FACT SHEET

Traffic Offences and Fines

What you need to know as a vehicle keeper without a residence in Germany

In a nutshell

Official post about your vehicle, including requests for a statement and fine notices, goes to your authorised recipient and is therefore deemed to have reached you. Deadlines run from the date of delivery, wherever you happen to be travelling. So read your scans promptly and pay fines on time.

01 Can traffic offences and fines even be served on me if I have no residence at all?

Yes. Anyone who registers a vehicle in Germany without having a residence there needs an authorised recipient (Empfangsbevollmächtigter) in Germany. The authorised recipient is registered with the Federal Motor Transport Authority (Kraftfahrt-Bundesamt). When a fines office (Bußgeldstelle) looks up the keeper of your number plate, it therefore receives your authorised recipient's address and sends its post there.

Your authorised recipient represents you when it comes to receiving official post. Notifications, summonses and formal deliveries, including those from the police and the courts, are given or served to them. Every letter that reaches your authorised recipient is therefore legally deemed to have reached you, and deadlines start to run, no matter where you happen to be travelling. In question 2, we explain exactly when a letter is deemed to have been received and why there is often a long gap between the date on a letter and its arrival with us.

For a fine notice (Bußgeldbescheid), this means: if you do not lodge an objection (Einspruch) within two weeks of delivery, it becomes final and enforceable. For vehicle keepers without a residence in Germany, enforcement usually happens in practice the next time you are stopped at a police check. Question 3 explains what consequences you may face.

02 Why is there often such a long gap between the date on a letter and its arrival with the authorised recipient?

This is exactly where legal theory and the day-to-day practice of the fines offices are far apart. Depending on the federal state, traffic offences are handled by towns and cities, districts or central fines offices. Their systems are not standardised and are barely connected to one another.

Many requests for a statement and fine letters are now generated automatically. However, one crucial detail is usually missing: the instruction that the letter should not go to you as the keeper but to your authorised recipient. For vehicle tax, this works reasonably well on the whole; with the fines offices, in our experience, it hardly ever does.

If an offence is notified by ordinary letter, the letter is therefore usually addressed to you by name as the keeper, together with our address. Your name, however, is not on the letterbox, because you do not live there and are not registered there. Before sending the letter, the fines office does not check whether an authorised recipient has been recorded for the keeper. The letter is therefore usually returned to the fines office marked "undeliverable" (unzustellbar). Only then does the office check the keeper details again – something it could have done beforehand if the systems were standardised – and send the letter to the vehicle registration office (Zulassungsstelle) where your authorised recipient is recorded. The registration office then sends it out a second time, this time to your authorised recipient.

Fine notices involve an additional complication. They are served formally, in a yellow envelope with a certificate of delivery (Postzustellungsurkunde). Such a letter may only be delivered to the recipient named on it. Because the keeper rather than the authorised recipient is usually named here as well, in our experience the postal service does not hand the letter over to us as the authorised recipient. This letter, too, is returned to the fines office with the same note and then takes the same detour via the registration office.

As a result, in practice there are usually two to three weeks between the date on the letter and its actual arrival with us.

For deadlines, what counts is not the date printed on the letter but the date of receipt or formal delivery. An ordinary letter reaches you as soon as it arrives with your authorised recipient. For a yellow envelope, the postal worker notes the date of delivery on the envelope. The two-week deadline for objecting to a fine notice, for example, runs from that day.

Whether a letter still arrived in time under these circumstances, for example with regard to the limitation period, is something you need to check yourself, clarify with the fines office responsible or have checked by a lawyer specialising in traffic law. This is not the task of your authorised recipient or of our authorised recipient service. Your obligations as the vehicle keeper remain with you.

Fines from abroad are a different matter: in our experience, demands from foreign authorities go directly through the registration office, which then sends the letter on to your authorised recipient.

03 What happens if I don’t pay my traffic fines?

An unpaid fine does not simply go away. It stays in the system, and the fines office will try to enforce it, first with a payment demand (Mahnung) and then with enforcement measures. Additional fees and costs are added at each stage.

If you still do not pay, a court can order coercive detention (Erzwingungshaft) at the request of the enforcement authority, for up to six weeks per fine. Coercive detention is not a punishment; its purpose is to make you pay. You still have to pay the fine.

In practice, for vehicle keepers without a residence in Germany, such a detention order is usually enforced at the next police or border check. You then have a choice: either you pay the outstanding amount plus costs on the spot, or you have to serve the detention.

The vehicle registration office can also take action. If post from the fines office is returned as undeliverable, the fines office can report this to the registration office. The registration office will then check your keeper details. If it considers them no longer accurate, it can require you to correct your keeper details or to deregister the vehicle. If you do not comply, it can impose a coercive fine (Zwangsgeld) and order compulsory deregistration, with police assistance if necessary. The vehicle may then no longer be driven, and your regular insurance cover ends. Under standard German policy conditions, the policy is converted into laid-up cover (Ruheversicherung), which only protects a parked vehicle.

So pay your fines on time, so that things never get that far.

This fact sheet is for general information only and does not replace legal advice. The statutory provisions and the information in the official letters prevail. Our descriptions of how letters are delivered in practice are based on our experience in customer service and may differ in individual cases.