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EU rivers ruling is a bridge too far

THE application of a new European Union passenger liability regime to inland waterways is still up in the air after more contradictory voting in the European parliament transport committee, *writes Justin Stares in Brussels.*

Despite previously voting to remove rivers from the scope of the proposed law, the committee last week passed an amendment suggesting that waterways can in fact only be excluded for four years.

By a slim majority — 22 votes to 19 — the committee passed an amendment stating: “In relation to carriage by inland waterways, Member States may choose to defer application of this regulation until four years after the date of its application.” Liberal MEP Paolo Costa, who is the committee’s chairman, secured the support of

the Socialist group for his amendment, while the largest group, the European People’s Party, voted against.

The regulation seeks to make the Athens convention on passenger liability enforceable in the EU and to extend it to cover national as well as international journeys. The parliament and national governments are expected to compromise by including some larger ships on national or cabotage voyages, but not all.

National governments are expected to oppose Mr Costa’s attempt to include waterways, though another amendment enlarging the scope of the regulation to sea voyages which use rivers for just part of their journey is less controversial. It was also passed in committee.

A further amendment seeking to ensure

waterways are covered by “comparable” separate cover was withdrawn prior to voting, as was an amendment aimed at imposing the Athens convention on waterways on a voluntary basis.

Voting on all other maritime safety issues took place en bloc, with many amendments passed with one show of hands. The European People’s Party requested a vote on Mr Costa’s amendments so that it could “have a chance to vote against”. MEP Georg Jarzembowski told the chairman before the vote that “you have your majority”, suggesting he knew the amendment would pass but wanted opposition made public.

The regulation would oblige carriers to take out insurance of around €300,000 (\$428,000) per passenger.