



A decision made

ECG president Costantino Baldissara (with vice-president Wolfgang Göbel, far left) weighs up the effect of the EU's trailer length compromise on vehicle logistics, with an eye on a future review date

“ In my last column, written early December 2014, I noted the likelihood that the legislative process of the revision of Directive 96/53/EC on ‘Weights and Dimensions’ for road traffic would be carried over to 2015. However, it is with mixed feelings that I can confirm the process was actually finalised under the Italian presidency of the Council of Ministers and therefore the Latvian presidency (which took over January 1st) is left with the job of ‘rubberstamping’ what was agreed during the so-called ‘trialogues’ between the Council, European Parliament and European Commission.

More specifically, a compromise was reached at a late-night meeting in December despite attempts by MEPs sympathetic to ECG's cause for a common solution.

At the start of these trilateral negotiations, the Italian presidency and the Commission seemed supportive of the ‘20.75-metre loaded length for vehicle transporters’ amendment that ECG advocated, and which featured in the European Parliament's negotiating position. However, when several national experts started to request clearer definitions of front and rear overhangs – with Germany in favour of their current 0.5 metres to the front and 1.5 metres to the rear, and France sticking to its prohibition of any front overhangs – opposition to our appeal for harmonisation started to grow, most vocally in Austria, Hungary, Romania and the UK.

Despite attempts to find a phrasing that all members states could agree to, we were defeated by time pressures. The end result was a compromise that maintains the status quo for carrier lengths for border crossings (which are technically limited to a maximum loaded length of 18.75 metres despite national variations) and the existing patchwork of national regulations for front and rear overhangs.

While our goal of EU-wide harmonisation of loaded lengths remains an objective rather than an accomplishment, the legislative result is largely favourable to vehicle logistics providers. The reason is that our industry's cross-border transport can effectively continue as it does today with the Commission's implicit commitment that it will not actively enforce perceived infringements.

Regarding the contentious issue of making truck cabins ‘rounder’ to increase aerodynamics (for fuel savings, as load capacity was always seen as a ‘no-go zone’ in the quest for efficiency), new designs will be permitted after three years following the prior adoption of specific type-approval

regulations – so possibly by 2020. These designs will be optional for truckmakers rather than obligatory. However, a positive side effect could be that longer cabins effectively eliminate the front overhangs used in vehicle logistics.

A chance to review

Most importantly, a review clause has been agreed that will open certain aspects of the legislation to a formal review three years after the new directive is transposed into national laws, which effectively means a review in about five years from now. The scope will include all the new additions to Directive 96/53/EC, such as provisions regarding alternative fuels and extra weight, on-board weight sensors and conditions for intermodal transport. Thanks to relentless lobbying by ECG and its members, it will also include any issues that pertain to specific ‘market segments’ such as our own. ECG was the only association to lobby openly on loaded length and we have gained respect and recognition from the Commission's unit for land transport, DG MOVE, and the MEPs involved in these intensive negotiations. Many are even informally referring to this as the ‘ECG clause’.

The final procedural steps should have been completed by the middle of March and we can start thinking about the review. Our increased visibility and standing will facilitate discussions with the Commission, the European Parliament and member states as we prepare for this process. We will continue to be heard both in Brussels and at national levels, and it is satisfying to know that new doors will be open to us thanks to a well-fought and respected campaign.

No sooner does one issue recede than another comes to our attention. Already this year we have new rules in Hungary (the EKAER legislation) and the introduction of a minimum wage in Germany. While other groups, such as the International Road Transport Union, are actively lobbying against some of these changes, ECG is focusing on informing and educating our members and stakeholders regarding implications and compliance (www.ecgassociation.eu for more).

Finally, let me note that the ninth course of the ECG Academy will graduate during the ECG Spring Congress in Lisbon, Portugal in May, by which time we'll have 170 alumni, most of whom are still working in vehicle logistics. The academy is open to all, and I hope we can celebrate our 10th course with a record attendance. ◦ ”