

"Together we're stronger." In Moldova, impressive partnerships lead to impressive results



AROUND THE WORLD, communities are committing to eliminating traffic fatalities and serious injuries, often as part of Vision Zero initiatives. A growing group of these cities is focused on improving safety along school routes and other places where children and youth walk and bicycle. In some places, youth are actively working with cities and other partners to effect this change.

Vision Zero for Youth recognizes that starting with youth can be the catalyst to build community support for Vision Zero, that Vision Zero should include a focus on youth, and that youth voices can play an important role in creating safer streets.

Vision Zero for Youth supports a Safe System approach to reaching zero serious injuries and deaths on roads. The Safe System approach is a shift away from a focus on the behavior of individual road users to a focus on changing the system to provide safer environments for all road users. Equity and consideration for underserved communities is a part of each of the key components of Vision Zero for Youth:

- **INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS** to calm traffic, improve crossings, and provide safe spaces for all users.
- **POLICIES AND PROGRAMS** focused on core issues such as slowing vehicle travel speeds.
- Use of crash **DATA AND PATTERNS** to identify problems, assess risk factors, and apply solutions in a systemic way.
- **PARTNERSHIPS** with education, transportation, law enforcement, local safety and health organizations, community members, elected officials and advocates.
- **ENGAGEMENT** of the community around a culture of road safety, with an emphasis on youth empowerment.

MOLDOVA: 2024 INTERNATIONAL VISION ZERO FOR YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD RECIPIENT

The goals of the International Vision Zero for Youth Leadership Award are to both recognize and highlight noteworthy road safety practices and inspire other cities to take bold steps to reach zero traffic deaths among children and youth. The award is presented by the Vision Zero for Youth initiative, led by the National Center for Safe Routes to School with support from the FIA Foundation.

Cities recognized with the International Vision Zero for Youth Leadership Award have taken impressive action to improve walking and biking safety for their children and youth with the goal of building safer, healthier communities for everyone.

Past recipients are Lusaka, Zambia; Fortaleza, Brazil; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Bogotá, Colombia; and Pleiku City and Gia Lai Province, Vietnam.

To learn more about the International Award, visit: [**www.visionzeroforyouth.org**](http://www.visionzeroforyouth.org).



2024 Vision Zero for Youth International Award ceremony. From left to right: Tatiana Mihailova, Automobile Club of Moldova; Rita Cuypers, FIA Foundation; Andrei Cecoltan, Moldova Ministry of Internal Affairs. Source: Automobile Club of Moldova

MOLDOVA, the Eastern European republic with a picturesque landscape that shares borders with Romania and Ukraine, was facing road safety problems that are all too familiar. Between 2019 and 2022, the rate of road fatalities in Moldova was approximately double the European Union average. But sadly similar to many other countries, Moldovan children were particularly vulnerable. The high rates of deaths and injuries were linked to excessive speeds, a common theme around the world, and rural areas were particularly affected.

Alarmed Moldovans decided action was needed. A groundswell of support and advocacy that germinated at the community level in Moldova's capital of Chişinău with help from a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other partners eventually moved its way up to the national level. Their efforts resulted in lower speeds and other safety improvements around schools throughout Moldova. This work has persisted during challenging times, including a global pandemic and war in neighboring Ukraine.

While the road safety movement in the country has been underway for about 10 years total, it started to gain real traction in early 2021. Keys to the movement have included focusing novel efforts around areas

where children actively travel to school, shifting thinking toward a change in road safety culture, and connecting a wide network of partners. For all of these aspects, the Moldovan movement highlights how a focus on safety for youth and reducing speeds led to bigger safety initiatives in the country.

These successes led to the republic of Moldova being named the 2024 recipient of the Vision Zero for Youth International Leadership Award. Led by the National Center for Safe Routes to School in the USA with support from the FIA Foundation, the Vision Zero for Youth International Leadership Award recognizes places that have taken impressive action towards stopping traffic deaths among children and youth when walking.

Innovative, youth-centered paths to safety

For years Moldovans have used creativity and a bold willingness to try new things in their approaches to road safety for school-age children. “Protecting children and our most vulnerable citizens is at the heart of our mission, and everyone should be committed to ensuring that our roads are safe for everyone,” said Tatiana Mihailova, Vice-President/CEO of the Automobile Club of Moldova (ACM), which promotes road safety, mobility, and automotive development. “The safety of children and pedestrians must always be a priority.”

For example: The ACM worked with the Eastern European Alliance for Safe and Sustainable Transport, a road safety NGO devoted to saving lives and preventing injuries, to develop road safety education for schools in Moldova in 2018. This activity was devised as an important access point for building partnerships with school leaders and the Ministry of Education and for creating a foundation for broader road safety strategies.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2021, the rates of road safety crashes, particularly those involving children around schools, continued to raise concerns. Education alone was not enough to improve safety – it must be coupled with other measures to achieve results. In Chişinău, a city of close to 720,000 people according to 2024 census numbers, residents and NGOs started talking about concrete actions they could take to address the continuing dangers.

A foundational element of this effort was a petition advocating for reduced speed limits in school zones. The ACM helped organize the petition to the Chişinău mayor for better road safety for youth and other vulnerable road users. This campaign included the support of 15 civic groups including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Inspectorate for Public Order, the Road Transport Department of Chişinău Municipality, several schools, disability organizations, a cyclists’ alliance, and other groups. In addition, more than 5,000 children and more than 20,000 community representatives signed on to the road safety effort.

This grassroots movement prompted the Municipal Transport Department and Mayor’s Office in Chişinău to implement pilot changes at two schools. They included establishing 30 km/h speed limits



Before (above), after (below) the installation of a raised and marked crosswalk at Stefan cel Mare school in Chişinău. Source: Automobile Club of Moldova



installing speed management infrastructure including the country’s first ever raised zebra crossing. These early improvements were so significant, they led to an increase in the iRAP Star Rating for Schools score from 2 stars to 4-5 stars (1 star is the least safe and 5 stars is the safest for pedestrians). Case studies were also developed to showcase this success and build buy-in with decision-makers.

Safety improvements at Stefan cel Mare Lyceum

In 2021, local authorities reduced the speed to 30 km/h and installed a raised, marked crossing in front of Stefan cel Mare Lyceum in Chişinău. According to police measures, the average speed at the crossing during student arrival times declined from 53.2 km/h in 2021 to 38.1 km/h in 2022. In December 2022 and January 2023, ACM conducted a survey of 80 students at the school, finding that 64 percent reported that they perceived that drivers drove slower and yielded to student pedestrians at the new school crossing. Moreover, 82 percent of the students reported that they felt the pedestrian crossing at the school was safer as a result of the improvements. A separate survey of the school’s teachers and administrative staff showed similar positive perceptions.

A culture shift that went nationwide

The momentum from these initiatives, combined with ongoing advocacy efforts by NGOs and stakeholders, led to the formation of a national working group that included government representatives, safety experts, and civil society organizations, with the goal of continuing speed management and other road safety efforts around schools and beyond. Some of the high-level supporters of this group had been in road crashes themselves, which served to motivate and stimulate commitment.

The working group developed a comprehensive proposal, highlighting the effectiveness of the 30 km/h policy in improving safety and its alignment with international best practices. Framing the issue is important. “It’s about community,” said Mihailova. “If you address 30 [km/h] to the public, people say it’s too slow. When you ask if you want a safer zone for children, they say yes.” The efforts involved several relationship-building strategies, such as press conferences, in-person meetings, presentations, and lobbying, all with the goal of presenting a united front to Moldovan national decision-makers.

These efforts succeeded, and in 2022, the national government introduced 30 km/h speed limits nationwide around school zones, as well as on roads near hospitals, parks, and historic landmarks. Subsequently, infrastructure upgrades were implemented in 199 school zones across Moldova, including 30 km/h signage, road markings, and raised crosswalks. In addition, speed bumps, bollards, ramps, and modern traffic signs were installed around a selection of schools. Improvements also included mobility access for people with disabilities.

Also, ACM developed a guide for 30 km/h in school zones to aid local authorities in implementation. It drew from global sources and incorporated local references and examples to ensure relevance.

In addition, ACM worked closely with partners to develop a national road safety strategy plan for 2024-2030 and presented it to the national ministries in 2024. As of this writing, the Republic of Moldova is considering signing this National Road Safety Programme into law in 2025. It aims to reduce the number of serious injuries and deaths through a combination of road safety measures, improved road infrastructure, and road user behavior.



Adults and children work together on a traffic calming project that was part of a larger project funded by UNICEF Moldova, ACM, the International Automobile Federation, and the FIA Foundation in 2023. Source: Automobile Club of Moldova

“Together we’re stronger.”

A distinctive hallmark of the Moldovan youth road safety campaigning has been the innovative way advocates incorporated the viewpoints and voices of a wide variety of people and organizations. “There are mutual benefits between local authorities and civil society organizations like us,” notes Mihailova.

For example, when the movement shifted from local in Chișinău to national, the campaign garnered support from influential figures including the Chișinău deputy mayor and mayor, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the head and members of the Executive Bureau of the National Road Safety Council, and journalists, and even entertainers like actors and singers. “Together we’re stronger,” stressed Mihailova about the importance of coalition building to bring about change.

There are many more examples of how the movement merged important perspectives:

■ WORKING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT:

The working group endeavored to align closely with law enforcement during the safety campaign. The coalition met with law enforcement bodies like the Patrolling Police and the General Police Inspectorate, coordinating meetings with other groups including the Education Department and school administrations to plan the activities and to promote the 30 km/h policy change for Moldova.

■ SURVEYING PARENTS AND TEACHERS:

A national survey of parents and teachers was administered by ACM to ask questions about perceptions of road safety around schools, how kids travel to and from school, usage of car seats and seatbelts, and more. In Moldova, 63 percent of people surveyed supported 30 km/h streets in urban settings and 92 percent around schools. Survey results became talking points when speaking with decision-makers to make the case for why change was needed.

■ INTEGRATING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:

Groups representing people with disabilities played an important role in Moldova’s national working group for the 30 km/h policy change, emphasizing the need for inclusive road safety measures. Their involvement helped ensure that the policy included features like curb ramps, tactile paving for the visually impaired, and better signage.

■ INCLUDING CHILDREN’S VOICES:

Children have been engaged in multiple aspects of road safety efforts, such as education, the national survey, data collection (e.g., seat belt & child seat use), and involvement in street changes. “We invite children, we explain to them why we’re slowing speeds and making changes to streets and explain how it will slow down drivers,” said Mihailova. Other examples in 2021 and 2022 include involving kids in safety awareness events like International Bicycle Day, UN Global Road Safety Week, and World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, as well as multiple demonstrations held just in Moldova.



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– **TATIANA MIHAILOVA**, AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF MOLDOVA

Results and beyond

In February 2025, key players in the Moldovan road safety movement took part in the 4th Global Ministerial Conference held in Marrakech, Morocco. Being able to tout such success on the global stage is a proper tribute to the significance of the safety advances along school routes in Moldova.

During a panel discussion at the conference, Moldova's Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister Serghei Diaconu made clear the challenges that road safety proponents faced in the country: "Let's be serious – road safety is not very sexy. As a politician, you're fighting with everybody. You're fighting with drivers that don't like to be punished, with other road users who don't want penalties to rise or things to slow down, and your own colleagues from the Ministry of Transport who want roads built quickly and, in some cases, are less engaged with safer roads."

But he went on to explain to the conference of hundreds of global road safety leaders how the process worked: a focus on partnerships and collaborations with road users, NGOs, mass media, as well as law enforcement and others.

Ultimately, partners working to improve road safety for youth in Moldova have a lot to brag about:

- They achieved road safety improvements around schools in Chişinău.
- The 30 km/h speed limits around school zones, as well as on roads near hospitals, parks, and historic landmarks, were implemented nationwide.

- They accomplished other school area safety improvements like speed bumps, bollards, ramps, and modern traffic signs on a national scale.
- They worked together with a wide variety of stakeholders on multiple levels to accomplish their safety goals.
- They did so during challenging times including the COVID-19 pandemic and the nearby war in Ukraine.
- They saw the iRAP's Star Rating for Schools for Chişinău rise.
- For these achievements, the country received the Prince Michael International Road Safety Award in 2024. The award recognizes outstanding achievement and innovation in improving road safety globally.

Speed reductions and improved infrastructure near schools are creating safer environments and fewer crashes. Tatiana Mihailova summed up the strategy that led to their success: "To hear the community voice, to cooperate closely with community, to involve as many kinds of community leaders as possible, to create long-term partnerships involving government, CSOs [community service organizations] and private sector... and be insistent!"



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