

Speed bumps on German road to lower emissions

May 27 2019, by Coralie Febvre



Germans's love for their cars sometimes clashes with their climate targets

Germany has in recent years polished its "green" image abroad, but the country was only recently forced to admit it will miss a self-imposed 2020 climate target.

With Berlin set to miss the [next decade](#)'s goals too unless lawmakers take bold action, here are some reasons why carbon reduction has proved tricky even for a wealthy country with an environmentally conscious electorate.

Car-land

The car industry is a pillar of German economic prosperity, juicing export profits and employing 800,000 people.

After a long rearguard action in Brussels against tougher emissions limits on Volkswagen, Daimler or BMW's fleets, Berlin remains reluctant to follow Britain and France in setting a cutoff date for new combustion engines.

Even the "dieselgate" emission cheating scandal has failed to dent politicians' coziness with the car, as leaders warned against measures that could harm ordinary drivers, such as bans from city centres for the most polluting vehicles.

Conservative transport minister Andreas Scheuer recently blocked plans for a nationwide speed limit on the country's famed Autobahn motorways, which the environment minister had proposed to slash both pollution and road deaths.

Nuclear phase-out

After Japan's Fukushima disaster in 2011, Angela Merkel took one of the biggest political decisions of her chancellorship in 2011, setting 2022 as the date for all German nuclear plants to be shut down.

Although widely welcomed at the time, especially by the decades-old anti-nuclear movement, the step overturned planning for electricity supply in a power-gobbling economy.

Germany has built up renewable energy sources like wind, solar, bio-fuels and hydroelectric power, accounting for 38 percent of consumption last year and headed for 65 percent by 2030.

But some constant supply is needed to balance out fluctuations in

naturally-generated power.

For now, electricity storage remains expensive and a project to build high-voltage energy links from north Germany's vast offshore wind farms to the industrial south is making only inching progress.

The obstacles have seen Berlin turn to Russian gas as an alternative, as well as razing entire villages to make way for open-cast mining of cheap but highly-polluting brown coal.

Long goodbye to coal

Ministers, industry, experts and unions spent months hammering out a "coal compromise" released early this year, calling for the fuel to be abandoned by 2038.

The four states most vulnerable to the resulting social upheaval—with areas especially dependent on coal mining—will be supported through the transition with 40 billion euros (\$45 billion) of public money.

Jobs in mining have shrunk by around 100,000 since the turn of the millennium, with just 30,000 people working in the sector by 2016—five times fewer than in the wind power industry, according to specialist website Strom Report.

Social conflict will nevertheless be hard to avoid, with most of the remaining posts concentrated in areas like the west German rust belt of North Rhine-Westphalia or the deindustrialised former communist east.

Mining regions are key parts of Alternative for Germany (AfD) strongholds in ex-communist eastern states like Brandenburg and Saxony, where the far-right party placed first in Sunday's European elections.

Upcoming state parliament elections in the region could see a repeat performance, with aftershocks set to rumble all the way to the chancellor's office in Berlin.

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