

Stockholm, September 19, 2017

To Finland Parliament members

### ***Concerning planned alcohol policy changes in Finland***

As a network of Nordic and Baltic alcohol policy NGO-s, we are highly concerned because of Finland's alcohol policy plans and especially increasing the availability of alcohol. Finland is currently having much stronger position compared to most EU states. With other Nordic countries, you have been leaders in implementing evidence based alcohol policies with exceptions like reduction in alcohol taxes in 2003 which was later considered a mistake. We urge you to keep your decisions on the safe side of public health and listen to your own alcohol and public health experts who have warned against these changes.

#### ***Alcohol - a major risk factor***

As you well know, alcohol is the third leading cause of death and disability in the world. And half of the global population is not drinking at all. Public health community is focusing more on the noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) that are collectively responsible for almost 70% of all deaths worldwide. The rise of NCDs has been driven by primarily four major risk factors: tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol and unhealthy diets.

These are avoidable riskfactors and it should be the sole commitment of every state and government to do their utmost best to decrease these unnecessary harms.

#### ***Should we compare Finland with Italy?***

Alcohol policy in Finland is often compared with much more liberal Italy where consumption rates are more moderate and lower. While reduction of alcohol consumption in recent decades in Italy is unarguable fact, we do [argue](#) that this change has taken place because of unintended consequences such as globalisation that changed the pace of typical Italian lifestyle and removed the traditional wine drinking from lunch time habits. Changes like that leave a country without a safety net for possible next developments. Public health needs structure and perseverance.

Recent studies show that drinking in Italy is on the rise. A [report](#) given by Italy's health ministry to parliament in the beginning of April showed particularly sharp increase in drinking in between meal times and binge-drinkers.

Another [study](#) from April in 11 European countries shows the proportion of women in Europe who drink alcohol when they know they are pregnant. Those who drank most frequently (more than one to two units per week) were in Italy (7.8 % of the women said they drank during pregnancy). Finland belongs to the group of nations that drank the least (lead by Norway and Sweden).

These are troubling signs for Italy and it would be a grave mistake to go against WHO recommendations and commitments hoping to achieve Italy-like levels.

#### ***Important changes in Estonia***

While it may be understandable that much weaker alcohol policy in Estonia (low prices and almost limitless availability) and an extent of cross-border trade has caused problems for Finland and reduced the effectiveness of the otherwise proven alcohol policy measures, the timing of these proposed changes cannot come at a more unexpected moment. As Finland is getting ready to move

toward liberalization, Estonia is about to adopt the strongest alcohol policy bill in more than two decades. Beer taxes will be raised by 160% by 2020, alcohol availability will be restricted by introducing separate departments into major food stores with non-transparent walls. Outdoor alcohol advertising will be banned and alcohol ads (in TV, print-media and internet) will be limited to showing only the product that may be presented on single color background, and without sound and visual design elements.

These changes in Estonia could already in short time be potentially influential also for Finnish situation as alcohol across the sea will be less attractive and Finland will lose a tap of almost free alcohol so close to its borders.

Dear members of Parliament, the effective alcohol policy measures are known. When it comes to scientific evidence and opinions of experts, there is no doubt that reducing alcohol's physical availability is effective in reducing alcohol related harm. The choice you are making is simple: public health or profits of economic operators.

Yours sincerely,

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president, NordAN

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Executive Director, NordAN

*NORDAN was established in September 2000 as a network of non governmental, voluntary organizations who all worked to reduce the consumption of alcohol and other drugs and who supported a restrictive alcohol and drug policy and who did not receive contributions from the commercial alcohol industry. Acting on these principles NordAN today have grown to have 90 non-governmental, voluntary member organisations in all the eight Nordic and Baltic countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden), all active in the alcohol and drug field.*