

Country Report for Estonia, Annual Meeting, London 2005

Estonian Alcohol Policy

Estonia is one of the countries in the Baltic Sea region with highest alcohol consumption. According to the December 2003 survey of the Estonian Institute of Economic Research 86% of the Estonian population (ages 16-75) consume alcoholic beverages. Drinking alcohol is more widely spread among men, young people and people with lower education, people from the North-East of Estonia and small towns.

Estonian inhabitants prefer wine and beer to strong alcoholic beverages. The latter are consumed more by the senior population. In the last 10 years consumption of beverages with average alcohol content has drastically increased in Estonia, and there is no declining tendency in terms of consumption of strong alcohol in respect to nationality and age.

General alcohol consumption in the last decades has increased worldwide; Estonia due to its alcohol consumption is considered among most unhealthy states (World Health Report 2002). Thus, 12,5 litres of legal 100% alcohol was consumed per capita (over 15 years of age) in 2004 (8,4 litres in 2001 according to the information of the Estonian Institute of Economic Research).

It is calculated that legal alcohol amounts to 60% of the consumed alcohol on the average, therefore, in 2002, in fact 20,23 litres of 100% pure alcohol was consumed per person. (Comparison: in 2002 in Latvia 8,4 litres per capita among persons over 14).

Alcohol consumption by the young people is of particular concern, because a clear connection has been established between alcohol consumption (even moderate) among the young people and alcohol abuse in the older age. In Estonia alcohol has been tried by 60% of the young people aged 10-13, and 55% of the young people aged 14-15 had been drunk at least once. 52% of the young people aged 14-15 are regular alcohol drinkers, and 69% of the young people aged 16-18. Most children get intoxicated not by strong spirits, but because they drink light alcoholic beverages (beer, cider, long drink), which are not considered alcoholic beverages by children themselves according to research.

As already mentioned, Estonia belongs to the countries with high risks connected with alcohol consumption such as number of alcohol related psychosis, injuries, suicide and traffic accidents as a result of driving while intoxicated.

Reducing harm caused by alcohol consumption in Estonia

To reduce harm caused by alcohol mostly high taxes, sales (time, age and sales location), and advertising restrictions, raising awareness of the population are applied as well as measures against driving while intoxicated, and counselling people with alcohol problems.

Increasing of the alcohol excise duty return is considered one of the most effective measures in decreasing alcohol consumption. Research shows that consumers react to the fact that alcohol price increases by reduction in consumption, whereas young people are most sensitive to the price increase. Therefore, raising the price of alcohol is particularly effective measure in reducing alcohol consumption among the youth.

Alcohol excise duty return was raised by 6% in Estonia from 2005, and yet the price of alcoholic beverages has increased less than standard of living.

The other effective measure to reduce alcohol consumption is curtailing availability of alcohol. An essential connection has been established between selling time restrictions, frequency of sales facility and alcohol consumption. Availability of alcohol and restrictions connected with it has been important object for discussion in recent years, which resulted in prohibiting of alcohol sales in kiosks and implementing sales restrictions by local governments. However, 1/3 of the alcohol consumers still have the opinion that alcohol is too easily available locally. At this point, this is due to the number of sales locations and time, because alcohol is often available 24 hours a day. Article 42 of the Alcohol Act provides that in its administrative territory, a local government council may establish restrictions concerning the selection, places of sale and forms of sale in retail trade in alcoholic beverages. Several local governments have exercised this right. Most widely used measure is restriction of the night-time retail sale restriction of strong alcoholic beverages (e.g. in Haapsalu, Pärnu, etc).

The third effective and quite inexpensive measure is prohibition of the alcohol advertising. The Ministry of Economic Affairs has made a proposal regarding restricting the alcohol advertising on TV before 22.00.

Estonian Temperance Union (ETU)

Before the World War II Estonian Temperance Union was with its 175 000 members one of the biggest NGOs in Estonia. During the Soviet regime all kind of non-governmental work was banned and the Temperance Union did not exist for 50 years. In 1989 Temperance Union was officially registered but for over 10 years there was no actual work. In 2003 the organisation was renamed – Alcoholfree Estonia (Alkoholivaba Eesti – AVE. In English the official name is still Estonian Temperance Union).

From there ETU has organised local departments in each county. ETU has at the moment a little over 300 members. Main priorities are under aged drinking and influencing alcohol policy.