

How FIAB Blocked a Mandatory Helmet Law

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The public perception in Italy regarding issues of cycling mobility in the context of sustainable mobility, road safety and a liveable urban environment has improved in the past few years, putting these issues on the agenda of both media and politicians. While the majority seems to endorse the arguments in favour of increasing bicycle use, there is still a lack of political and technical will to translate these arguments into decisions applicable at the street level.

In its attempt to promote policies that favour cycling mobility, FIAB managed to convince MPs to create an Inter-group in the Italian Parliament called “Friends of the Bicycle.” This group currently gathers 40 MPs, accounting for approximately 5% of their total number. This group met several times to prepare a well-balanced legislative framework to be submitted to the legislature. FIAB discussed its own proposals with the Inter-group coordinators, submitted a technical position paper related to the negative effects of mandatory helmet requirements, and also arranged a meeting with all the Inter-group’s members.

The peculiarities of the Italian bi-cameral parliament played an important role in the development of the helmets policies when the Senate debated a bill entitled “Provisions for Road Safety.” A member of the Democratic Party singlehandedly introduced an amendment making helmets mandatory, even though his expertise was related to safety in the workplace. The committee for Public Works in the Senate approved this amendment and sent the proposal to the floor of the chamber. Benefiting from an unusually high level of support in the media, FIAB mobilized and contacted Senate members, who passed an amendment making helmets mandatory for cyclists younger than 14.

The bill returned to the Chamber of Deputies for its final approval, but by this time the Democratic Party adopted the position of its Senator, favouring mandatory helmets. FIAB attempted to address the merits of the issue: the cost-benefit-risk analysis of the measure, the irrelevance of the problem (3% of cycling deaths under 14 years compared to 50% over 65), the priority of concepts such as safety in numbers, the 20:1 ratio between earned and lost years from cycling (2 years life expectancy gained for the improvement of public health of the cyclists against 30 days lost due to accidents), the difference between usefulness (the helmet is useful in some falls) and effectiveness (it doesn’t work in the majority of collisions).

Fortunately, the issue was linked with the Urban Mobility Action Plan proposed by the European Commission, so the responsible committee in the Chamber was the Transport Commission. FIAB proposed and obtained a hearing with the members of the committee before they voted on the amendments to the road safety bill. Despite no previous experience in such parliamentary hearings, FIAB convincingly presented the arguments against mandatory helmet use, which is also supported by the ECF. The next day, the amendment was unanimously rejected.

In evaluating the process, it is noteworthy that the press rallied behind the FIAB argument, helping it gain visibility. It is also important to concentrate lobbying efforts on a critical mass of MPs with expertise in the area, who are receptive to solid arguments and unlikely to give in to demagoguery. The FIAB experience presents several important lessons, both for future lobbying and for countering mandatory helmet legislation: 1. preparing a solid background with the arguments necessary; 2. mobilize quickly when the political situation requires action; and 3. clear and concise presentation of the relevant argument to the authorities.

Moreover, while the Italian success story of repealing mandatory helmet use is a singular case, highly dependent on the Italian political context and conjecture, several elements can be drawn out as red flags that other organizations can take into account to block such legislation:

- Legislative proposals are often launched by individual politicians
- Such decisions are often taken for emotional reasons, without proper background information and preparation
- The technical matters involved are not intuitive for the decision-makers
- The chances of success increase if one has the opportunity to explain their reasoning to decision-makers who are open to arguments

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