out date for vehicles with internal combustion engines (ICE) from 2035 to 2030 - in itself already a radically different position than this time last year where the phase-out date was set at 2040. Pressure is mounting from all sides as without this decision, the UK stands no chance of meeting its net-zero 2050 targets. If the UK does move in this respect, focus will inevitably shift to Brussels and the EU's ambitions.

For its part, the European Commission has been much more reticent on any such ban. Despite ambitions for greater electrification of vehicles set out in the European Green Deal and a slew of measures tackling vehicle emissions in the pipeline. The EU lacks a phase-out date for ICE vehicle sales. The Commission is not consulting on one and has shown no indication that it is even on the cards for discussion.

One of the key challenges for the EU is the readiness of member states for the transition, which varies widely. Electric vehicle (EV) sales are expected to reach a million sales in 2020, but while the average EU market share of electric and hybrid vehicles has been increasing, there are huge discrepancies in the uptake across member states. For example, the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (ACEA) data shows that in 2018, the number of EVs and plug-in hybrids sold in 2018 ranged from just 93 cars in Latvia to 67,504 in Germany. This is an example of a more general trend - a considerably lower take-up of EVs in Central and Eastern Europe

The same is true of charging infrastructure, which is a necessary pre-condition for an EV rollout and without which a ban on ICE cars is a gamble. 76% of all EV charging points in the EU are located in just four countries. The Netherlands, Germany, France and the UK have the highest number of charging points, ranging from around 35,000 in the UK to over 52,000 in the Netherlands. The majority of the remaining European countries then have less than 2000 charging points, with notably Greece having just 50. To reach the EU's aims of EV rollout, the European Commission have estimated at least 2.8m electric charging points will be needed across the EU by 2030, entailing a 20-fold increase.

Nevertheless, EU policymakers know that an EV strategy has to be part of a credible 2050 net zero strategy. So, what should we expect from Brussels? The European Green Deal policy agenda has many potential levers to enable progress on EV rollout. Key elements will be in the Sustainable Mobility Strategy, set for release later this year, addressing connectivity and a review of vehicle emissions standards in 2021, where it is expected to tighten the 2030 limit on carbon dioxide emissions for vehicles - although there is so far no hint of an EU-wide ICE ban.

Reviews of the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Directive and the Trans-European Network Transport (TEN-T) Regulation will both address charging infrastructure and connectivity across the EU. However while these could go some way towards addressing the unevenness of uptake of EVs across the EU, when you consider that the typical lifetime of a car might be 15 years, it is hard to see how without a firm

ban on cars with internal combustion engines by 2035 at the latest, transport could be decarbonised in time for the EU's net-zero by 2050 goals.

Regions and cities are also going to implement their own incentives, either by increasing the cost of vehicle registration based on emissions or creating policies that support low emissions vehicles. In Berlin, EVs are eligible for an 'E' plate allowing them to superior street parking. But none of this is a substitute for a proper EU policy, bringing all member states up to a level where electric vehicle uptake is a logical, cost comparable choice for consumers.

The relatively short timeframes for getting policy in place to create the right trajectory for 2050 suggests Brussels will need to find better tools for driving the transition - or use some of the existing ones in a more ambitious way. If the UK takes the plunge, the EU will feel all the more pressure to follow suit. The next year will show if it can work out how.