An influential coalition of public health NGOs have dramatically quit the EU's flagship stakeholder platform on alcohol in protest over what they see as a lack of European commission initiatives to tackle alcohol related harm.

The group of NGOs cite recent comments made by EU health chief Vytenis Andriukaitis that he would not be taking any action to replace the EU's now defunct EU alcohol strategy, as going directly "against demands from [EU] member states and the European parliament for a new comprehensive strategy.".

Following harsh criticism over the EU's inaction from both national health ministers and MEPs, the parliament in April called on Andriukaitis to come up with plans to replace the EU alcohol strategy which expired in 2012.
Headed up by the European alcohol policy alliance (Eurocare) and European public health alliance (EPHA), the group of 20 NGOs accuse Andriukaitis of ignoring the calls from MEPs and EU governments and, in a short open letter tendering their resignation, warn of their "deep concerns" over what they consider “the neglect of public health and the prioritisation of alcohol industry interests.

The letter goes on to say, "Concerns have been raised about the lack of evidence to indicate that voluntary commitments from the alcohol industry lead to reductions in alcohol harm. We have also raised objections, including to yourself... about the lack of formal structure available to public health bodies to discuss evidence for effective alcohol policy in the absence of vested interest groups."

The NGOs are also concerned over possible commission plans to water down EU measures on tackling alcohol problems by placing the issue within a more generalised non-communicable diseases health framework.

Eurocare secretary general Mariann Skar, said, “We deeply regret the commission’s decision not to establish a new EU alcohol strategy. The EU is the heaviest drinking region in the world and with 120,000 premature deaths related to alcohol each year; we absolutely must have a comprehensive strategy to tackle alcohol harm.”

Nina Renshaw, EPHA's secretary general said, “The commission has finally admitted what the health community has long suspected - that they have abandoned alcohol policy altogether.”

Renshaw also told this website that, "In return for some self-defined voluntary actions under the forum, the drinks lobby has fended off much needed legislative action and our health will continue to suffer. The promises that the industry commitments in the forum would deliver better health have proved empty."

The NGO walk out from the forum triggered a swift response from industry group spiritsEurope, with director general Paul Skehan saying in a press release that the association regretted their withdrawal.

“Dialogue with those who have different views is never easy; but we think that dialogue is worth continuing, particularly if, as in the case of the forum, it is based on real actions on the ground”, said Skehan.

“While we fully agree with the public health groups that alcohol related harms must be addressed in a serious, comprehensive manner at EU and national levels, we do not share the NGOs’ opinion that the idea of reducing those harms as part of a wider plan addressing non-communicable diseases is necessarily a bad thing”.

"Without any details yet published by Commissioner Andriukaitis, it seems very premature to already dismiss such a strategy. We have constantly called for a more holistic approach to addressing alcohol harm".
About the author

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