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International Conference in Lisbon Road Safety

Communication of Member of Parliament Fernando Pereira

It is proposed that this Interparliamentary Conference on Road Safety should discuss and deepen what can be done to seek European harmonisation, especially with regard to concepts and principles.

Following this line of action, in this Communication I shall briefly look at the issue of the effects of alcohol on several of the variables that this theme brings with it.

1. Alcohol: A Public Health Problem

First and foremost, we should stress that the harmful and dangerous patterns of alcohol consumption are a real public health problem, as the European Court of Justice has said on several occasions.

For this reason, most Member States have taken concrete steps to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol. Policies have been



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established in this field, both at national and Community level, but the damage caused by the excessive consumption of alcohol continues to occur on an unacceptable scale.

The statistical elements available show that the bad effects of a high blood alcohol content (BAC) have reached all Member States (e.g. the consumption of alcohol by young people), which means that these measures have not been effective, as not only has this problem continued to linger but also got worse in certain cases.

Some issues warrant rapid action by their currency. Here I am talking about the transnational relationship which fits in perfectly with the issue of harmonisation that has been discussed in this Conference.

The difference in BAC limits in neighbouring countries leads to impunity, and this is the only way in which we can understand the transnational commercial promotions involving alcoholic beverages, which could attract young consumers.

This all calls us to give the due attention to this problem, a real Public Health problem which is responsible for 7.4 % of all health problems and precocious deaths in the European Union.

We must bring out true awareness of this fact in those people who are most exposed, our youngsters.



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About 10 % of female mortality and 25 % of male mortality within the 15 to 29 age bracket are linked to dangerous patterns of alcohol consumption.

This consumption has ill effects for those who drink, but also for society as a whole.

Hence, there is no doubt that here we are looking at what is a real Health and Public Safety problem.

2. Harmonisation: a *stony path*

We all agree that there is a strong correlation between BAC and the risk of getting involved in road accidents.

Therefore, the policies to reduce inappropriate driving while under the effects of alcohol have always been considered as a priority for the reduction of accidents and victims resulting therefrom.

The regimes applied are based on a combination of BAC limits, inspection, publicity and legal or administrative sanctions, with the combination varying from one country to another.

The proposals to set a uniform maximum limit for BAC have not been adopted, thanks to the objections made by some Member States.



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Hence, the harmonisation of standards has bitten the dust, and only the standardisation of principles now remains.

This is why we must demand that the European responsible parties make an extra effort to make the Member States aware of the importance of harmonisation, so that the principle of solidarity may prevail over undue use – in my opinion – of the subsidiarity principle.

This is a real *stony path* in which, surprisingly, all means are used to prevent the reality reaching those at the top.

One example of this is the position of the Committee of the Regions which I now quote: *'I have great doubts as to the use of the strategy of the European Union, of analysing the differences in alcohol consumption patterns by country, age and sex'*.

And, believe it or not, there are also doubts, as I continue to quote, *'in the execution of regular and comparative field surveys about the consumption of alcoholic beverages'*.

This legitimate but retrograde position goes to show just how difficult it has been to advance with a harmonised European policy which, in my opinion, should not be opposed with the *'different cultural habits regarding alcohol consumption'*.



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The cultural habits may indeed be different from one country to another, but everyone will agree that the effects of alcohol are the same in any European country.

3. Advantages of more harmonised BAC limits in the European Union

One of the main advantages of the harmonisation of the maximum legal limits on BAC in the EU is that in this way a clear message is passed on to drivers: above a certain limit, driving under the effects of alcohol is a dangerous activity.

More uniform limits shall provide the driver with a reference standard for national inspection and also for publicity campaigns throughout Europe.

Wherever we may be driving, as drivers we must be aware of a more uniform limit above which we know that, should we be stopped by the authorities, we shall be committing a traffic violation, that of driving under the effects of alcohol.



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4. It is essential that the maximum BAC limits in Portugal be changed for specific groups of road users.

As mentioned, the in-depth studies that have been carried out show that the risk of accidents on the road connected with alcohol increase in direct proportion with BAC.

All Member States have set limits for BAC. The studies tend to suggest a maximum limit of 0.5 mg/l or less. The effective application of measures to tackle driving under the effects of alcohol could significantly reduce the mortality rate on the roads, as also the number of wounded and maimed.

The strict key to success lies in the combination of tough inspection and active awareness building.

The fact is that in Portugal this inspection falls well short of European recommendations, as not even half the drivers that should be controlled do in fact carry out breath tests for blood alcohol.

This is why it is essential that the Government provides the Police Forces with the necessary instruments so that the BAC limit of 0.5 is enforced.

At this phase, in general terms, there is a need to make the current limit in Portugal be respected in sustainable form.



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This does not mean that one cannot take a step forward and reduce the BAC limit in Portugal for young and inexperienced drivers, as also for those drivers of public transport and commercial vehicles, especially those transporting hazardous materials.

The reasons behind the Proposal that we now defend are very well known:

- About one quarter of road accidents could be related to alcohol consumption. It is the group of young people between 18 and 24 that is at greatest risk. In this age bracket, between 35 % and 45 % of deaths are due to road accidents. Among teenagers, road accidents are also the most common cause of death (47 %, according to several European sources). In relation to accidents caused by driving under the effects of alcohol, two thirds of the people involved are aged between 15 and 34.
- The new legislation governing the group transport of children means that it is essential that this complementary step be taken, to make transport safer (whether public or private).



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- The risk of a large bus being involved in a major road accident, with deaths or seriously injured victims, is more than that of a car, in terms of vehicles/km, which reflects the larger number of passengers transported by buses.
- Statistics show that fatal accidents involving large buses and vehicles transporting goods are responsible for about 18 % of all fatal accidents in the EU.
- Accidents involving vehicles transporting hazardous goods can be very serious.

Thus, it is important that Portugal breaks free from its obstacles and makes sustained advances, to reduce the number of victims of accidents caused the infringement of BAC limits.

Portugal must do something. The country must seriously bet on campaigns for awareness building and also implement the 0.2 mg/l BAC limit in the case of young and inexperienced drivers, as also for drivers transporting children, drivers on public transport and also those who drive commercial vehicles, especially those transporting hazardous goods.



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We feel that this is the moment to tackle this Health and Public Security problem, which is that of driving under the effects of alcohol.