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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The 2035 ban on ICE vehicles is entering a phase of political review

The European Union's decision to prohibit the sale of new cars with internal combustion engines (ICE) from 2035 has long been viewed as a critical milestone in the green transition.

At the time of its adoption, the ban was not only a climate measure but also a political statement: Europe wanted to demonstrate its willingness to go further and faster than the rest of the world, even at the cost of short-term economic and social disruptions.

Today, however, that same decision is undergoing serious reconsideration. The debate is not about climate objectives but about who bears the cost, who risks losing industry, and whether the EU is even capable of enforcing such a deadline without political resistance.

An increasingly strong group within the EU seeking to relax or reinterpret the ICE ban acknowledges the importance of climate goals.

The key question now is whether the design of the transition is sustainable amid economic stagnation, geopolitical shocks, and deep social divisions within the Union itself.

In other words, can Europe afford the luxury of technological maximalism at a time when its industrial base is weakening and its political cohesion is under strain?

A decision with unclear consequences

When the ban was agreed, the European political context was significantly different. Energy was relatively cheap, inflation was low, and global supply chains were stable.

The war in Ukraine, disruptions in energy markets, rising raw material prices, and the decline in European industry's competitiveness compared to the United States and China have significantly altered the situation.

The once bold step now seems increasingly like a decision with unclear consequences.

Resistance to the ban does not come only from the political fringes.

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The argument is not ideological but structural: the transition to exclusively electric vehicles requires massive investment in infrastructure, stable supply chains for batteries and raw materials, and social mechanisms to mitigate job losses.

At a time when the EU is already lagging behind the US in attracting investment and behind China in controlling critical raw materials, the question is no longer whether the transition is necessary, but whether the pace is politically and economically sustainable.

A framework that can be adapted

In this context, the reaffirmation of synthetic fuels (e-fuels – fuels produced using renewable energy) carries clear political significance.

Their introduction as a permissible exception shows that the ban on internal combustion engines is no longer a tightly closed system.

If it is accepted that a vehicle with an internal combustion engine can remain on the market under certain conditions, then the ban itself shifts from an absolute rule to a matter of political interpretation.

Thus, the decision for 2035 is no longer seen as final but as a framework that can be adapted to the interests of member states and industry.

In this situation, the European Commission is in an unenviable position.

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On the one hand, it must defend the credibility of the entire European Green Deal, which has become a central pillar of European politics.

On the other hand, member states seeking flexibility are exerting increasing pressure. A concession in the automotive case would inevitably have a domino effect.

If the internal combustion engine ban is eased, why should other obligations, from energy standards to agriculture and industrial emissions, not also be reviewed?

Shift from an ideological to a pragmatic phase

The dispute reveals its true nature here. It is not a dispute about cars but about who in the EU makes decisions on major transformations and who bears their cost.

In the previous phase of European integration, the transition was managed from Brussels with the assumption that member states and societies would follow the given framework.

Today, it is clear that political reality has limits that cannot be ignored without consequences.

It is interesting that in this debate, discussion of climate science is diminishing, while focus on industrial policy is increasing.

In European discourse, electric vehicles are now seen not only as an environmental issue but also as a geopolitical challenge.

If the EU now proves unable to adapt its policies to new circumstances, the risk is not only a loss of industrial competitiveness but also a loss of citizens' trust in the institutions' ability to manage major changes

The EU relies on imports of lithium, cobalt and other key raw materials, while China holds a dominant position in battery processing and production.

In this context, the complete electrification of transport appears to be a shift from one dependency to another, which is politically difficult to justify at a time when Europe's strategic autonomy is under discussion.

If the ban on internal combustion engines is relaxed, it will not signal the end of the green transition.

However, it will mark its shift from an ideological to a pragmatic phase. Instead of rigid deadlines and uniform solutions, the policy will increasingly depend on a mix of technologies, national exceptions, and incremental adjustments.

This will slow the pace of the transition but may enhance its political sustainability.

For Europe as a whole, this is a test of its capacity to learn from its own decisions. The Green Deal was intended as a symbol of European leadership in combating climate change.

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In this respect, the debate on banning internal combustion engines reflects the broader European decision-making crisis.

It shows that the EU is entering a phase where it can no longer rely solely on moral authority and regulatory power as its only policy tools.

Ahead lies a period during which any major transformation must be justified not only by climate objectives but also by economic sustainability, social stability, and geopolitical realities.

If Europe finds a way to achieve this balance, easing the internal combustion engine ban could be an example of a mature policy that recognises when to adjust course.

If not, it risks turning the entire green agenda into a symbol of the political separation of elites from the societies they govern. That would be a far more costly mistake than any technical compromise on engines and fuels.