

EU alcohol strategy: No one size fits all approach

Written by Alberto Cirio on 12 September 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

Alberto Cirio looks back at the issues and decisions that led to Parliament's alcohol strategy resolution.



Alberto Cirio | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Europe's approach to alcohol, both at EU level and in the member states, is inconsistent and illogical, to say the least.

Figures are misread and an ideological animosity often takes precedence over proper analysis, leading to proposed solutions that are often biased. The first problem occurs when we try to include every alcoholic product within a single definition.

Consumption experiences have completely different features: wine consumption, for example is usually associated with meals while whisky is drunk after dinner and gin is mostly used for cocktails.

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These three contexts generate different absorption patterns and consequently different health effects. Attempting to provide a single policy approach is, in the best case, naïve.

Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, the real issue is not alcohol in itself but its abuse. Talking about 'alcohol-related-harm' makes no real sense (the European Parliament's resolution recognised the use of 'alcohol-abuse-related-harm').

According to European Commission figures Italy, the EU Country where wine is most consumed, is where people report drinking alcohol most frequently and admit abusing most rarely, while the Finns, with similar per capita consumption levels, report the opposite behaviour. Therefore, attempting to deliver a single EU policy response is again simply naïve.

The different consumption patterns across European countries are indeed worthy of tailored prevention campaigns and policy responses.

While looking for common trends, Europe emerges with a three main traits: in Mediterranean countries mostly wine is consumed but rarely in excess, central European Countries are more beer-inclined, while northern states, where despite high levies, binge-drinking is commonly observed and is in fact on the increase.

Curiously, binge-drinking does not seem to easily translate into most southern European languages.

For these reasons, Parliament's resolution should perhaps have better differentiated among alcohol products, reduced the scope for EU intervention and left the rest to member states, while also reminding us that alcohol does not necessarily harm its consumers.

In fact, the bitterest battle was the one on labelling, where three issues arose. The first regards pregnant women: though there is no other period in the life of a woman where medical control is so frequent, and all doctors advise abstaining from consuming alcoholic products, some think a pictogram would make the difference on the decision to drink.

The second regards calorie content: while the need for transparency is important, and showing the nutritional content of food is a step forward in empowering consumers, a drink is a pleasure and not a nutritional component.

Furthermore, teenagers with nutrition issues might think of trading a bottle of wine with a food that is equivalent in calories, and this outcome would not be desirable at all.

Last but not least, illustrating a diseased liver on a bottle, as some suggest, is in my opinion a disgusting way of offending the millennia of culture, thousands of SMEs who make a respectable product and all the people who work for them.

Unfortunately, on some of these issues the co-sponsors did not communicate well and a reasonable compromise wasn't found.

Therefore, against the European Parliament's tradition, there was a muscular confrontation on the number of votes instead of a frank and open debate on the issues, and in this case ideology played a decisive role. The resulting text was thus not ideal but it was the position of the Parliament.

Within this whole context, the behaviour of the European Commission has frankly, been disappointing.

The representatives of Europe's citizens worked for months to prepare the resolution's text, taking on board experts and the stakeholder advice, discussing and amending in a bid to deliver a compromise text and they have just disregarded it.

Actually, I do not think the Commission's old EU alcohol strategy was enough to prevent deaths due to alcohol abuse for the reasons I stated earlier. Nonetheless, it provided stakeholders with a forum where issues could be discussed and solutions could be found.

The Commission, in deciding not to act, has considered such a forum unworthy (and this is a legitimate choice) however they have not found it necessary to inform Parliament and this is serious interinstitutional injustice.

However, let's look on the bright side. Now EU member states can be more effective in applying their own tailor made policies within their territory, and this approach is much more likely to deliver pay back.

Time will prove who is right, as long as we objectively observe the results. A glass of good wine is a healthy companion to have while waiting.

About the author

Alberto Cirio (IT) was the EPP group rapporteur on Parliament's resolution on the alcohol strategy

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