

WRITTEN QUESTION P-0810/03
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to the Commission

Subject: Averting alcohol-related harm in Finland and the Union

Finland, Sweden, and Denmark will have to end their restrictions on alcohol imports at the beginning of 2004. Once Estonia has been admitted to the EU on 1 May 2004, Finland will be faced with a very difficult situation from the public health point of view. Alcoholic drinks are significantly cheaper in Estonia than in Finland, the price difference being due mainly to the different tax rates. The scale of alcohol-related harm varies in proportion to changes in total alcohol consumption. Studies indicate that, once import restrictions have been lifted, total consumption in Finland will rise by as much as 15%, resulting in, among other things, an increase in alcohol-related deaths, by 450 cases a year, and in an upsurge, also linked to alcohol, in the demand for social and health services, amounting to over 500 000 additional visits a year.

In its Conclusions of 5 June 2001 on a Community strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm¹ the Council focused on drinking by young people as an area of particular concern. After the import restrictions have been lifted, alcohol prices in Finland will fall, and consumption will increase accordingly, first and foremost in low income groups, and that includes young people. Article 152 of the EC Treaty stipulates that all Community policies and activities must be defined and implemented in such a way as to ensure a high level of human health protection. The Council, in its Conclusions of 5 June 2001, called on the Commission to put forward proposals for a comprehensive Community strategy aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm and has identified excise duties as one means of pursuing such a strategy.

Contrary to what was stipulated in the text, Directive 92/84/EEC² on minimum excise duty rates was not reviewed by the end of 1994. The Union could do much to prevent the harm which alcohol does to public health by imposing standard excise duties on alcoholic beverages above the present rates. Should tax harmonisation on the basis of public health considerations fail to happen, Finland will have no possibility of protecting itself from the worsening adverse consequences of alcohol drinking unless it is allowed to continue to restrict alcohol imports.

1. Will the Commission embark on an initiative with a view to raising the minimum assessment base for excise duty on alcoholic beverages, taking into account the effects of alcohol consumption on public health?
2. How would the Commission view a possible Finnish request to continue the restrictions on alcohol imports?

¹ OJ C 175, 20.6.2001, p. 1.

² OJ L 316, 31.10.1992, p. 29.