



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania social briefing:
How Alcohol Consumption Habits are Changing in Lithuania
Justas Karčiauskas


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

How Alcohol Consumption Habits are Changing in Lithuania

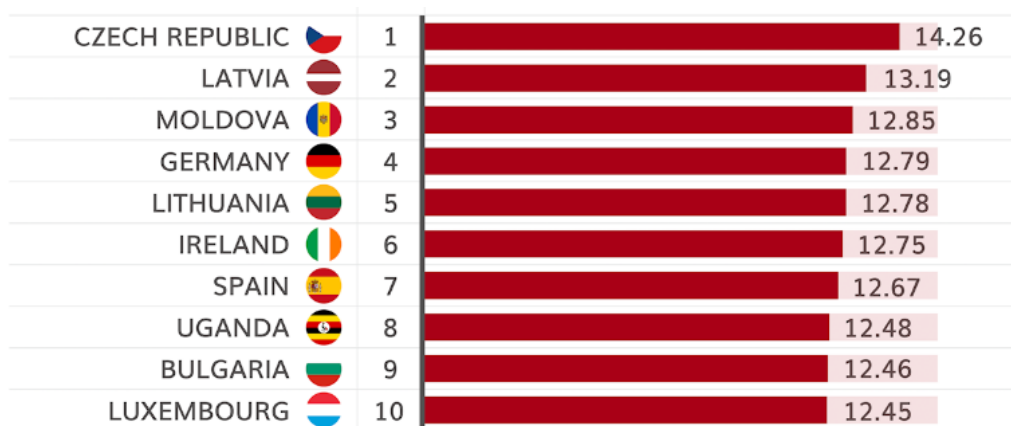
Summary

The latest report of the seven-year study into habits of alcohol consumption in Lithuania has been released. It summarizes statistics and identifies new trends of alcohol consumption in Lithuania. Some of the changes in alcohol consumption are a result of government restrictive intervention and regulation. The briefing analyses the topic of alcohol consumption in Lithuania and concludes that it is one of the major problems in Lithuanian society, and can be directly linked to numerous severe negative consequences.

Introduction

For many years Lithuania was among the countries with highest alcohol consumption per capita in the world. (See **Graph 1**). Latest report of the seven-years long study into habits of alcohol consumption in Lithuania, carried out by scientists of Vilnius University, has been released. The report has insights into trends and habits of alcohol consumption in Lithuania. The report identifies major areas of concern, and factors that set new trends of alcohol consumption in Lithuania. As part of the discussion, the briefing talks about alcohol use disorder or alcoholism – one of the major problems in Lithuania’s society – and identifies related negative consequences for the country.

Graph 1: Top 10 countries with the highest alcohol consumption per capita worldwide ¹



¹ TASTEATLAS: These countries drink the most alcohol, at: <https://www.tasteatlas.com/these-countries-drink-the-most-alcohol>

In order to discourage people from consuming alcohol, Lithuanian government, over last decade, enacted of a number of legal and administrative changes. For example, in 2014 it became illegal to consume alcohol in public places, like streets and parks. In January 2018, the legal age for alcohol consumption was raised from 18 to 20 years old. Since 2018 different restrictions to advertise alcohol in certain events, newspapers and magazines started being implemented. In 2019 restrictions to sell alcohol kicked in. For example, regular shops are not allowed to sell alcohol after 3 p.m. on Sundays and bank holidays, and after 8 p.m. on any other. ² Finally, the government has steadily raised excise duty on different types of alcoholic beverages, which meant that the price of legally sold alcohol has been rising. Almost all of the aforementioned restrictions and regulations are in effect as of July 2023, at the time of writing this briefing.

Whether or not the government intervention has achieved its objective of decreasing alcohol consumption is debatable, but it certainly has changed some of alcohol consumption habits, which will be discussed below.

Effects of alcohol price increase

The year 2022 saw a huge hike in alcohol prices because from 1 January 2022 a higher excise duty on alcoholic beverages was introduced. On average, alcohol price increased by 11,4 per cent in 2022 compared to 2021. Sparkling grape wine rose in price the most by 15.3 percent, beer produced in Lithuania - 13.6 percent, fruit wine - 13.2 percent, vermouth - 12.8 percent, imported beer - 11.8 percent, bitters - 10 ,9, Vodka produced in Lithuania - 10.2 percent. ³

The alcohol price increase, just like price increase of any other product, is a factor that reduces alcohol consumption. This is in line with the decrease of alcohol consumption in 2022, compared to 2021 (See **Graph 2**).

² NARKOTIKŲ, TABAKO IR ALKOHOLIO KONTROLĖS DEPARTAMENTAS: Įsigaliojo nauja alkoholinių gėrimų pardavimo tvarka, at: <https://www.anyksciai.lt/naujienos/isigaliojo-nauja-alkoholiniu-gerimu-pardavimo-tvarka/2434>

³ TV3: Lietuviai geria mažiau, bet rūko – daugiau, at: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/verslas/lietuviai-geria-maziau-bet-ruko-daugiau-n1239345>

Graph 2: Consumption of pure alcohol, litres per year, in Lithuania. Upper line denotes consumption per each resident of Lithuania 15 and older, lower line denotes consumption per total population of Lithuania ⁴



However, the official statistics usually takes into account the sales and consumption of legal alcohol, and the price increase of legal alcohol pushes some consumers to consume more of home-made illegal alcohol. Lithuania, in particular, has deep 500 years old traditions of producing Lithuanian type moonshine – distilled alcoholic beverage, with alcohol content reaching 50% to 75% home-made liquor, in Lithuanian called *samanė* or *naminė*. ⁵ Unfortunately, nowadays most of Lithuania’s moonshine is produced illegally,⁶ and sometimes the consumption of such alcohol may lead to terrible consequences. For example, in August 2021, the country was shocked by the news that 19 people died in Kaunas after consuming illegal home-made moonshine, in the most terrible illegal alcohol consumption disaster in Lithuania. ⁷

Alcohol consumption habits

For the seventh year in a row, the study of alcohol consumption habits in Lithuania conducted by scientists of Vilnius University showed that the proportion of people who

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ WIKIPEDIA: Moonshine by country, at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moonshine_by_country

⁶ 15MIN: Alkoholio fabrikas Vilniaus rajone: pareigūnai aptiko 3 tonas falsifikatų, at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/nusikaltimaiirnelaimes/alkoholio-fabrikas-vilniaus-rajone-pareigunai-aptiko-3-tonas-falsifikatu-59-2061774>

⁷ LRT: Ekspertai: Kaune alkoholio surogatais mirtinai apsinuodijo 19 žmonių, at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1535609/ekspertai-kaune-alkoholio-surogatais-mirtinai-apsinuodijo-19-zmoniu>

consumed alcohol in Lithuania is gradually increasing, but the total amount of alcohol consumed has decreased slightly over the past 7 years.

The scientists of the study have identified two biggest problems. One is that the proportion of women in the group of people who drink very often and a lot increased noticeably during the seven-year period under study. Second, the trend of increasing the consumption of illegal moonshine began to take shape, according to the distributed report.⁸

"The main negative trend that began to develop two years ago is a significant increase in moonshine consumption. In 2022, compared to 2021, its consumption increased more than three times. Taking into account that moonshine consumers are mainly chronic and heavy drinkers, the increase of moonshine during the last two years, is extremely large," comments the VU researcher Dr. Algirdas Bartkus. He notes that over the past seven years, the share of frequent drinkers has dropped significantly, from 6 to 4 percent, and from 44 to 50 percent. the share of occasional users has increased. Also, during the studied period, the share of women in the group of people who drink very often and a lot increased significantly. By 2020, women accounted for only 1 out of 10 heavy drinkers, and currently 1 out of 5 heavy drinkers is a woman," observes Dr. Algirdas Bartkus.⁹

The analysis of the data on places of consumption showed that, although the home remains the main place where people consume alcoholic beverages, over time there is a trend that more and more people consume alcohol in cafes and restaurants, during events and concerts. This is gradually bringing us closer to Western Europe, where the majority of alcohol is consumed in bars and restaurants. There is a visible and positive trend that less and less alcohol is consumed in workplaces. Also, the study revealed that heavy alcohol consumption as a whole is becoming rarer, but the share of people who drink excessively is constant and makes up about 1 percent.¹⁰

⁸ DELFI: Tyrimas: lietuviai geria mažiau, bet yra dvi bėdos – girtaujančios moterys ir pilstukas, at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/tyrimas-lietuviai-geria-maziau-bet-yra-dvi-bedos-girtaujancios-moterys-ir-pilstukas.d?id=94016969>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Alcohol consumption versus alcoholism

Apart from the long-term negative effects on health, high alcohol consumption per-capita may indicate that a portion of population suffers from much more severe problem – alcohol use disorder or alcoholism, which is a serious disease or disorder distinguished by uncontrolled drinking. This could be due to emotional and physical dependence as well as a preoccupation with alcohol consumption. People suffering from alcoholism have strong addiction to alcohol and need to go through a lengthy and complicated rehabilitation process in order to stop consuming alcohol. Even after a successful treatment, such people remain susceptible for re-occurring drinking problem for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, Lithuania not only is the leader in terms of alcohol consumption per capita, but also is suffering from one of highest rates of alcoholism in the world. According to World Health Organization, 13.35 per cent of males and 1.98 per cent of females in Lithuania suffer from alcoholism.¹¹

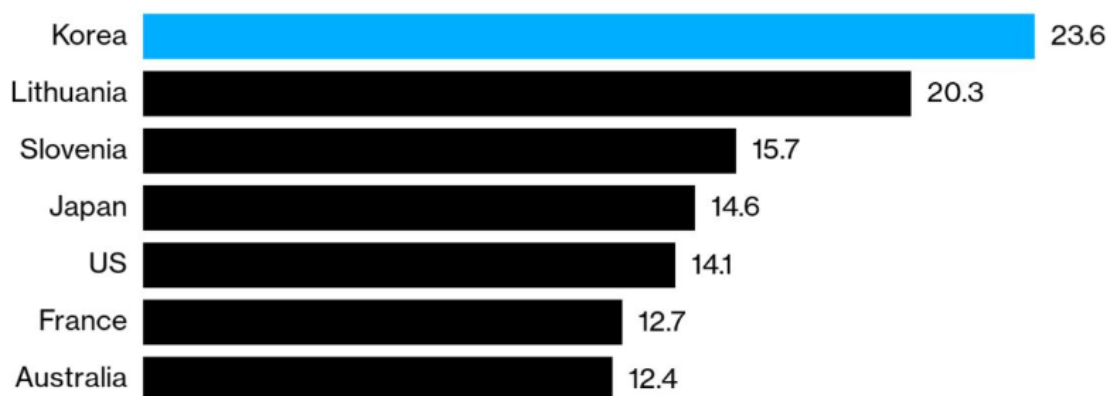
Consequences of alcohol consumption

There are many well-documented negative consequences related to alcohol consumption, for example, chronic health issues, drink-driving and resulting traffic accidents, domestic violence, suicides and crime. Perhaps unsurprisingly but sadly, Lithuania's society severely suffers from almost all of these problems.

For example, Lithuania for a long time has topped charts of countries with highest rates of suicide. It has been working on this problem intensively, and only recently left the number one position in the chart (see Graph 3)

¹¹ ABBEYCARE GROUP: Alcoholism by country statistics, at: <https://www.abbeycarefoundation.com/alcohol/alcoholism-by-country-statistics/>

Graph 3: top 7 countries with a highest number of suicides per 100,000 people worldwide (data 2021) ¹²



Alcohol also has an effect on the crime situation in Lithuania. According to National Statistics Department, during the year 2021, a third of crimes were committed by drunk persons.

¹³

Alcohol consumption is responsible for a variety of health issues. The Institute of Hygiene estimates that in 2021 in Lithuania at least one diagnosis directly related to alcohol consumption was registered in 23.7 thousand. persons. 100 thousand population had 846 sick persons, and in 2020 - 845. Alcohol dependence, alcohol toxicity and alcoholic psychosis were recorded most frequently. Alcohol consumption brought a bouquet of diseases mainly to young men. The data show that the incidence of diseases directly related to alcohol consumption is the highest among men aged 30-39 and is 3.4 times higher than that of women. In 2021 678 people died from diseases directly related to alcohol consumption, which is 80 more deaths than in 2020. The most common diseases directly caused by alcohol consumption were alcoholic liver disease (51%), accidental alcohol poisoning (20.5%) and alcoholic cardiomyopathy (10.6%). ¹⁴

¹² BLOOMBERG: Korea's Suicide Rate Rises, Remains Highest in Developed World, at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-27/korea-s-suicide-rate-rises-remains-highest-in-developed-world?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner

¹³ TV3: Naujaisi duomenys: lietuviai alkoholio vartoja daugiau, trečdalis nusikaltimų kaltininkai – išgėrę, at: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/naujaisi-duomenys-lietuviai-alkoholio-vartoja-daugiau-trecdalis-nusikaltimu-kaltininkai-igsawere-n1170042>

¹⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

For many years Lithuania has been among the countries with highest alcohol consumption in the world. Unlike in other countries of South and West Europe with long traditions of safe alcohol consumption, alcohol consumption in Lithuania has many related negative consequences. It could be argued that unsafe and excessive alcohol consumption, which can lead to alcoholism and other alcohol-related problems, is one of the major issues in Lithuanian society. It is therefore unsurprising that alcohol consumption in Lithuania is often seen in a negative light, and the government has adopted a number of restrictive measures in an attempt to reduce the use of alcohol. On a positive note, it appears that the habits of alcohol consumption in Lithuania are slowly getting closer to those of the countries with well-established alcohol consumption traditions.