

Major EU Row as Germany Criticised for Stance on Transiting Drivers

Actions Cause Delays in the Supply Chain



EUROPE – Germany is coming under immense pressure from other member states over its policies toward foreign HGV drivers in relation to control of the Covid 19 virus. In the past few days several leading organisations with road transport interests have complained directly to the German government.

On 14 February Germany effectively closed its land borders with the Tyrol region and Czech Republic which brought an immediate response from the Association of European Vehicle Logistics (ECG (<https://ecgassociation.eu/>)) whose President, Mr Wolfgang Göbel wrote to Mr Matthew Baldwin, Deputy Director of the EU Commission's Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE (https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/organisation/dg-move-dg-mobility-transport_en)), and to Mrs Elisabeth Werner, Director of Land Transport at the European Commission.

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Mr Göbel expressed his concerns with respect to the new Covid test measures required by the German government with which truck drivers have to comply to be able to cross German borders. The new measures have been put into force at very short notice which did not allow truck operators to prepare. The letter was in response to an earlier warning from the International Road Transport Union (IRU (<https://www.iru.org/>)).

The IRU followed up on 19 February with a message sent directly to Chancellor Angela Merkel saying that Germany's refusal to exempt professional truck drivers from mandatory Covid-19 testing breaks following its previous commitments on EU 'green lanes' and the free movement of goods, was leading to similar behaviour from other member states, all of which does little or nothing to curb the virus.

IRU Secretary General Umberto de Pretto said that a chain reaction was building up across the continent, adding:

"Truck drivers, alone in their cabin and working to strict hygiene measures, pose little risk to the spread of the virus. Making them queue for hours in sub-zero temperatures at makeshift test centres on the side of the road without proper physical distance control however is not only pointless, it is dangerous.

"Germany was long an anchor for free trade across Europe's single market. We implore Chancellor Merkel to recognise the damage that her government's decision is now causing, especially to her neighbouring countries, and to immediately exempt truck drivers from mandatory Covid-19 testing so they can do their job and keep supply chains moving. Germany's place should once again be at the heart of a Europe that is united in fighting the pandemic, not causing chaos with short sighted and pointless border restrictions."

The argument was picked up by no less than Transport Commissioner Adina Vălean (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/valean_en) who, whilst agreeing that EU states are free to impose travel bans, argued the supply chain must be kept free to operate, with freight drivers allowed to pass unhindered. The definition of the Czech and Tyrol regions as 'virus mutation areas' caused Germany to insist drivers pre-register and carry proof of a negative coronavirus test.

Vălean was clearly unimpressed by the argument saying it was forcing the drivers from their cabs to join queues and doing the opposite of what was required with the interaction with others actually putting their health at risk, continuing:

"Of course, it's causing disruption, it's putting a burden on transport workers, from the risks they take in testing facilities because they have to leave their truck to the fact that there are supplementary costs, because these tests are not for free. [The low rate of positive driver tests in Ireland and Italy] shows the testing requirements are not a proportionate measure."

The EU Commissioner's stance is that the impact could be alleviated by adding exemptions for truckers that are only transiting, or by recognising tests taken within the past 72 hours, rather than the current 48-hour timeframe.

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