

The right message?

Monika Kosińska and Mariann Skar question the appropriateness of EU president Herman Van Rompuy's support for Europe's alcohol industry

Last month, the Parliament Magazine published an article entitled “Tax hike ‘could hit beer industry hard’” detailing comments made by EU president Herman Van Rompuy during a meeting organised by the Brewers of Europe. The European Public Health Alliance’s (EPHA) president Archie Turnbull responded to Van Rompuy’s comments in an open letter questioning the appropriateness of the president’s intervention. Van Rompuy’s statements, that beer “strengthens social cohesion” and is a “symbol of hospitality and conviviality”, are inappropriate in light of evidence and reality across Europe. Levels of alcohol consumption in Europe are damaging and unacceptable – with a recent studies showing that alcohol is more harmful than heroin.

The EU has the highest level of alcohol consumption in the world, with binge drinking becoming the norm across the EU.

In 2006, 80 million Europeans aged 15 years or older reported binge drinking at least once a week. Globally, 25 per cent of deaths in young males are due to excessive alcohol consumption. Overall, it is estimated that 55 million people in the EU drink alcohol to harmful levels, and of these individuals, 23 million are considered to be addicted. For these reasons, the strong support expressed by the European council president, the institution responsible for defining the general political direction and priorities of the EU, to the alcohol industry, is quite alarming.

“Although the alcohol industry is part of the EU economy, as president Van Rompuy acknowledged, their products also create substantial costs to growth and societal development”

Although the alcohol industry is part of the EU economy, as president Van Rompuy acknowledged, their products also create substantial costs to growth and societal development. The total tangible cost of alcohol to the EU was estimated to be €125bn in 2003, equivalent to 1.3 per cent of GDP. Beyond the social and health consequences for individuals, alcohol use often affects third parties. Through road accidents or violent behaviour, relatives are often as damaged by alcohol consumption as drinkers. Foetal alcohol syndrome, which affects one per cent of the population, is another example of how alcohol impacts on third parties, with irreversible consequences on the physical, mental, behavioural and learning capacity of babies.

In our open letter, we expressed our strong disappointment over the European council and its president’s support of an industry that damages European lives, communities and economies if not used in moderation. It would be more appropriate to support concrete measures that have proven to be effective such as actions on pricing, availability, access and marketing of alcohol rather than encouraging people to consume it.

Portraying alcohol and beer in particular, as “strengthen-



ing social cohesion” and being a “symbol of hospitality and conviviality” does not send the right message about alcohol consumption, especially to young people. United and coherent messages regarding alcohol need to be sent from European politicians and their institutions. Politicians should show through their actions that their decisions are based on a long term vision for a healthy Europe. ★

Monika Kosińska is secretary general of the European Public Health Alliance (EPAH)

Alcohol is a key health determinant responsible for more than seven per cent of all ill-health and early death in Europe. This information seems to be lost when some of our main politicians at European level discuss and plan for the future. Eurocare, the European alcohol policy alliance is very concerned when the European council president Herman Van Rompuy gives his support to the beer industry without reservation.

Europe’s problem is definitely not too little alcohol consumption; we have the highest drinking levels in the world, the highest alcohol per capita consumption and the highest alcohol-related harm problems. Taking into account current levels of alcohol consumption, especially among young people, we can only imagine the enormous costs to public spending that we and our children will have to bear in the not so distant future. Van Rompuy suggesting that alcohol, in this case beer, is a factor of social cohesion is displaced when social and health problems are visible in nearly all European cities on weekend nights. Statistics reflect this alarming reality, with chronic diseases, to which alcohol is the third main contributory factor, at the top of global risks threats.

Alcohol-attributable disease, injury and violence drain the health, welfare, employment and criminal justice sectors across the EU to the tune of €125bn a year. This is only the tangible cost to EU society and does not include the pain, suffering and loss of life due to the causes of alcohol misuse. There is a very close relationship between the per capita consumption and the prevalence of both alcohol related harm and alcohol dependence. Alcohol is a very heavily marketed product and young people especially are an important target group as they are being exposed to unprecedented levels of sophisticated marketing. Eurocare is calling for restrictions on marketing – similar to the French ‘Loi Évin’ alcohol and tobacco policy law passed in 1991 – across Europe. Eurocare calls upon decision makers to include beer, wine and spirit in the ‘provision of food information to consumers’ proposal and request health warning messages on alcoholic beverages.

Experts also agree on the important role of pricing policies and taxation in reducing alcohol related harm. Moreover, the minimum rates set in 1992 are out of date and should

Open Letter

To the attention of Mr Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council,

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you in response to your comments made at an event organised by The Brewers of Europe at which you were the keynote speaker. These were published on theparliament.com on 14 October 2010 (“Tax hike could hit ‘beer industry high’”). On behalf of the European Public Health Alliance, the European Platform for non-profit health organizations, we would like to highlight our concern regarding the comments you made publicly in your capacity as President of the European Council on beer consumption.

We would like to remind you that although the alcohol industry is part of the EU economy, their products are also creating substantial costs to growth and societal development:

- The total tangible cost of alcohol to EU society in 2003 was estimated to be 125 billion Euros¹, equivalent to 1.3% GDP, which is roughly the same value as that found recently for tobacco.
- Lost productivity due to alcohol-attributable absenteeism and unemployment has been estimated to respectively cost €9bn - €19bn and €6bn - €23bn².
- Parts of the economic cost are also paid by other people or institutions, including much of the estimated €33bn due to crime and €17bn for healthcare systems³.
- 1 in 3 of all road traffic fatalities are due to excessive drinking, 4 in 10 of all murders and manslaughters⁴.

Moreover, young people are increasingly vulnerable to alcohol due to massive marketing and changes in behaviour:

- 25% of young male mortality is due to excessive alcohol consumption⁵.

¹ Alcohol in Europe Report, June 2006

² The impact of alcohol on Europe, Alcohol in Europe Report, June 2006

³ The impact of alcohol on Europe, Alcohol in Europe Report, June 2006

⁴ Alcohol in Europe Report, June 2006

⁵ Alcohol in Europe Report, June 2006

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be increased to reflect the real cost of alcohol as outlined by the study commissioned by the European commission earlier this year. Europe has been drowning in cheap and easily available alcohol over recent years, while the alcohol industry’s profits have been rising.

With all the austerity measures there are really other sectors of our economy that we should be promoting and accelerating growth in, not a sector which produces a product with well reported negative side effects. An increase on taxes would provide the much needed money in public budgets which face deficits unseen in decades. ★

Mariann Skar is secretary general of Eurocare, the European Alcohol Policy Alliance

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