When EU leaders arrive in New York next week for the UN climate summit, they will do so not with a bold new emissions target but with a placeholder—a “statement of intent.” It is a compromise designed to save face, but in reality it underscores a deeper crisis: Europe’s inability to match its rhetoric of climate leadership with decisive action.

The Illusion of Unity

The European Commission and Denmark rushed to frame Thursday’s late-night deal as a demonstration of unity. “The EU is and will remain a global climate leader,” declared Denmark’s climate minister Lars Aagaard. Yet the truth is less flattering. By kicking the can down the road to November, the EU has signaled not unity but paralysis. Its two-page promise is not leadership—it’s paperwork.

Climate diplomacy thrives on credibility. The Paris Agreement depends on countries voluntarily committing to ambitious action and building trust that others will do the same. By showing up without a concrete 2035 plan, the EU undermines its own claim to leadership. Worse, it risks giving cover to countries less inclined to act, who can now point to Europe’s indecision as justification for delay.

A Fractured Bloc

The fight over numbers—whether the bloc should commit to a 66 percent reduction from 1990 levels or aim closer to 72 percent—masks a more fundamental divide. For countries like Spain and Germany, the higher figure is essential to maintaining the EU’s trajectory toward climate neutrality. For Slovakia, Poland, and Italy, even the lower bound feels excessive, given their reliance on fossil fuels and industrial competitiveness concerns.

This standoff reflects a broader tension: how to reconcile the EU’s green ambitions with the

economic anxieties of member states already grappling with inflation, energy costs, and political populism. The postponement of the 2040 climate target discussions only deepens the uncertainty, leaving the 2035 plan suspended in midair.

Global Stakes, Local Hesitations

The timing of Europe’s hesitation could not be worse. The UN summit was designed to spur momentum toward stronger commitments ahead of COP30 in Brazil. Instead, the EU risks arriving as an observer rather than a driver of ambition. As Mary Robinson rightly noted, what the world needs from Europe now is “courage and clarity,” not ambiguity and delay.

For decades, the EU has prided itself on being the standard-bearer of global climate action. Its Emissions Trading System, renewable energy targets, and Green Deal have often set the pace for others. But leadership is not a static title; it must be continually earned. With China and the U.S. signaling their own climate priorities in different ways, Europe’s credibility is now on the line.

A Moment of Choice

The EU’s leaders still have a narrow window to reclaim momentum. By November, they must decide not only on a number but on a political narrative: Will Europe remain the world’s climate vanguard, or will it become a bloc paralyzed by internal squabbles?

A clear, ambitious 2035 target—closer to 72 percent than 66—would send the right signal. But more importantly, it would reaffirm that Europe still sees climate action as an opportunity, not just a burden. Anything less risks reducing the EU’s climate leadership to little more than an empty slogan.