Sustainable and smart mobility strategy

SUMMARY

Transport is the backbone of the EU economy, connecting people and businesses across various EU regions and countries. The coronavirus pandemic has shown the impact of mobility restrictions on the free movement of people, goods and services and, at the same time, confirmed the essential role of transport in safeguarding the functioning of vital supply chains. However, transport also generates significant costs to society, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, environmental pollution, accidents, congestion and loss of biodiversity.

EU ambitions to address these negative impacts have increased over the years. In December 2019, the European Commission put forward the European Green Deal that aims to make the EU carbon neutral by 2050. This goal was subsequently endorsed by the European Parliament and EU Member States. To achieve climate neutrality, the EU transport sector has to cut its CO₂ emissions by 90 %. This requirement is in stark contrast with the past trend: despite previously adopted measures, transport is the only sector in which greenhouse gas emissions have kept growing.

The Commission has therefore proposed a strategy outlining how it wants to transform the EU transport sector and align it with the European Green Deal, by making it green, digital and resilient.

While transport stakeholders have welcomed parts of the strategy as steps in the right direction, concerns about the text’s high ambitions and lack of concrete elements have been voiced.

The Commission is to start proposing the measures envisaged in 2021. It remains to be seen to what extent, with what modifications and how fast they will be adopted and then implemented by EU Member States, shaping transport transformation for the years to come.
Background

The course of EU transport policy has been defined by successive European Commission strategies. A major landmark, the 2011 White Paper, entitled Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area, identified the shortcomings of mobility in the EU – many still largely present today – and proposed an ambitious approach to overcome them. It included the reduction by 60 % of transport greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 against 1990 levels and by 20 % below their 2008 levels. Declaring that ‘curbing mobility is not an option’, it made the ‘modal shift’ principle the cornerstone of the EU approach to transport, setting the goal to shift 30 % of road freight journeys over 300 km to less-polluting modes such as rail or waterborne transport by 2030, and more than 50 % by 2050.

While the 2015 Paris Agreement gave new energy to climate efforts, it did not explicitly address the need to reduce aviation and maritime emissions. The ensuing laborious debates and negotiations in the relevant international fora – the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) – resulted in the adoption of the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) and the Initial IMO Strategy on reduction of GHG emissions from ships, both appreciated for their global reach and criticised for their lack of climate ambition.

Reducing EU transport emissions has been the target (or part of) several other EU strategic documents, in particular the 2016 Strategy for Low-Emission Mobility. The von der Leyen Commission put forward the European Green Deal in December 2019 as a response to the acceleration in global warming, aiming for an EU with no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050, where economic growth is decoupled from resource use, leaving nobody behind.

In 2020, due to Covid-19 related mobility restrictions, transport activity decreased significantly, bringing massive losses to the industry and leaving thousands of transport workers without a job. Going beyond short-term specific coronavirus measures, the Commission proposes to rebuild the sector, making it greener and smarter. On 9 December 2020, it put forward the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, outlining the planned steps to transform the EU transport system in line with the ambition of the European Green Deal and the objectives of the EU’s Digital Strategy. The mobility strategy is complemented with an action plan listing 82 initiatives in 10 key areas for action (‘flagships’) with concrete measures to be adopted over the next four years.

The gist of the strategy

The European Commission pledges to replace the course of ‘incremental change’ followed until now with a fundamental transformation. This translates into three approaches applied to all modes of transport. First, to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels by replacing existing fleets with low- and zero-emission vehicles and increasing the use of renewable and low-carbon fuels. Second, to increase the use of less-polluting modes and shift a substantial part of today’s inland freight carried by road (75 %) onto rail and inland waterways. And third, to internalise the external costs.

A set of milestones is to keep the strategy on track. By 2030, the Commission aims to have in Europe at least 30 million zero-emission cars on the road and 100 climate-neutral cities, double high-speed rail traffic (compared to 2015), achieve carbon neutrality for scheduled, collective travel for journeys under 500 km, and ensure that automated mobility is deployed at large scale, and that zero-emission marine vessels are ready for the market. By 2035, zero-emission large aircraft should be market-ready.

By 2050, the Commission expects that in the EU, nearly all cars, vans, buses and new trucks are to be zero-emission, rail freight traffic will double and high-speed rail traffic triple, while the multimodal trans-European transport network (TEN-T) should be fully operational thus ensuring high-speed connectivity. The Commission wants to achieve this by strengthening the existing rules, proposing new legislation and providing support measures and guidance.
In road transport, the Commission wants to further tighten the CO₂ emission standards for cars and vans as well as for trucks and buses. It intends to propose stricter air pollutant emission standards (Euro 7) for combustion engine vehicles, without however giving any end-date for the sale of combustion-engine cars in Europe. It intends to review the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Directive and boost the availability of electricity and hydrogen by putting in place more vehicle-charging points. The measures designed to stimulate the demand for zero emission vehicles include not only carbon pricing, taxation, road charging and changes to the rules on weights and dimensions, but also actions supporting the uptake of these vehicles in corporate and urban fleets.

Rail should be further electrified, and where this is not feasible, hydrogen should be used. The European Year of Rail 2021 initiative is expected to boost cross-European connections. The Commission is to propose new ticketing rules that would facilitate selling tickets that combine rail, air and bus journeys. To give a new push to rail freight, the Commission is to review the rules for rail freight corridors and integrate them with the TEN-T corridors into ‘European transport corridors’, which would bring extra rail capacity, improve cross-border coordination and cooperation between rail operators and facilitate the deployment of new technologies.

To decarbonise the aviation and maritime sectors, the Commission is to propose legislation to support the production and uptake of sustainable alternative fuels for each sector. To make these modes pay for their CO₂ emissions, it wants to include the maritime sector in the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) and reduce the free allowances allocated to airlines. It plans to implement the ICAO market-based measure CORSIA through the EU ETS and continue to exert pressure in the IMO towards adopting an international market-based measure for the maritime sector. Having analysed the current fuel tax exemptions for aviation and maritime fuels, the Commission would like to close the existing loopholes during the forthcoming review of the Energy Taxation Directive.

To green airports and ports, the Commission will propose incentives for the deployment of renewable and low carbon fuels, and ensure that stationary aircraft and vessels can use renewable power. The revised lending policy of the European Investment Bank and the EU green taxonomy criteria (identifying which investments count as sustainable) will support the introduction of new, cleaner and quieter aeroplanes and ships. Other measures should target the greening of ground movements at airports and port operations, as well as the wider use of smart traffic management. The EU rules for airport slot allocations and airport charges are to be reviewed and adapted. To better use the potential of EU inland waterways both along the trans-European transport network and for the last-mile delivery in cities, the Commission will put forward a support programme targeting the renovation of barge fleets and improving access to financing.

The more horizontal areas of action outlined in the strategy target healthy and sustainable inter-urban and urban mobility; connected and automated mobility; innovation, data and artificial intelligence; reinforcing the transport single market; making mobility fair and just for all; enhancing transport safety and security, and safeguarding the EU’s global position.

Reactions

The European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF) observed that while the strategy declares transport workers to be the sector’s ‘most valuable asset’, the proposed initiatives do not match this statement. The environmental NGO Transport & Environment appreciated the focus on reducing the climate impact of air and maritime transport. In their view, however, the envisaged heavy reliance on biofuels for planes and ships may lead to ‘another EU biofuel fiasco’ and cause deforestation. Instead, they recommend focusing on renewable hydrogen. Greenpeace decried the lack of binding reduction targets, be it for air travel, the number of privately owned cars or a ban on short-haul flights where there is a greener alternative.

The rail sector welcomed the heightened focus on rail transport, reminding nonetheless that the full internalisation of external costs by 2050, the implementation of the framework for smart mobility and the completion of the TEN-T are key to meeting the objectives outlined.
The European automobile manufacturers (ACEA) warned that the objective of having 30 million zero-emission cars on EU roads by 2030 is ‘far removed from today’s reality’ and is not matched with the ambition to roll out sufficient charging infrastructure. The road transport industry (IRU) cautioned that the strategy, based on an approach measuring only tailpipe emissions, will fail to achieve carbon neutrality. It also risks destroying the coach transport sector, which they see as by far the greenest and most inclusive form of transport. In their view, policies must be based on the well-to-wheel principle and all fuel alternatives to diesel are needed in the coming decades.

European shipowners (ECSA) stressed that maintaining the international competitiveness of the EU maritime sector is key to fulfilling the ambitions set. They underlined that a global approach is preferable to regional (EU) measures, both in terms of cutting shipping emissions and improving the conditions of seafarers, hard-hit by the Covid-19 crisis. The European sea ports (ESPO) welcomed short-sea shipping being seen as a sustainable modal shift option, but questioned the lack of support to short-sea shipping and ports. The inland ports (EFIP) welcomed being recognised as ‘enablers of green logistics’, and noted that incentives and funding for the deployment of renewable and low carbon refuelling infrastructure will determine the uptake of clean vessels.

Five leading European aviation associations welcomed the strategy’s ambition, assuring that they are committed to reach net zero CO2 emissions by 2050. They warned, however, that that the sector’s decreasing resources resulting from the coronavirus crisis are an obstacle that will need to be factored in and addressed at both EU and national levels.

While cycling associations appreciate the positive statements about cycling, they regret that no specific milestones for cycling as a transport mode in the transport system of the future have been set, nor does the action plan contain concrete actions to increase cycling uptake.

**Outlook**

Following the action plan and the European Commission’s 2021 work programme, the first measures are expected in early 2021. Their impact will depend on whether they are accepted by EU Member States. While some earlier Commission proposals have not been adopted as EU law, the current momentum towards a climate-friendly, post-coronavirus regeneration favours adopting ambitious new legislation (the EU climate law) and revitalising some long-blocked files (Eurovignette).

**MAIN REFERENCES**


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