

MEP ARI VATANEN IN AN INTERVIEW FOR EUROPE GATEWAY

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MEP Ari Vatanen EPP-ED, Chairman of Mobility for Prosperity in Europe, organised the event "The Integrated Approach to Road Safety" on Monday 14 May in the European Parliament in Brussels. In his speech Ari Vatanen brought to the attention of the public the drastic differences between EU Member States in deaths on roads: whereas in the Netherlands, UK or Sweden there are 130-150 deaths to million cars, in Lithuania and Latvia these figures rise to 600 and 800 respectively. "We must ensure that best practises are spread out to the whole union. One of the means to do it is the new Infrastructure Directive which can be followed on a voluntary basis on national roads as well. But most importantly, we must understand the importance of investments in safe roads, such as motorways. Roads that enable smoothly flowing logistics are also safe", stated Vatanen.

Gateway Europe is a partner of the initiative for the European road safety Charter. In connection to this, Gateway Europe's Nikolay Karamihov interviewed Mr. Vatanen. Mr. Vatanen you are famous throughout the world with your achievements as a rally pilot where the high speed and calculated risks are important for the good performance. But now as a MEP you are very active on the issues of road safety and the prevention of accidents. What has done so far the European Parliament and what is to be done till the end of the mandate?

I want to work for safer roads, because it is a concrete way to improve peoples' lives. The European Parliament makes a lot of reports on crises around the world or the EU constitution - but we must neither forget about the daily lives of the people who sent us to the parliament. There is still so much that we could do and can do. First of all law enforcement. Okay, that is not an EU

matter, it is not within our competence, but that is by far the most efficient way to get things done - through law enforcement, just abiding by and obeying the current rules. We can certainly share best practice among EU members and now there is a debate on an infrastructure directive, which would force member states to improve safety on EU-financed main roads. Europeans are mobile thanks to the European road network. It is not justified, or fair on European competitiveness, that we should spend so much money on railways, which serve so little purpose compared to the road network. We have to be just in that allocation and treat all transportation modes equally.

The EU also supports safer roads for instance through its eSafety initiative: funding is given to innovative new technologies which help prevent accidents (so-called active safety) instead of just mitigating the effects of accidents (passive safety).

Very concretely, the European Parliament also is involved in setting all kind of technical standards for vehicles. Having common standards is important not only for safety but also to allow the vehicle manufacturers to produce vehicles efficiently.

Last year in Bulgaria 1042 people have died in road accidents. The numerous campaigns for public awareness and the increasing of the penalties have little effect. The media are talking about "War on the roads". What is possible to be done both in national and European level to reduce the number of the accidents?

Why do we do so little? It is because it is not the Concorde which crashes, it is not the pride of the UK and France which crashes. When that happened, all Concorde were grounded immediately. No stone was left unturned in seeking to remedy the problem. But when it comes to traffic safety, it is just one family crying here, another family crying there.

Yet things need not remain so bleak. Traffic has grown threefold since 1970 and yet fatalities have been halved. So cultures can be changed. We must believe in the new generation. At the end of the day, whatever we do, responsibility always lies with the individual. At the end of the day we are responsible. For my part I have learned the hard way the importance of road safety. When I was a small boy I was with my entire family in a motor car when my father was killed. I remember him leaning against the steering wheel, that anxiety in my chest. I am sure that experience has left me with a bigger internal handicap than I dare to admit. If every EU Prime Minister would lose one family member in a traffic accident, we would immediately have a different attitude to road accidents. They are not a fatality!

As I mentioned before, the penalties for speeding and drunk-driving have been significantly increased, but there is no visible effect. Some citizens believe that this is because of the corruption in law enforcement agencies and the sense of impunity that some drivers have because of this. What can be done to change this?

Automatic speed cameras are a way to make people "pay for their sins". Speed cameras cannot be bribed and have proven very effective in France and Finland.

Drink driving is a major problem and can be remedied only by changing attitudes and visible campaigns. In a few years I hope it will be possible to drastically cut drink driving by making alco-locks standard in every vehicle. Of course it is possible to make someone else blow in the alco-lock, but very stiff penalties would make many think twice before making this very questionable favour.

The European Parliament is working on a paper proposing to limit the top speed of the new automobiles. Will this be accepted by the member states and by the industry and what effect you think it will have both on the road safety and the industry?

I don't know whether it will be accepted or not - but I don't support this measure. It is false

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to think that speed as such is dangerous: only inappropriate speed is dangerous! In some circumstances 30 km/h is the maximum safe speed. This is why I for instance advocate dynamic speed limits where the maximum speed is automatically adjusted according to weather and traffic conditions.



Numerous proposals for increasing the road safety have been accepted by EU, but still there are no common rules for the alcohol limits and the use of lights during daytime. What can be done in this field, since last year in your report for the EP, you calculated that the casualties will drop with 60% if all use safety belts and no alcohol is allowed. How can the member states be persuaded to change the laws and implement them?

Enforcement is mainly an issue for the Member States. The EU can help spread best practice for enforcement but the national level is the appropriate level on which to legislate and act. What we could also do at the EU level is to "name, fame and shame" those who do especially well or badly. This may make governments act in order to reach the level of their EU peers.