

# EU Parliament Backs Tighter Internet Traffic Rules

## Move Could Restrict Some Internet Charges

By

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BRUSSELS—European Union lawmakers voted Thursday to adopt a more forceful position on ensuring all online traffic is treated equally, a move that could make it harder for Internet providers to charge more for certain services.

The vote completes the European Parliament's negotiating position ahead of talks with the 28 EU member states on a wide-ranging overhaul of the EU's regulatory framework for the telecom industry. The proposed legislation covers areas as diverse as ending mobile roaming fees between EU countries, defending consumer rights and changing the way countries allocate spectrum to mobile operators. "We've just passed a resolution on a proposal which is absolutely necessary and will make a great contribution to developing the European telecommunications market," said Pilar del Castillo, the Spanish center-right MEP who has guided the legislation through parliament. "We're ending roaming for calls, [texts] and data, that's what consumers are going to hear today."

Lawmakers voted Ms. del Castillo's report through by 534 votes to 25, with 58 abstentions. They also voted in favor of a stronger set of amendments put forward by the Socialist, Green and Liberal parties on the most contentious part, the provisions relating to "net neutrality." This is the concept of giving equal treatment to all Internet traffic, regardless of location, the device used or the content of the service and had been hotly debated ahead of the vote.

The reform package will be negotiated with the 28 EU member states in coming months and will be Europe's first-ever net neutrality legislation. Only the Netherlands and Slovenia have currently enshrined the concept into national law.

The debate hinged on so-called specialized services, where Internet providers charge more for a particular product, such as a guaranteed smooth connection for online television, or secure virtual private networks for businesses. The commission had said these would be allowed only if they didn't impair other users' Internet service. But MEPs want to restrict their availability further.

"We managed to introduce a precise definition of specialized services so that they are not confused with Internet access services," the Socialist MEP responsible for the dossier, Catherine Trautmann, said following the vote. She said "a binding reference to the principle of net neutrality" had been included.

Pirate Party MEP Amelia Andersdotter said: "Information online should not be subject to discrimination, blocking or interference by Internet access providers."

Telecom operators were unhappy. The European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association, or ETNO, described the vote as "a step in the wrong direction" and urged member states to bring the proposals back to the commission's original idea in the next part of the legislative process.

"If the restrictive changes to the Open Internet provisions are confirmed in the final text, the access of European citizens and businesses to innovative and high-quality services will be negatively affected," ETNO Chairman Luigi Gambardella said. "This would turn into a dangerous situation, in which the European digital economy will suffer."

The GSM Association, which represents the interests of mobile operators world-wide, said the decision would "further compromise investment and hinder innovation," although it did welcome the parts of the package relating to spectrum allocation for mobile networks.

European Commissioner for the Digital Agenda, Neelie Kroes, who presented the legislation in September, said the commission expects a final agreement on the package by the end of 2014.

"In 2010, I promised to end roaming charges by the end of 2015, and now we are one step away from achieving that result," Ms. Kroes said after the parliamentary vote. "We are now close to removing many other barriers so Europeans can enjoy open, seamless communications wherever they are."

Digital-rights groups, which issued an open letter along with consumer organizations urging parliamentarians to back the changes made by the Socialists and Greens, said the vote made the EU an example for the U.S., where a similar debate is under way.

"The European Parliament today established the EU as the major global force to protect the freedom of the open Internet," said Joe McNamee, executive director of European Digital Rights. "The value of the Internet is its openness."

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