

Column Tomas Vanheste

'Where are we in the discussion? How do we position ourselves in the debate about the future of Europe?'

Dirk Messner raised those two questions in his thought provoking speech this morning.

And because questions deserve an answer, I'll try to answer them. By tackling one Sustainable Development Goal, number 13, on climate action, and a very important piece of European legislation in this field, the Effort Sharing Directive.

'I will do whatever it takes to defend and implement it.'

This is what climate commissioner Miguel Arias Canete said about the Paris Agreement in a speech at the EU sustainable energy week in Brussels in June this year.

It were, of course, symbolic words. Canete referred to Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, who during the financial crisis spoke the famous words "The ECB is ready to do whatever it takes to preserve the euro. And believe me, it will be enough."

I'm not an economist, but I think that I'm on the safe side, if I say that we now, five years later, can with some confidence say that Draghi did enough and that the euro will survive.

But what about Paris? What does it mean when Canete says that he will do whatever it takes to defend and implement it?

One of Canete's most important actions was to present in summer 2016 the "Effort Sharing Regulation", setting out binding annual greenhouse gas emission targets for Member States for the period 2021–2030.

The regulation covers all the sectors of the economy that fall outside the scope of the EU Emissions Trading System. Like transport, buildings, agriculture and waste management. They account for almost 60% of total EU emissions.

The targets vary from minus 40% emissions by 2030 for Luxembourg and Sweden to zero for

Bulgaria.

Is Canetes proposal enough to meet the target of the Paris Climate Agreement to keep the temperature rise well below 2 degrees in 2100?

No. That is at least what ngo's like Climate Action Network say. According the Climate Action Network the overall target is too weak and there are too many loopholes in the regulation. They made a calculation and conclude that the loopholes will result in a reduction of emissions of only 23% by 2030, instead of the 30% goal the Commission sets.

Take the country in which we are now. The target for the Netherlands is minus 36%. But the loopholes will lead to a reduction of only 23%.

Or France, the country of which the president is famous for his strong words about climate. Make The Planet Great Again! The target for France is minus 37%, the concrete emission cuts will be 28%.

So if the calculations of Climate Action Network are correct, the EU will by far miss its target of a reduction of 30%. And this 30% goal is too weak anyway to have any chance that the goals of the Paris Agreement will be met.

This is also what other environmental organisations think, like the European Environmental Bureau, a network of 140 environmental citizens' organisations who's secretary general Jeremy Wates spoke here today.

The EEB says that “in order to set the EU on a path to meet the Paris Agreement goals, a target of at least a 47% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 for the ESR Sectors is needed.” Way higher than the Commissions 30%.

What is the basis of this 47%? According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) the world is still heading for a temperature rise of 2.9 to 3.4 C this century, with all the so called Paris pledges, the reductions countries promised to realise in Paris.

So we need to do a lot more. And a calculation leads to the conclusion that this means minus 55% for the EU and this translates into minus 47% for the sectors under the Effort Sharing Regulation.

This is what ngo's and also the United Nations say. But today we are in a more or less scientific environment, among advisors who pretend that their advice is science-based. Probably you want to hear from me not what ngo's say about the Commission's plan but what the informed scientific judgement of scientific advisors is.

And here we have a problem. You easily can find opinions about the Commission's proposal from all kind of organisations. Business organisations, farmers organisations, environmental organisations, they all made position papers about the regulation.

But two voices seem to be missing: the voice of the citizens and the voice of the scientists.

The European Enviromental Bureau says it represents 140 citizens organisations. Of course being a member of an environmental organisation is a way to engage yourself as a citizen. But the EEB is a professional organisation and I wonder how many citizens know it and feel represented by it. In the European debate the direct voice of the citizen seems to be missing.

And the same is true for the scientist. I couldn't find any document in which one of your member organisations analyses the commission's proposal critically. Please correct me if I'm wrong.

As I said the Effort Sharing Regulation covers 60% of the emissions of greenhouse gasses in the EU. So it is an extremely important piece of legislation. Scientific advisors can play an important role in policy making by providing sound analyses of the consequences of different policy options. So for me it is very difficult to understand why they did not try to contribute to the debate by analysing the Commission's proposal. The Commission held a public consultation before presenting the propopals. But again, scientific advisory councils did not contribute.

Of course the proposal of the European Commission is not the end point. In the past months the European Parliament tried to strengthen the proposal. On the 14th of June it adopted its amendments. To mention a couple of important amendments: it set a longterm goal of 80% reduction by 2050. And it introduced measures to reward memberstates with a GDP below average if they take early action.

But the Parliament is not the only legislator in the European Union. The other one is the Council of the European Union. Tomorrow the Environmental Council, the meeting of the environmental

ministers of the 28 member states, will take place in Luxembourg.

What about the position of the members states?

Last week the Czech Republic ratified the Paris Agreement. Now all member states have ratified it. Probably the Council will call in their conclusion for full implementation of the Paris agreement.

But, as Jeremy Wates said today, there is a huge gap between the beautiful words and the concrete actions. In reality a lot of the member states try to introduce further loopholes that will weaken the regulation instead of reinforcing it.

In March the ngo Carbon Market Watch published a report on the position of the member states. It concluded that only three member states – Sweden, Germany and France – try more or less to strengthen the proposal. All the other ones try to weaken it.

What are the crucial discussion points?

- In the proposal the reference level for the reduction is the average of the emissions in the years 2016, 2017, 2018. The starting point is in 2021. While the emissions at that time will probably be lower than the average 2016-2018 the target is more strict when you take the emissions of 2020 as the starting point. Some countries, like Sweden, want to do this, some countries want to keep it as it is.
- A second important point is land use and forest management. In the proposal of the European Commission there can be 280 million credits by planting trees, credits that can be used to lower the reduction obligations. Some countries like Finland want to expand this system to other forms of forest management.
- A third important issue is the possibility the European Commission wants to give to nine countries to use surplus credits from the Emission Trading Scheme to lower the reduction obligations. Again some countries support this, others not.

The overall picture is that there is overwhelming support for measures weakening the regulation. So there is a good chance that a rather weak proposal will be weakened further.

So let's come back to Canetes words that he will do whatever it takes to defend and implement the Paris agreement.

They seem to be rather hollow. Because his proposal is not really an implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Even Gilles Gantelet, the representative of the European Commission, admitted it today. 'We need less speeches, less beautiful words, more actions,' he said.

But even if the Commission presented a proposal that fulfills Paris it would not have the power to make it come true. In the EU as it is a European does not have real executive power. In the end the Council of the European Union, the member states, are in charge.

The struggle around the Effort Sharing Regulation is just one example of a general problem in the domain of sustainable development. The rethoric about the EU being a frontrunner in the domain of sustainable development is often beautiful. But the concrete actions are most of the time a lot less impressive.

One of the reasons that Canete gets away with it, is that only ngo's criticize him. He can always say: it's their role to ask more.

Of course scientists are not activists. And of course policy is more than implementing scientific advice. But still I think that it would be very helpful if not only ngo's but also scientific advisory councils gave their informed opinion about crucial parts of the EU policy. There is work to do for you!

This morning Dirk Messner said: 'We have been incredibly successful in changing the frame of the debate, in bringing about a paradigm shift.'

But if you want to be incredibly successful not only in changing the thoughts but also the real world, you have to make a closer connection to the most important policy maker, the European Union.

During the conference someone in the audience raised the question: 'Should our councils more often address the EU for their advice?' My answer is a definitive yes. Because the EU is where the action happens. Or should I say: where the action can happen, if you kick them a little bit more?