Monthly barometer

TRENDS IN ROAD FREIGHT PRICES IN FRANCE

Febuary 2026 |

upply

FRENCH ROAD TRANSPORT: **VERY SHARP DROP IN PRICES IN FEBRUARY**

Road transport prices fell sharply by 1.6% in February, and the conflict in Iran is now increasing costs and threatening growth. The coming stagflation could be fatal to many transport companies.

According to the monthly business survey by the Banque de France, published on March 10, 2026, growth in France's gross domestic product for the first quarter is expected to fluctuate between 0.2% and 0.3%, bolstered in particular by market services. The Banque de France warned that, "*however, this technical forecast is subject to downside risk given the uncertainties surrounding the conflict in the Middle East and its impact on supply chains and energy prices, which could weigh on activity towards the end of the quarter*".

UNEVEN GROWTH

In February, industrial production continued its upward trend at a pace broadly in line with business leaders' expectations. However, there are disappointments in certain sectors which are traditionally major providers of flows for road freight transport. "*Some activities in which a more marked increase had been expected recorded a decline or limited growth. This was particularly the case in the automotive sector, which was penalised by the contraction of the domestic market and temporary supply difficulties, as well as in the pharmaceutical and metal and metal products sectors*", explains the Banque de France in its survey. Conversely, the chemical, machinery and equipment sectors and the computer-electronic-optical manufacturing sector are supporting growth, while demand for components remains dynamic, particularly in the health, telecommunications, and defence sectors.

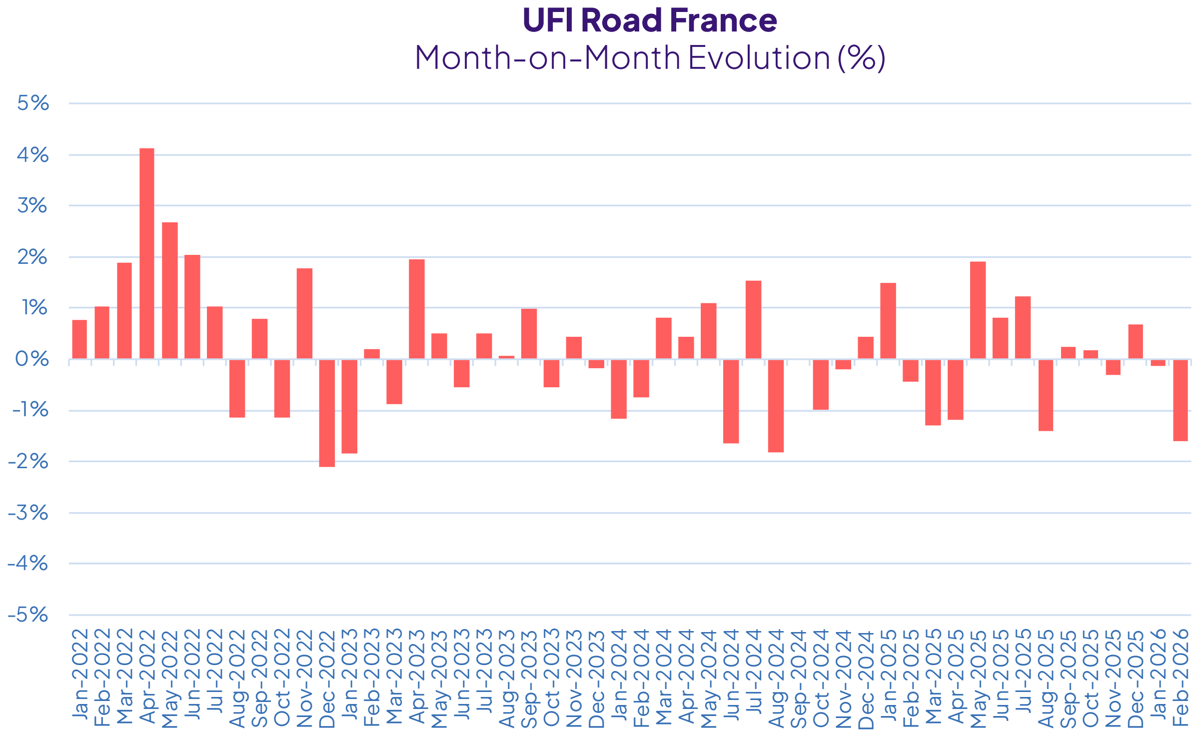
In the construction sector, activity increased in February at a rate above its long-term average, but contractors anticipate a sharp slowdown in activity in March.

Uncertainty and gloom are reflected in the business climate as measured by INSEE. In February, the composite indicator of the business climate in France lost almost two points. At 97.4, it is moving away from its long-term average. It remains above the 100 threshold in industry but below in construction, services, and retail.

Political instability since the dissolution of the National Assembly in June 2024 is exacerbating this climate of uncertainty, pushing economic actors into a wait-and-see approach. Geopolitical tensions, particularly due to the American and Israeli strikes on Iran, will very likely fuel further uncertainty and reinforce this wait-and-see attitude.

AN UNPRECEDENTED PRICE COLLAPSE SINCE AUGUST 2024

Despite slight growth, the road transport market in France took a steep downward turn at the start of this year, with prices collapsing by 1.6% month-on-month. This is no longer the slight decline seen in January, but a real plunge. Such a drop had not been observed since August 2024.



Source | Upply Freight Index – Road France

Generally, a sharp decline is linked to a contraction in demand but also to a drop in diesel prices. This was also the case in August 2024.

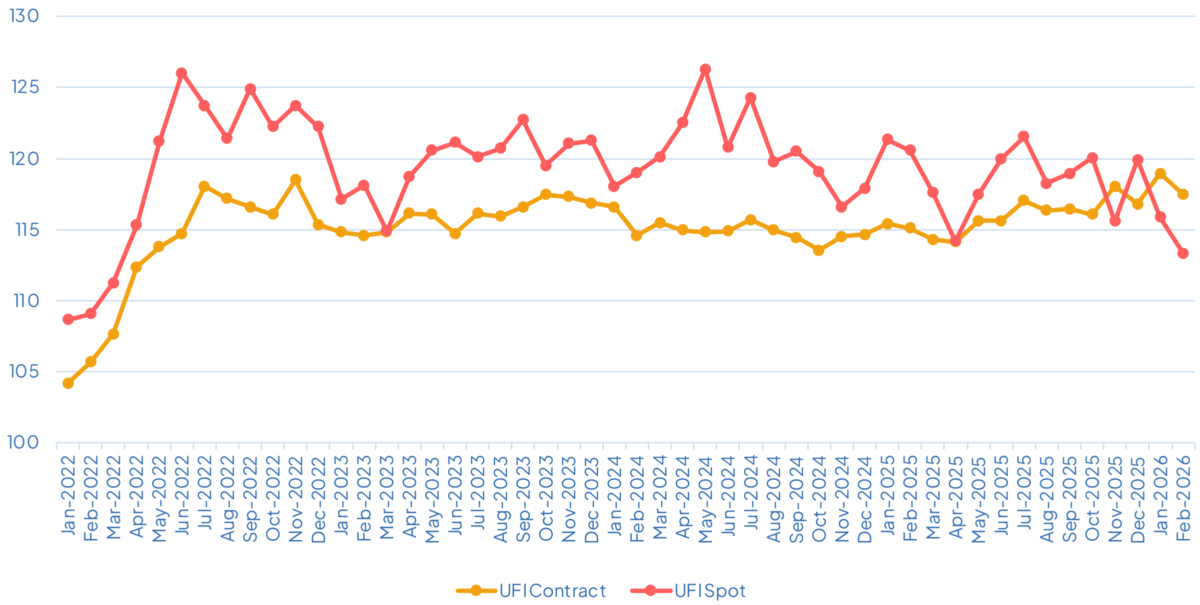
But none of these factors were observed in February. Professional diesel fuel rose by 3.0%, after already increasing by 3.4% in January. In road transport, variations in costs — and therefore prices — depend closely on changes in the price of professional diesel. We therefore expected freight rates to rise as early as February, linked to the delayed pass-through mechanism.

Yet, against all expectations, road transport prices have fallen. An anomaly that leaves professionals perplexed. Two main hypotheses are put forward to explain this paradox:

- Increased competition between carriers, forced to lower their prices to maintain their market share in a gloomy economic context.
- A drop in demand, linked to a slowdown in industrial and commercial activity at the beginning of the year, as indicated by the business climate indices which each lost three points in industry and services.

ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT IN THE SPOT AND CONTRACT MARKETS

UFI Contract and UFI Spot
Base 100: January 2019

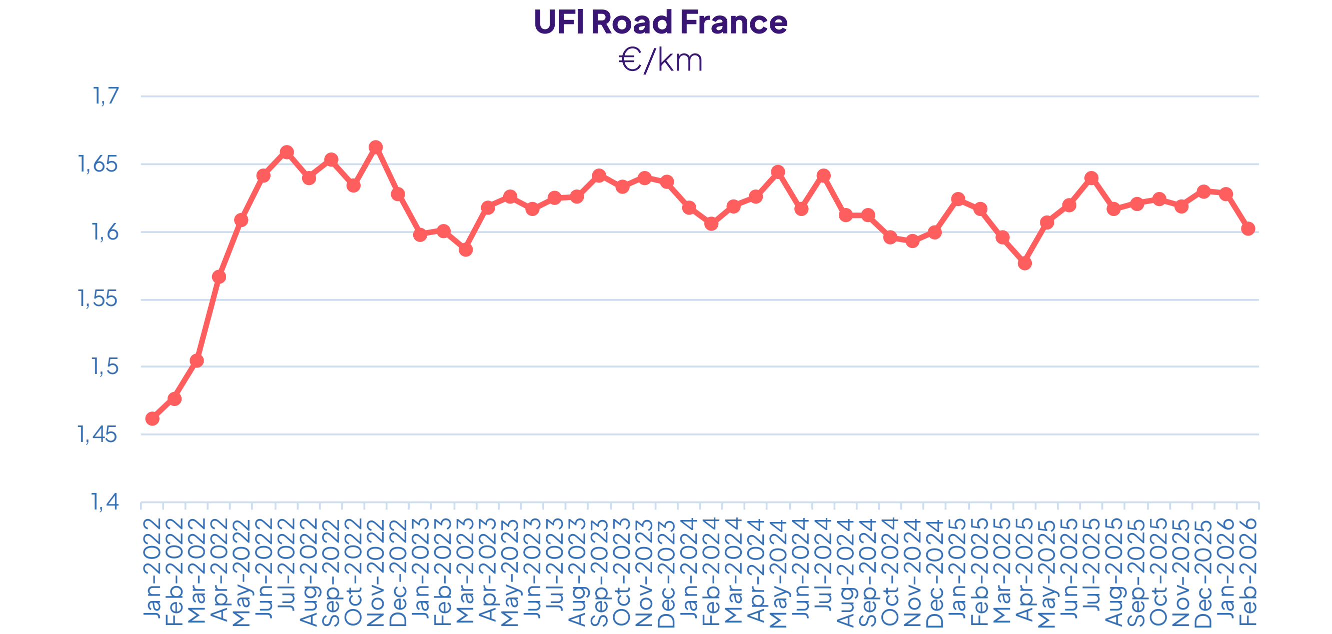


Source | Upply Freight Index – Road France

- **The SPOT index**, which represents the benchmark index for non-regular transport prices in France, fell by 2.2% in February after a decline of 3.4% in January. The decline in these non-contractual prices reflects an imbalance between supply and demand in the transport market. This is a fairly classic phenomenon in the first quarter and is repeated almost every year, as the volumes to be transported are traditionally lower at the beginning of the year, after the logistical peaks of the holiday season. The trend is therefore nothing exceptional.
  However, the index had not been this low since 2022, and the 12-month SPOT moving average has been falling for more than a year: this is therefore no longer a seasonal variation but a long-term trend. The market is clearly structurally trending downwards.
- **The Contract index**, which represents contractual prices between shippers and carriers on the French market, fell by 1.2% in February. On the other hand, the 12-month moving average continues to rise by about 0.2% per month, or 2.4% over 1 year. Contrary to what is happening on the spot market, we are therefore still seeing price growth on the contract market at this stage.

DETERIORATING CASH FLOW LEVELS

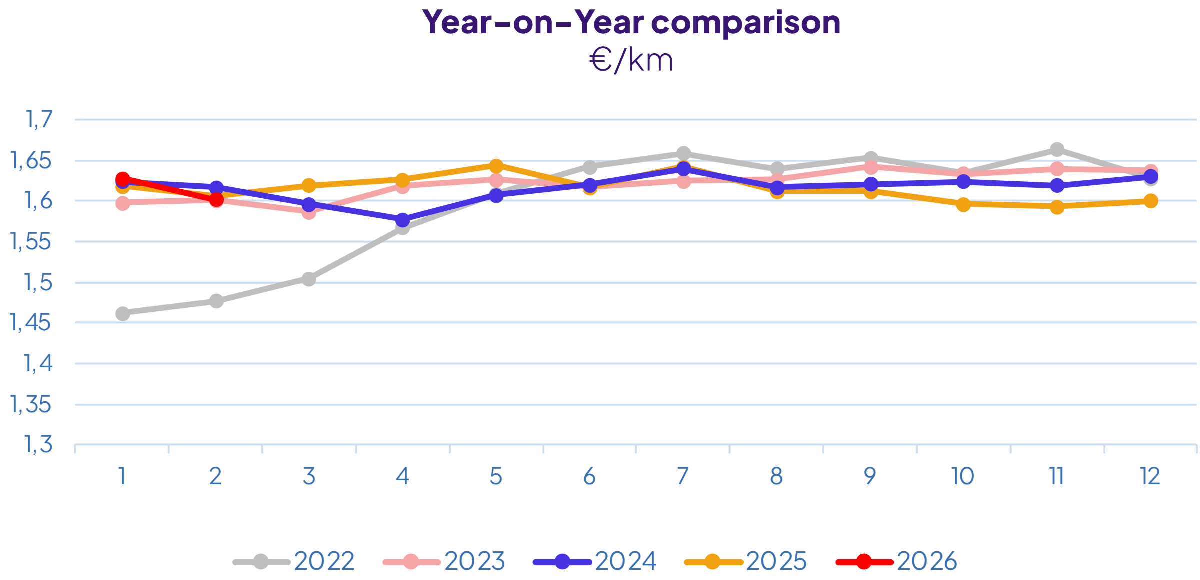
In February 2026, the average price of transport per kilometre travelled in France fell back to €1.600, losing almost 3 cents compared to the previous month. For several months, prices seemed to fluctuate within a range of €1.620 to €1.640 per kilometre, as if the market were hesitating between stability and tension.



Source | Upply Freight Index – Road France

The trend in February raises concerns about the start of a more pronounced downward trend, resulting from a deep imbalance between supply and demand in the sector. One thing is certain: by accumulating months of low volumes, French transport has entered a period of great fragility.

Overall, there has been a decrease in freight transport prices of almost 1% over the past year. At the same time, inflation in LDEA (long distance articulated units) prices amounted to +0.7%. We can therefore deduce that carriers as a whole have suffered a contraction of their margin of 1.7%. Of course, this is an average which may cover different realities, but in general, the cash flow of road transport companies has deteriorated significantly. This has a direct impact on salaries. In the absence of an agreement between employers' organisations and trade unions at the end of the mandatory annual negotiations, the scale of minimum contractual wages, which has not been increased since October 2023, will remain the same in 2026.



Source | Upply Freight Index – Road France

AN EXTERNAL SHOCK COMING AT THE WORST POSSIBLE TIME

In this context, the outbreak of the conflict in Iran is very bad news, for both road carriers and shippers, with a very real threat of stagflation. While the decline in volumes is already here, inflationary threats are back. Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, in response to Israeli-American military strikes, immediately caused oil prices to surge, with a barrel projected to be over $100, and consequently diesel prices as well.

In the first week of March 2026, the CNR observed an increase of approximately 20% in professional diesel. This increase led to a price hike of more than 4% in just one week of the total cost price of a long distance vehicle.

This crisis has hit a sector that was already very shaken. SMEs and very small businesses, which have less negotiating power and often more fragile cash reserves, are particularly exposed. The looming stagflation poses a real threat to their survival. "*Some companies are rightly considering putting the trucks on hold, refusing to work at a loss. Massive failures could occur, leading to a loss of sovereignty for the French fleet and potential disruptions in supply chains,*" warns the FNTR.

Professional organisations in the sector have all appealed to the government, calling in particular for the establishment of direct aid measures to road transport companies, as was the case in 2022 during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At the time, the State had notably put in place a fixed aid per vehicle.

But the "at any cost" approach has left its mark, and with a budget deficit of 5.4% in 2025, the state's room for manoeuvre is limited. For now, the government has explicitly ruled out any direct financial measures, during a meeting organised on March 17 at the initiative of Philippe Tabarot, Minister of Transport and Maud Brégeon, Government Spokesperson and Minister Delegate for Energy. However, the government said it is ready to explore other avenues, notably solutions which are being considered regarding fuel credit limits or deferrals of social security contributions, but nothing has been formally decided.

Professional organisations did not hide their bitterness and concern after this long-awaited meeting. "*We really need to weigh the cost of inaction against the cost of this aid,*" emphasised Jean-Marc Rivera, the Deputy Director General of OTRE.

KEY INDICATORS

Sources | INSEE (base 100 = long-term average), CNR (base 100: December 2000)

INDICATORS	February 2026	January 2025	Evolution M / M-1	February 2025	Evolution over 12 months
Insee Business climate Index	97.4	99.3	-1.9%	95.9	+1.6%
CNR Commercial Diesel Index	193.34	187.66	+3.0%	195.67	-1.2%
CNR's Long Haul semi trailer truck Index	166.29	165.06	+0.7%	165.19	+0.7%

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