European cities slow to adopt electric buses

An electric bus during tests in Krakow, Poland, July 18, 2015. [Konrad Krajewski / Shutterstock]

Fully electric buses account for only 9% of urban bus sales in Europe, according to research by Transport and Environment (T&E), a green campaign group. High upfront costs are the biggest barrier to their deployment on a mass scale.

Electric buses are also in many cases missing the ability to achieve the corresponding fuel savings.
But with the right incentives in place, they could become a first-choice option, T&E said in a new report published on Thursday (8 November).

“Air pollution is a silent killer in our cities,” says Anna Lisa Boni, secretary general of Eurocities, a network of European cities. “To protect the health of citizens, the power of procurement to deploy cleaner bus fleets is one of the tools city authorities are using, alongside promoting walking and cycling and investing in other forms of public transport,” she said.

T&E claims electric and diesel buses are already at parity in terms of total cost of ownership (TCO) when the health costs imposed by air and noise pollution are taken into account. “Add climate costs, and electric buses have today a lower TCO than diesel buses,” T&E says.

“Electric buses are the superior choice in every respect now. They have no tailpipe emissions, they’re quiet, comfortable and economical,” said Lucien Mathieu, transport and e-mobility analyst at T&E.

“If mayors and regions are serious about tackling the air quality and climate crises, the only rational decision is to buy electric buses from now on,” he said.

Last month, lawmakers in the European Parliament’s environment committee backed a mandate for zero-emission buses, saying they should make up 50% of sales by 2025 and 75% by 2030. The full Parliament will now vote on the motion next week.

The European Automobile Manufacturers’ Association (ACEA) supports European efforts to deploy more electric buses in cities, saying “zero-emission technologies offer the best outcome both in terms of local emissions and noise pollution”.

However, it says “there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution” and that “other technologies may be better suited in some cases” due to due to different local characteristics. Those range from full electric to hybrid buses, or those powered by hydrogen, bio-diesel, bio-methane and compressed natural gas (CNG), ACEA said.

The environmental benefits of gas-powered buses has become a subject of growing controversy. While T&E says they show “little or no air quality or climate benefits compared to diesel,” trade association NGVA Europe argues they provide “a reduction in tailpipe CO2 emissions by 12% compared to diesel, going up to 20%” in some cases.

Even diesel has become a subject of debate, despite being vilified in the wake of the Volkswagen scandal, with ACEA maintaining that emissions from the latest Euro VI engines “have been slashed to near-zero levels”.

What all agree on is that zero and low-emission buses should be further encouraged with public procurement rules, although ACEA insists any targets there should be “realistic”.

By continuing to browse the website, you are agreeing to our use of cookies
“For cities struggling with the higher capital cost of zero-emission buses, a grant could be made available through the new EU budget from 2020,” says Lucien Mathieu. This, he says, should be complemented by a Europe-wide zero emission sales target for new buses.

Further Reading

• T&E report: Electric buses arrive on time (8 Nov. 2018)

Want to know what's going on in the EU Capitals daily? Click here!