

Stand firm against the gigaliner lobby



The political rejection of heavy goods vehicles weighing 60 tonnes, so-called gigaliners, is something that has been repeatedly demonstrated in several votes taken in Europe and Germany. However, sections of the transport lobby are once again attempting to get the EU-wide introduction of mega trucks back on the agenda. The German states of Thuringia and Mecklenburg have quietly extended by one year the special permission granted for operating longer, heavier vehicles (LHVs) on two routes

The European Parliament and the German transport minister had already decided categorically in 2007 that LHVs would not be permitted. In Brussels, it was decided to leave it up to member states to decide whether they would allow LHVs onto the roads, like Sweden, which is a large sparsely populated country. Or whether to reject them like the majority of countries in the EU. At the end of January however, the EU Commission presented a report that above all emphasised the positive aspects of mega trucks, with the intention of re-opening the debate on their EU-wide introduction. Pilot trials in the German states of North-Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg were sensibly cancelled. The case was different in Mecklenburg: its state government is obviously attempting to introduce mega trucks via the back door.

Currently, the maximum total permissible weight of standard 18 metre HGVs is 40 tonnes. A broad coalition of interested groups from the Green Party to the automobile club ADAC is working to maintain this limit. Simple facts sometimes lead to unlikely coalitions: simply put, such mammoth trucks are a great danger to road safety. A 60 tonne LHV travelling at 80km/h that hits the tail end of a traffic jam without breaking has almost the same kinetic energy as a 40 tonne vehicle travelling at 100km/h. In addition, the crash barriers on motorways are only designed for vehicles weighing up to 38 tonnes. The ADAC is also warning about new dangers in tunnels, since additional freight would be a greater fire hazard. Maintaining current safety levels would require modifications costing millions.

Gigaliners would also lead to expensive road infrastructure modifications, with bridges being most affected by the weight. Calculations by the Federal Highways Agency show that the necessary reinforcement of bridges would cost around eleven billion euros. In addition, there would also be costs for modifying junctions, traffic roundabouts and HGV parking facilities. The extra stress on the road surface would also increase the cost of maintenance, something which is already being neglected for reasons of cost. All of this will have to be paid for by society, enabling a few large transport companies to maximize their profit margins. Privatising the profits and leaving taxpayers to cover the costs? This has to be stopped!

Gigaliners would also be a transport policy catastrophe since they would impede the predicted modal shift to the environmentally friendly and safe railways. This is because 50% of rail freight is carried either in single-wagon transport or in combined rail and road transport. These modes of transportation would be ruined by the introduction of mega trucks, which would result in 1.3 million HGV journeys being shifted back to the roads. An awful prospect in view of the debate on the climate. In order to protect its environmental reputation, the German national rail operator DB AG, which owns Europe's largest road haulier Schenker, has also spoken out against gigaliners.

Apart from ecological and financial reasons, the fact that a large proportion of today's 40 tonne trucks are making half empty journeys – with the situation getting worse – is also an important factor.

More freight require larger trucks – but ultimately, the solution to this equation will not be what is expected, because larger trucks will increase the amount of goods on the roads. Neither the Green party nor the ADAC wants this to happen – and neither the taxpayer nor the environment will be able to cope.

Michael Cramer

Member of the European Parliament and transport policy spokesman