

The new season in the FIA European Rally Championship starts on 22 March in the Azores (Portugal). In 2018 the Russians will be actively involved in the struggle for the Champion titles in two scoring categories – overall standing (ERC-1) and production cars ERC-2. As the last season, Russian Performance Motorsport team will be represented by two crews: Alexey Lukyanuk and Alexey Arnautov in the Ford Fiesta R5, and Sergei Remennik and Mark Rozin in the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X.

Alexey Lukyanuk from St. Petersburg plans to spend a whole season in the FIA European Rally Championship – to start at eight rounds. Despite the fact the partnership program has not yet been finalized, Alexey stays positive and is actively working towards rising funds. The crew in the Ford Fiesta R5 is supported by: “GK Trassa” – the leading Russian fuel company; Roko airplanes – the Czech leader in aircraft building; Qiwi – the leader in the payment systems market; COOLSTREAM – the largest chemicals producer; Hortex and others.

Alexey Lukyanuk, Ford Fiesta R5, *«I love the Azores rally. When we first started here in 2016, we got accustomed fairly fast, showed good speed on the stages. They are narrow, quite technical, with fairly good grip, and despite the surface is slippery and loose, I like it. I believe our previous experience will help us. I plan to to recheck the pace notes from the last year, as 95% of the stages are similar to the last year. We changed out approach to the car's setup, started to work with new engineer, who has great experience of the world championship events. We just finished the tests in Italy and both Fiesta and me and satisfied with the steps we've made. I cannot wait to experience all of that on the real track, on the real stages. I am thinking over the tactics, preparing.»*

In 2018 the organizers have changed the rules for production cars (ERC-2), and now the scores must be obtained not at the six rounds, as it was before, but only at four of them. It will allow many entrants to reduce their participation budgets and attract more drivers from national championships. And this approach is starting to justify itself: the number of drivers who registered to receive points in the championship doubled! Uralian Sergei Remennik announced his starts at the first three rounds, and the further program of participation in the season will be adjusted depending on the results shown.

Sergei Remennik, Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X, *“For us, this will be the second visit to the Azores Rallye. We are waiting for it, as we are waiting for the start of the European Championship season. As I said, the fact that the organizers met the participants' needs and changed the rules of the series, determined our choice – we will take part in this series again. Also we are very pleased with the number of participants in the ERC-2 standings: they are twice as many as usually!*

Now we know what to wait for and it is much better than last year, when we went to the special stages in complete uncertainty. Then only Alexey Lukyanuk's past on-board videos helped us. Now we have our own personal experience, and we already know how to prepare for this race. I think everyone expects to achieve the best result. And we will definitely try to improve the last year's result! I hope, we will be able to do that. Azores are the splendid islands and it is a very beautiful race, we are looking forward to the last seconds count down at the start”.

There are 76 participants in the entry list of the FIA European Rally Championship opening round, 35 of them will perform in the R5 class cars. The organizers decided not to change the last year's route, it means almost 90% of the roads intended for the rally will remain the same. It is a great advantage for those who started here last year.

The main peculiarity of the island round in Portugal is too unpredictable weather conditions – due to its geographical location in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, almost at an equal distance

from Lisbon and New York – the archipelago has a subtropical marine climate. But for the rally this feature means the inability to predict the amount of rainfall in different parts of the island in one day – the rain here can start suddenly without warning, just a few minutes after you have seen a clear sky.

The second feature is amazing gravel special stages with a loose surface and a high parapet resembling the bobsleigh track stoppers. Due to weather unpredictability, all public roads on the island are separated from free spaces either by a fence made of volcanic stone or by a fairly high side piling. This requires the crews to pay special attention to the turns passage, because it is rather difficult to get away after touching such an obstacle or going off the road.

The rally begins on Thursday with qualification runs and the subsequent ceremony of choosing starting positions. The Ceremonial start and the passage through the starting podium takes place at 2 pm local time. The traditional spectator stage “City Show” on Ponta Delgada streets is taken out of the main rally route, it will be held on Wednesday on the eve of the starting events. The so-called “super special” laid along the central embankment and streets includes elements of high-speed maneuvering and jumps on the trampolines. The result shown in this show is not included to the rally standings and the drivers will not get additional points for this track, but it is a wonderful occasion for spectators to get acquainted with motor sports without leaving the city.

15 special stages of the rally will be held on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, when the FIA European Rally Championship first round winners will be announced at 7.30 pm local time.