

A Road Safety European Policy - Harmonisation of Concepts and Principles for Road Safety in Europe

Statement of Member of Parliament Luís Queiró

Vice-President of the Committee for Transport, Tourism and Communications of the European Parliament

Mr President,

My fellow Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Assembly of the Republic for hosting this "III Interparliamentary Conference on Road Safety in Europe". The discussion of these issues is most important, and therefore it is with great pleasure that I find myself here, in the post of Vice-President of the Committee for Transport, Tourism and Communications of the European Parliament.

"We are all going to pass away, but we must avoid this happening on the roads". These are the wise words of Ari Vatanen, a former famous rally driver, particularly successful in Portugal, and now a respected MEP, constantly engaged in the cause of prevention of casualties on the roads.

Luís Queiró

If we want to give this discussion a European slant, we could start by mentioning that mobility is essential for one of the most important liberties of the European Union, which is the freedom of circulation, and also for the fulfilment of the internal market, this being a central aim within our community of 27 Member States.

This idea, apparently evident, has the consequence that, in a growing market, like ours has become in spite of the problems, there are more and more people and goods circulating. However, this does not mean that the probability of an accident shall be higher and hence more tolerable. On the contrary, the same development mentioned here requires greater protection of the lives and the physical integrity of all.

Unfortunately, however, the history of European mobility has its dark side which must not be ignored and which only now, very slowly, has started to be relieved.

At first sight, the data is encouraging. Today's reality is very different from that of the 1970s. In three decades (1970 to 2000), road traffic has tripled, while in fifteen years (recent data) there has been a significant reduction in the gravity of road accidents. In global terms, the number of deaths on the roads has declined from 76 076 in 1991 to 42 953 in 2006.

However, even today, road deaths are still the main cause of death for people aged under 50. On the other hand, the annual direct and indirect costs thus incurred for EU-25 come to about 200 million Euros, which is about 2 % of the GDP of the European Union.

Even taking into account the fact that the prospects in the widened European Union have been positive, there is no cause for slackening. This is even more the case because the gap between the Member States with the best and the worst results is widening, with the result that the degree of security in the Baltic States, for example, is 8 times less than in the United Kingdom.

Within this issue, as a Portuguese citizen and considering the long track record of road accidents in the country, I would like to take this opportunity to hail the results of the efforts that Portugal has made, especially since 2002, and which, as mentioned here, have been constant.

It is well known that in 2002, in Portugal, an average of 4 people died every day as a result of road accidents, with high human costs (more than one thousand lives lost every year) and also material losses (almost 3 % of GDP) arising therefrom. In 2006, only 4 years after the implementation of the first National Plan for the Prevention of Road Accidents, the number of deaths declined to just over 2 deaths per day. Although this is still a very high figure, it is a clear sign that the reality has changed and that we have embarked on a path which shall be long, but is well guided.

Four years before the 2010 target, when the National Road Accident Prevention Plan sought to bring road death and injury rates down by 50 %, if we look at the averages between 1998 and 2000, we can say that the target has been achieved.

Together with France, Portugal has been the European country to have had the greatest reductions in casualty rates. Although still one of the European countries with highest casualty rates, this recovery has enabled our country to get better results than Spain or Austria. The continuation of this effort requires, without any doubt, the continuation of the implementation of the National Plan for the Prevention of Road Accidents and also the bringing of our efforts into line with the guidelines set by the European Union. The sharing of good practices and best methods should be a national priority, together with use of technological innovations.

Going back to the European approach, here again the common target is that of reducing the number of fatal victims of the roads by 50 %, by 2010. This would mean saving 25 000 lives on European roads. This is most important and can be achieved. However, something is going wrong, as we are still falling short of the targets we have proposed.

So let us try to know what has to be done.

The actions that have been proposed at the European level normally focus on the three main domains: vehicles, infrastructure and behaviour; that is, the three components that make up the traffic system. These are actions which seek to be complementary and help the measures taken at national level.

The purpose of this approach is to construct a global European picture of strengthening of road safety, on a permanent basis, capable of predicting performance indicators that allow us to assess the progress made, and also enable us to work, in adjusted form, with the agreed principle of "shared responsibility", as each of us has a role to play to make European roads safer.

Indeed, safety is a common responsibility of each and every one of us.

As far as vehicles are concerned, through unwavering efforts and tough legislation, the automobile manufacturers are producing safer and safer vehicles. Similarly, technological progress, thanks to the same standards enforced by the legislators, have enabled the building of roads with ever greater safety standards.

A successful management of road safety must take into account several different criteria. On the one hand, it should try to identify all the weak points of the system, that contribute to the occurrence of road accidents or that make these accidents more serious or even fatal, so that the consequences thereof may be made lighter.

On the other hand, all road safety initiatives shall - or at least should - be based on reliable statistics about the causes of accidents and other relevant issues. The collection and analysis of data, now covered by the **European Road Accident Database (CARE)**, are essential for the planning of efficient and appropriate measures for improving road safety.

Another important instrument for the participation of all is the **European Road Safety Charter**, which calls upon all members of society, whether a small school in a tiny hamlet, a rural association or a large multinational company, to make a significant contribution towards improvement of road safety.

In the same direction, enforcing speed limits, the application of the legislation about driving under the effects of alcohol, the improvement in training of drivers, and the **European Driving License, whose main purpose** is that of avoiding what has been called "driving licence tourism", are other important measures.

On the other hand, the new openings provided through technological development, from standards concerning crash tests, air bags and electronic stability systems, and the technical possibilities of the development of safer roads, from design and maintenance of roadways through to vertical or horizontal signposting and safety audits, are other fundamental elements within this global package of measures.

Even so, we can still do more, also because, as we well know, most road accidents are caused by traffic offences, in disobedience of basic and essential rules of the road.

Knowing this fact, we must act preventively on human behaviour, as the correction thereof is by far the factor that is most likely to produce positive results in the short term.

The strength of this idea is impressive, but the crux of the matter is that if everyone respected the traffic rules, this would cause a reduction of 90 % in the number of deaths on the roads.

If everyone used seat belts (no matter where they were going), kept to legally established speed limits and never drove after drinking, deaths would be reduced by some 60 %, and we would have complied with, and even surpassed, the target set, of cutting the number of road deaths by half by 2010.

As this is not the case, and knowing that the other components of road safety also have an influence on the result, we have other battle fronts that could be used.

In the **sphere of technology**, the **eSafety** programme is an excellent initiative for the development and introduction of new safety technologies, that plans an integrated form of co-operation between industry, the European Commission and European Parliament, and all other parties involved.

There are still a lot of improvements to be made within the area of private safety, from devices to encourage use of seat belts, to devices for the elimination of blind spots in rear mirrors or better protection of pedestrians, which has a lot to do with the zones of vehicle impact and absorption - areas in which the European Parliament has made a lot of effort, seeking to provide as much security as possible in the very concept of the vehicles.

However, the most promising future lies in the enhancement of active safety, in the so-called "intelligent vehicles".

It is in this context that the **eSafety** programme, as mentioned above, has been speeding up this process. Through this, we envisage the increase in the opportunities provided by telematic applications, to reduce the number of fatal accidents in the medium to long term.

One of the most interesting initiatives is that of the eCall system, which is part of the eSafety package, which involves the establishment of a harmonised pan-European system for emergency calls from the vehicles themselves, automatically activated in the event of an accident. It is estimated that this initiative could save up to 2 500 lives per year in the EU, as well as saving some 26 million Euros in costs that can be put down to the accidents or to the traffic congestion arising therefrom. Indeed, we must not ignore these figures, and we shall thus boost the introduction of this system as soon as possible, as standard equipment in all new cars that are sold.

Just as interesting within the domain of new technologies, we have the device that **blocks driving under the effects of alcohol, built into the ignition key of the vehicle**. It is this kind of intelligent gadget, or intelligent speed assistance technologies, that should be introduced into as many cars as possible, at an accessible price. They shall contribute towards better protection not only of the drivers but also of the more fragile road users, like cyclists and pedestrians.

Concerning infrastructure, the European Parliament has approved a report about the proposal for a Directive regarding the **management of road infrastructure safety**, to which the MEPs wish to contribute, for better addressing of the issue of security in road infrastructure, acknowledging the fact that the evolution of the roads has, by and large, lagged behind the growth in traffic.

The improvement and adaptation of the road network at current traffic levels is important, also because now it is possible to make systematic integration of road safety issues at all stages of conception, construction and use of the roads, resorting to the use of impact appraisals, audits and security inspections, whose necessity and efficiency in terms of costs and benefits cannot be cast into doubt. Therefore, security issues should also be a pre-requisite for the planning, construction, maintenance and use of the roads.

Nowadays, this aspect is decisive - the nurturing of a **safety culture within road engineering** that respects the principle of subsidiarity - this is certain - but which becomes an instrument that includes all domains within road safety.

The list of ongoing initiatives is quite long, as we can see, as also is our duty of collaboration. Although I do not wish to ramble for too long, I would also like to point out the two main areas for the future when there is, in my opinion, some root work to be carried out: on the one hand, skills training for young road users, and, on the other hand, the building of awareness in automobile manufacturers, concerning the *en masse* introduction of intelligent security systems, that have shown a good cost-benefit relationship in this domain.

If there is a place where the famous adage "Each person's freedom ends where the next person's freedom starts" really holds true, then this place is the road. And it is in honour of this principle that we have the indeclinable responsibility of continuing our joint actions. The measurement of our success as far as road safety legislation is concerned, dear colleagues, both here and also in the EP, are the lives we have helped to save.

Thank you very much!