

Despite the European Parliament's Dieselgate inquiry committee, the European Commission is standing by, hiding behind bureaucratic squabbling to avoid taking its responsibilities, write Claude Turmes and Zdzisław Krasnodębski.

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In many European inner cities, air quality is disastrous - a condition caused by the deliberate manipulation by the car manufacturers of 35 million diesel cars sold over the last few years.

After years of omertà, a German court has now paved the way for driving bans for diesel cars in German cities. This is a potential solution for German cities, but what if the bulk of the 35 million manipulated cars ends up in Central and Eastern Europe through secondary market?

Even though the European Union has instated ever stricter emissions standards since the 1970s, air quality has not improved, on the contrary. The blame - which we know since the Dieselgate scandal has come to light - lies with the car manufacturers, who have bypassed the legal limits with cheating software and have knowingly put the health of millions of citizens in Europe at risk.

New diesel motors are much worse on NO₂ than old ones because they inject diesel more thinly and with higher pressure. Deliberately cheating on the abatement technology with these motors emitting high NO₂ levels is a criminal activity that should have consequences. Authorities in charge in the United States have sentenced the car manufacturers to compensation and penalty payments amounting to billions of dollars, penalties largely used to clean up the air and promote electrification. Meanwhile, the damaged parties in Europe - in this case the millions of Europeans who suffer from low air quality and the owners of 35 million manipulated cars - remain without any compensation.

Besides the car manufacturers, the national governments are mainly responsible for the biggest industrial scandal ever. They have always protected the authority of the national type approval authorities - in Germany this is the Federal Bureau of Motor Vehicles and Drivers. The main interest of this body was and still is serving the interests of their domestic industries.

So in Europe, the absurd situation has arisen that only the KBA is authorised to impose recall actions of manipulated cars by VW, Audi and co.: not only for those driving on German roads, but for millions of German cars that were sold all over the EU. Authorities from other member states cannot impose recall programs according to the current legal frame.

The German association ADAC has recently highlighted that it is technically feasible to retrofit almost all manipulated euro 5 and euro 6 motors with hardware (SCR with add blue injection). Although there are hundreds of different models of cars, in reality you only find a limited number of different engines in these cars, which makes standardised retrofit possible.

And as VW is announcing a new record benefit of over €10 billion, nobody should tell us that the car industry would not be able to pay for these retrofits. Such hardware retrofits would not only prevent painful diesel bans in cities, but would also offer a durable solution.

Without hardware updates, millions of manipulated diesel cars banned from German cities will be offered cheaply in secondary markets and end up in those parts of the EU where citizens have less income. As these manipulated diesel cars emit 3 to 7 times the NO₂ of old diesel cars, the air quality in Bucharest, Sofia, Warsaw or Athens could be negatively impacted for decades.

Despite the European Parliament's Dieselgate inquiry committee, Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Selmayr's EU Commission is idly watching these disgraceful activities while hiding behind bureaucratic squabbling over responsibilities.

Precisely because the Dieselgate scandal is not a purely German problem, the Commission has to free itself from its self-imposed shackles and defend itself against the clientelism of the KBA and the German government. Specifically by acknowledging the hypocrisy of the software updates that were agreed at the Berlin diesel summit and by presenting a guidance note for hardware upgrades, specifying which manipulated cars can and should be retrofitted.

The Common Air Quality Index by the European Environment Agency shows that Europe is divided by the air we breathe: while poor air quality is a problem almost all over the EU, Eastern Europe is affected disproportionately. Cities like Sofia, Bucharest, Riga and Warsaw are amongst the sad frontrunners of the European air pollution statistics.

To export the diesel problem there would have fatal consequences. When we talk about the future of Europe, we cannot ignore the stark disparities between East and West in terms of air quality.

When our citizens are helplessly left with the "car-morra", we should not be surprised about an increasing disenchantment with politics and the EU. The Dieselgate scandal is about nothing less than the credibility of policy-makers all over Europe. That is why it takes political courage now to demand the manufacturers to pay up. In Berlin and Brussels.

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