

Ten proposals for a more sober EU

IOGT NTO's goal is an EU that contributes to and empowers Member States to pursue evidence-based alcohol policy as well as creates opportunities for research, exchange and cooperation.

Here are ten concrete proposals to get us there.

1. Stop subsidising wine production and alcohol marketing through the agricultural budget

Every year, the EU spends more than 200 million euros to support alcohol production and alcohol marketing through specific wine subsidies in the agricultural budget. In the short term, this money should go to helping wine farmers convert to non-alcoholic farming. In the long term, the subsidies should be completely abolished.

2. Stop alcohol tax evasion. Allow Sweden to collect Swedish tax on alcohol transported by private individuals from other EU countries

Within the EU, alcohol excise duty is paid in the country where the alcohol is consumed and the costs of alcohol occur, except when private individuals themselves transport it across an internal EU-border. The exception leads to increased alcohol consumption, increased smuggling and negative alcohol excise duty competition between countries. This increases alcohol-related harm. Countries where this causes problems (e.g. Sweden, Denmark, Finland & Estonia) should be able to choose not to apply the exception.

3. Introduce a requirement for alcoholic beverages to be labelled with a message on the negative health effects of alcohol as well as caloric value and ingredients

The EU today requires that all foods be labelled with nutritional content and ingredients. Alcoholic beverages are given a special exception in labelling legislation. This exception should be removed and additional labelling required to raise awareness about alcohol as a health-harmful product. For example, an Irish-model text that informs about the link between alcohol and lethal cancers.

4. Counteract the alcohol industry's influence over the EU institutions through stricter rules for lobbying from economic vested interests

The economic interest of the alcohol industry is in direct conflict with the public interest of reduced alcohol consumption. At the same time, the alcohol industry spends more than SEK 80 million annually on lobbying in Brussels. The Global Framework Convention for Tobacco Control requires that the tobacco industry be excluded from influence over tobacco policy. The EU should work towards the adoption of a similar convention for alcohol. The EU should also set a good example by limiting the access and influence of the alcohol industry over public health policy. MEPs can set a good example by adopting guidelines for themselves, their delegation and their political group to reduce the influence of the alcohol industry.

5. Remove the loopholes for broadcasters broadcasting alcohol advertising from other EU countries

Alcohol advertising increases alcohol consumption, especially among young people. The EU currently has minimum rules for TV-advertising for alcohol within the EU. These rules are very weak and most Member States have adopted stronger legislation nationally. The EU minimum rules should be updated and strengthened. At the same time, EU legislation should not make it possible to circumvent national alcohol advertising bans.

6. Allow the taxation of wine by alcohol content and raise the minimum levels of alcohol excise duty permitted in the EU

Unlike other alcoholic beverages, EU countries can only tax wine by volume, not by alcohol content. Despite the fact that it is the alcohol, not the amount of grape juice, that is harmful. The EU should recognise alcohol tax as a health tool by allowing member states to tax all alcoholic beverages progressively based on alcohol content. In addition, the EU's minimum excise duties on alcoholic beverages are very low. For wine, there is not even a minimum level required. The minimum taxes should therefore be raised sharply.

7. Protect Member States' public alcohol monopolies from profit-driven distance sales from other EU countries

EU Member States with public alcohol monopolies may today set specific rules for cross-border trade in alcohol. At the same time, the European Commission has initiated a process to make it easier to sell alcohol over the internet. It is important that health and enforcement of public health legislation is given the highest priority in that process and that Member States' public alcohol monopolies are not undermined by private distance sales.

8. Stop the special status of alcohol in trade agreements. Today, the alcohol industry benefits at the expense of other sectors

Trade policy is decided at EU level. The alcohol industry has used trade agreements to try to stop public health legislation in countries both inside and outside the EU. The Commission also expends negotiating capital and human resources to forward the interests of the alcohol industry. This means less spent on other, less harmful, sectors. For example, alcohol is identified as an offensive interest in trade negotiations and staff hours are spent on specific wine and spirits annexes. As a first step, the alcohol sector should be de-prioritised and in the long run be completely excluded from EU trade agreements.

9. Renew the alcohol strategy. Support research, exchange and cooperation between civil society, international organisations, authorities and ministries

The EU previously had a strategy for guiding its work and supporting Member States in reducing alcohol-related harm. The strategy ran out in 2012 without being renewed, despite the demands of the Member States, the European Parliament and the EU Committee of the Regions. As part of the renewal of the alcohol strategy, money should be reserved at EU-level for international work with alcohol as barrier to development, as well as for alcohol research and support for civil society organisations that work with the alcohol question at EU level.

10. Adopt an alcohol directive that prioritises public health. Ambitious alcohol policies should not be hampered by the internal market

Today, alcohol policy is affected by a variety of EU directives. Often, alcohol is included as a small part in a broader legal text. This means that experts in public health and alcohol prevention are often not involved enough when legislation is developed. The EU should gather its rules on alcohol in an alcohol directive, just as it has already done for tobacco. The directive should clarify that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity on the internal market.