

Transport Council

Ministers seal political deal on Eurovignette

By Isabelle Smets | Friday 15 October 2010



The Belgian EU Presidency has succeeded in pushing through a political agreement on revision of the Eurovignette Directive, paving the way to the 'polluter pays' principle for road transport. Its success resulted from a difficult compromise between peripheral states – which were the most reluctant because their hauliers will pay the highest price – and more central states, more ambitious because they bear the brunt of the inconveniences caused by truck traffic. The compromise, which will enable the EU institutions to begin second-reading negotiations after a stalemate of a year and a half, was adopted by qualified majority, with Italy and Spain opposed and Ireland and the Netherlands abstaining. Portugal will take a stand at the time of formal adoption of the Council's common position. The European Commission backs the agreement although it made no secret of its disappointment over certain compromises made to convince the sceptics.

The agreement will enable member states – without imposing any obligation – to charge tolls to heavy-duty vehicles to cover the external costs resulting from the road transport of goods. The 'external costs tolls' will come on top of existing infrastructure access charges allowed under the current Eurovignette Directive (1999/62/EC). They can be used to cover the costs of air pollution and noise.

Congestion – the cost of traffic jams – is not included in external costs, contrary to what the Commission proposed. However, the states will be able to take it into account in their infrastructure charges. The subtlety in relation to external costs is infrastructure charges cannot generate revenues. So if states decide to increase infrastructure charges at certain times of the day as an incentive for trucks to circulate in non-peak hours, they will have to lower them at other times. Periods during which higher infrastructure charges can be collected must not exceed five hours a day. The maximum variation in such charges to include congestion will be 175% of the normal amount. This was one of the difficult points of the discussions in Luxembourg, because a number of peripheral states argued for shorter peak periods and a lower authorised surcharge.

WHAT ROADS?

The entire European motorway network, totalling around 30,000 kilometres, is concerned. This is twice the extent of the existing Eurovignette Directive, which is limited to the Trans-European Transport Network (15,000 km).

An important detail is that, like the current directive, the new text will not allow states to use both motorway tolls and a tax disc system (eg yearly fee). Ten member states currently have a tax disc system for access to the motorway network: Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Hungary and Poland. These countries will not be able to use

'external costs tolls' unless they give up their tax disc system. Hungary and Poland have already said they will do so.

WHAT VEHICLES?

Environmentalists will not be happy to learn that the states will be able to limit the scope of the text to vehicles of 12 tonnes and over, excluding smaller ones. The clause of the existing Eurovignette Directive establishing an extension to vehicles of 3.5 tonnes from 2012 is consequently modified, marking a regression. In addition, exemptions are allowed for vehicles in the Euro 6 (until end-2017) and Euro 5 (end-2013) emission classes. This resulted from a battle between those who did not want to consider exemptions for Euro 5 trucks (mainly Germany and France) and those who sought exemptions for Euro 6 vehicles until 2020.

WHAT COST FOR PROFESSIONAL DRIVERS?

The average road toll in the EU is currently 15 to 25 eurocents/kilometre/vehicle. According to the Commission, it is expected to increase by an average of 3-4 eurocents/kilometre/vehicle. The way the states have to calculate these costs is set out in the directive: either using a mathematical formula or referring to maximum costs contained in tables (eg, for air pollution, from one to 16 eurocents/km/vehicle depending on the emission class). Any changes to these calculation methods would have to be approved by co-decision (not comitology, as in the initial procedure).

The revenues from road charges "should" be allocated to the transport sector to contribute to its sustainability. This is bound to be a point of conflict with the European Parliament, which is demanding mandatory allocation of such revenues to sustainable transport. The Council is not unanimous on the question, though, and Parliament may be able to count on countries like Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Italy, Slovenia, Portugal and Estonia, which hinted that they could support the principle of mandatory allocation.