

**EU Standard and Euro-Traffic Police against Road Traffic Accidents,
or
The Self-Management Instrument Called Brussels *)**

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In the war on the roads Bulgaria is, regrettably, a tragic champion. Among the EU Member States Bulgaria ranks **second** (after Romania) in the number of road deaths per billion vehicle-km, **4.2-fold** the EU average.

Between 1951 (when records began) and 2006, 52,276 people were killed on the roads in Bulgaria (as many as the population of an Asenovgrad or a Kurdjali). By comparison, this exceeds 2,000-fold our death toll (26) of all international military missions in which this country participated during that period. In addition, 318,388 were injured on the roads (comparable to the population of Varna). The magnitude of these statistics turns the problem into a demographic factor.

Road traffic accidents in the EU have yet another important dimension: damage to property and financial loss. According to World Bank figures, road traffic accidents cost Bulgaria some BGN 1,000,000 (one billion leva) annually, i.e. about 2 per cent of the country's GDP. For the entire EU, the financial losses inflicted by road traffic accidents approximate **EUR 340,000 million annually**. This money could have been spent on a number of very appropriate purposes: improvement of the road infrastructure, health care etc. It could even help cope with worldwide famine, which would cost as little as EUR 20,000 million annually, according to the Director-General of FAO.

Road traffic accidents have yet another, third global dimension. They have a strongly adverse impact (and in many different ways) on the **quality of our life**, on **global climate change**, on the **sustainability of human development**. This is a problem that the EU is starting to perceive as a global challenge.

Therefore, there is one way to address the issue: **the EU will have periodically to enforce the best European practices of road traffic safety within the entire territory of the Union**. Whether we want it or not, whether we believe it or not, this is what expects us, but it is only for our own good.

The Accession Treaty that we signed with the EU in April 2005 gives us legislation consisting of 90,000 pages, based on directives and regulations (over 3,500 in number), standardising all possible spheres of life of Europeans. Some of them are more familiar: about noxious emissions, food safety, fishing quotas. Others are news to many. Who could have imagined that there is an EU *Directive relating to ... sweetened chestnut pureé* (I am sure that very few people in this country even know how it tastes)! Recently, the European Commission initiated a ban on cannibalism among domestic animals.

We also have nearly 70 EU standards for the various car parts. For the time being, however, we have no directive limiting road deaths in the EU. Human life on the roads is not less important than the rest of the environmental standards that the EU imposes on its Member States. For entry into the Euro-zone, we require low inflation. We should be prepared to guarantee more safety to both pedestrians and drivers upon entry into the EU territory! This is coming.

The Common European Road Safety Policy is gaining momentum. The EU sets itself ambitious goals. One of the best known targets is to halve road deaths in the EU by 2010.

But this threshold target is quite insufficient for Bulgaria and Romania, and the EU will realise this very soon. Because, even if each EU Member State reduces its fatal road traffic accidents by 50 per cent, we will still be on top of the table and will still have 4.2-fold worse performance than the EU average. It is precisely for the sake of the laggards (rather than for the sake of the achievers) that the EU needs a **Common European Road Safety Policy**, which would not allow Member States to deviate substantially from the EU average. We consider it natural for the European Commission to penalise governments that fail to cope with domestic waste disposal, game protection, or the environment. It is time to get prepared for mechanisms that **will make sure that the national road death toll stays within a narrow band above the EU average**. To put it differently, unless we follow the right European road on our own, we should be ready that Brussels will steer us there. The same (albeit in a longer term) applies to the traffic in Sofia: unless we do something about the jams, Brussels will have to tackle them, too.

The Common European Road Safety Policy passes through Community **legislation on road traffic**. As well as through standardised (not necessarily identical) limits to permissible speed and blood alcohol concentrations, requirements to use seat belts and lights, roundabouts (which help avoid many crashes), non-use of mobile phones and non-smoking, and driving instruction courses. Along with uniform Euro-fines and other sanctions that would have the strongest deterrent effect on road cowboys. Standardisation does not imply bureaucratic regimentation: if roads in Germany are objectively better and traffic accidents are fewer, let the speed limit in Germany be higher. The same applies to fines: they need not be identical but, say, in Italy, they should be proportionate to Italians' purchasing power.

Somebody will say: fines in Bulgaria don't work – few drivers bother to pay them. Something can be done about that, too. We will start with surveillance cameras along the road, then we will introduce all sorts of GPS systems, and we will finally be exchanging traffic policemen with Britain, Finland and Sweden – this will definitely work. In the long term, we will establish an **All-European Traffic Police**, which will be a natural evolution of Euro-integration. This will close the circuit within the EU: common rules, common practices, common control.

All this – and much more – will inevitably happen. **Let us be ready: the best in road Euro-integration has yet to come**. Let us be ready for mandatory electronic stability control (ESC): a computerised technology that reduces the risk of skidding, for mandatory car intelligence, for an in-built automatic accident warning

system and other wonders besides which the Single European Emergency Call Number 112 will look like a child's play.

This logically begs the question: why don't we put our house in order on our own instead of waiting from Brussels to order us to do so? Here is the answer. In 2000-2008, **while negotiating with the EU, we developed a new national reflex:** The most important and the most urgent priorities come from Brussels, and the rest are side-tracked. Similarly, schoolchildren prioritise the subject in which they will be tested tomorrow rather than next term. Governments and municipalities are just like schoolchildren. Therefore, all branches of government should be aware of one thing from now on: **Brussels does not believe in tears, actions speak louder than words!**

This fact of life makes Brussels our priceless ally in the struggle for self-perfection. We will benefit the most from the inevitable Common European Road Safety Policy. Under the Treaty of Lisbon, not only government institutions but civil society, too, will have the right to initiate legislation. Let civil society become aware of this mission. As a Member State, we can seek a Europewide solution to a common problem that is at its worst in our country. Common EU standards presuppose common EC control. We are not daunted: we remember that **verification is the ultimate form of trust.** It is an even more ultimate when it is European.

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*) We can all feel the ever greater practical applicability of the EU to an improvement of ordinary Europeans' everyday life. This article emerged as a result of a Liberal discussion on *the limit to which the EU can favourably impact citizens' life*. We arrived at the conclusion that there is no limit to this impact, and it extends far beyond our current ideas of it. We have yet to introduce standards leading to quality of life in fight with its opposite: climate change. As long as we want it, and as long as we are not afraid to want it, we can speed up these processes. The Treaty of Lisbon will bring more good news: civil society, too, is already vested with the right to initiate legislation. It remains for civil society to make good use of this hard-earned right.

This article is part of a larger work on the subject of *Recharging Europe*, the discussion on which triggered a nationwide campaign spearheaded by Bulgaria's Minister of European Affairs: recharging the EU with new energy to generate a new quality of life.