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Second push for Athens convention

Extending scope of regulation is 'feasible'

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Brussels

THE European parliament is to defy European Union ministers with a second attempt to enforce the Athens convention on domestic trades.

The proposed regulation on the liability of carriers of passengers by sea should enforce the insurance convention on both international and domestic or cabotage

routes. Italian member of the European parliament Paolo Costa, who is rapporteur and chairman of the parliament's transport committee, says he believes extending the scope of the regulations is "feasible".

Rejecting the common position of EU transport ministers, who decided to restrict the regulation to larger 'class A' vessels on cost grounds, Mr Costa said he would reintroduce the extended scope. "The insurance market will have the capacity to insure these types of risks with a reasonable extra cost for the passengers," he said. The regulation would oblige carriers to take out insurance or a guarantee to cover liability of around €300,000 (\$475,000) per passenger.

Last year, transport ministers watered down the draft law after smaller shipowners, mainly in the Mediterranean, expressed concerns that the insurance industry might not be able to offer affordable cover. This angered the European Commission, which said that the law had been reduced "to an empty shell".

With his response, Mr Costa seeks to redress the balance. The parliament and the council of ministers will now enter behind-closed-doors talks on the content, with the outcome unpredictable.

Another restriction of the scope of the regulation does, however, seem to have been accepted by the transport committee

chairman. After a personal crusade aimed at enforcing the Athens convention on inland waterways too, Mr Costa looks to have given up. He argued last year that the extension in scope was essential: "Do we have to wait for an accident on the Danube before everyone agrees on this inland waterway measure?" he asked, despite several votes in parliament calling for waterways to be excluded.

The latest text reads: "The council [of ministers] shared the European parliament's views to exclude from the scope of the regulation the [sic] inland waterway transport." But Mr Costa added a proviso: "However, the European parliament

adopted some provisions giving more time to adapt to the operators".

The regulation seeks to tidy up the EU's patchwork maritime passenger liability cover and make the Athens convention legally binding. The proposal follows frustration in Brussels that EU member states are not willing to ratify and enforce the international conventions they signed on a voluntary basis. The proposal is part of a seven-strong package of safety laws. Ministers have in general supported industry's cost and viability concerns regarding several proposals, whereas the commission and parliament have sided with consumers and potential victims of maritime disasters.