

Siim Kallas

Vice-President and Commissioner for Transport

Working together to reduce deaths on Europe's roads

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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Ladies and gentlemen

Each year, European roads are the scene of an unacceptable number of fatalities.

Last month we received the latest annual figures for 2011.

They give me particular cause for concern because the rate of decline in road deaths in Europe has slowed down markedly.

This is a worrying change in the trend, given our previous successes in getting the numbers down.

But a trend that has **not** yet changed is that drink driving remains a major killer on our roads today.

Although drink drivers know that they can be caught and that the penalties are tough, alcohol-impaired road users are still involved in about a quarter of all fatal crashes in Europe.

And that is despite a tide of public opinion which is firmly against drink driving.

I am still optimistic that we can progress towards our 'vision zero' for road safety in 2050 and manage to halve road casualties by 2020. But despite the good progress made in the last 10 years, a period during which we have cut road deaths by almost 45%, there is clearly a long way to go.

Today's situation is not good - and progress has slowed down in 2011. It is unacceptable for 85 people to die every day on Europe's roads.

So what comes next? At the European Commission, we are now examining the latest data and trends to get a better picture of the reasons behind these results.

The main problem, ultimately, is enforcing the rules. To some extent, differences in national cultures across Europe can also be a factor – but that **in no way** excuses drink driving. One alcohol-related road death shatters a family's life and is one death too many.

Rules only work when they are enforced, and that means constant checks and controls on the roads. That said, preventative measures are not a substitute for enforcement, but go hand-in-hand with enforcement - and vice versa.

As you know, the Commission has embarked on an ambitious 10-year programme designed to halve the number of deaths on Europe's roads by 2020. It contains seven strategic objectives, one of which is 'better enforcement' – including national enforcement plans for our Member States.

This is an area where we clearly need to work harder. So I will now be writing to our Member States to request more information on their national enforcement plans, to get a better picture of what is actually happening on the ground and to find out what initiatives they are planning.

While I know that we are not out of the woods yet as far as the economic crisis is concerned, I would also like to be reassured by the Member States that any financial cutbacks to national budgets will not delay or stop this vital work.

The situation should, I hope, improve when they integrate the cross-border enforcement directive agreed last year into their national statute books.

We expect these new rules to act as a strong deterrent and raise road safety levels. At the moment, many people seem to think that when they drive abroad, the usual rules just stop applying. Statistics show that a foreign driver is three times more likely to commit a road traffic offence than a resident driver.

That is unfortunately also true for the other recognised 'big killers' on our roads: speeding, running red lights and failing to use seatbelts.

The new rules will plug a big gap in enforcing traffic laws across the European Union.

We are also aware of the rising incidence of drug-driving, especially among young drivers. While all EU countries have limits on the amount of alcohol that drivers may consume, legal thresholds have yet to be set for other drugs.

This is why the Commission promotes prevention and awareness campaigns, like the "European night without accidents" event organised in nightclubs across Europe each year. When people leave, they are encouraged by a team of young volunteers to take a breathalyser and/or a drug test.

If we can help with campaigns like these to change young people's driving mentality into a more positive approach, it will go a long way towards reducing the number of road accidents where young people are involved.

Ladies and gentlemen

Let me now turn briefly to the issue of maximum permitted blood alcohol content, or BAC, for drivers. While the majority of Member States have set a legal BAC limit of 0.5 mg/ml, these limits vary widely across the EU. They range between absolute zero tolerance and 0.8 mg in a couple of countries.

As you may recall from the Commission's 2001 recommendation on this subject, we would ideally like to see all countries adopt a 0.5 mg limit – or move towards an even lower one.

But here I have to repeat what I have said in the past, that it should be up to individual Member States to choose the BAC limit for their own territory. National cultures differ too much to have a pan-European limit – just compare Belgium with my own country, Estonia, for example. So I do not intend to make any legal proposal in this area during the mandate of this Commission.

Lastly, on alcohol interlock devices. The Commission is closely following the various pilot projects that are underway for deploying these devices in vehicles. Of course, some Member States have already passed legislation in this area: Finland has already made their use compulsory in all school buses and daycare transport.

This year, we will commission a study to examine this issue in greater depth and look at different experiences with installing and using alcohol interlock devices.

It will also examine the possible cost/benefit implications of compulsory application of alcohol interlocks in all EU Member States as well as their effects on road traffic accidents caused by drink driving.

Ladies and gentlemen

As I said at the start, the situation today is worrying. But if we work together to raise awareness, to enforce the rules better and to change people's driving habits, then we can truly make a difference.

We have already done so – the progress that has been made in reducing road deaths since the start of the millennium should encourage us to do even better.

Thank you for your attention.