

1. **Dr. Ivanov, how would you summarize this year's edition of the "Safe Road Infrastructure" conference? Did you manage to achieve the goals you had set during the preparation of the forum?**



Without exaggeration, I believe that this year's edition of the conference was the strongest so far — both in terms of content and in the professional calibre of the participants. We achieved all the goals we had set for ourselves. I would like to express my gratitude to our partners — the Bulgarian Branch Chamber "Roads" and the Chamber of Builders in Bulgaria — who contributed immensely to the high level of the forum. I also thank our sponsors and, not least, Stroitel newspaper for the professional media coverage and the excellent cooperation we have built over the years, which is of great importance to us and to all our members.

As I already mentioned, we succeeded in meeting all our objectives: bringing together international experts, the academic community, designers, and builders; conducting discussions based on data and scientific methodology; and formulating concrete recommendations that can be implemented by the institutions. But there is something even more important, which often remains invisible — the value of bringing people together. The conference is a platform where colleagues, partners, and sometimes even competitors sit side by side and speak openly about problems and solutions. It is a place where the professional community temporarily sets aside competition and commercial interests to focus on a cause that stands above everything else — saving human lives.

This very atmosphere is what makes the conference truly valuable. New knowledge matters, but even more important is that people begin to understand each other and work together. That is the real strength of the forum and the reason it has a tangible

impact on the sector. All of this was evident in the numerous discussions at the end of the individual panels, many of which continued outside the hall, as time was not sufficient to cover all the questions and topics that the participants were interested in.

2. This year, the conference placed a special emphasis on the German experience in road safety. What did we learn from the German experts, and which German practices could be applied in Bulgaria?

The German experience is valuable not because it is foreign, but because it is proven. However, the main question is not how quickly we can transfer a given practice to Bulgaria, but whether it will be effective and sustainable. That is why I believe the most important thing we should adopt from the German specialists is the way they make decisions — based on scientific research and detailed analyses. In Bulgaria, we often look for quick, sometimes emotional solutions, but they have zero or minimal, short-term impact. We need to start developing science in this field — to study our roads, our vehicle fleet, and our behaviour as road users. We can use German methods, but we must adapt them to Bulgarian reality. Only then can we be confident that the measures we take will have a real effect on reducing road-traffic accident statistics.

This year, the German experts presented specific practices that are fully applicable in Bulgaria. First and foremost is the structure and organisation of the Federal Highway Research Institute (BASt). This is an institution under their Ministry of Transport, which has separate scientific units dedicated to each element of the transport system — human behaviour, road infrastructure, automotive engineering, and more. Their research serves as the foundation for the regulatory documents according to which Germany designs, builds, and maintains its roads. This is a model that Bulgaria must adopt.

The second important element is the German practice regarding road restraint systems. They presented their long-standing efforts to reduce the high number of fatalities caused by collisions with trees and other roadside obstacles. For this purpose, they have developed a dedicated document addressing the protection of trees that cannot be removed and are dangerously close to the roadway. This is an example of an extremely pragmatic approach: when you cannot eliminate the risk, you manage it through engineering solutions.

The third emphasis was on traffic organisation and the crucial importance of road signs and markings for safety. The German experts demonstrated the cross-sections of different road classes and highlighted that the two-lane cross-section is used only for low-class roads. In Bulgaria, it is predominant across almost all interurban sections. All these examples show that the German experience is not just a collection of good practices, but a comprehensive philosophy in which science, engineering, and human behaviour form a single system.

3. What were the main conclusions from the discussions and presentations during the two-day forum? Were there any specific proposals around which the participants reached consensus?

The discussions outlined several key conclusions around which the participants reached a clear consensus. One of the strongest highlights was presented by Prof. Hristina Nikolova, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of “Infrastructure Economics” at UNWE. She demonstrated the scale of the real economic losses caused by road-traffic accidents in Bulgaria — a topic that is often underestimated by both the public and policymakers. According to the research, the losses from a single fatality on the road in Bulgaria reach nearly EUR 2.5 million; from one severely injured person — around EUR 350,000; and from a lightly injured person — EUR 27,000. In 2025 alone, the country lost EUR 1.92 billion, or EUR 5.3 million every day, which represents approximately 1.7% of GDP. For the period 2012–2025, total losses exceed EUR 24 billion. And these figures cover only accidents involving casualties. Imagine the scale of the losses if we also include all other crashes resulting in material damage. These numbers clearly show that road safety is not only a social issue, but also a massive economic problem that must be considered when developing policies, strategies, and concrete measures. Another important conclusion was related to the role of education, human behaviour, and road-infrastructure maintenance as interconnected elements of the safe-system approach. Participants emphasized that road-user culture is formed from an early age and requires consistency in education — both in schools and in the training of future engineers. The psychological factors influencing driver behaviour were examined as a critical component in risk assessment and in planning safety measures. In addition, strong emphasis was placed on road maintenance and timely prevention of high-risk sections — something that is often underestimated, yet essential for preventing severe accidents.

4. One of the key topics was the “Vision Zero” concept, aimed at preventing fatalities and serious injuries in road-traffic incidents. What is necessary for this concept to become a truly applicable practice in Bulgaria?

The Vision Zero concept originates from Sweden, where it was introduced in 1997. Its adoption was not easy and took years, as its goals initially seemed revolutionary and even impossible. Yet the results came quickly, after which the Netherlands further developed and adapted the approach, and over time it was embraced in almost the entire world. I would like to recall that the integrated “Safe System” approach and the principles of Vision Zero were adopted as state policy in Bulgaria by a decision of the Council of Ministers back in 2019. At that time, a number of specific legislative and infrastructure measures were included. Unfortunately, much of the professional community notes that most of these measures have not been implemented or have

been implemented only partially, and the integrated approach has remained largely on paper. This is one of the reasons we have not seen good results over the years.

For Vision Zero to become a truly applicable practice in Bulgaria, the first step is improving the dialogue between responsible institutions on one side and NGOs, the academic community, designers, and builders on the other. Road safety is a collective task and can only be achieved through joint efforts and consistent actions. Clear mechanisms for cooperation, data sharing, joint analyses, and coordinated decision-making are essential.

Secondly, we must begin making decisions based on scientific research rather than intuition or momentary priorities. This means studying our roads, our vehicle fleet, and our behaviour as road users, and developing standards that reflect the real conditions in Bulgaria.

Thirdly, institutional capacity must be built — experts who can evaluate projects, analyse risks, and prescribe measures. At present, the lack of qualified personnel in the administration is one of the most serious obstacles to implementing the integrated approach.

Vision Zero is a philosophy that requires consistency in the actions of both the public administration and society.



5. **Let us also include in the interview Eng. Aleksi Kesyakov, one of the doyens of road safety in Bulgaria. When we talk about road-traffic accidents, the victims, and the losses borne by society, families, and individual road users, it is important to look at the history of these unwanted events in order to assess whether we are moving in the right direction. What is the situation in our country?**

Eng. Aleksi Kesyakov: The 458 fatalities recorded in 2025 are the lowest number since 1962, when 506 people lost their lives at a time when Bulgaria had only 210,000 registered motor vehicles. The highest number of fatalities was in 1990, when 1,527

people died. And how is it possible that, despite this more than threefold reduction in the number of victims, in 2025 Bulgaria ended up as the country with the highest road-traffic mortality rate — 71 fatalities per 1 million inhabitants, compared to an EU average of 43, and around 20 in some European countries?

These differences are not accidental. They reflect disparities in the safety of road infrastructure, the safety and technical condition of the vehicle fleet, the behaviour of road users, and, of course, the quality of pre-medical and specialized medical care.

6. What actions have European countries taken to achieve a higher level of road safety, considering that in 2001 Bulgaria's road safety performance was better than that of more than half of the countries in Europe?

Alexi Kesyakov, Eng.: Here, we must undoubtedly highlight the shift in road-safety policy in many countries, expressed through the adoption of the integrated "Safe System" approach — known as Vision Zero in Sweden, "Sustainable Safety" in the Netherlands, "Safe Travel" in New Zealand, and others. What is the secret behind the integrated Vision Zero approach, introduced in Sweden in 1997 as a national road-safety policy and later adopted by many countries around the world?

The approach is based on four principles, united by the motto that "Health and life must never be traded for any other benefits."

First principle: Humans naturally make mistakes — but natural mistakes, not those caused by illiteracy, arrogance, lack of discipline, or low culture.

Second principle: The human body is fragile. It is not designed to withstand impacts above certain thresholds. From this perspective, regulating kinetic energy is vital.

Third principle: Road safety is a shared responsibility between road users and the designers of the system.

Fourth principle: All elements of the system must have a high level of safety, and if a failure occurs somewhere, the remaining elements must prevent the event or reduce the severity of its consequences.

Road-safety policies aligned with the principles of Vision Zero have helped many countries achieve high levels of safety. By applying these principles when analysing crash data on our roads and when developing specific measures for improved safety, it is entirely possible for Bulgaria to reach the average European road-safety indicators within 2–3 years.

In continuation of Vision Zero, I would add that road safety has three-time dimensions: PAST: Everything that has happened so far — it is a fact and will not return. Action is taken only on the consequences: investigation, prosecution, court, lawyers, doctors, and so on. The past must be analysed, and measures must be identified to prevent repetition.

FUTURE: Everything that will be undertaken in the near and long term — tomorrow, this week, this month, this year, in ten years, and in the distant future — based on an

analysis of the past through the principles of Vision Zero and European and global experience.

PRESENT: As they say, “here and now.” Road traffic happens only in the present moment — there is no yesterday, no tomorrow. At this exact moment, the infrastructure will not change, the control system will remain the same, the behaviour of others will be the same, and the safety of the journey is in the hands of the individual road user. A user who values their life, health, and freedom must understand that their behaviour can very easily cause them to lose all three.

Here I would allow myself to quote an ancient author: “Behind every great misfortune lies great ignorance.”

Very often, when assessing fatal crashes, the principles of the integrated Vision Zero approach are not taken into account. A single indicator is selected and treated as the only one. This was the case in the public debate about guardrails, which showed how road safety can disappear in favour of commercial interests. And if two grain trucks have torn through a guardrail designed to withstand a vehicle of one and a half tons and have killed innocent people, why is it not mentioned how many people have been saved by these guardrails, given that there are more than 4,500 guardrail damages resulting from road-traffic accidents?

7. In the spirit of the principles embedded in the integrated approach, we must answer the question: Is it possible, in the near future, to establish a trend of sustainably reducing the number of road-traffic fatalities in our country?

Alexi Kesyakov, Eng.: I am convinced that it is possible, but we must provide answers in several directions.

First: How long will it take for our road infrastructure and roadside environment to reach the level of active and passive safety seen in Sweden, and what resources will be required?

Second: Over what period can the active and passive safety — and the technical condition — of our vehicle fleet reach the level of, for example, the vehicle fleet in the Netherlands? And what resources will be necessary?

Third: How long will it take for the quality of medical care provided to road-traffic casualties in Bulgaria to reach, for instance, the level currently available in Romania?

Fourth: Over what period can the behaviour of road users in Bulgaria approach the behaviour of people in countries with the highest levels of road safety, such as Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, and others?

8. What should be undertaken, and what resources will be necessary?

Alexi Kesyakov, Eng.: I am convinced that a higher level of road safety on our roads can be achieved in a short period of time, by relying on each road user’s love for their own

life, health, and freedom, as well as on the desire of institutions and society as a whole to prevent fatalities and serious injuries resulting from road-traffic accidents.



- 9. Mr. Ivanov, at the end of the conference the participants adopted a concluding declaration outlining priorities and future steps for improving road safety. What are the most important tasks that need to be carried out after the forum, and how will progress be monitored?**

As tradition dictates, after each conference the participants discuss and summarize the topics, problems, and solutions presented by the speakers, after which they adopt a Concluding Declaration. Our goal is to be constructive and useful to society, which is why this document is sent to every responsible institution with competencies in the field of road safety. The most important task is for state authorities to begin working in a sustainable and consistent manner, so that the measures do not remain only on paper.

The declaration sets out specific steps — from financing road safety, through developing a standard for the content of road-design projects and introducing modern pavement-design standards, to updating road signage, registering road-safety elements, and ensuring timely restoration of damaged road-restraint systems. These are measures that can be implemented immediately and that have a direct impact on safety.

It is also crucial to address the shortage of qualified personnel. Municipalities must have competent specialists who can review, evaluate, and supervise road-design projects. Without experts who understand the essence of a project and can assess its quality, even the best regulatory documents will not lead to real results.

The Concluding Declaration is not a symbolic document, but a practical tool — provided there is understanding of the problems and willingness to solve them. If institutions,

the professional community, and the academic sector work together, we can achieve real, rapid, and effective progress.

10. What will be the main highlights of next year's conference?

Next year will be particularly important for us, as well as for everyone working in the field of road safety, because it marks 30 years since the introduction of the Vision Zero concept in Sweden. This will also be the main focus of the Thirteenth "Safe Road Infrastructure" Conference. Our ambition is to bring one of the creators of the concept, which would be an exceptional achievement for us.

This year we received excellent feedback from the President of BAST and the accompanying experts, who visited Bulgaria for the first time. They were impressed by the professional level of the conference and the discussions held. As a result, they assured us that they will join us again next year. This is important because in 2027 we will be able to discuss not only good practices, but also the concrete actions Germany is planning to address the negative road-safety statistics. Their experience can be extremely valuable for Bulgaria, as it will allow us to learn about their most current challenges and the solutions they are implementing.

Our goal as organizers is to raise the professional level of the event every year, to present different perspectives, and to give every participant the opportunity to engage in the discussions. If we manage to bring together some of the creators of Vision Zero, the German experts, and the Bulgarian professional community, it will be a strong signal that our country is capable of making significant progress toward a road-transport system that saves human lives.