

INTERPARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE AT LISBON

A European Policy for Road Safety

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My fellow Members of Parliament,

Dear Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we shall be discussing Road Safety in Europe.

The figures released by the United Nations do not leave a shadow of doubt: road accidents are the most important cause of death among people aged under 25. Throughout the world, some 400 thousand young people die in accidents on the roads, while millions more are maimed or wounded.

Therefore, there can be no doubt that this is an area of fundamental importance, and which has warrants growing attention within Europe.

Well-known is the target, set back in 2001, of saving 25 thousand lives by 2010, achieving this through the reduction of the number of fatalities caused by road accidents to 29 thousand in the above mentioned year. This is, indeed, an ambitious goal, that would represent the halving of the number of road deaths in 9 years. According to the most recent data, for this goal to be achieved this would require even greater effort from Europe as a whole, as between 2001 and 2007 the number of deaths on the roads of the European Union decreased by only 21 %, a far cry from the 50 % reduction sought by 2010.

However, significant advances have indeed been made: the situation we face today has little in common with the situation of 20, or even 10, years ago when we consider road safety. This means that we have already reversed the trend, but of course there is still a lot to be done.

Most of those present will probably remember the days when people could abstain from using seat belts, headrests, or adequate restraint systems for children; or, through the technological backwardness of those times, driving

cars without such “modern gadgets” as air bags, forefathers of seat belts, ABS, steering control or assisted driving.

Beyond these technologies which seem closely linked to the issue of road safety, we would also like to draw your attention to some new gadgets that, without us realising it, can also save lives in accidents that may even cease to exist thanks to the use thereof. Here I am talking about GPS, onboard computers and all other devices that make driving safer and more predictable, by giving information to the driver.

It would come as no surprise if, over the next decade, we would have a merger of the current GPS systems with official traffic management systems. If this does indeed happen, then we shall not only avoid accidents but also solve one of the biggest headaches of local authorities: urban road casualties.

I would also like to highlight the role played by the Obligatory Inspections of the current car pool. Far beyond the “extra fee” that some people had envisaged, these inspections have proved to be a powerful ally in upholding the security standards required for public roadways.

I would also like to congratulate everyone for the fact that the times when our children were transported in a manner now considered irresponsible have vanished into the mists of the past.

With regard to this issue, I would like to briefly go over the legislation already approved in Portugal for the transport of children.

Without entering into the technical side of the matter, it is with great pleasure that I see that at long last we are adequately protecting our children who not only are the future of our nation but are also the most fragile of road users, as in most cases the decision for them to be transported is beyond their control - hence, we must make sure that utmost security is provided for them.

Turning now to individual transport, and in my personal case, I can assure you that, not having any children (at least not yet) I have been able to follow the growth of my two nephews since they were born, through the changes in the chairs that I have had to attach to the rear seat of my vehicle.

I well know that we still need to follow some steps so that all Portuguese and European citizens may feel the need to do the same with their children; nevertheless, it is with joy that I see that we now have specific legislation in this regard. Protecting our children in an appropriate manner, we are just doing our duty.

My fellow Members of Parliament,

Arriving here, you could not but notice with satisfaction that my country was the second best in Europe in terms of reduction in the number of fatal victims of the roads between 2001 and 2007 (42 %), behind France (43 %). The fact of the matter is, however, that we all need to make more of an effort so that we may reach our global target by 2010.

In this regard, I do sincerely feel that this Conference, with its statements and Communication Sessions, discussions and exchange of ideas, have contributed to our advances in this area.

It shall also be additionally important that the good examples presented by the Member States in a range of different areas are in fact adopted, or even copied, I would say. I do not believe it would be negative to copy good examples and good practices!

For example, the Latin countries of Southern Europe could, and should, progress towards the adoption of the policies of the Nordic countries regarding speed control.

Conversely, the countries of Northern Europe would only reap benefits if they would look at the developments that have been undergone by the protective road infrastructure that the vehicle users at greatest risk have got to know in the South.

At this point, dear colleagues, let me inform that it was with pleasure that I approved, together with my colleagues at this Assembly, in the previous Legislature in 2004, our Law no 33/2004, by which the State started to do its part, by protecting the plumbs of the guardrails, that had previously caused many deaths and also amputation of limbs among users of two-wheeled vehicles - a class that is often little remembered, but which has an ever greater number of users, including not only motorcycles but even bicycles and even scooters.

Apart from being an example from Portugal to the rest of Europe, this Law, which introduced the so-called "double rails" for the protection of users of two-wheeled vehicles, is now in the process of being reanalysed because it could also be an inspiration for the adaptation of the current conventional rails for the protection of heavy vehicles which, as the Inquiry Commission for the infamous accident on the A23 (the Beira Interior Motorway) well concluded, this could prove to be highly positive so that an ever lower number of human lives may be lost in road accidents.

If it is true that accidents do happen, then at least we can learn something from them, so that they are not repeated!...

Dear Colleagues,

If we act in this way, we shall, without any doubt, be contributing towards a growing harmonisation of concepts and principles regarding Road Safety in Europe.

Here, it is worth remembering that ever since the European Economic Community, as it then was, was first set up in 1957, there have always been those who doubted - and many have done so through the years - that there would be the possibility of integration and harmonisation between the different European countries.

History has come to show, with reasonable clarity, and with greater or lesser delay, that they were wrong - which has also been the case with regard to the approximation and integration of concepts of Road Safety.

Trailing this path is beneficial for all: either in the harmonisation of the regulations governing road building, or the laws and standards applied thereto, we can all come out winners.

But please pay attention, we can have no illusions: the proof of our success or lack of success on this mission shall only be obtained at the moment of the most important harmonisation of all: the harmonisation of safe driving by all European drivers.

After all, the responsibility lies not only with the State but also with the citizens.

Harmonisation also includes action from the different European authority forces, and here, particularly, we cannot but salute our very own GNR and PSP for their highly commendable work, of rigour and updating, that they have developed in recent years.

Dear Parliamentary Colleagues,

When we address issues related to Road Safety, we are automatically reminded of the number of lives that are scythed away by the roads every year and, obviously, the number of lives we could save.

As I am an Economist by profession, I could not wrap up my speech except by looking at the economic impact of the theme of this Conference, something that affects the lives of the countries and their peoples, including their stages of development and respective happiness.

Apart from the stark human tragedy composed by thousands of people killed or hurt on the roads, all countries are directly and indirectly affected by the consequences of what happens on the roads. Data from the United Nations and from the European Road Safety Observatory show that the average cost of road accidents for European countries comes to about 2 % of the respective GDP, every year.

This percentage, which could seem somewhat conservative for some countries, in my country works out at some 340 million Euros per year. I repeat, 340 million Euros per year at 2008 prices.

Well, I sincerely believe that, as a politician and also a driver myself, I should propose that a sum of this size be invested in prevention, education and public works, instead of carrying on as we are doing now, allocating a similar sum, or even more, to areas related to health and social security, as a direct result of road accidents. Indeed, in this case I am sure that we would have a much happier, fairer and more prosperous country!...

The fact is, dear colleagues, guests, ladies and gentlemen, transmitting this desire and ambition of mine, which I believe is shared by all, to the realm of reality, this does not mean that I shall be talking about numbers, but rather about human lives that have been lost!... As I see it, I feel it would go down very well if these sums could be passed on to Ministries like those for Education, Public Works or Internal Administration, to really operate in the field of prevention! Like in any other intelligent political option, the State does not increase their expenditure nor lose income, but rather just limits their activities to the allocation of funds to where they are really needed, instead of continuing to bet on the old and worn failed formulas of the past.

This would be an excellent way for Europe to help the world, and I think we can reach the conclusion that this way we would be contributing towards the significant improvement of the planet on which we live.

Thank you very much.