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# Brussels spat over inland waterways liability

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A ROW broke out in the European parliament transport committee on Monday over inland waterway liability regimes.

Euro MPs witnessed an aggressive exchange between a leading member of the largest grouping and the committee's chairman over whether inland waterways should be covered by the Athens convention on passenger liability.

At stake was an attempt by the chairman, Italian MEP Paolo Costa, to extend coverage to at least part of Europe's inland waterway network. Previous attempts to impose the convention on companies operating along rivers and canals have been rejected by both the parliament and national governments.

A proposed law before the European parliament would impose the convention on international voyages by sea only. It would oblige carriers to take out insurance or a guarantee to cover a liability of around €300,000 (\$444,100) per passenger.

Mr Costa is trying to re-insert the extension to cover at least journeys involving inland waterways in part. One of his amendments would also allow member states to extend cover to waterways on a voluntary basis.

But German MEP Georg Jarzembowski, from the European People's Party, said that the question had already been settled.

"We are fighting the old fight over again," he said. "Rivers are not the same as the sea. Inland waterways ought not to be dealt with."

"This has not been settled," said Mr Costa. "It should still be open to discussion." Speaking so fast that interpreters struggled to keep up, Mr Costa said treating river boat passengers differently from sea passengers was "inadmissible". How could legislators tell some passengers they would be covered by insurance while others would not be, he asked? Legislation would leave passengers without any cover if an incident happened less than 20 nautical miles out to sea, he said.

Mr Jarzembowski replied: "You are accusing us of leaving inland waterways passengers defenceless. This is not the case."

The inland waterway industry believes extra cover is not necessary because if a ship sinks in a river passengers can swim to the bank.

Mr Costa has made passenger cover on inland waterways something of a personal crusade. The parliament has passed several amendments stripping inland waterways from the proposal, though one amendment was also passed which included it, allowing Mr Costa to claim that he had "won".

The European commission supports the inclusion.

The committee will vote on the amendments next week.