

A “free ride” for drivers between Germany and France



The car is packed and the Müller family from Karlsruhe in Germany is off for the weekend: they are going to visit friends in nearby Strasbourg on the other side of the border. When they return to their car on Sunday evening, they find an unpleasant surprise on the windscreen wiper: a warning note because they entered the city without having obtained a French vignette for their German car.

At the moment, the *circulation différenciée* (differentiated circulation) is announced only about once a year for about five days, when air pollution levels rise too high in Strasbourg. However, the city is planning to introduce an overall environmental zone for the entire urban area to start on January 1st, 2022. In practice, this means that drivers have to get the French and

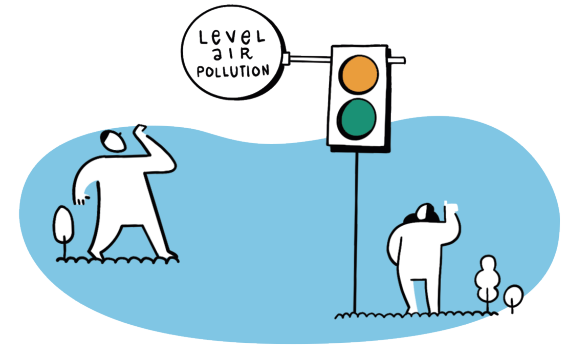
the German vignette for their cars, indicating the exhaust emissions of their vehicles. There is no unified system because emission standards differ in France and Germany, and there is no mutual recognition of the neighbouring country's system. Consequently, the free movement of cars, people and eventually goods are hindered in the cross-border region. In the future, high fines will even be charged and by 2028, all diesel cars will be completely prevented from entering the city.

So, driving between Germany and France in the Eurodistrict Strasbourg – Ortenau is no longer such a carefree issue. Financially, this does not mean a major burden – the vignettes cost between EUR 4.21 and 20. But there are even some accessibility challenges, since the French vignette can only be purchased online by credit card.

All this seems to cause unnecessary trouble in today's united Europe.

“ There is this general lack of understanding for the citizens. We live together. We cross the border almost every day (before COVID-19). And everything is based on the same European legislation and on the vehicle class. So, if I already have a German vignette, why can't I use it in the French system, too? If all countries used their own vignette, at some point in the future the entire windshield would be full ”

states **Dr. Lioba Markl-Hummel, Project Manager at the Strasbourg – Ortenau Eurodistrict**, summarising the citizens' feelings.

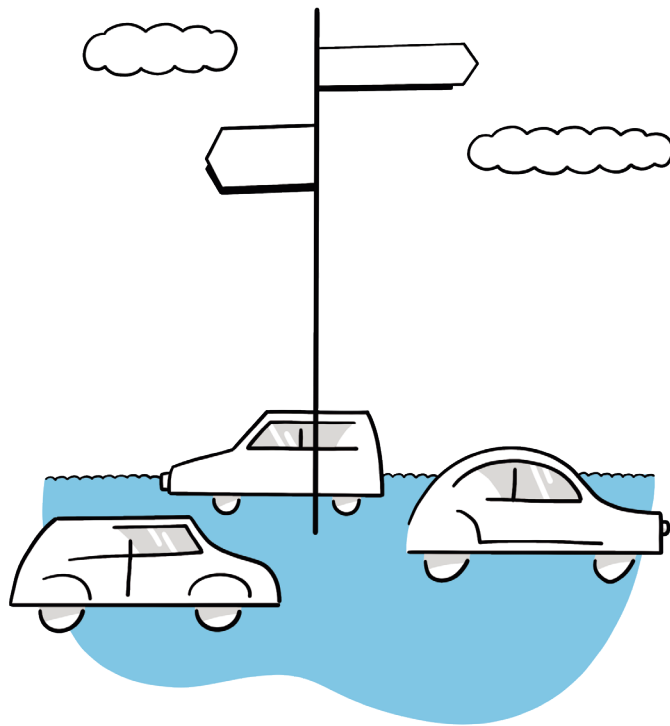


In the Upper Rhine region in particular, there is a historical bond and a strong will to increase the permeability of the border between Germany and France, and to work together to protect the environment.

The different vignette systems are even more bothersome, because when the Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe¹ was introduced, the idea was to harmonise standards across the European Union. However, the Directive was interpreted and implemented differently in every member state of the EU during the following years.

So, what are the possible solutions to the problem?

- **The European solution:** The Directive is currently under revision, and this could be the starting point for revisions of the common legal framework so that member states can develop a shared vignette system in the future.
- **The bilateral or multilateral solution:** a possible solution could be the development of a common vignette legal framework, in which the member states would need to modify their national legal framework to introduce mutual recognition.
- **The regional solution:** It would be possible to mutually recognise the vignettes within the cross-border region. However, amendments to the national law might also be necessary here if the competence lies at the national level.



Alternative solutions allowing to introduce exceptions to the applicable law, for example recognising the legal provision of the neighbouring Member State, would also be very beneficial.

Through the *b-solutions* project, the Eurodistrict managed to put the topic on the political agenda: it was discussed during the last German–French Council of Ministers and some cross-border bodies in the region. For the moment, however, the issue is still up in the air and greatly depends on the political will and priorities in the two countries.

¹ Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe, *Official Journal L 152*, 11.6.2008, p. 1–44.