

## TRANSPORT

**Rail package still tops agenda**

By Isabelle Smets

The EU's fourth railway package will take centre stage in transport discussions in the coming months and talks in the Council of Ministers on its political dimension may get under way this half-year. The matter is sensitive since it affects the liberalisation of national passenger transport (the only segment not yet open to competition) and relations between rail companies and infrastructure managers.

The Council's priority, though, is to wrap up the technical side of this fourth package, namely new procedures for certification and authorisation of rolling stock meant to save railway companies money. To do so, the 28 still have to work out a political agreement on revision of the role of the European Railway Agency (ERA), which will gain powers in this new process.

The Greek EU Presidency will tackle this issue in a working group in January, with the hope of securing an agreement at the March Transport Council. Officially, informal negotiations could then get under way with the European Parliament, which voted on the texts in December 2013, just before the Christmas break.

At this stage, however, that is not the Greek Presidency's intention, even if the negotiating positions are not so far apart. Instead, the negotiations will take place with the new Parliament, after the May elections.

If the Council reaches a deal on the technical side in March, work on the political dimension could start in April. But there is no chance of seeing an agreement at the June Transport Council. At most, there may be a ministerial discussion on one or another aspect of the proposals. By late December, the Presidency had not yet decided with which text to begin the discussions: the proposals on liberalisation of national passenger transport, which also include the whole question of governance, so sensitive for railway companies, or the proposal to make tender procedures the general rule for public service contracts.

Such contracts currently cover the vast majority of European railway lines, but are still awarded to a great extent without a public tender.

The fourth package is not the only rail sector issue to be addressed in the coming six months. Just before Christmas, the European Commission presented a proposal for a public-private

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*Access to the port services market will also be a focal point*

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research partnership called Shift2Rail, in which it will inject €450 million by 2020 (to be matched with €470 million from the private sector). The initiative will coordinate research into new rail technologies and equipment with the aim of modernising railways and boosting the competitiveness of Europe's industry. As one of the Greek Presidency's priorities, the proposal is expected to be adopted during this legislature. The Transport Council will discuss it and agreement is hoped for in March. There will not be any negotiations with Parliament since this does not come under co-decision. Nevertheless, Parliament's Committee on Industry (ITRE) will give an opinion.

**BOOSTING ALTERNATIVE FUELS**

Another important issue will be alternative fuel infrastructure, or how to push member states into setting up recharging points for electric vehicles and refuelling stations for hydrogen, LNG (liquefied natural gas) and CNG (compressed natural gas) to lessen dependence on oil. Both the Council and Parliament's Committee on Transport (TRAN) adopted their positions in late 2013, so negotiations can begin. Three-way talks are scheduled in January and February. The two institutions hope to come to agreement by 5 March, the date of the final three-way session. Everything will depend on the flexibility with which they approach the issue. Considering the gap between their posi-

tions, a great deal of give-and-take will be needed. MEPs are intent on imposing binding targets on, for instance, the minimum number of public recharging points for electric cars and maximum distance between CNG refuelling stations, but EU governments are opposed to such an approach.

Another sensitive issue is updating of the regulation on air passenger rights, meant to settle a number of questions left ill-defined up till now. These include: the definition of "exceptional circumstances" that exempt airlines from certain obligations in the event of missing a connecting flight or compensating for lengthy delays. Parliament's TRAN committee adopted its position in December, but the Council has still to do so. It plans to take that step during the Greek Presidency.

On maritime transport, access to the port services market will be a focal point. Parliament has already rejected Commission proposals on two occasions – in 2003 and 2006 – and could well do so again.

Misgivings among many MEPs emerged during initial debates, in any case, and amendments will certainly be tabled. A verdict is expected on 11 February in the TRAN committee. The Council's attitude will depend on the outcome of that vote. The Greeks will address the matter seriously if they get a green light from the committee.

They will also work on an agreement to revise the directive on maximum dimensions for trucks. EU governments will have to take sides on whether or not to authorise cross-border circulation of giga-liners, giant trucks weighing up to 60 tonnes. MEPs have been divided so far. The outcome of the February vote in the TRAN committee (with a plenary vote in April) is uncertain, even if the rapporteur is clearly pressing for a ban on cross-border traffic of these mammoth vehicles.

Sustainable urban mobility will be on the agenda now that the Commission has just adopted a communication on the subject.

The Greeks may try to have conclusions adopted in Council. ■