

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission: European Road Safety Action Programme: Halving the number of road accident victims in the European Union by 2010: A shared responsibility'

(COM(2003) 311 final)

(2004/C 80/21)

On 2 June 2003 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 24 November 2003. The rapporteur was Mr Simons.

At its 404th plenary session (meeting of 10 December 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 112 votes in favour and two abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The purpose of this Communication is to give effect to the target set in the White Paper on European Transport Policy of halving the number of road deaths by 2010.

1.2. The Action Programme aims at:

- encouraging road users to improve their behaviour,
- making vehicles safer, and
- improving road infrastructure.

1.3. In its programme the Commission describes specific measures ranging from the drafting of technical guides to the collection and analysis of data on accidents. By way of example, the following list contains only those measures on which the Committee has been asked, or will shortly be asked, to give its opinion:

- Approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to compulsory use of safety belts in vehicles of less than 3,5 tonnes ⁽¹⁾;
- Training of professional drivers for the carriage of goods or passengers by road ⁽²⁾;
- Minimum safety requirements for tunnels in the Trans-European Road Network ⁽³⁾;

- Information and Communications Technologies for Safe and Intelligent Vehicles ⁽⁴⁾ (TEN/164, work in progress);
- Road transport controls ⁽⁵⁾ (TEN/166, work in progress);
- Driving licences ⁽⁶⁾ (TEN/167, work in progress);
- Motor vehicles with regard to the seats, their anchorages and head restraints ⁽⁷⁾ (INT/198, work in progress);
- Anchorages for motor-vehicle safety belts ⁽⁸⁾ (INT/199, work in progress);
- Safety belts and restraint systems of motor vehicles ⁽⁹⁾ (INT/200, work in progress).

1.4. Finally, the Commission calls on everyone in authority, with decision-making powers, or acting in an economic, social or representative function to subscribe to a European Safety Charter, whereby in addition to complying with universal principles each signatory undertakes to implement specific actions. The commitments given will be publicised and compliance with them monitored.

2. General comments

2.1. The Committee feels that at this stage it can deliver only a short opinion outlining the framework in which the concrete measures are to be implemented. As soon as the Commission produces more detailed proposals for achieving the objective, the Committee will obviously give its opinion on those.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2000) 815 final — 2000/0315 (COD), OJ C 260, 17.9.2001, p. 30.

⁽²⁾ COM(2001) 56 final — 2001/0033 (COD), OJ C 260, 17.9.2001, p. 90.

⁽³⁾ COM(2002) 769 final, 2002/0309 (COD) OJ C 220, 16.9.2003, p. 26.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2003) 542 final.

⁽⁵⁾ COM(2003) 628 final.

⁽⁶⁾ COM(2003) 621 final.

⁽⁷⁾ COM(2003) 361 final — 2003/0128 (COD).

⁽⁸⁾ COM(2003) 362 final — 2003/0136 (COD).

⁽⁹⁾ COM(2003) 363 final — 2003/0130 (COD).

2.2. The Committee regards the Commission's action programme as a strong political signal to the Member States to focus their efforts on achieving the objective of the programme, despite any shortcomings it may have. The Council's resolution of 5 June shows that this signal has been understood. It is now a matter of practical implementation.

2.3. The Committee fully supports the Commission's concern to reduce the number of road accident victims, but would make a number of comments aimed at improving the feasibility of the action programme.

2.4. For instance, the Committee finds no reference to its opinions of 1997 ⁽¹⁾ and 2000 ⁽²⁾ and above all no assessment of the second EU road safety programme. The Committee thinks that valuable lessons can be learnt from past experiences.

2.5. The Committee considers the Commission's objective of halving the number of road fatalities by the year 2010 compared with the 2000 figures to be somewhat ambitious. In our view this would be feasible if there were a specific target to work towards, e.g. 20 000 fewer fatalities by 2010, rather than the vague and unqualified notion of 'halving'.

2.6. The Committee considers broadly appropriate the Commission's approach based on a targeted Action Programme where the subsidiarity principle is rigorously applied so that all those concerned at the different levels have a clearly defined framework for action, because it ensures that the Member States are not given any opportunity to avoid implementing or adequately implementing certain measures by invoking the subsidiarity principle.

2.7. However, the target mentioned in point 2.4 was fixed in 2001, i.e. before the European Union had taken the decision about enlargement. The Committee therefore thinks that the Commission should carry out a mid-term review in 2006 containing a number of additional proposals since the annual death toll in the new Member States is 12 000 and this figure could be dramatically reduced by stepping up joint efforts.

2.8. The Commission notes that a series of measures are necessary in order for its objective to be achieved. These range from measures designed to improve the behaviour of road users themselves to making vehicles safer and improving road infrastructure by eliminating so-called black spots. Since by far the majority of accidents seem to be due to human error, the Committee believes that attention should be paid to improving compliance with existing rules that directly concern road users.

2.9. The Committee thinks the Commission's proposal that a European Safety Charter be signed with a view to introducing specific measures will have a greater impact if the EU promotes the implementation of those measures in some way.

3. Specific comments

3.1. The Committee agrees with the Commission that the Member States are far too reticent regarding measures that should be taken at Community level in the sphere of road safety. This is certainly regrettable given the seriousness of the problem and the way responsibility for the various aspects of road safety is shared by different authorities. The Commission gives as an example of this the harmonisation of blood alcohol limits, an issue that has already been under discussion for 12 years, even though a Commission report shows that alcohol is implicated in 25 % of fatal road accidents. The use of drugs is increasingly a factor.

3.2. In its 2001 opinion ⁽³⁾ the Committee argued for harmonisation of alcohol and drugs checks in the EU in the interests of improved road safety. The Committee would once again strongly urge the Commission to take up this matter and in particular ask the Council to finally take a proper decision.

3.3. Given the Committee's observation in point 3.9 below that four factors account for 37,5 % of fatal accidents and that targeted action could therefore have a considerable impact, the Commission should set priorities. The Committee also believes cost-effectiveness to be an important principle and that cost-benefit analyses should be carried out for all the proposed measures included in the Commission's Communication.

3.4. The Committee is of the view that it is important to analyse accidents in detail so that the right measures can be taken. To this end some kind of map of accidents and their causes could be drawn up to shed some light. The Committee would also point out that many measures would work better or could be better enforced if there were EU-wide agreement, e.g. harmonised speed limits, blood alcohol limits or penalties.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 73, 9.3.1998, p. 66.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 14, 16.1.2001, p. 30.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 14, 16.1.2001, p. 30.

3.5. The Committee supports the measures proposed by the Commission for the Action Programme, which range from harmonised enforcement legislation to continuing education and information campaigns, and the introduction of a points-based driving licence. In particular the Committee underlines the importance of good driving instruction and further instruction in the form of refresher courses for both young and older drivers. The Committee also points to a problem that has been neglected, namely that of aggressive drivers. Particular attention should be paid to such drivers as part of a road safety programme. Obviously maximum use should be made of the benefits of technical advances in vehicle design and consumer education through the European New Car Assessment Programme (EuroNCAP).

3.6. On the technical front, steps should be taken to encourage the installation of certain warning devices in all vehicles which do not yet have them. To mention just a few possibilities: for cars, warning indicators or sounds when seat belts, including back-seat seatbelts, are not fastened, speed is excessive or tires under-inflated might be considered; and for lorries, reflective strips on the rear and sides.

3.7. In addition to the above-mentioned behavioural and vehicle-related factors, the Committee also thinks that more attention should be paid when building and improving infrastructure to road safety aspects such as the occurrence and identification of black spots and harmonisation of road signs in the Member States. Information may be obtained by drawing up a fatal accidents map showing in particular the black spots, accompanied by an analysis of the causes of accidents for each black spot. This map can then be compared with the Charter so that measures can be taken where they are needed. In addition, relevant information on successful publicity campaigns must be disseminated, e.g. the 'BOB' (alcohol-free driver) campaign in Belgium. The Committee also points to the successes of the 'Euro-RAP' ⁽¹⁾ organisation in reducing the number of accident victims. Euro-RAP provides a road map of various European countries indicating the level of danger on different roads, based on accidents that have actually occurred.

3.8. The Commission devotes considerable attention to measures that have been taken or are planned in relation to commercial goods and passenger transport. Those measures in theory promote the safety of road users, because professional drivers are by definition more often on the road and therefore more likely to be involved in an accident. Sadly, the causes of accidents have not yet been fully investigated. The Committee is therefore pleased that analysis of road accidents is to be one of the main tasks of a planned European Road Safety Observatory.

3.9. The Committee would point out that of the 40 000 fatal accidents, 15 000 are caused by too much alcohol, excessive speed or not wearing a seat belt, or a combination of these factors. The most effective approach would be to target these factors, along with additional information on black spots.

3.10. In addition, the Committee notes that the most progress in terms of the Commission's target of halving the number of fatal road accidents by the year 2010 will be seen in countries where the need for road safety measures is currently under-recognised. In countries that have already made significant progress, it will be very difficult to make still further improvements — but of course this does not mean that nothing should be done.

3.11. The Commission proposes setting up a European Road Safety Observatory within the Commission. The Committee endorses this, but with the express proviso that it operates independently and is adequately resourced.

3.12. The Committee would draw attention to the dangers of using mobile phones in cars, and most certainly where a handsfree kit is not used. It therefore calls for adequate controls on this.

3.13. Unlike other language versions, the title of the Dutch version of the Communication omits to mention that it refers to road accident victims. As the Dutch version could therefore be read as covering air, sea and inland waterway accidents, the Commission should amend the title accordingly.

4. Summary and conclusions

4.1. The Committee warmly welcomes the Commission's European Road Safety Action Programme and offers some comments and suggestions aimed at improving its feasibility.

4.2. It regrets that the Commission has not carried out an assessment of the second road safety programme so that the lessons learnt can be incorporated in this third programme. In addition the Committee points out a number of missing objectives and priorities.

⁽¹⁾ European Road Assessment Programme.

4.3. Given the accession of 10 new Member States to the EU in 2004, the Committee thinks that a mid-term review should be carried out in 2006 with proposals for additional measures.

4.4. The Committee believes that the European Safety Charter proposed by the Commission would have a much better chance of succeeding if the measures mentioned are accompanied by some form of EU support.

4.5. The Committee draws attention to the fact that improvements will be noticed mainly in countries where measures implemented to date have still not had a sufficient impact. In countries where considerable progress has been

made in the past few years, the benefits could be relatively small, but of course this does not mean that nothing should be done.

4.6. In practical terms, the Committee proposes drawing up fatal accident maps showing black spots in particular and analysing the number of accidents that have taken place there so that targeted measures can be taken.

4.7. The Committee supports the Commission proposal to set up a European Road Safety Observatory, provided there is a guarantee that it will be independent and be adequately resourced. It assumes that the Observatory would draw on the knowledge of existing organisations such as Euro-RAP.

Brussels, 10 December 2003.

The President

of the European Economic and Social Committee

Roger BRIESCH
