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# Strengthening Alcohol Policies in the EU: An Advocacy Memo



March 2025

**TO: EU POLICY MAKERS**

**FROM: ESPOL MASTER STUDENTS**

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## **DECLARATION**

This advocacy memo is the result of collaborative work by the authors. All sources of information, data, and supporting evidence have been properly cited in accordance with academic and professional standards.

The authors affirm that the content reflects original analysis and recommendations, and that any use of third-party materials has been appropriately acknowledged.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the following experts for their valuable time, insights, and contributions to the development of this advocacy memo: Wim Van Dalen (EUCAM), Rebecka Öberg (IOGT-NTO), Anamaria Suciu (EUROCARE), Maik Duennbier (Movendi International), and Dag Rekve (WHO, SAFER Initiative).

We also extend our thanks to the following individuals for their thoughtful feedback and constructive suggestions during the review process: Wim Van Dalen (EUCAM), Rebecka Öberg (IOGT-NTO), Anamaria Suciu (EUROCARE), and Anonymous reviewer (EUCAM).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Alcohol advertising in Europe significantly influences youth drinking behaviour, despite existing regulations. Digital marketing, especially through social media, has increased exposure among vulnerable groups, contributing to early alcohol initiation and long-term health risks (WHO, 2024). Research shows that over 30 % of European teenagers report regular alcohol use, while one in four deaths among young adults (aged 20–24) is alcohol-related (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018). Alcohol consumption also hinders progress on 14 out of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), exacerbating health inequalities and economic burdens (IOGT-NTO, 2024). Furthermore, the alcohol industry's lobbying efforts continue to weaken regulatory enforcement (Petticrew et al., 2017). To address these issues, this memo aims to assess existing shortcomings and provide actionable solutions. These include the implementation of mandatory health warning labels (Movendi International, 2017), a ban on social media alcohol advertising (Anderson, 2009), as also reported by WHO, reveals digital alcohol marketing is poorly regulated in Europe, with only 14 countries enforcing online bans (WHO, 2021), the development of an international regulatory framework inspired by tobacco control policies (Berdzuli et al., 2020), and stricter limitations on industry lobbying activities (Petticrew et al., 2017). Urgent policy action is required to protect youth and mitigate the social and economic harms of alcohol advertising.

## BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

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Although alcohol consumption is widely recognized as a major risk factor for numerous health conditions and a cause of over 200 diseases (Rehm et al., 2021), young people remain insufficiently protected from its dangers. According to the WHO (2024) report on trends in adolescent substance use in Europe, Central Asia and Canada, among 15-year-olds surveyed, 57 % reported having tried alcohol at least once, while nearly 37 % had consumed it within the past 30 days. Alarmingly, alcohol is responsible for one in four deaths among individuals aged 20–24 in Europe, primarily due to injuries (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018). Furthermore, adolescent brains are particularly vulnerable to alcohol's harmful effects, impairing decision-making, impulse control, and self-regulation (White & Hingson, 2019). Early alcohol use is also strongly linked to a higher risk of developing alcohol use disorders later in life, highlighting the urgent need for stronger preventive measures.

With eight of the ten countries with the highest per-capita alcohol consumption worldwide located in Europe, European youth is particularly vulnerable to its harmful effects. Alcohol consumption is deeply embedded in European culture, making it difficult to challenge its pervasive influence (The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, 2024). More than a social norm, drinking is part of European cultural traditions, with the alcohol industry capitalizing on this heritage. This normalization is further amplified by modern social media, where influencer culture plays a growing role in promoting alcohol consumption. Unlike traditional ads, influencers create a more personal and aspirational appeal, subtly reinforcing drinking as a desirable lifestyle choice (Hendriks et al., 2020). Given Europe's high alcohol consumption rates, addressing this issue is crucial, as the fusion of cultural traditions and digital marketing only strengthens the normalization of drinking.

Beyond youth health, alcohol production and consumption pose significant barriers to sustainable development, hindering 14 out of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Movendi International, 2020). From a health perspective, alcohol is a major contributor to non-communicable diseases, accidents, and a growing global health burden. Economically, alcohol-related productivity losses and healthcare costs weaken economic growth and poverty reduction efforts (IOGT-NTO, 2024). Socially, alcohol disproportionately harms vulnerable populations, exacerbating inequalities, particularly among youth and marginalized communities (Movendi International, 2020). Environmentally, alcohol production depletes water resources and contributes to pollution, undermining responsible consumption and sustainability. Addressing these challenges is crucial to achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Despite the general decline in youth alcohol consumption, it remains highly risky for young people, contributing to accidents, addiction, and mental health issues, while also fueling broader societal problems such as inequality, economic costs, and public health burdens—yet current policies remain insufficient to effectively address these risks.

# CRITICISM ON CURRENT EU ALCOHOL MARKETING POLICIES

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Alcohol control policies in Europe have been inconsistent, often favoring economic and industry interests over public health. This is mainly due to the intense lobbying exercised by alcohol companies (Kluge et al., 2025). Despite the advancement in the EU's Beating Cancer Plan (EPHA, 2023), the plan faces criticism for lacking clear outcomes and timelines, raising concerns about its future progress and effectiveness (Gallina, 2025). Furthermore, there is an absence of mention in the 2025 European Commission's work plan regarding undelivered prevention policies, which further weakens the EBCP's original ambition and raises questions about the EU's commitment to long-term public health strategies (Gallina, 2025). Significant challenges in alcohol policy still persist, further highlighted by the EU's recent introduction of new measures supporting the wine industry (European Commission, 2025). The main issues include:

- 1. Inadequate labelling requirements and lack of health warnings:** Alcohol labelling refers to the inclusion of nutritional information and ingredients on alcoholic beverages. In the EU, drinks with more than 1.2% alcohol by volume are exempt from mandatory labelling (Food Safety, 2023), limiting consumers' awareness. Clear labelling can increase knowledge and public support for stronger alcohol policies (World Health Organization, 2024), while current efforts are limited to voluntary, industry-led initiatives, such as QR codes (Kluge et al., 2025). The need for stricter labelling rules has been highlighted as a strong starting point for introducing regulation within the industry.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ms Suci, Policy and Advocacy Manager at Eurocare, on 12 February 2025.

Alongside this, health warnings on alcohol products play a key role in informing the public about the risks associated with alcohol consumption, including cancer, addiction, and injury (World Health Organization, 2024). Ireland has taken a major step in this direction. In May 2023, it adopted legislation requiring all alcohol products to include health warnings starting in 2026. This initiative marks a clear move toward prioritizing public health over industry interests (Slattery, 2024).

**2. Weak taxation and pricing policies:** Affordability is still a huge problem in Europe. Even if there have been some tax increases, alcohol has become more affordable in many countries because tax adjustments fail to match inflation and rising incomes. Only 30 % of European countries link alcohol taxation to inflation. In particular, 22 European countries do not impose an excise tax on wine, especially in wine-producing countries, where taxes are kept low to support the domestic wine industry. For instance, between 2007 and 2012, the EU provided subsidies of €0.15 per liter of wine produced, boosting the financial power of the industries (Neufeld et al., 2022). Lithuania managed to reduce affordability by combining tax hikes with minimum pricing policies, although these initiatives are rare elsewhere (Berdzuri et al., 2020).

**3. High alcohol availability:** Alcohol is still widely accessible across Europe, with few significant national restrictions. There have been small-scale efforts, like local bans in Switzerland, but their impact is insignificant. On top of this, online sales and pandemic-driven policies, such as classifying alcohol as an essential good, have increased availability in many countries (Berdzuri et al., 2020). In Finland, for example, a 2018 reform that expanded alcohol sales in supermarkets led to a rise in alcohol-related deaths and liver diseases. Despite only a modest increase in overall consumption, heavy drinkers were disproportionately affected, underlining the risks associated with high availability (News, 2022).

**4. Lack of progress in marketing and advertising restrictions:** Despite evidence connecting alcohol marketing to increased consumption, particularly among the youth, regulatory efforts are delayed. Alcohol companies adapt quickly to digital marketing trends, while governments have a hard time imposing control. International trade agreements also restrict national regulations on advertising (Berdzuri et al., 2020) because they prioritize market access, which leads to increased alcohol consumption and related harms (Zeigler, 2009). France is often cited as an example of strict alcohol marketing regulation, thanks to the Evin Law. However, recent data show that its effectiveness is limited. In fact, according to Santé Publique, young people are still heavily exposed to alcohol advertising. This includes radio, print, and online platforms. For instance, youth aged 13–17 were exposed to an average of 46 alcohol ads per year on the radio alone in 2020, up from 41 in 2018. This equates to roughly one ad every three days via radio and press, representing one-third of all advertising investments. This is a reflection of how even strong regulatory frameworks can be undermined without proper enforcement of modern media channels (Nguyen- Thanh, 2025).

**5. Policy fragmentation and economic bias in the EU:** Alcohol policy in the EU is fragmented across multiple working groups, leading to inconsistencies. While alcohol is recognized as a public health issue, it is also treated as an economic product to promote. The EU gives priority to trade and competition over health, often forgetting the long-term effects of alcohol consumption on society (EPHA, 2023). This is also reflected in the disparity observed in meetings with the Commission, where, as of 2022, the alcohol industry participated in 270 meetings over the past six years, while NGOs participated in only 14. As a result, 95% of meetings focused on economic interests, while only 5% addressed public health concerns (Movendi International, 2022).



The common issue underlying these policy challenges can be traced back to the policymakers themselves. This problem became particularly evident in the interview conducted with Rebecka Öberg, European Policy Officer at IOGT – NTO. She asserted that *“Many policymakers are unaware of the extent of the problem, requiring fundamental education on alcohol marketing’s impact.”* What it implies is that awareness should not only be spread among those who consume alcohol but also among those who manage and regulate its consumption. Furthermore, policymakers should also have more awareness of the lobbying activities of the industry.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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## 1. Alcohol Health Labelling

A comprehensive health warning scheme for alcohol products should be introduced at the EU level, similar to Ireland's groundbreaking measure set for 2026. Ireland's decision to require warnings stating, *"There is a direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers,"* demonstrates a strong commitment to public health and consumer rights (Slattery, 2024). This makes Ireland the first EU member state to take such action, aiming to raise public awareness about the health risks of alcohol by providing clear, evidence-based information. While the move has been praised by the public health community, it has also triggered strong resistance from the alcohol industry, which is actively working to prevent the disclosure of the harms associated with its products (Juslin & Österman, 2023). As for the case of tobacco, changes in health warnings have been linked to increased effectiveness in tobacco control efforts (Hammond et al., 2007). Besides health text labeling, the graphic and pictorial warning label is more effective in influencing people's perception of smoking risks (Cantrell et al., 2013). Jung (2016) found that graphic warning labels (GWLs) play a significant preventive role among adolescents by discouraging smoking initiation, promoting smoking cessation, reducing tobacco consumption, and lowering overall smoking rates. Implementing strong pictorial warnings on tobacco packaging was a powerful policy tool to combat smoking-related harm, especially in vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected by tobacco use. Taking the case of tobacco as the model, this policy ensures that individuals can make informed choices about alcohol consumption. In addition, one potential solution for health warnings is the creation of an EU library of warnings, which Member States could access. A similar example already exists, provided by Eurocare, whose library has been developed by experts using the relevant methodology. Given that Member States are progressing at varying rates due to local political factors, the EU should establish the library.

It would ensure a consistent implementation of health warnings across all Member States in line with scientific evidence (Eurocare, 2023). Alcohol-related harm is a major public health concern across Europe, contributing to cancer, liver disease, and other serious conditions. Implementing a standardized EU-wide regulation would provide consistent and clear health information to all citizens, reducing misinformation and promoting healthier choices.

## **2. Social Media Advertising Ban (Lithuania and Norway)**

The EU should consider establishing a comprehensive regulation of social media advertising ban on alcohol, following the steps of Lithuania, and Norway which implement a comprehensive ban on alcohol advertising. These countries have recognised the dangers of alcohol marketing, particularly its influence on underage drinking and excessive consumption. Research highlights that alcohol advertising increases youth exposure, normalizing drinking behaviors and contributing to public health concerns such as addiction and alcohol related diseases (Hessari, et al., 2019). France also pioneered alcohol regulation with the Évin Law, which aims to protect youth by banning alcohol advertising on TV and youth-focused media and restricting content that links alcohol to positive imagery like parties or glamour (Karine, Raphael, Viet, & Nathan, 2022). The updated WHO list of NCD (Noncommunicable Diseases) “Best Buys” includes key alcohol control measures such as increasing excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, enacting and enforcing comprehensive bans or restrictions on alcohol advertising across various media, and limiting the physical availability of alcohol by reducing retail hours of sale (WHO, 2023). These measures are recognized as highly cost-effective ways to reduce alcohol-related harm and improve public health outcomes. A comprehensive EU-wide ban would help curb these risks by reducing the influence of alcohol brands on vulnerable populations. An expert from EUCAM stated that *“implementing a social media advertising ban is a feasible objective.*

*However, achieving this goal necessitates a phased approach, beginning with national-level policy initiatives before expanding to EU-wide advocacy efforts”.*<sup>2</sup>

The realistic approach is to start with supporting the member states who haven't started as well as those who have already started to implement stricter regulation on alcohol advertising. While both levels are important, the national level is currently more politically and practically difficult to influence. This makes European-level action an appealing and potentially more effective route for initiating meaningful change, especially when national governments are gridlocked or influenced by competing interests. Given the vast reach of social media and its targeted advertising capabilities, strict regulations are necessary to prevent exposure among minors. By enforcing an alcohol advertising ban, the EU would prioritize public health and align with global efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm by WHO.

### **3. International Binding Framework for Alcohol Policy (Similar to Tobacco Regulations)**

The establishment of a binding international framework for alcohol policy, similar to the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), is a strategic initiative to reduce alcohol consumption and raise awareness among young people in the EU. The WHO FCTC, adopted in 2003, has significantly reduced tobacco consumption through comprehensive measures such as advertising bans, taxation, and restrictions on smoking in public places. A similar legally binding agreement for alcohol could harmonise policies across EU Member States, ensuring a consistent approach to reducing alcohol-related harm among young people. Such a framework would give national governments instruments for introducing more effective policy measures.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mr Van Dalen, President of EUCAM, on 9 March 2025

EU members should plead for such a framework and work together with public health organisations, civil society, and like-minded countries all over the world to attain this goal. The European Alcohol Action Framework 2022-2025, developed in consultation with Member States and civil society organisations, serves as a fundamental step towards this goal. By aligning national policies with international standards, the EU can create an environment that discourages underage drinking and promotes healthier behaviours among young people.

#### **4. Restrict Alcohol Industry Involvement in Politics**

Restricting the alcohol industry's involvement in national and international policies, similar to the measures applied to the tobacco industry, is essential to protect public health and ensure unbiased policy-making in the European Union (EU). The alcohol industry often uses tactics similar to those historically used by tobacco companies to influence policy decisions, including lobbying, partnering with government agencies, and engaging in corporate social responsibility activities that can influence public perception and policy outcomes.

A comprehensive study of 24 countries found significant penetration of the alcohol industry into the political sphere, with many cases of government officials holding industry positions and numerous partnerships between governments and the alcohol sector (Leung et al., 2024).

To counter this influence, the EU can draw lessons from the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which includes Article 5.3, explicitly designed to protect public health policy from tobacco industry interference. Implementing similar measures for the alcohol industry would include:

1. **Conflict of interest policies:** Based on the FCTC's viewpoint, the industry's interest is fundamentally opposed to that of public health and, thus, should not have a seat at the policy-making table.

Drawing from this, the EU could establish strict guidelines to prevent individuals with ties to the alcohol industry from holding positions that could influence public health policy. This would prohibit the alcohol industry from participating in the development of public health policies, except in strictly regulated, transparent settings (e.g., public consultations where their input is recorded but not privileged).

**2. Avoid Partnerships and Non-Binding Agreements:** Banning or restricting alcohol industry contributions to political campaigns and parties to reduce undue influence. Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs), co-regulatory arrangements, voluntary partnerships, and other forms of collaborations with the alcohol industry should be avoided by EU institutions and member states. Under the pretense of cooperation, these create opportunities for the industry to influence policy, often undermining public health goals.

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