Port services regulation report divides opinion

Has Knut Fleckenstein's long-awaited report on the port services directive managed to steer a steady course though choppy seas?

With the port services regulation (PSR) going to the vote in the Parliament's transport committee, Knut Fleckenstein's report has divided opinion.

While many have recognised the difficulty of reaching a balanced conclusion on a complex issue, some remain unconvinced he has reached the correct one.

Gesine Meissner, ALDE group shadow rapporteur, believes that, "the attempt at opening the markets for some port services has failed," something she says is "deplorable from a liberalisation point of view."
As the constituency MEP for Northern Germany, encompassing the entire German coastline and all its North Sea and Baltic ports, Meissner argues it is important to avoid "destroying existing structures or obliging port authorities to create new entities for consultation procedures and complaint mechanism."

She believes the compromises that will be put to the vote at in the transport committee, "respect current models that are well functioning."

Greens group shadow rapporteur Keith Taylor is less enthusiastic. He says that the port services regulation has, "failed to tackle real issues in Europe's ports." The Greens, he explains, want to, "embed seaports into the wider framework of a sustainable transport policy."

This should "address safety, social and environmental standards, incorporate cooperation and coordination between seaports, and avoid external costs."

Achieving this will require "coherent and binding provisions covering environmental impact assessments and enhanced port logistics."

This would help overcome bottleneck in Europe's freight networks and reduce the over dependence on land transport, protecting the environment and improving health and safety. He believes that the regulation could address many of these issues.

However, "it clearly fails to meet its own objectives of ensuring a more sustainable and interconnected transport network, modernised port services and an appropriate framework to attract investments."

He also feels that while the report had been correct in addressing the issue of financial transparency, it had not done legal certainty to the sector.

If the Parliament chooses to adopt the report, he warns that it should, "be prepared for serious criticism," having supported legislation that, "does very little to tackle anything at all."

EPP group shadow rapporteur Elissavet Vozemberg-Vrionidiis broadly satisfied with the report. She feels that it "concludes a balanced compromise text, which has incorporated the essence of the EPP key issues."

She highlights the strengthening of financial transparency in the port sector as a priority for maintaining the sector's competitiveness. This, she says, will, "contribute to a level playing field and boost investments and innovation in ports."

She also welcomes providing ports with proper autonomy over infrastructure charges. This would, "give them the opportunity to attract new, or retain existing traffic, during downturns."

She also notes that helping small ports "avoid the disproportionate administrative burdens and costs" would help keep them flexible, while enhancing their quality and efficiency of services.

ECR group shadow rapporteur, Peter van Dalen, says that for his group, the essence of the PSR is on,
"reducing administrative burden, providing ports with freedom of organisation and bringing transparency on ports finances."

He believes that ports should be allowed to organise themselves how they want, setting their own infrastructure charges. Such autonomy means that the EU should not "impose all kinds of social provisions" on ports.

He acknowledges that European ports have to respect European labour standards, but at the same time, the EU has to respect, "the plurality of the continent; it cannot impose a 'one-size-fits all' solution for all ports.

Dalen strongly supports the desire to bring financial transparency to the European ports market. "All players must disclose their books, so that it is clear whether or not ports are benefiting from market-distorting aid." He is aware that organising this within the PSR would bring an administrative burden of its own, but wants to see this kept to a minimum.

ALDE group MEP Boguslaw Liberadzki is much more scathing, urging his colleagues to vote against the report. He described the PSR as "a betrayal of the European Parliament's mission."

While he praised Fleckenstein for, "wrestling admirably with the challenges of reaching a satisfactory compromise text," he felt that the compromise set before the transport committee "does not address the very real concerns of a number of ports across Europe."

He is concerned that the rapporteur has tried to leverage the Commission's desire to regulate ports by linking his support to an agreement on state aid for ports.

This means that "proper consideration of the regulation appears to have been lost," and that proposal is "divorced from the core principles that should determine the approval of any legislation."

A vote in favour of legislation, he says, "should not be decided by the pursuit of a bargain with the Commission on a separate issue."

About the author

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