

The European Union plans to go carbon neutral by 2050. Rebecca Harms, climate spokesperson for the Green group in the European Parliament, told DW it's a worthy goal but we need focus on the decades in between.

Deutsche Welle: Ahead of COP24 next week, the European Commission has said the European Union will be carbon neutral by 2050. What's your take on the strategy?

Rebecca Harms: It's a major step forward. It's the first time the European Commission has formulated a complete strategy for decarbonization. In that sense, it's a good thing. I don't see any problems in the formulation of long-term goals, but rather in the lack of ambition in climate protection between now and 2030.

And why is that?

It will be very difficult to achieve the long-term CO2 reduction targets if we postpone all really ambitious measures — which will also call for major changes — until after 2030. We need to implement effective steps towards decarbonization over the next 10 years — now. The current EU target for 2030 is not ambitious enough. It means the really important in-between steps will be postponed until after 2030, i.e. for the next generation of politicians.

This behavior has become typical in climate policy. Ambitious goals are always formulated for the years that lie far ahead, and don't actually do enough in the meantime.

What do you mean by that?

We must tighten the EU targets for 2030 now. That also applies to other industrialized countries at the UN climate conference. At the same time, we must admit that we haven't done enough so far to reduce the burning of fossil fuels.

The European Union continues to include nuclear power in its projections. What do you think of that?

There have been no less than two new construction projects in the EU since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. It's clear that nuclear power stations are no longer competitive. The European Commission is trying to keep nuclear power in its energy approach by pleading that the lifetime of old power stations be extended. I think that's insane. It's an attempt to fight the devil with the Beelzebub.

This is a high-risk strategy and we must warn against it. A systematic policy for energy efficiency, savings and renewable energy is both competitive and creates more jobs.

Currently, on the one hand there's a climate protection movement and on the other, a pro-fossil fuel movement led by US President Donald Trump. What's your assessment of the balance of power right now?

Donald Trump is backed by a great deal of capital. Take the enormous capital of the Koch

brothers, for example — they are betting on a future with raw fossil fuel materials and without climate protection. But that's something other than a movement.

In Europe, and especially in Germany, there's a growing awareness of the need for climate protection in parts of civil society that do not necessarily belong to the climate movement — such as trade unions.

It's becoming clear that we have to switch to climate-friendly production methods and climate-friendly products if we want to remain competitive. For example, I'm currently engaged in discussions with representatives from (trade union) IG Metall and the automobile industry (about how they can do this).

Although it's still a difficult debate, trade unions and the automobile industry have come to realize that blocking climate protection is not going to work in their favor.

There are huge challenges ahead. Where do you think we will be in five years time?

Either we succeed in transforming the EU into a climate-friendly, resource-conserving economy through our own political measures, or we will be forced to do so by external influences and thus experience disruptive changes.

The automobile industry will face strong challenges from big markets like China. The Chinese government has set out a very clear path toward converting to electricity, for example.

Will we be able to achieve the 1.5 degrees Celsius target?

The IPCC report said that there is still room for improvement if we are ambitious. In my opinion, the European Union should again proceed in a similar way to when the European Community was first set up, but this time with different priorities.

At that time, joint agreements were made to promote the coal, steel and nuclear industries.

Today, a climate union would have to be the EU's primary project for the future. Then, I would no longer worry about where we stand in five or 10 years' time.

So you're not currently very optimistic?

I'm doing my best.

Rebecca Harms is a climate policy spokesperson from the Green/EFA group in the European Parliament, and until 2016 was the chair of the Greens in the European Parliament.

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