

European Road Freight Market Review

July 2026 - rates, demand, capacity, fuel, and where the second half is heading

The month in one paragraph

Mid-July finds the market in a deceptive calm. Spot rates have slipped a few percent off their May record - but only because diesel fell, and that support ended on 1 July when Germany's fuel-tax rebate expired. Contract rates didn't give back a cent. Demand is in its normal summer lull rather than a downturn, capacity is in its worst squeeze month of the year, and the balance of the market still sits on the carriers' side of neutral. The setup into the fourth quarter points one direction.

Indicator	Where it stands	Direction
Spot rate (EU average, FTL)	~1.82 EUR per loaded km - 4% off the May record (~1.90)	~ +10% vs last year
Contract rate (EU average)	~1.85 EUR per loaded km - flat-to-firm on the month	~ +10% vs last year
Spot vs contract book	Spot ran above contracts in April-May - the repricing signal; now back just under	renewal pressure
Diesel (EU average)	1.78 EUR/l in June; ~1.83 tracking for July	~ +18% vs last year
Transport demand	Seasonal dip - roughly at 2025 level	correction, not downturn
Capacity	Below every comparable month of 2023-2025	structurally short

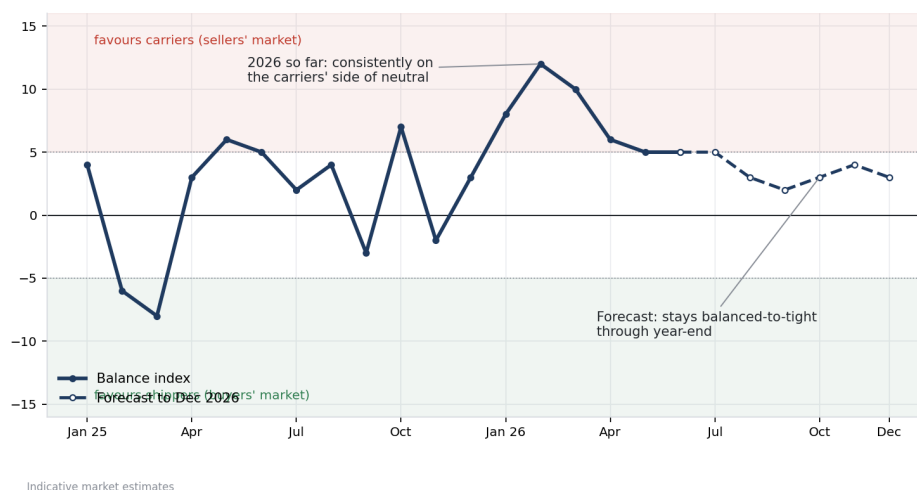
Rates are quoted per loaded kilometre (excluding empty positioning). All figures are indicative market estimates, deliberately approximate.

1 | Who holds the cards right now

One number summarises the whole market: the balance between how much freight needs moving and how many trucks are available to move it. Through 2025 that balance swung around neutral. In 2026 it has sat consistently on the carriers' side - and the forecast keeps it there through December.

The market still leans toward capacity providers

Road freight balance index: demand vs capacity · -5 to +5 = balanced market



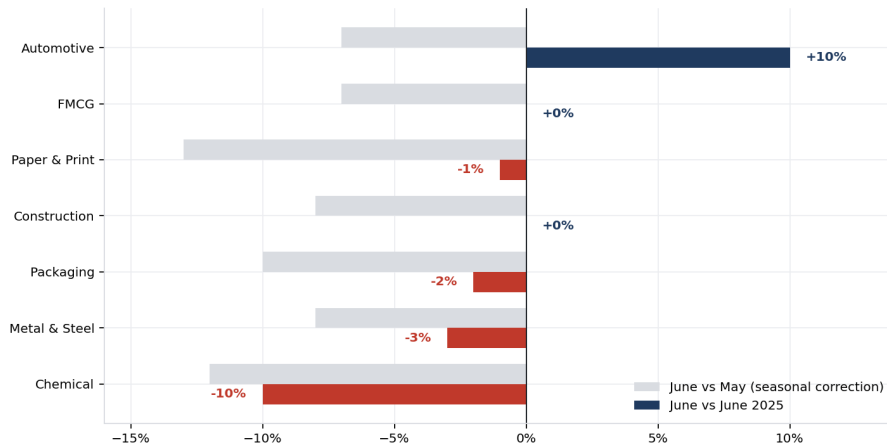
Takeaway: This is not a market where waiting gets you a better price. Balanced-to-tight conditions persist through year-end.

2 | Demand: a correction, not a downturn

June looked weak at first glance: every industry shipped less than in May. But May was the strongest month in four years, and a summer step-down is exactly what the season dictates. The chart below separates the two stories - the grey bars show the one-month correction, the coloured bars show where each industry really stands against last year. Only Chemical is genuinely soft. Automotive still runs about ten percent ahead.

June corrected everywhere - only Chemical is weaker than last year

European transport demand by industry, approx. change



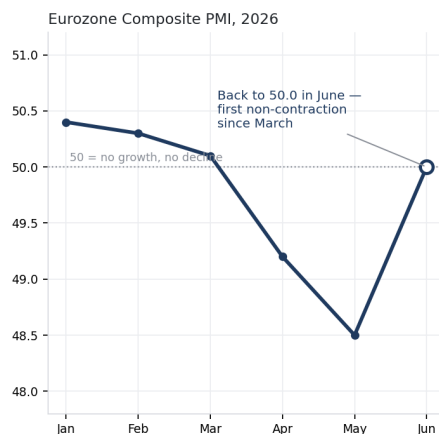
Indicative market estimates · EUR per loaded km where rates are shown

Geographically, June's contracted demand rose most clearly in Slovakia, France and the Netherlands, held stable in Germany, Spain, Belgium and Austria, and eased in Italy, Czechia, Hungary, Portugal and Poland. On international lanes, volumes strengthened around Belgium and France while Central European routes (CZ-PL, PL-CZ, DE-PL) softened. Spot demand jumped hardest in Portugal, Belgium, Romania and Italy - Romania with a clear late-month spike.

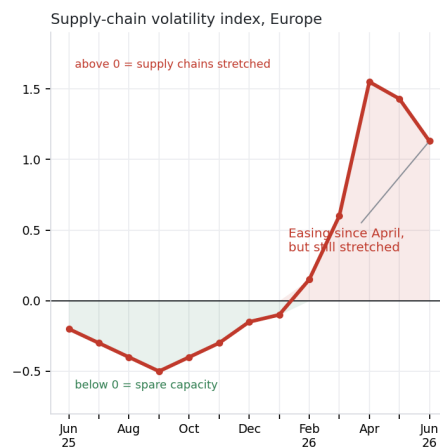
The wider economy supports the "pause, not peak" reading. The Eurozone Composite PMI returned to exactly 50.0 in June - the first month without contraction since March - with business confidence at its best since the Middle East war began and cost inflation cooling at a near-record pace. One honest caveat: European factories cut their input buying in June at the sharpest rate since the war's outbreak, while safety stockpiles sit at their highest since early 2023. Part of today's freight is inventory positioning, not final consumption - worth remembering when reading the autumn.

The backdrop: economy stabilising, supply chains still stretched

Two independent reads on the same story



Indicative market estimates

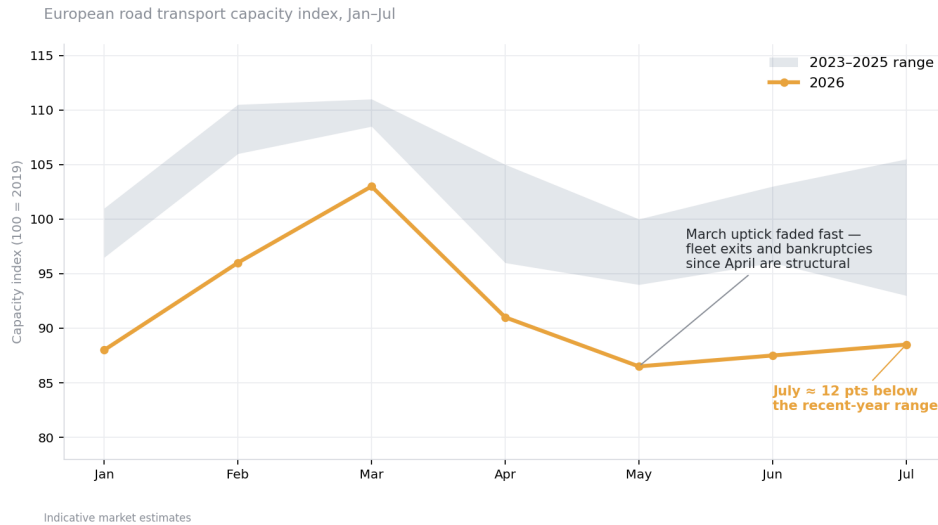


Takeaway: Underlying demand is intact and full-year volumes are tracking ~2-3% above 2025. Expect a quiet July-August, then a normal Q4 peak.

3 | Capacity: the real story of 2026

While demand corrected, capacity did not recover. The fleet reductions and carrier bankruptcies that began in April are structural, and the index has run below every comparable month of 2023-2025 all year. June brought tactical relief - fewer rejected contracted loads, more spot offers visible - but relief is not reversal.

Capacity runs below every recent year



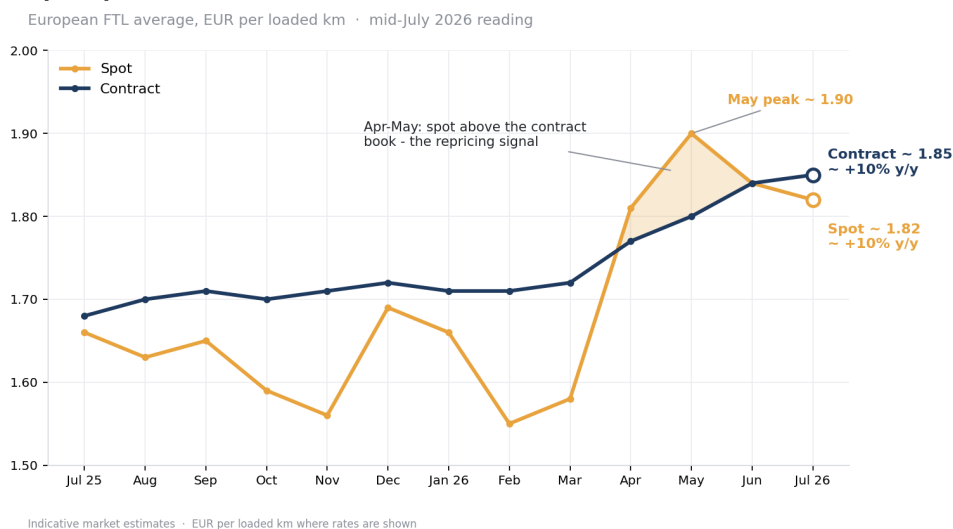
July then stacks the calendar against the market: German and Austrian holiday driving bans, Poland's weekend truck restrictions, and the Brenner rail line closing for the second half of the month - pushing intermodal and automotive volumes onto longer road detours. A gradual capacity improvement is expected from late summer, but there is no path back to 2024-2025 levels this year.

Takeaway: July is the squeeze month. Whatever capacity you rely on, it is scarcer this month than the rate sheet suggests.

4 | Rates: the repricing signal was sent

Spot sits near 1.82 EUR per loaded km at mid-July, about 4% below the May record - and the entire decline maps onto the fuel curve, not onto lost freight. Contracts, at about 1.85, gave back nothing and hold roughly +10% over last year. The signal worth reading: in April and May, spot spiked above the contract book for the first time in over a year. Whenever that happens, the next tender round reprices upward - the squeeze premium paid on the spot market becomes the carriers' opening argument. By mid-July spot has eased back just under contract, but the message was sent.

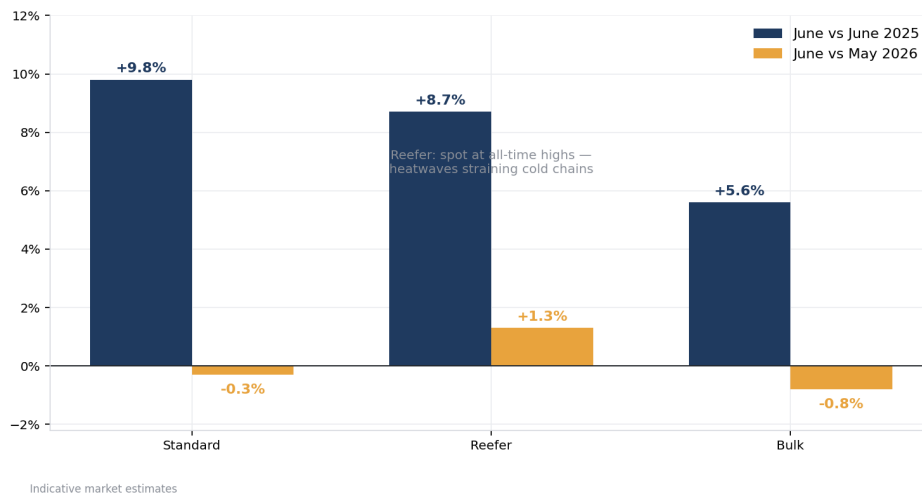
Spot spiked above the contract book - then eased back under it



The equipment split tells the same story with different intensity. Standard equipment leads the year-on-year table; refrigerated is the hot corner right now, with spot at all-time highs as heatwaves strain cold-chain capacity; bulk is easing off its spring, fuel-driven spike.

Every equipment type costs more than a year ago

Contracted rate development by equipment, approx. change



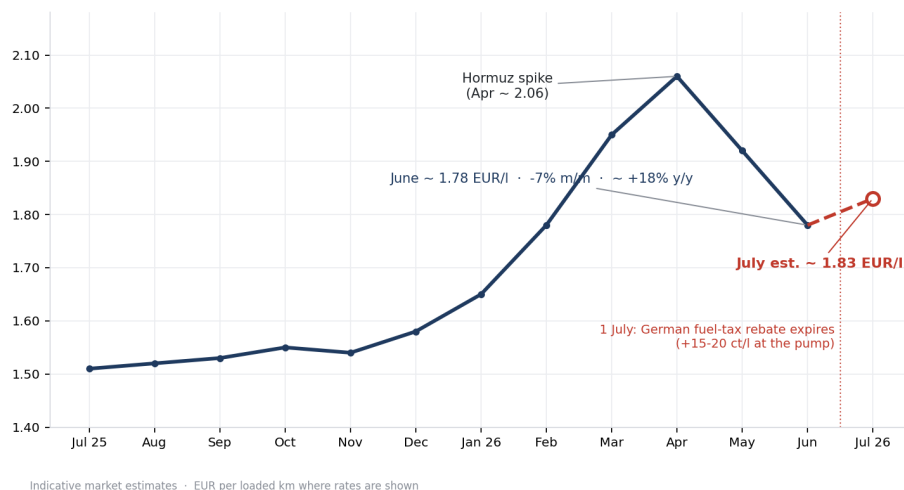
Takeaway: June-July softness was a fuel story. With diesel turning back up, the floor under spot is close - around 1.76-1.78 EUR per loaded km over the summer.

5 | Fuel and costs: the 1 July inflection

Two months of falling diesel were the only force pulling rates down - and that force just reversed. Germany's temporary fuel-tax rebate expired on 1 July, adding 15-20 cents per litre back at the pump overnight; the EU average is tracking near 1.83 EUR/l this month, still around 18% above last year. July's contracted rates will not inherit June's tailwind.

The fuel tailwind ended on 1 July

Diesel pump price, EU big-5 average, EUR per litre



Beyond fuel, four developments are worth a cost-model update:

- **CO₂-based tolls agreed.** EU institutions reached a provisional deal on Eurovignette amendments: toll classes aligned to emission standards, with member-state discounts of up to 75% for low-emission trucks - a real total-cost lever for fleet renewal.
- **Dutch tolls cut - temporarily.** The Netherlands trims newly introduced toll rates by 22.3% from 1 September to 31 December; full indexed tariffs return on 1 January 2027.
- **ADR enforcement hardened.** Harmonised EU roadside checks on dangerous-goods transport are live since 24 June - missing documentation can now mean immediate immobilisation.
- **Consolidation accelerates.** CMA CGM agreed to acquire FedEx Supply Chain (\$1.4bn, into CEVA), Ewals Cargo Care's takeover of Vos Transport was cleared, and OB Stroom closed its acquisition of Med Frigo. Meanwhile the Netherlands and Belgium committed EUR 240m to the Gent-Terneuzen rail freight link - a signal of where intermodal policy is heading.

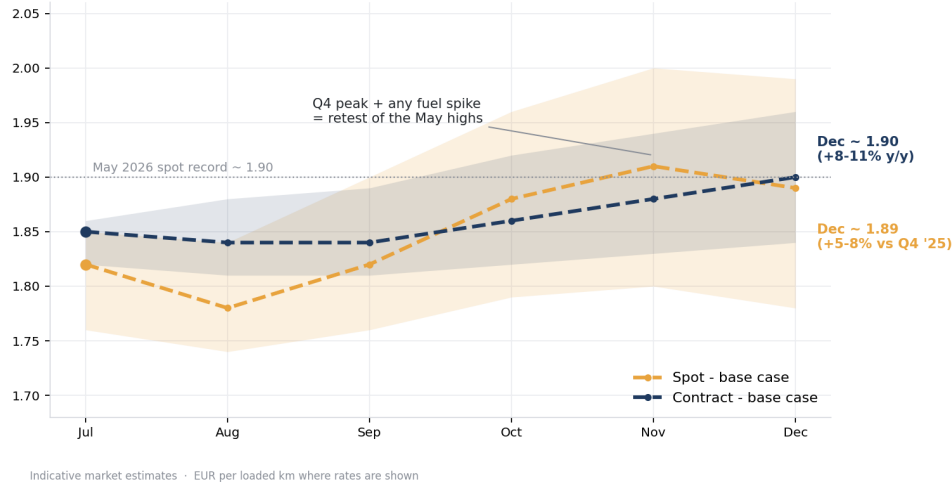
Takeaway: The cost base is repricing upward again - fuel first, tolls next. Fixed-rate agreements without fuel clauses are living on borrowed time.

6 | Where this goes by December

Base case: a soft July-August with spot finding its floor around 1.76-1.78 EUR per loaded km, then a normal fourth-quarter peak lifting spot roughly 5-8% above Q4 2025 - with a retest of the May highs (~1.90) if peak season meets any fuel spike. Contracts drift sideways through Q3, then rise 2-4% as the 2027 tender season opens, closing the year about 8-11% above December 2025. Expect carriers to arrive at those tenders with hardened fuel-indexation clauses: after a year in which diesel moved 18% and tolls repriced twice, appetite for fixed rates is gone.

Where this goes by December

EUR per loaded km, base case with risk band · wildcard: Strait of Hormuz / diesel



Indicative market estimates · EUR per loaded km where rates are shown

The assumptions behind this: transport demand about 2-3% above 2025 for the full year, capacity shortages persisting into 2027, and no resolution of the Strait of Hormuz situation. That last one is the wildcard sitting inside the risk band - any escalation reprices diesel within days, spot within weeks, and everything else at the next indexation date. It is the single largest error bar on every number above.

7 | What to do with this

If you buy transport: contract your Q4 capacity in August, not October - and trade indexation for capacity guarantees rather than fighting the clause. The premium you avoid in peak season pays for the flexibility you give up.

If you sell transport: hold contract discipline through the soft summer. The cost base - fuel, tolls, compliance - justifies current levels, and the spot-contract picture says the market agrees with you.

All rate levels are indicative estimates for the European FTL market, quoted per loaded kilometre, intentionally approximate. Prepared 17 July 2026.