



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania Social briefing:

**Lithuania is leading in Europe in introducing the stringent controls
on tobacco and alcohol consumption**

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The Nordic countries which have been famous for a long time for their stringent alcohol policies and the control of the consumption of alcohol through the state monopoly of wholesale and retail of alcohol have been recently overtaken by Lithuania in its efforts to create a new model for the tobacco and alcohol controls.

While the Nordic countries (except mainland Denmark but including the Faroe Islands) keep the government monopoly on manufacturing and retailing of alcoholic beverages and make the alcohol accessible to the consumers only through the specially-designated state enterprises, in Lithuania no such controls exist. The tobacco and alcohol manufacturing and retail is in the private domain and the government acts only as a regulator on the basis of the public health concerns.

Until recently the public health concerns have not been taken into the political agendas of the mainstream political parties and the societal ills have been left largely to the society itself. With the entrance into the EU more than a decade ago Lithuania committed to the European Social Charter of a Council of Europe which serves as a point of reference in European Union law. The Charter in particular includes a right to health among everyday human rights that it guarantees. The integration of the EU has further deepened the adherence to this principle, also underpinned by the Structural Funds supporting the policy focus on the social rights of society. This created a policy framework to which the political parties could subsequently tap.

The governing party (the Union of Greens and Farmers) integrated the public health agenda in their party programme, including the policy initiatives related to the control of tobacco and alcohol consumption, and after the party

came to power at the end of 2016 this agenda ended up in the Government's programme.

By following this agenda the Government aimed to address two issues: to increase the revenues for the state budget by increasing the excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol and to start decreasing the consumption of tobacco and alcohol altogether by making the alcohol consumption less accessible for public.

In June the Parliament approved the government's three-year plan for increasing the excise tax on tobacco products by 6 to 14 per cent annually starting next March. Another step taken was to curb the tobacco and alcohol consumption in order to decrease the costs of the public health system related to the health conditions impacted by smoking and binge drinking which have been identified by the World Health Organization as the main risk factors adversely impacting Lithuania's state of health.

The Government chose to adopt a strict regulatory approach which has some similarities with the legislation which came into effect in Singapore in 2015. Similarly, as in Singapore the authorities banned all public consumption of alcohol and, similarly, as in Singapore the retail shops in Lithuania are not allowed to sell alcohol after certain hours. Actually, the shops in Singapore are disallowed from selling alcohol between 7 am and 10.30 pm while such an alcohol "curfew" is in effect across Lithuania from 10 am until 8 pm on a work day and from 10 am until 3 pm on Sundays. Besides, the ban extends to the national days and the total ban of alcohol sales is in effect on the first day of the starting school day each year (1 September). These regulatory efforts came in effect as of 2017 with the new legislation introduced by the Government to address the public health risks associated with alcohol consumption and related public ills. Though the public response to those regulatory steps was mixed if not altogether hostile, yet the public consensus was that the society had to do more in order to address the societal issues related to the alcohol consumption.

The report on the state of health in Europe in 2017 (prepared for the OECD by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, an

intergovernmental partnership) has showed the appalling state that the public health of the country has found itself. Although life expectancy in Lithuania is increasing (74.6 years in 2015), it is six years lower than the EU average (80.6), and the lowest in the EU. In addition, the gap between men and women is exceptionally large, with life expectancy for Lithuanian men (69.2 years) more than 10 years lower than for women (79.7 years), the largest gender gap in the EU.

The main risk factors identified which severely impact the public health in the country are smoking and binge drinking. The proportion of adults who smoke in Lithuania has dropped sharply to below the EU average (from 32% in 2000 to 20% in 2014), due to tighter tobacco control policies, but more than one in three men still smoke every day. According to the report, Lithuania has the highest level of alcohol consumption in the EU (50% higher than the EU average) and more than one in three men report heavy alcohol consumption on a regular basis. Obesity is relatively low but increasing, particularly among adolescents.

Though there are critical voices that regard the report as being based on the incomplete or misleading data, yet the consensus is that the state of the public health is an issue and the risk factors as indicating are clearly playing their role. Lithuania leads in the statistics on drunk driving-related fatal and injury road accidents; the driving under the influence of alcohol or psychoactive substances is beyond the law if Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) limit is above 0.4 g/l. The report “Progress in Reducing Drink Driving in Europe” (released by the European Transport Safety Council in February 2018) has the linked the drunk driving incidents in Lithuania to a high rate of alcohol consumption and noted one of the lowest number of control checks of the drivers for drunkenness when comparing to other EU countries.

Given such situation the closing days of the summer witnessed the renewed interest of the Government in further battling against the social bad habits such as excessive drinking and smoking which put the country at the top of the list of

the most alcohol-consuming countries in Europe with almost 13 litres of alcohol per capital per year, almost twice higher than such a figure in China, for example. With the restrictions on the sales of alcohol in supermarkets a year ago in place, the reports indicate a decrease in the consumption by 0.9 litre of alcohol per capita per year. Emboldened by this impact the Government is now is looking for new ways of bringing the levels of the consumption of alcohol and tobacco to new lows.

At the beginning of the year, the Lithuanian government introduced what is thought the strictest alcohol laws in the European Union, raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 20, restricting opening hours for off licenses and banning all advertising for beers, wines and spirits.

For the autumn parliamentary session new alcohol-access restricting proposals have been registered, including those on the size of packaging. Under new amendments, plain cigarette packaging will be introduced and the display of cigarettes would be banned and smoking in residential balconies, outdoor cafes, beaches and other places would also be prohibited. The amendments to the Law on the Control of Tobacco, Tobacco Products and Related Products envision the commencement of the restrictions from November, 2022.

In the striving of cigarette plain packaging, Lithuania would follow similar initiated tables by Ireland, France, Norway, Hungary, Slovenia, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. If the amendments on the display of cigarettes and other tobacco products in retail outlets, except for specialised shops and sections, are approved, they will go into effect in November 2019. Not only stores will be banned to show the names of producers and prices, but also will be stripped of right to promote sales of tobacco goods and advertise sale discounts.

In addition to the ban on smoking indoors in public places and the cafes, the Parliament aims to introduce bans on smoking in outdoor cafes, balconies, terraces and galleries, closed bus shelters, on beaches and at children playgrounds. The ban is also related to smoking inside vehicles if under 18-year-olds and pregnant women are among passengers.

Although such focus on the public health has created a lot of space for debate and made the society more aware about the health risks and the related issues at hand, yet the critics say that such a heavy-handed approach in creating and extending the bans to as much activities as possible address the outcomes rather than causes which create the social ills related to the binge drinking or other misbehaviour in the first place.

The public health will stay high on the agenda not only because it can create immediate impacts and make headlines, but also because it affects almost every individual in the country who would have to cast a vote next year at the national, presidential and the European elections and whose health the Government wants to take care of at least by showing the concern for the public health of all.