

Maritime transport

Kallas back with fresh attempt to liberalise port services

By Isabelle Smets | Tuesday 21 May 2013

Will Brussels and Strasbourg find themselves having to deal with angry dock workers in the coming months? The European Commission is preparing to present a legislative proposal to open port services to competition, a subject known to be extremely sensitive following the Commission's failed attempts to liberalise the sector in the early 2000s.

Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas has repeated on a number of occasions during his mandate that he wants to review restrictions on the provision of port services (in autumn 2012, he mentioned pilotage of ships arriving in and departing from ports, towing, mooring, etc), saying they lead to high costs and lower quality. This is the third attempt to liberalise the sector. The two previous endeavours sought to establish freedom to provide services as a general principle in EU ports handling at least 1.5 million tonnes of freight per year or 200,000 passengers. Only space, capacity or safety constraints, or reasons related to port development policy could justify a restriction on the number of service providers. Both attempts were rejected by the European Parliament, however, against a backdrop of at times violent demonstrations by dock workers. In 2006, on the eve of rejection of the second proposal, a demonstration by thousands of dockers degenerated, causing injuries and considerable damage to the EP buildings in Strasbourg.

Will the proposal meet the same fate this time? Sources at the Commission say that the lessons of the past have been learned and that the executive is taking a different approach. The contentious aspects of the earlier proposals have apparently been left out, including, according to a trade union source, a general authorisation for self-handling, which would have permitted crews to perform certain services rather than using port service providers. That was one of the main concerns of the dock workers, who highlighted the risk of social dumping (and feared for their jobs), during the previous liberalisation attempts. Will they be reassured this time? Protest movements do not necessarily bother with details...