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Spain Halts Bill to Lower Drivers' Blood Alcohol Limit

The measure lapsed when Parliament dissolved before a snap election, delaying a road safety change officials said was nearing approval.

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Spain's effort to lower the legal blood alcohol limit for drivers has been put on hold after the dissolution of Parliament ahead of a snap general election, a setback that the country's top traffic official said came just as the measure appeared close to passage.

Pere Navarro, the head of Spain’s Directorate-General for Traffic, or DGT, said in Madrid on Wednesday that the proposal had effectively lapsed because of the early election call for Nov. 29. “The issue was tied up,” Navarro said during the presentation of a road safety campaign launched with Brewers of Spain, the industry group for brewers.

The measure had advanced in the lower house only days earlier. On Sept. 29, Spain’s Congress approved the initial consideration of a Socialist Party bill that would have tightened the legal threshold for drinking and driving. The proposal sought to amend the traffic law by classifying as a serious offense driving with alcohol levels above 0.1 milligrams per liter of exhaled air or 0.2 grams per liter of blood, up to the current general limits of 0.25 milligrams per liter of breath or 0.5 grams per liter of blood.

The initiative now falls with the current legislature, after Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called early elections and the Cortes, Spain’s Parliament, was dissolved. Navarro said the DGT had already done its part by presenting and defending the reform and had expected the second attempt to succeed.

He noted that an earlier opportunity to pass the measure failed in March, when the text was rejected in the Interior Committee, which has full legislative powers on such matters. According to Navarro, the proposal then returned to the agenda and seemed to have stronger support after being accepted for consideration in late September.

Navarro, who has long defended lower alcohol limits, said the first effort ran into political resistance and pressure from organized interests. He said “the alcohol lobby,” in his words, had met with all parliamentary groups before the earlier vote and argued that lawmakers were forced to choose between those interests and road crash victims. He framed that choice as an ethical issue and said he believed the reform would eventually become law, even if the timetable had now been pushed back.

The traffic chief also stressed that Spain’s current alcohol limits date from 1998 and said the country has been operating under the same framework for nearly 30 years. He said authorities conduct about 9 million breath tests each year in an effort to avoid what he called a sense of impunity among drivers.

Navarro said alcohol remains the second leading cause of traffic crashes in Spain. He pointed to figures from the 2025 annual report of the National Institute of Toxicology and Forensic Sciences, presented in July, which found that 290 drivers who died tested positive for alcohol, down 2% from 2024. Of those cases, 20% had blood alcohol levels above 1.20 grams per liter, the threshold that can trigger criminal liability, and 11.6% showed extreme intoxication above 2 grams per liter, levels that forensic officials have said completely impair the ability to drive.

The comments came during the launch of the campaign “Elegir SIN alcohol volante es la caña,” a public awareness effort backed by Brewers of Spain. The campaign promotes alcohol-free choices for drivers and reflects a broader push by some parts of the beverage industry to align with stricter road safety messaging.

At the same event, Brewers of Spain President Jacobo Olaya presented findings from a study on alcohol-free beer consumption carried out with Alpha Research and based on 2,000 online interviews. According to the survey, 42% of respondents said they choose alcohol-free beer at any time when they know they will have to drive later. That share rose to 47.9% among men, 47.3% among people ages 30 to 44, and was especially high in the regions of La Rioja at 64.5%, Murcia at 54.3%, and Asturias at 53.8%.

Asked in what settings they most often drink alcohol-free beer, nearly half of consumers, 47.3%, said they do so whenever they have to drive. Other common situations included short trips or travel, cited by 32.5%, and time spent at the beach or pool, cited by 30%. The tendency was strongest among men at 52.5%, among people ages 30 to 44 at 49.1% and 45 to 59 at 50.8%, and among respondents in Asturias at 61.5% and La Rioja at 61.3%.

The pause in the legislation could matter beyond road safety policy. A lower legal threshold could have affected drinking habits outside the home and, over time, influenced sales patterns in bars, restaurants, and the wider beverage market, including beer, wine, spirits, and non-alcoholic alternatives. With the measure now stalled, any such shift is likely to be delayed until a new Parliament is formed and the issue returns to the legislative agenda.

For now, the DGT is left defending a proposal that had cleared one procedural hurdle but did not survive the election call. Navarro said the groundwork had already been laid and described the issue as one that had been “sown,” suggesting that its approval was only a matter of time.