



The Story of Road Safety in Finland

– The importance of the narrative and beliefs

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Liikenneturva – The Finnish Road Safety Council



In-car cell phone use and hazards following hands free legislation

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[TRU \(Traffic Research Unit\)](#)

Research output: Contribution to journal > Article > Scientific > peer-review





Source: Wikipedia / El Grafico. Public domain rights.

**Sapir–Whorf hypothesis –
language influences our understanding and
ultimately our worldview**

Finland

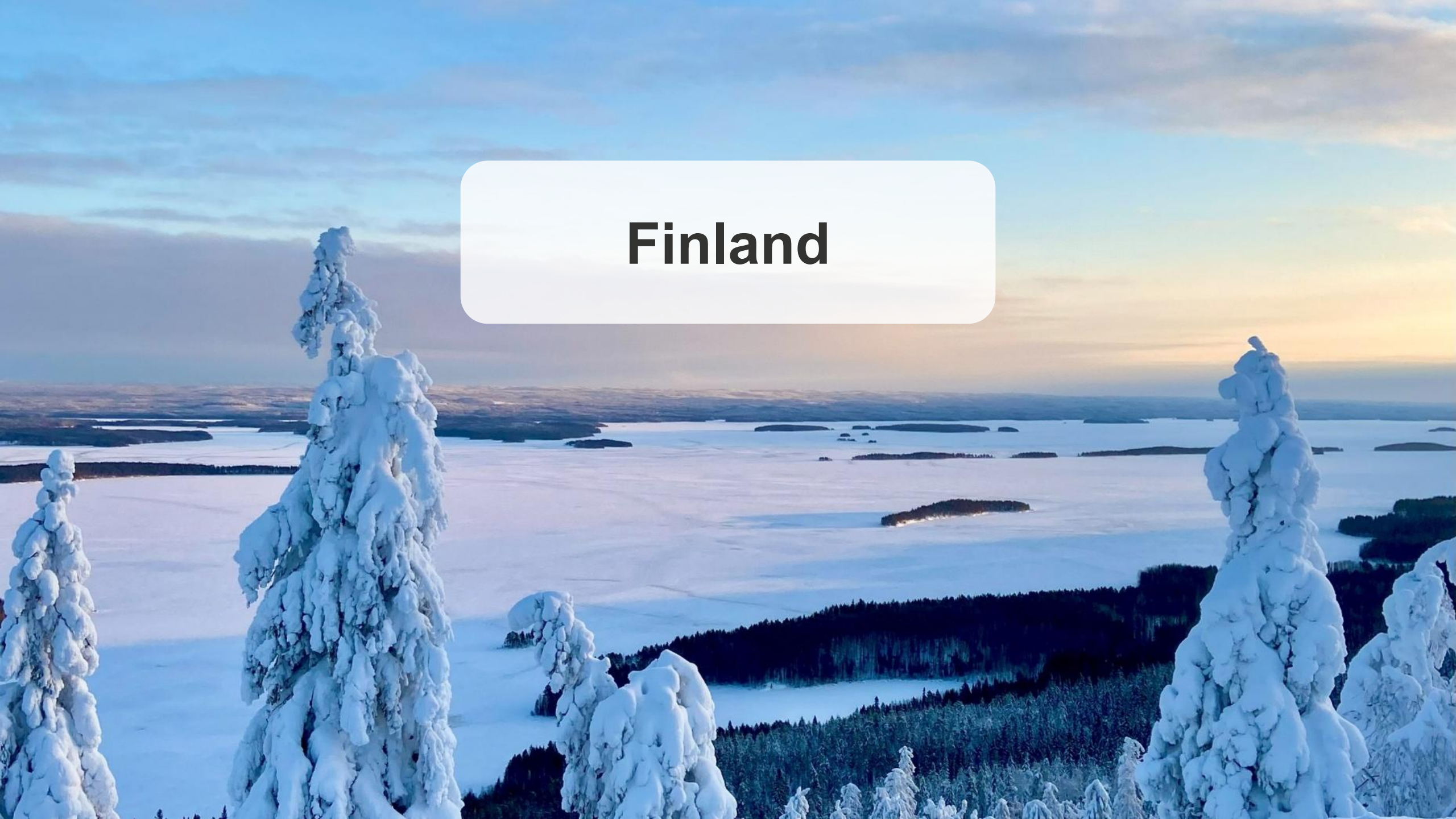
A wide-angle photograph of a Finnish winter landscape. In the foreground, several tall, slender evergreen trees are heavily laden with thick, white snow, their branches drooping under the weight. They stand on a snow-covered hillside. In the middle ground, a vast, flat expanse of a frozen lake or tundra stretches out, dotted with small, dark, snow-covered islands and peninsulas. The horizon is low, showing distant, hazy hills. The sky is a mix of soft blues, purples, and oranges, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall atmosphere is serene and cold.



Photo: Ville Seppänen
www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/suomi-ala-ikina-muutu-kuva-bussipysakilta-kiteyttaa-kansan-jayhan-luonteen/6154418

Finland in a nutshell

- 5,6 million people live within 338,462 km²
 - UK 69,23 million people live within 243,610 km²
- Multi-political party system
 - Rule of law
 - Equality
 - Transparency



Finland - the "happiest" nation in the world*

*World happiness report 2024

Finland is a well organised society

Score		Country	Rank
90	=	Denmark	1
88	↑	Finland	2
84	↑	Singapore	3
83	↓	New Zealand	4
81	↑	Luxembourg	5
81	↓	Norway	5
81	↓	Switzerland	5
80	↓	Sweden	8
78	↓	Netherlands	9
77	↑	Australia	10
77	↑	Iceland	10
77	=	Ireland	10

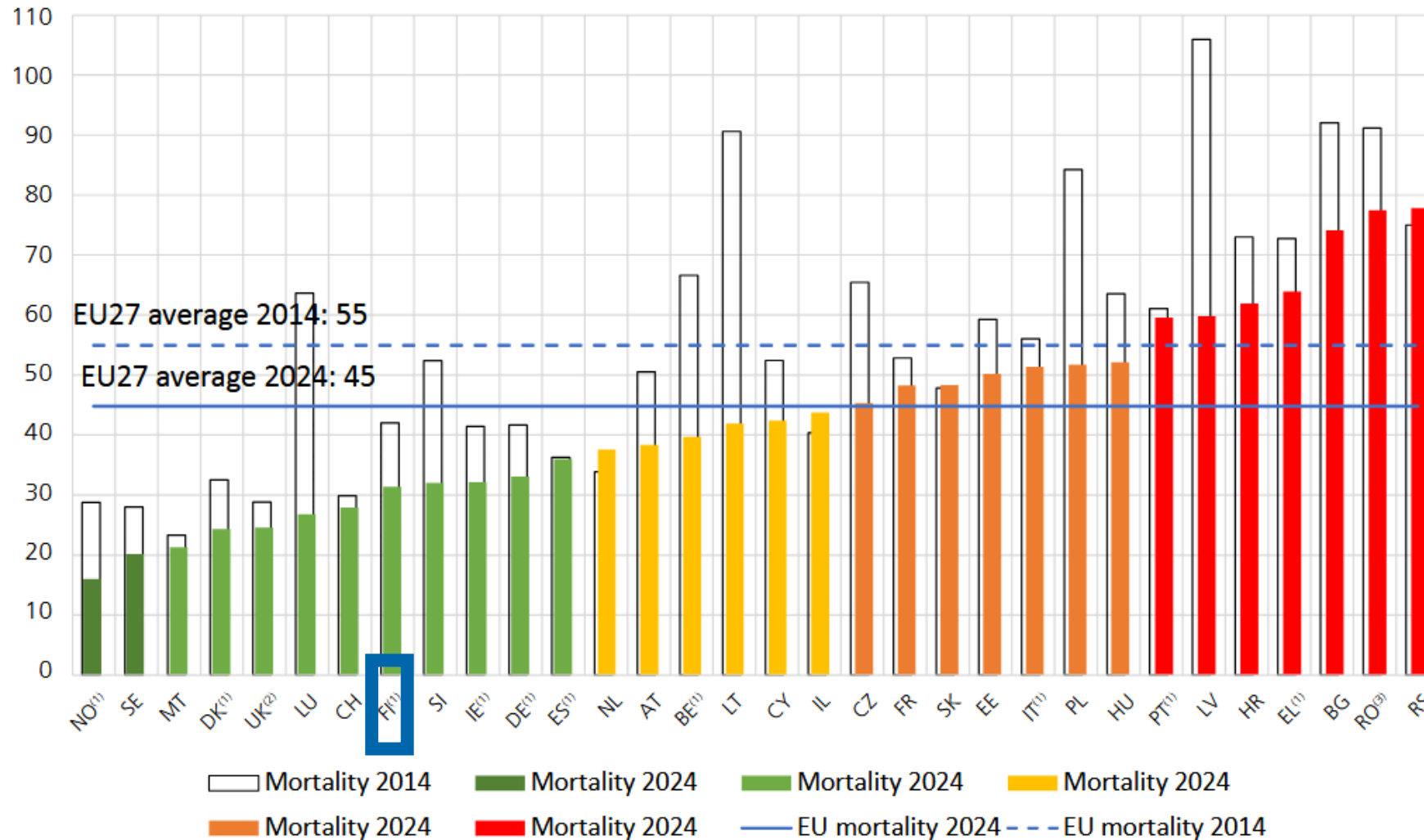
Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

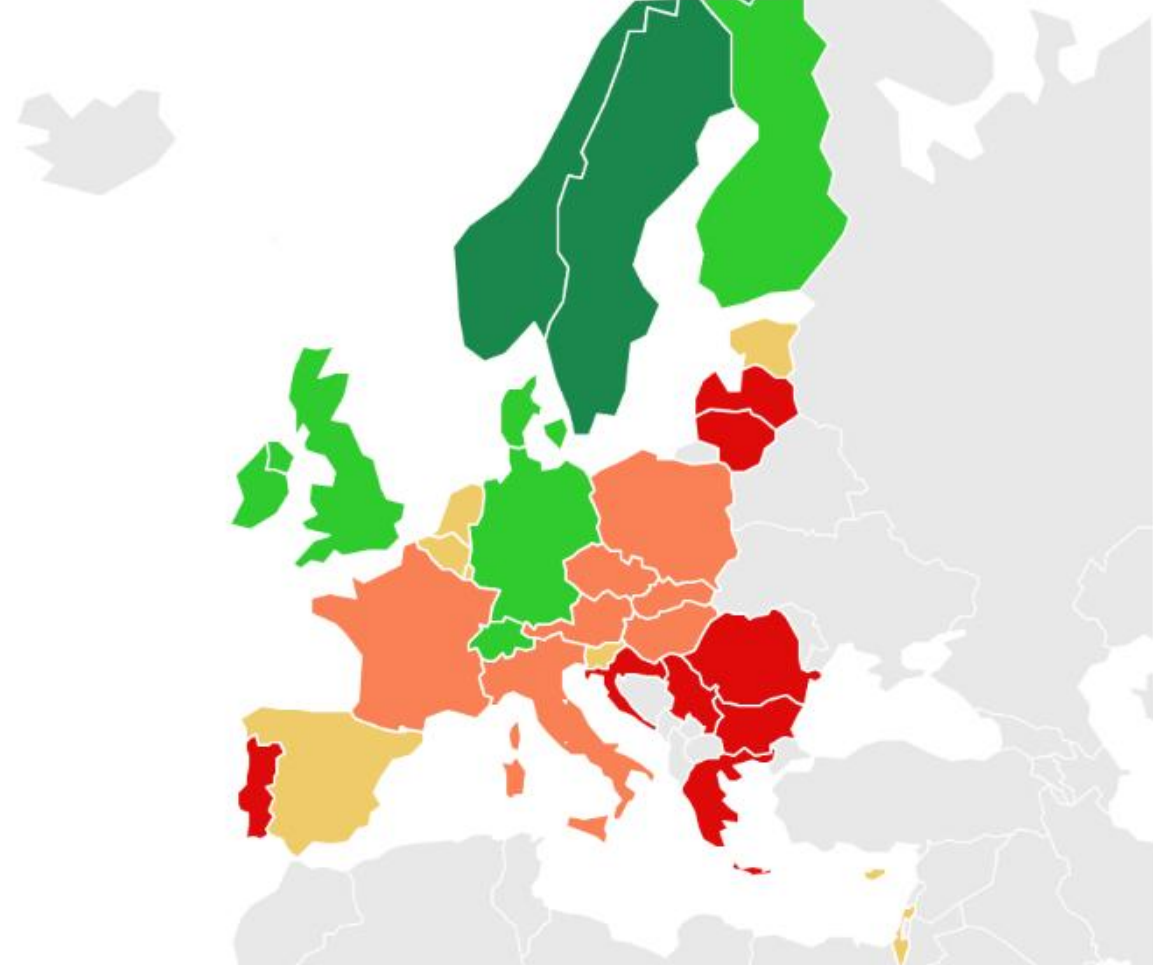
Goal:

To reduce road traffic deaths and serious injuries by 50% from 2021–2030.

Under 100 road deaths by 2030.

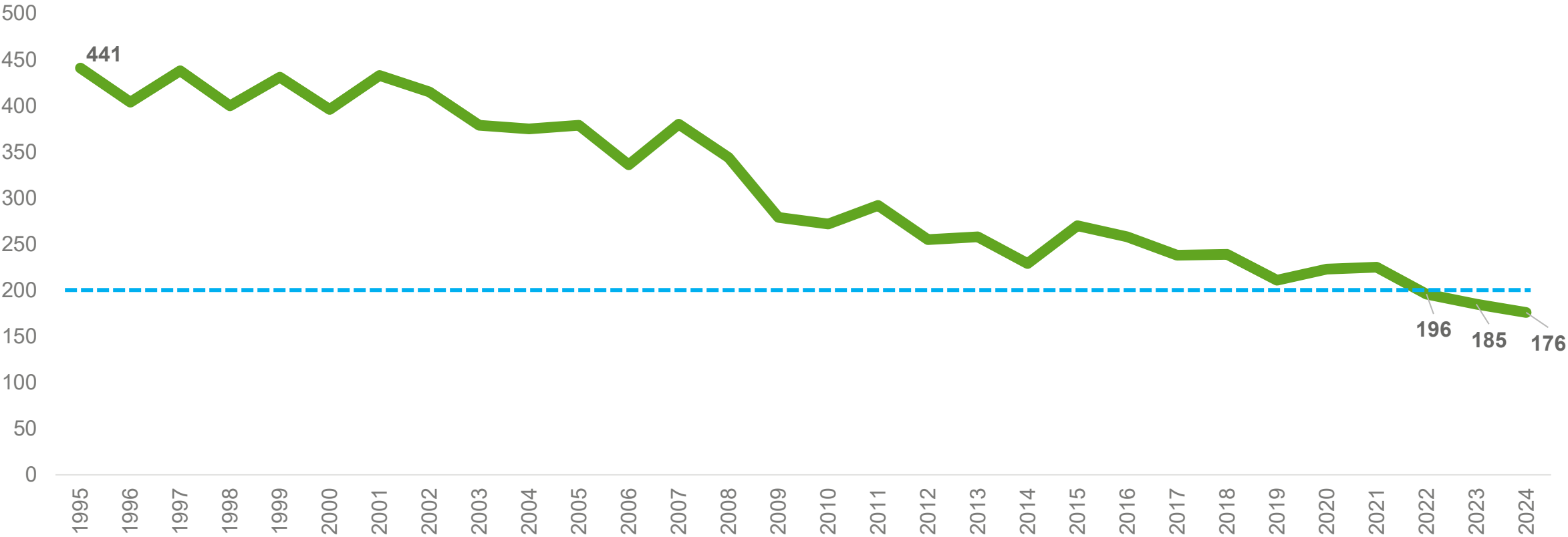
EU road mortality 2024 and 2014





Finland Wins European Transport Safety Council's Road Safety Prize for 2024

Road deaths finally below 200





Science based politics – not quite

Finnish road safety experts agree that most of the policies and political actions taken in Finland between 2004 and 2021 had an (positive) impact on road safety.

- 49 key policy actions and decisions related to traffic safety

Research paper: Assessing Road Safety Impacts of Policy Actions in Finland 2004-2021
(Pöllänen, Katko 2025)

Different realities



Road deaths are rare



During a two-kilometer journey, a driver

- experiences 600 traffic events
- makes 240 perceptions
- makes 80 choices
- takes 60 actions
- makes 1 mistake.*

*Ihmisen kokoinen liikenne (1997)

Human Factors in Automotive engineering (2015) Walker, et al.



Personal reality

- Most common reality is the reality of a single driver
- $N=1$



Culture reality

- Traffic safety culture is created through commonly shared beliefs and/or perceptions.
- Shared beliefs strongly influence individual behavior in traffic.
- Beliefs can support or degrade road safety.

Source: Traffic Safety Culture: Definition, Foundation, and Application (2019). Toim. Micholas John Ward, Barry Watson & Katie Fleming-Vogl.

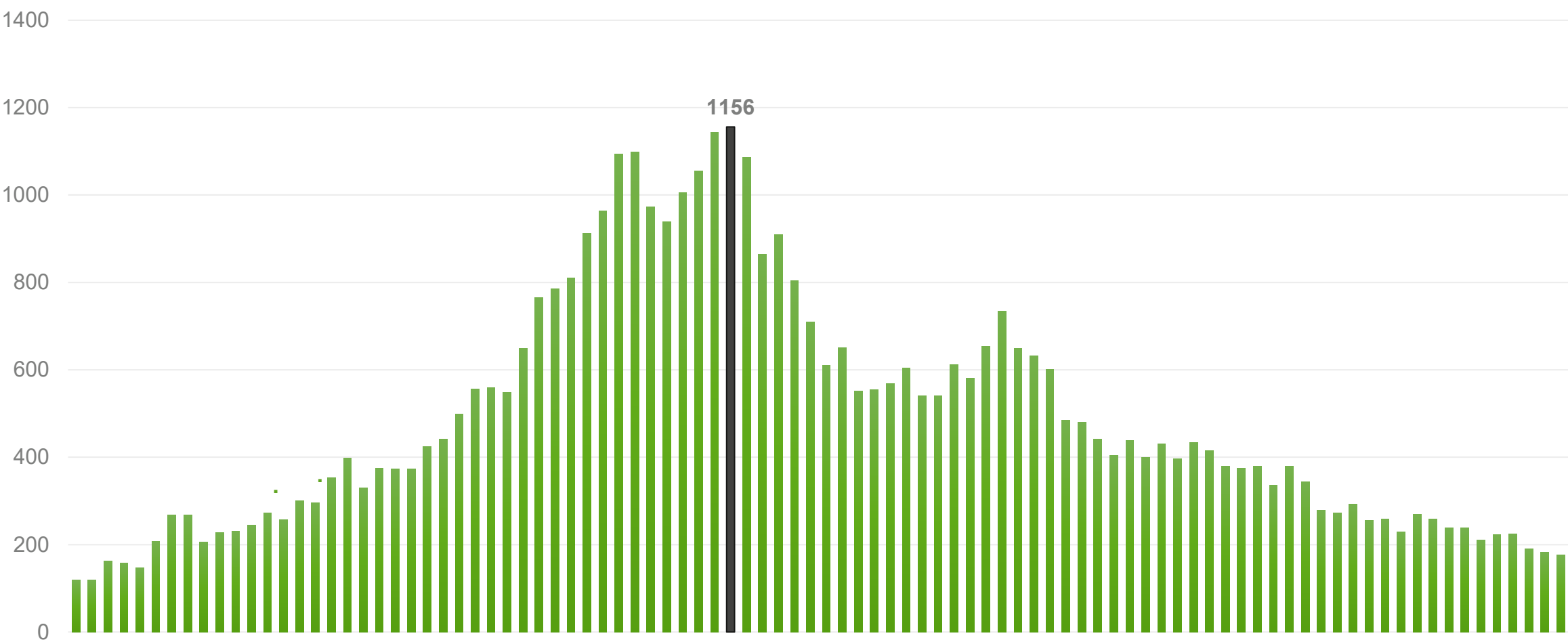


Imported reality

- Many ideas and narratives are imported
- Usually from Anglo-American cultures
 - "Speed enforcement as a source of funding for government "
 - "An accident or a crash"
- Ideas are imported from different countries even if they do not fit to the local culture

Finnish stories, narratives and beliefs

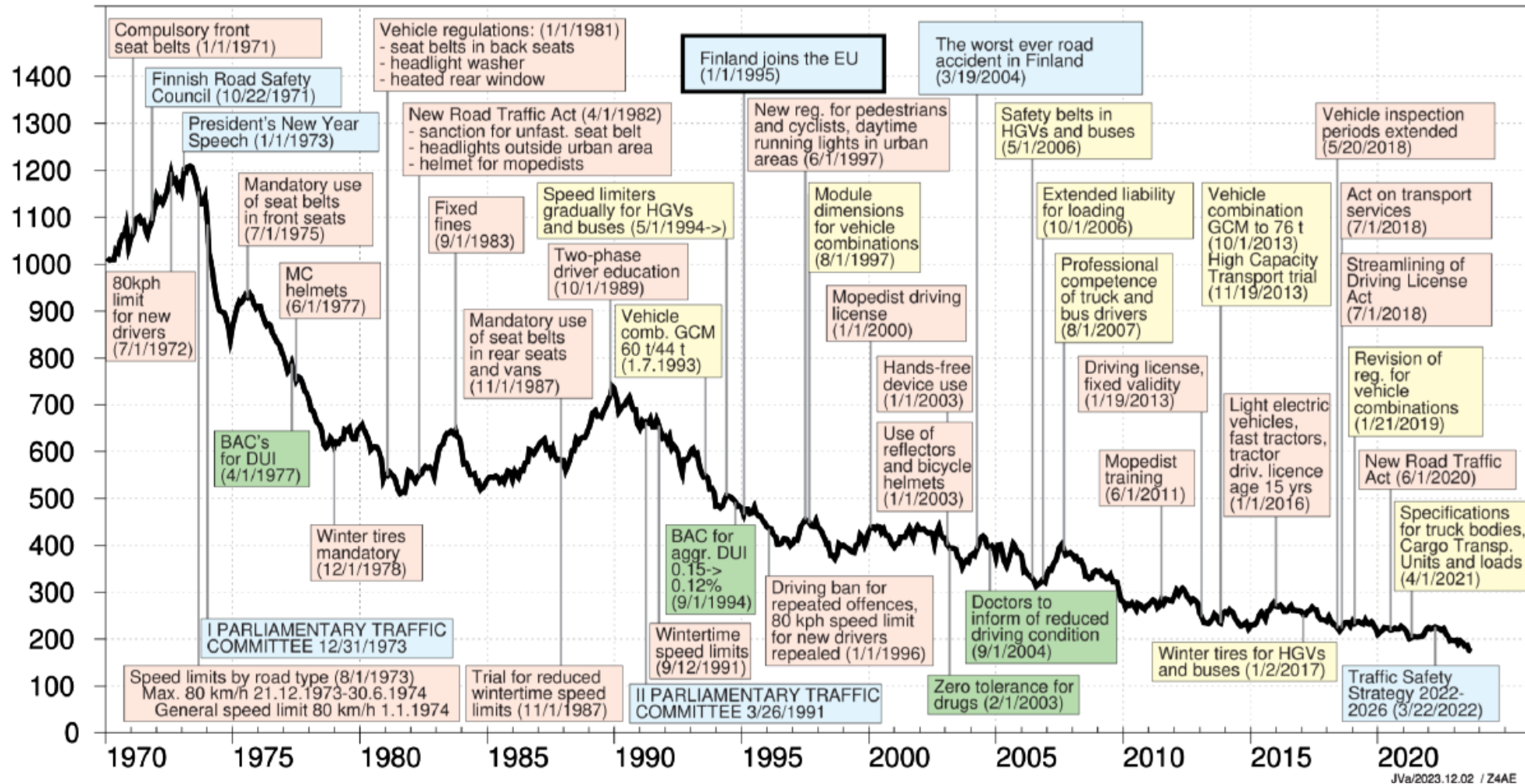
Road Deaths in Finland 1931–2024*



Source: Tilastokeskus, 2024 preliminary



Road traffic fatalities in Finland – and road traffic policy decisions



JVa/2023.12.02 / Z4AE

Or maybe it was something else

- The decrease in traffic deaths can also be partly explained by the increase in the experience of the average driver.
- A story that highlights the importance of political decision-making is useful.

Source: A car road deaths model to explain the annual road death peak near 1970 in high income countries, using driver experience and travel

Henk Stipdonk, Safety Science Volume 129, September 2020

Can you have too much research

Data: in-depth crash investigation

- All fatal road and cross-country crashes are investigated in Finland by **Crash Data Institute**
 - Dates back to 1968 and is mandated by law
- The goal is to prevent crashes from happening again
- 20 multidisciplinary teams, total of ~300 team members
 - Teams are independent
 - No stand on guilt or insurance compensation
 - Standardised investigation forms and methods

Operation at the scene of accident

The police officer interviews the driver.

The vehicle specialist inspects the vehicle.

The physician examines injuries.

The traffic specialist inspects the road.



The members of the investigation team perform

- a general inspection together
- a basic information inspection each
- special examinations if necessary

The psychologist explains the actions of participant.



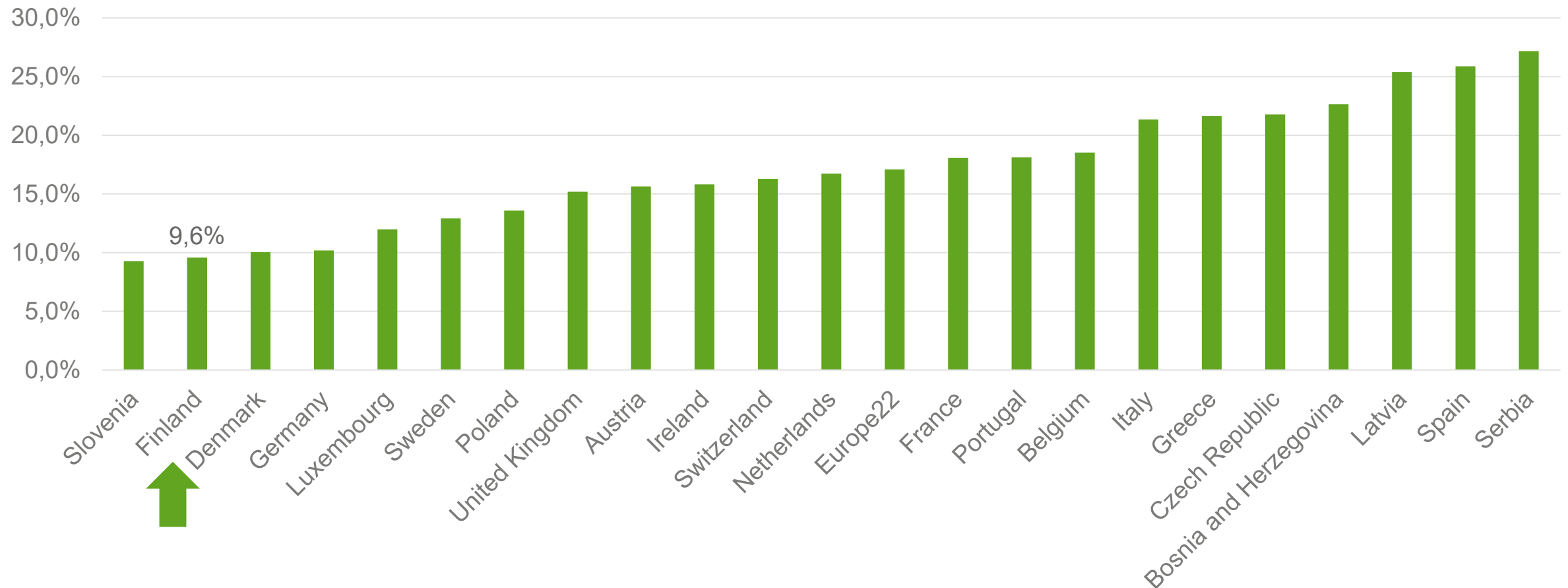
Harmful narratives



**Finland has the least amount of
police per capita in Europe.**

On a typical journey, how likely is it that you (as a car driver) will be checked by the police for alcohol?

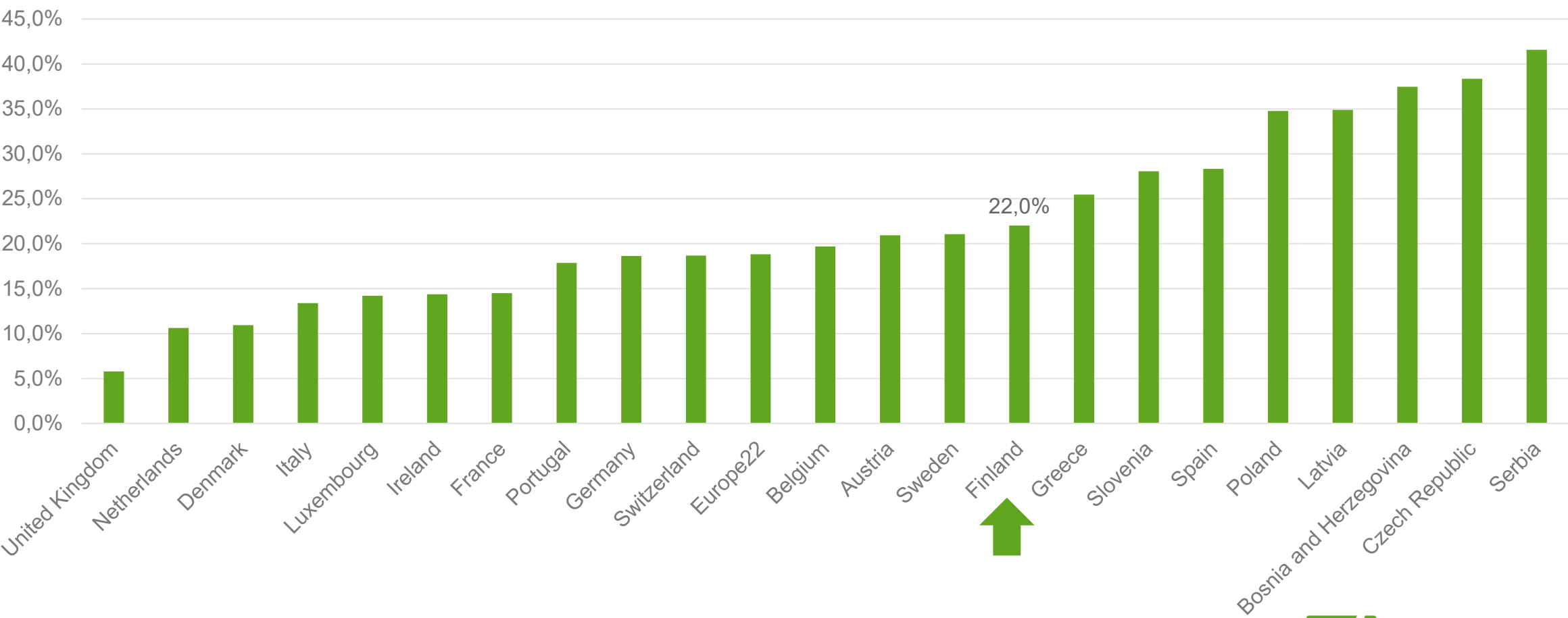
% likely (5-7) (scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is “very unlikely” and 7 is “very likely”)



ESRA3 (E-Survey of Road Users' Attitudes)

In the past 12 months, how many times have you been checked by the police for alcohol?

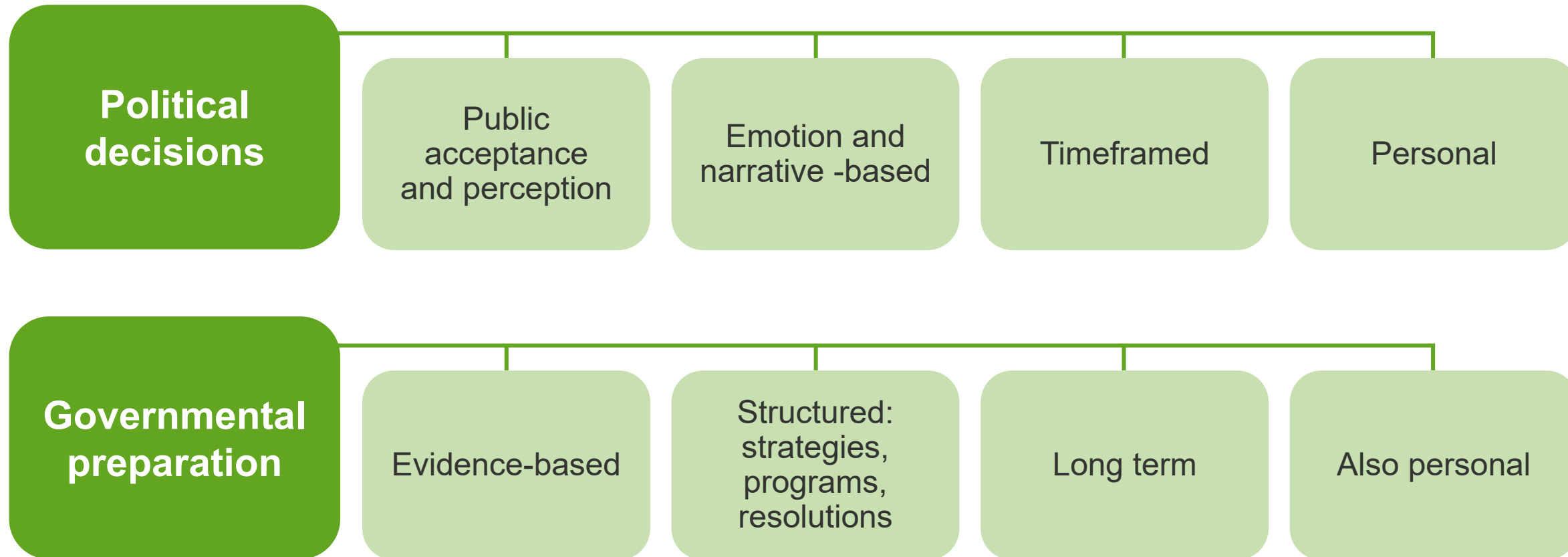
% at least once



ESRA3 (E-Survey of Road Users' Attitudes)

Politics and behaviour change

Two levels of advocacy work

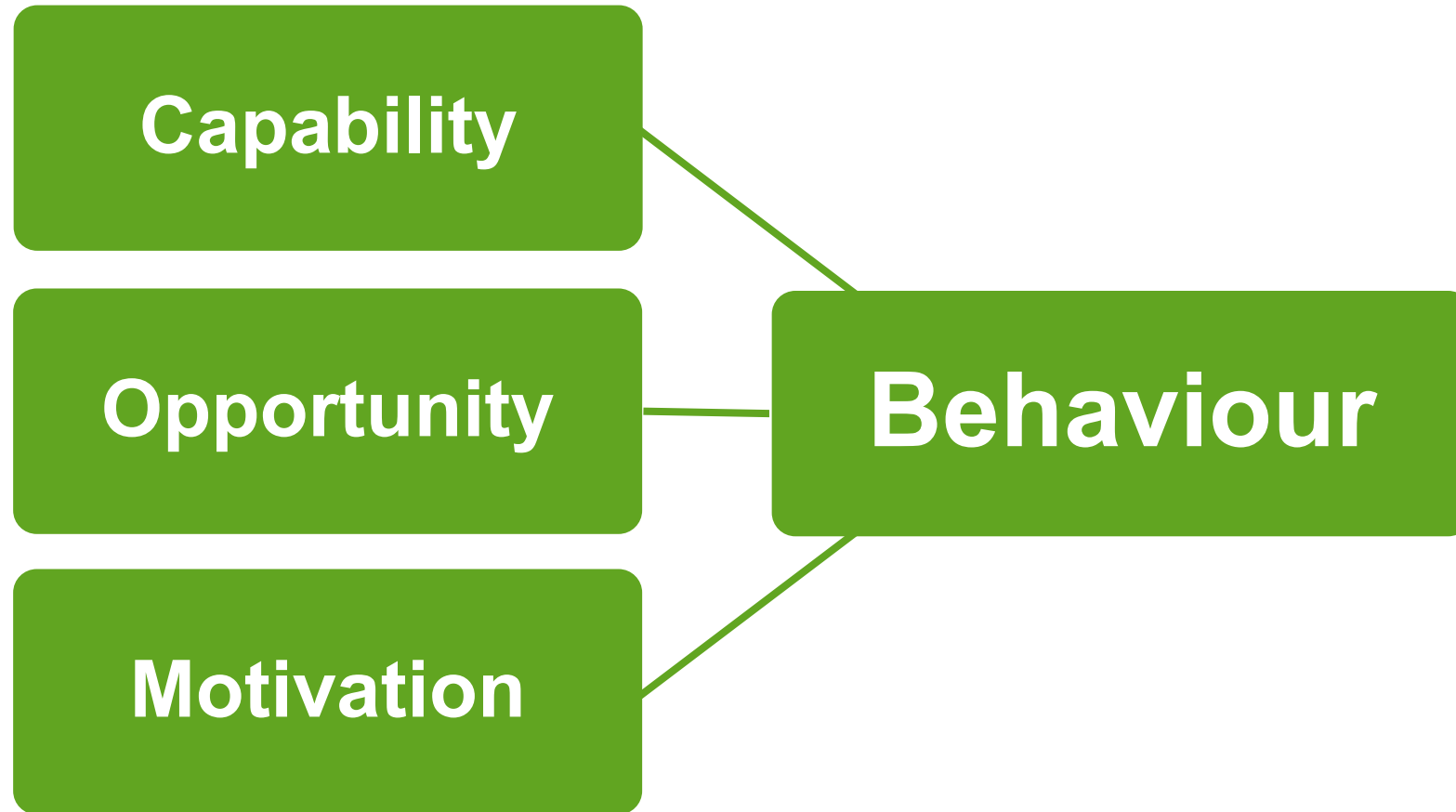




Political commitment

COM-B –model (Michie et al.)

Capability, Opportunity, Motivation



MINDSPACE –model (Dolan et al.)

M = Messenger

I = Incentives

N = Norms

D = Default

S = Salience

P = Priming

A = Affect

C = Commitments

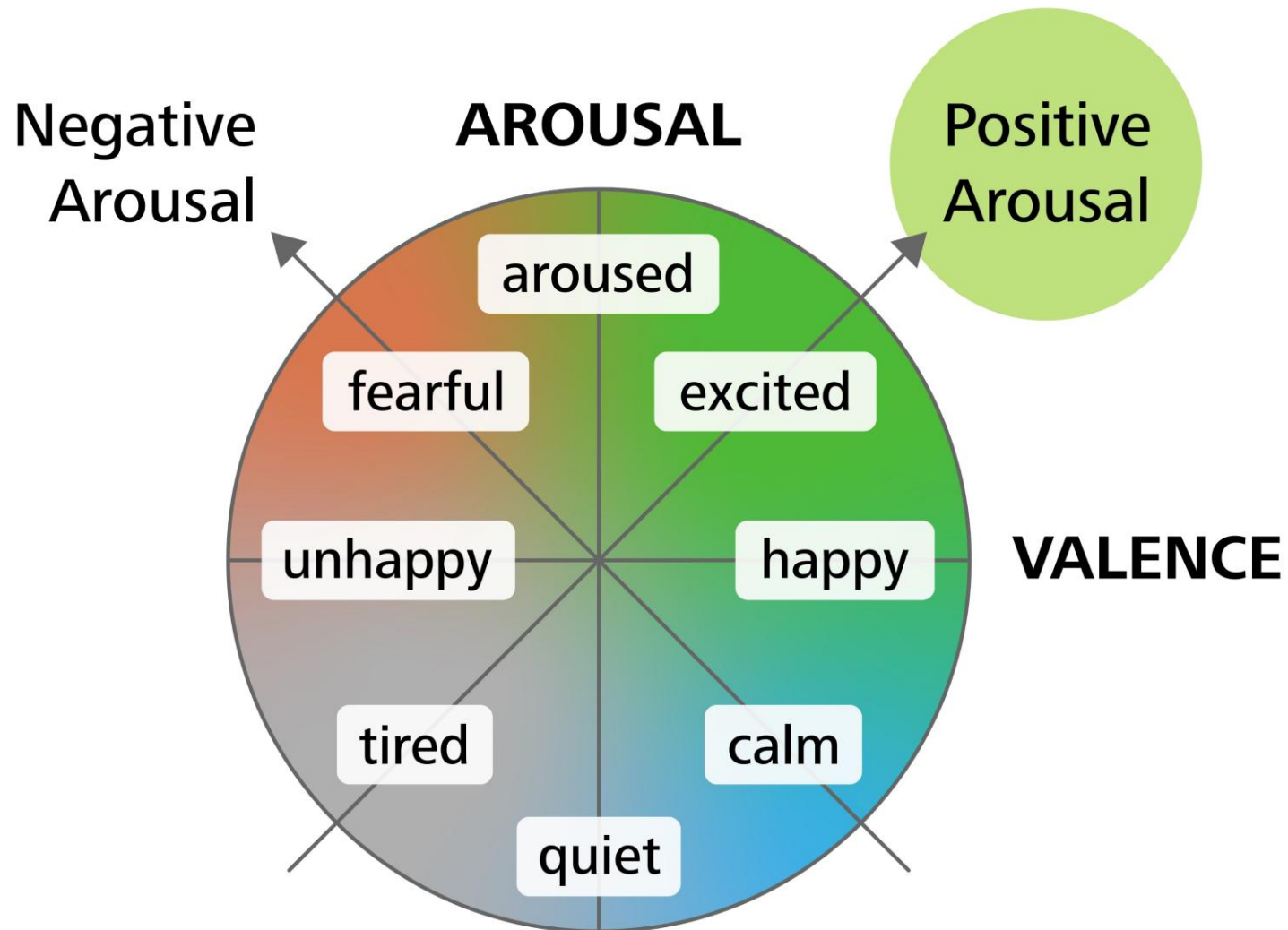
E = Ego



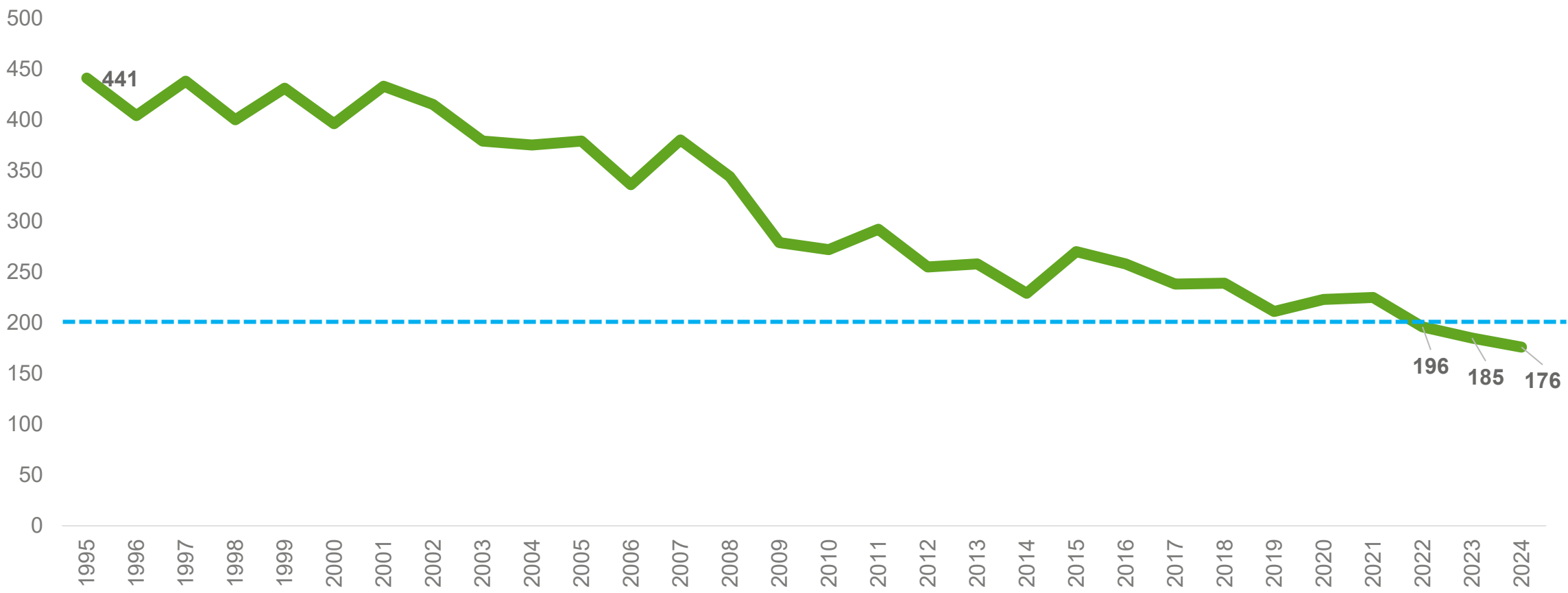
Changing the story

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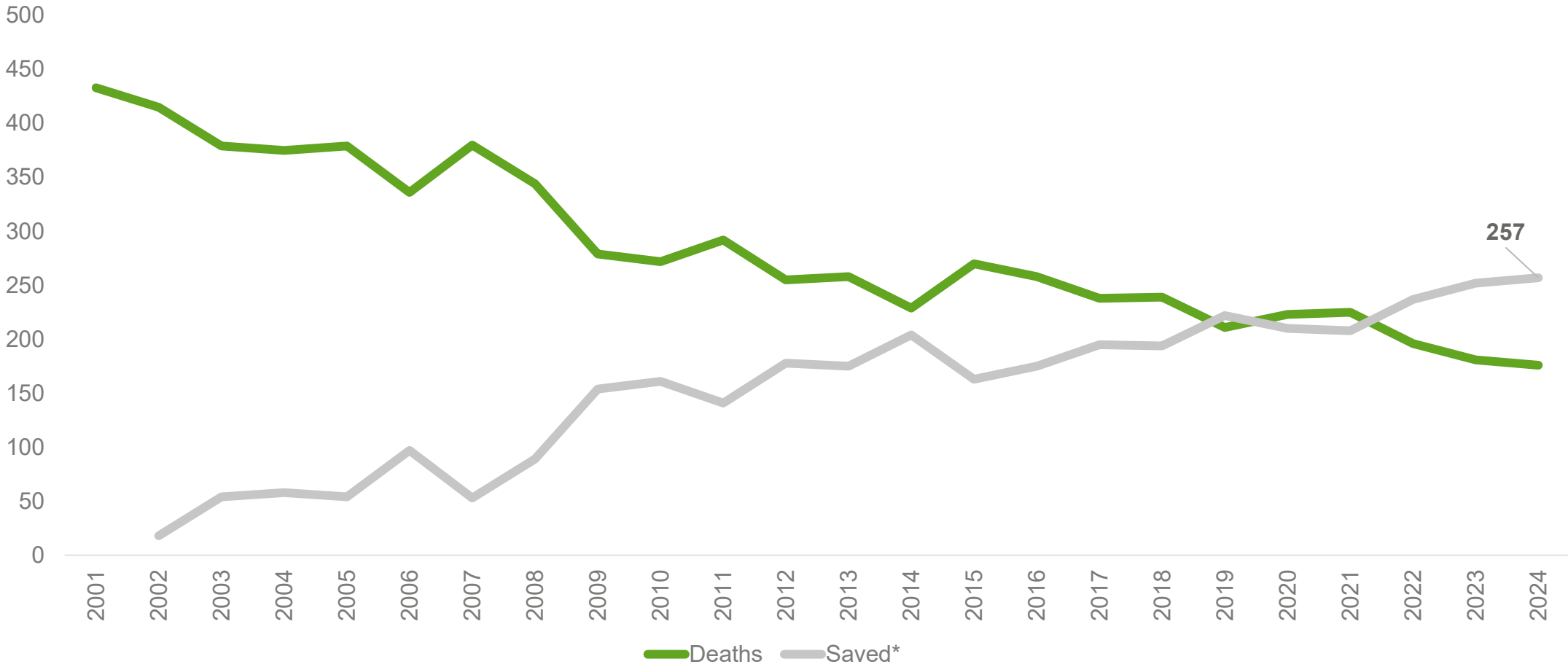
Circumplex Model of affect (Russell 1980)



Road deaths finally below 200



Road deaths and lives saved in Finland



*lives saved compared to safety level of 2001



Make vision zero personal



Thank you for your time!
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