The EU is stuck in a dilemma when it comes to electric vehicles

In a comprehensive statement, the European Court of Auditors has expressed its doubts about the problem-free implementation of the ban on combustion engines. Reducing car emissions is "easier said than done". When implementing the laudable goal of a zero-emission car fleet, the EU must ensure "that it does not pay for its ambition in climate protection by weakening its industrial sovereignty". The higher-level supervisory authority in Luxembourg also warns that achieving the climate targets should not overburden citizens financially.

Zero-emission transport is a key element of the European climate strategy, which aims to reduce net emissions to zero by 2050. To achieve this, CO2 emissions from cars with combustion engines must be reduced. Options for alternative fuels must also be explored. And finally, battery-powered electric vehicles must reach the masses.

Reducing car emissions

Although the EU has made progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it has not made progress in the transport sector, which accounts for around a quarter of total CO2 emissions in Europe, half of which come from cars. "The Green Deal can only be successful if car emissions are reduced. However, we must note with regret that despite ambitious targets and strict requirements, most conventional cars still emit as much CO2 as they did twelve years ago," says Nikolaos Milionis, Member of the European Court of Auditors. Although, according to Milionis, engines have become more efficient, this has been offset by cars that are on average around ten percent heavier and engines that are around 25 percent more powerful, which are required to move this weight.

Uncertain future for alternative fuels

Alternative fuels such as biofuels, e-fuels or hydrogen are often cited as potential successors to gasoline and diesel. However, in their report on biofuels, the EU auditors emphasize the lack of a clear and stable roadmap to tackle the industry's long-term issues of fuel availability, cost and environmental friendliness.

"As they are not widely available, biofuels are not a reliable and credible alternative for cars," says Milionis, describing the current status of the Luxembourg studies. According to these studies, the amount of biomass produced domestically is not sufficient to be a serious alternative to conventional fossil fuels. However, if the biomass is mainly imported from third countries, this runs counter to the goal of strategic autonomy in the energy sector, warns Milionis.

The Court of Auditors is therefore reopening an old debate when it says that the production of biofuels can throw ecosystems out of balance and have a negative impact on biodiversity, soil and water quality. The auditors do not see it as the duty of politicians to establish clear rules, but rather pose the ethical question of whether the production of fuels should take precedence over the production of food.

None of this applies to HVO fuels made from residues and waste. Nevertheless, the EU auditors conclude that all biofuels are not yet competitive. Biofuels are more expensive than carbon-based fuels. For this reason, the auditors give the climate-politically absurd advice that it is currently "cheaper to purchase emission certificates than to reduce CO2 emissions with the help of biofuels".

Ultimately, the EU auditors are thus denying all alternative fuels the opportunity to actually reduce CO2 emissions from combustion engines. However, the auditors also see problems on both the demand and supply side for the alternative of electromobility, which make it unlikely that the EU will be able to "reconcile" its Green Deal and its industrial

sovereignty.

Electric vehicles as a "dilemma"

The auditors believe that the European battery industry is lagging behind the global competition. This could nip a full build-up of capacity in the EU in the bud, they believe. Less than ten percent of global battery production takes place in Europe; worldwide, China produces the lion's share at 76 percent. Annemie Turtelboom, member of the European Court of Auditors, sees a fourfold dilemma for the EU - between ecological priorities and industrial policy as well as between environmental goals and the costs for consumers."

A particular obstacle for the EU's battery industry is its heavy dependence on imports of raw materials from third countries with which it has not concluded suitable trade agreements. For example, 87 percent of raw lithium imports into the EU come from Australia, 80 percent of manganese imports come from South Africa and Gabon, 68 percent of raw cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo and 40 percent of graphite from China.

The dependence of imports on raw materials that are in high demand not only leads to cost constraints. In addition, many of the countries of origin are unstable in terms of domestic politics or even pose geopolitical risks for Europe's strategic autonomy - not to mention the social and ecological conditions under which these raw materials are mined, the report states.

The auditors also emphasized that the costs of batteries produced in the EU are still much higher than planned, despite extensive public support. Batteries account for a significant proportion of the cost of an electric car: up to €15,000 on average in Europe. If there is no clear improvement in the EU's capacity and competitiveness, there is a risk that the "electric car revolution" in Europe will rely on imports and thus have a negative impact on the European automotive industry with its more than three million jobs in the manufacturing sector, warn the EU auditors.

The charging point plight

In practice, access to electromobility is proving difficult for many Europeans. Firstly, there is a lack of charging points throughout the EU. Secondly, the availability of public charging stations varies greatly from country to country. These are particularly rare in Eastern Europe: 70 percent of charging points are located in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Travelling with electric cars across Europe is therefore not easy, partly because there is a lack of real-time information and a harmonized payment system.

"The EU does not have many trump cards when it comes to electrifying its vehicle fleet: access to raw materials, the costs to be borne by industry and citizens and a lack of infrastructure could lead to it gambling away its commitment," warns Annemie Turtelboom. Battery-powered electric vehicles are crucial in Europe's ambitious quest for a zero-emission vehicle fleet. Turtelboom therefore sees the EU as being forced not only to reconcile the Green Deal with its industrial sovereignty, but also to take into account the financial burden on consumers. It is important to ensure that European industry can produce electric cars on a large scale at competitive prices, while at the same time securing the supply of raw materials and improving the charging infrastructure across the continent. (aum)

Images for article

Photo: Autoren-Union Mobilität/Tank & Rast

Kia EV9 at a fast charging station.

Photo: Autoren-Union Mobilität/Kia

Photo: Auto-Medienportal.Net/BMW