

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

I have a pleasure to welcome you here in Estonia in Tallinn on 4th Fit to drive congress. It is an honour to host such important international road safety event here in Estonia.

Estonian road traffic has made a stormy transition during the last 17 years of independency. Only the number of cars has grown nearly 2 times. During this years lot of young and inexperienced drivers have added to the traffic. As the wealth of citizens has grown the car has turned to be a commodity and therefore also the usage of cars has increased very rapidly. At the same time it should be noted that despite of the fast increase of car usage, in long term the number of traffic accidents and victims shows decreasing tendency. In 1991 we had in Estonia 491 persons killed in road accidents and last year the number dropped to the level of 132 persons. But of course we have also had bad years when the number of killed persons in road accidents has not been decreased or even has been increased comparing to the previous year. During these years we have had more than 32 000 accidents with human injuries and nearly 4500 are killed in these accidents.

Traffic accidents and their consequences are a serious social problem. There are many different way and solutions to deal with it. But the possible solutions and their implementation depend very often from the readiness and willingness of the community. It has been continues work to changes drivers habits, behaviour and attitude to other road users.

The legislation (including traffic rules) has had lot of changes and improvements. In 1992 the speed in urban areas was limited 50 km per hour. Since 1995 we all drive in Estonia around with lights on and since 1997 all passenger cars should have winter tyres during the winter period. In 2001 the blood alcohol limit decreased to 0,2 mg per gram.

The changes in legislations would do anything without proper implementation and enforcement. Therefore is very important good co-operation and exchange of experiences between different administrations, organizations and institutions.

Also is important to have a vision, goal and a program – how to improve the road safety situation. In 2003 was approved National Road Safety Programme 2003-2015. The main goal of national traffic safety programme is to decrease the number of road deaths below 100 by 2015. The whole programme is divided into 3 stages and at moment we are in second stage.

Some of the priority areas stated in the programme were:

- traffic culture of all road users**
- traffic supervision**
- drink driving and speeding**
- lack of seat belt and child restraint use**
- vulnerable road users**
- novice drivers**

And to improve the situation there are 8 different measures concerning legislation, education, training, traffic safety campaigns, traffic supervision etc.

Last year was established also the National Traffic Safety Commission – governmental body, responsible for policy making, supervision of the Programme implementation and collaboration of all concerned parties. Members of the Commission are also 6 ministers (Finance, Social, Internal, Justice, Education and Transport). There are also other members from different administrations and organisations.

The coordinating body for National Safety Programme is Estonian Road Administration, responsible for analysis of all information concerning the Programme and its application plans.

At this stage we are quite positive about to reach the goal of 100 by 2015. The improvement of the road safety during the last few years has been significant. But it is still far away from being satisfied. If we compare the number of deaths and accidents with the best EU countries or even with the average EU level, we have a still space to improve ourselves.

The main concerns for us are single vehicle accidents, collision of moving vehicles, accidents with pedestrians and also drunk drivers. Directly or indirectly alcohol caused last year death of 54 persons out of 132. Since 1.July the sanctions to drunk drivers will be made harder - hard drinking drivers will be taken to the criminal responsibility.

In the road traffic the weakest link is human being. From his/her decision and attitude depends very often not only his/her but also others well-being and health. Everything starts from the education and training. In the latter stage are also important different measures to influence or prevent driver's bad behaviour (enforcement, campaigns, demerit point system, rehabilitation etc).

More effective enforcement of speed limits during the last few years has decreased multiple times the number of over speeding drivers and the traffic has become calmer. Due to the continuous campaigns and enforcement the usage of safety belt has increased in Estonia from 50% to 95%.

And finally

You have very tight programme for this 2 days packed with different topics – from drivers education and training to drivers rehabilitation and counselling. I am sure that during the seminar You will hear lot of interesting and useful information. And the best experts on the field of road safety can exchange their views and experiences. I hope that it will help us to contribute towards halving road traffic fatalities within the EU to 25000 by 2010, according to the goal of the Conference of Traffic Ministers in May 2004, Dublin and as specified also in the Road Safety Charter.

I wish You constructive atmosphere, fruitful discussions and pleasant stay here in Tallinn.

And if You have time I suggest You to visit our old town, where at the moment “Old town days” are taking place.