

EG on Alcohol and Substance Abuse (ASA EG)
Twenty-first working Meeting
Online □
October 15, 2020

Title	Minutes of the ^{21st} working Meeting of the ASA EG
Submitted by	ITA in Coordination with the Chair
Summary / Note	This document outlines the main discussion points and decisions made during the 21st working Meeting of the ASA EG

1. Opening of the Meeting and welcome

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic the ASA EG has organized an online meeting. **Mr Bernt Bull (Chairman, Norway)** has welcomed the meeting participants.

2. Adoption of the Agenda

Mr Bernt Bull (Chairman, Norway) presented the draft meeting agenda. The Meeting adopted the Provisional Agenda (submitted as Document ASA 21/2/1).

3. Update around NDPHS issues (report from the Chairs and ITAs meeting, NDPHS strategy development)

Mr Bernt Bull (Chairman, Norway) briefly informed the ASA EG members about the outcome of the Expert Group Chairs and ITAs meeting, that took place online on October 14th. The Meeting aimed to discuss the development of the new strategy for the NDPHS. The meeting decided that the NDPHS Secretariat would propose to the CSR to prolong the existing NDPHS Strategy, and would request the EGs to develop the Action plan for 2021. During the meeting, the ITA of the ASA EG noted that the actions for 2021 were mostly related to the Project submitted to the EU, and not the current strategy. This needed to be taken into account while developing and presenting the action plan for the adoption for the CSR. The NDPHS Secretariat agreed on this comment and proposed that the Action Plan would not be formally prolonged as such, meaning that the Annual Work Plan template would need to be modified because now it refers to the Action Plan. NDPHS Secretariat suggested that the annual work plan will refer to the Objectives of the Strategy and action will be according to the proposal submitted to the EU. The issues on how the COVID 19 may impact the new strategy and if this will have implication for the priorities listed in the strategy. It was decided that the NDPHS will stick to priorities already indicated by the EG and in the meantime can look for the possibilities of revision of some activities in the light of the impact of the pandemic to the strategy topics. It was also decided that the new strategy will be adopted in October 2021. The Secretariat has also informed that there were positive signals from the Eu, concerning the proposal submitted by the NDPHS, meaning that EGs will have an opportunity to start their projects, included into the request, in 2021.

4. Country reports on recent developments in the field of Alcohol and Substance abuse policy developments.

Ms Jaana Markkula (Finland) presented recent developments in Finland. She noted that during the Covid-19 pandemic, alcohol consumption has been on the decline in Finland: between April and June 2020 the total alcohol consumption was 10 % lower than the year before. The main reasons behind the fall were: restrictions on travelling, which has decreased alcohol imports from abroad, and the closing of on-premise establishments for two months in April and May. The majority of Finns seem not to have changed their consumption habits during the pandemic. Among those who have been affected the most are people under 35 years and with the negative impact of the COVID on their economic situation. The new strategy on Substance abuse and addiction is under the preparation, and the release is planned to happen at the beginning of 2021

No reduction observed in drug use or supply was observed during the COVID 19 period this year. In the meantime, authorities quickly invented new ways of implementing services in municipalities and organizations: e.g. substitution treatment drugs have also been delivered home, outreach work has been strengthened, food packages have been distributed, and digital services and virtual care programs have been introduced. Cooperation between NGOs and municipalities has intensified.

The full presentation (in English) is available on the webpage of the Meeting in the post-meeting documentation https://www.ndphs.org/?mtgs_asa_21_on-line

Ms.Triinu Taht (Estonia) briefly presented the situation in Estonia. Estonia in 2019 has decided to reduce the Alcohol excise tax by 25%, due to the case with the big cross-border shopping (almost 1/3 of the alcohol was brought from Latvia and other countries). Somehow this leads to the problem when excise tax for beer and spirits are a little bit closer, and it also has an impact on the price of beer. The reduction of the excise tax has also lead to a decrease in cross-border shopping, from 34% to 26%. The morbidity and mortality data from the second half of 2019 shows that the decline leads to the increased consumption and as a result, increased morbidity and mortality rates.

It was also measured how the partial display ban in alcohol shops has worked, and first data shows that it had an impact on the impulse purchases. The regulation is enforced by the consumer protection agency and local government authorities.

There was a ban on flavors on e-cigarette liquids, which was under fire for a long time. The parliament even blocked the transposition of EU directive on track and trace measures, with the condition to accept it only if e-liquids will be untaxed and all flavors and heated tobacco allowed. The Government found the compromise in allowing the menthol flavor for the liquids. The herbal smoking products with different tastes together with nicotine pouch cigars are appearing on the market. There is more scientific evidence that flavors are more used to attract the younger generation to start the smoke, it can be seen as a recruiting the youth for smoking, and therefore it requests a quick reaction from the health field.

Mr.Bernt Bull (Norway) asked how the price of alcohol products has changed after the reduction of excise tax.

Ms.Triinu Taht (Estonia) responded that price has felt, especially for some iconic products, including the cheapest vodka. That may lead to an increase in the consumption of that product.

Ms.Sanita Ladzina (Latvia) presented the current situation in Latvia. This year, after two years of discussions, the cabinet of ministers has adopted a national action plan on the consumption of alcohol beverages and limitation of alcoholism, for the year of 2020-2022. The list includes five directions, among them reducing the demand for alcohol beverages, limitation and control of supply alcohol beverages, restriction on alcohol marketing and pricing policy, monitoring and research, therapy and rehabilitation. In March, the Government decided to allow, due to the COVID 19 situation, the online

sale of alcohol beverages, which was banned previously. As for the Tobacco, the display ban of tobacco products came into force on the 1st of October. In addition to that, the amendments to the Tobacco law are discussed aiming to define the NT substitute products (nicotine pouches), to prohibit their sale in Latvia. However, the Parliament has decided that because these products are not banned in other countries, Latvia will also not deny them but will try to put the regulations while allowing their placement in the market.

Ms.Laura Isjaeva (Latvia) presented the results of the research on how alcohol consumption has changed during the COVID 19 period. According to that research during the first five months of COVID 19 period, the number of road accidents caused by the drivers under the alcohol influence, the number of domestic violence due to the alcohol has increased. However, more info and time is needed to analyze how the COVID 19 pandemic influenced that alcohol consumption in Latvia. Latvia has also joined the DEEP SEAS project.

Ms.Triinu Taht (Estonia) mentioned that drink driving has also increased in Estonia, and even children's and women's shelters are too full, and this hidden problem needs to be more analyzed.

Ms Jelena Talackiene (Lithuania) presented the current developments in Lithuania. Further trend in reduction of legal alcohol consumption is being seen in Lithuania. Evaluation of the impact of alcohol control policies on morbidity and mortality in Lithuania and other Baltic states" project has started recently. Funded by the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, a nearly USD 2 million project brings together Baltic and Canadian researchers working in close collaboration with WHO/Europe country offices. The five-year project will not only help gather valuable data but also identify the best practices that can lower alcohol-related harm across Northern Europe and beyond.

Due to the COVID 19 situation, Government abolished most of the Alcohol bans introduced at the beginning of the year in summer.

In the field of other substances, a draft amendment on Fibre Hemp Law (prepared by Members of Parliament and currently being notified to the EC), detailed opinions of the EC, IT received end of standstill prolonged +3 months. The objective of the draft law is to provide the possibility to process all parts of fibre hemp by permitting market placement of not only hemp fibre, seeds and seed products, but also other products (for example, food, feeds, cosmetics etc.)

The survey commissioned by the Drugs, tobacco and alcohol control department (2020), among persons aged 18-74 (n = 1007) showed that smoking habits are changing in society. The number of users of traditional tobacco products is decreasing, and the number of users of e-cigarettes and novel smokeless tobacco products is increasing. The amendments of Tobacco Control Law will come into the force from January 1st, 2021. Among the new regulations introduced the smoke will be prohibited on private balconies if any of the residents of the multiapartment house has justified objections against (followed good Latvian experience), in common residential outdoor premises, in outdoor cafes except special areas set for smoking, at public transport stops and children playground. Smoking bans cover use of traditional and novel smokeless heating tobacco products and use of e-cigarettes.

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Ms.Triinu Taht (Estonia) noted that the decision of Lithuania to ban smoking on the balcony had echoed strongly in Estonia, and there are now suggestions to follow that path. She also asked if Lithuania has set any limits on how strong the nicotine pouch can be

Ms Jelena Talackiene (Lithuania) answered that to set the limit, the working group was established for that purposes, and they are looking now in the different contents and their toxic limits and try to develop that limits. The Ministry of Economy leads the working group. In the beginning, the Ministry

of Health was arguing to ban that product as it was done in Latvia, but because of the lobby and pressure, the government still has not made.

Ms.Triinu Taht (Estonia) noted that nicotine pouch is available also on the Estonian market; they are taxed, but their Tobacco content is not regulated. Estonia is working on this issue and tries to define the limit as soon as possible, as there is a plan to build a factory in Estonia, producing the pads with 50mg nicotine per pad.

Ms.Sanita Ladzina (Latvia) mentioned that Latvia has now developed a new amendment law project aiming to regulate the nicotine pouch products in the same way as electronic cigarettes, and the maximum amount of nicotine in one unit (contains 20 pouches) will be 20mg of nicotine. Meaning that the maximum strength allowed for one pouch will be 1 mg nicotine. Latvia will also set the limit of how many pouches will be in one unit – not more than 20. There will also be special health warnings on the products and taxes (like Estonia) will also be set for these products.

Mr.Bernt Bull (Norway) proposed to organize a separate meeting to discuss these issues related to the new Tobacco products in more details.

Mr.Janusz Sieroslowski (Poland) briefly presented the current developments in Poland. A most important story was related to the process of integration of the management structures related to the Alcohol and Drug problems. Up to now, there were two institutions, National Institute for Drug Prevention and PARPA agency (dealing with the Alcohol issues), which are going to merge now. They are waiting now for a Parliamentary decision on that merge. The taxation of nicotine-containing smoke-free products is introduced since the beginning of October.

Ms Eleonor Säfsten (Sweden) presented the development in Sweden. The project aiming to triangulate the different sources to see the impact of COVID 19 on Alcohol and Tobacco consumption is implemented, and the results will be available later this year so that they can be presented in Spring 2021. The self-reported consumption in March and April 2020 was at the same level as the corresponding level period of 2019. It could be changed later, but this info is not available yet. New temporary legislation - infection control measures at restaurants was introduced from 1 July 2020, demanding restaurants to be responsible for controlling the distance between the costumers.

The Government launched an action plan for the prevention of narcotics and related crime (August 2019). The Government has announced a greater focus on drugs in the future ANDT-strategy period and, at the Government's request, the Public Health Agency of Sweden has in 2020 submitted a report that included several proposals on how to prevent the use of narcotics and the social and medical consequences of drug use.

In the Tobacco field, they are no longer permitted to sell menthol-flavoured cigarettes, from May 20th, 2020. Other flavoured tobacco products have been banned since 20 May 2017, but menthol cigarettes have been covered by an exception that disappeared on 20 May this year.

In June 2020 the Government decided to restrict gambling at online casinos and vending machines as a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic. The restrictions came into force on 2 July and will apply until the end of the year.

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Prof.Eugenia Koshkina (Russia, Co-Chair) presented the current developments in the Russian Federation. According to the Federal Service for Alcohol Market Regulation, for the seven months of 2020, the volume of vodka production in Russia amounted to 96.4% compared to the same period last year, for wine this amount accounted for 95.3%, and for beer, it was 103.3%. At the same time,

according to the Federal State Statistics Service, in the first half of the year, alcohol imports also decreased remarkably - it was imported into the country by 92.2% compared to the same period in 2019. Most of all, wine imports decreased - 80.8% were imported into Russia by the first half of last year. Imports of strong spirits (including vodka) amounted to 89.4%. However, beer imports increased by 12%.

Meanwhile, according to the Federal State Statistics Service, sales of alcoholic beverages to the population in Russia during the period from January to July not only did not decrease but, on the contrary, increased slightly. Compared to the same period last year, shops had sold vodka 1.7% more, wine - 3.1%, sparkling and champagne wines - 1.4%, beer and beer drinks - 2.9%.

Sociological studies, conducted by the Anti-Drug Commissions, show that the number of respondents using drugs both regularly and occasionally remained at the same level and amounted to 1.3% or 1.9 million people. In all territorial bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the departments to combat the spread of drugs on the Internet have been created. In December, a bill was drafted that provides for up to two years in prison for drug propaganda on the Network and the cultivation of drug-containing plants.

Dr.Zaza Tsereteli (ITA) asked to clarify which age groups were tested on drugs in the schools and if that was mandatory testing.

Prof. Eugenia Koshkina (Russian Federation) responded that schools are testing children from age 14th. Parents are providing informed consent for the testing, and it is voluntary.

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Ms.Nadja Frederiksen (NWC, NCM) updated on the current activities of her organization. The Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) has recently adopted a new vision - Vision 2030: "The Nordic region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world in 2030". One of the priorities of that vision will be **a socially sustainable Nordic region, meaning that activities will be related to** the improvement of healthy lifestyles to prevent NCD's. Among other activities, there has been a proposal from the Nordic Council to the NCM to produce a joint evaluation of the Nordic countries' drug policy, and highlight best practice for reducing the harm of drug use. However, no decision whether to proceed with this has been made yet.

Nordic Welfare Center (NWC) implemented the project on substance use during pregnancy. The focus of the project was on smoking, **alcohol** and other substance use during pregnancy and the harms to the fetus (e.g. **FASD**) caused by maternal substance use during pregnancy. To improve the exchange of information on FASD among the countries and experts, an online platform - fasdnordic.org/ has been established by the experts involved in the project.

The report from the project shows that there among other things is a need for prevalence studies on FASD. The size of the problem is unknown as FASD is an undiagnosed disorder, and without knowing the size of the problem, it is not easy to influence the political level.

Nordic Alcohol and Drug Research Assembly (NADRA), which is organized every third year, is planning to organize its Meeting in August 2021¹.

¹ [After the ASA EG meeting those plans have been changed. NADRA will take place in Espoo \(near Helsinki\) on 8-10 September 2021.](#)

Dr.Zaza Tsereteli (ITA) mentioned that one of the topics of the NDPHS Declaration on Alcohol Policy adopted in 2018, was FASD and therefore suggested to see closer cooperation with NCW on this subject.

Mr.Bernt Bull (Norway) underlined the role and importance of the NWC in the work of the ASA EG while providing a permanent link to the researchers conducted in the Nordic Countries. He proposed that NWC contacts the Danish chairmanship at the alcohol expert group of the NCM to include FASD subject in the upcoming Meeting of the group on November 20th.

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Dr Carina Ferreira-Borges, Programme Manager, Alcohol and Illicit Drugs Programme & Prisons and Health Programme (WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs) presented the ongoing activities of the EURO office. The office has launched several reports, among them on Alcohol pricing and alcohol marketing policies in the European Region. The fact sheet on Alcohol and COVID 19 was produced and widely disseminated. The final report on the implementation of the European Plan on alcohol was published, and the draft framework is developed, covering six priority areas. The Framework is planned to be present next year at the Regional Committee. However, due to the COVID 19 situation and many emerging issues, it is not clear yet if the discussion on the Framework will be included in the agenda of the Regional Committee meeting. The CIS Alcohol Policy network is established to facilitate knowledge exchange among the member countries. The WHO will soon launch the fact sheet on Alcohol and Cancer, the dates to be decided.

Mr.Bernt Bull (Norway) asked if there was information about the dates and modalities of the consultations around the updating of the Global Alcohol strategy.

Dr Carina Ferreira-Borges (WHO) responded that dates are TBD and the working on the final document is still ongoing.

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Mr Bernt Bull (Chairman, Norway) briefly presented the current developments in Norway. There is a preparation of Alcohol strategy, mainly consisting of elements related to the best buys, adding some other features to be introduced. Norway was discussing the liberalization of drug policy, and for this reason, a special commission was established to develop a white paper, which was presented to the Parliament in April. The main principle of the paper was to move the policy issues from the Justice sector to the Health sector. The proposal for the Parliament is still not ready, as there is no consensus within the Government on the measures proposed.

Dr Zaza Tsereteli (ITA) thanked the participants of the Meeting and proposed to organize another meeting of the ASA EG to discuss the development of the NDPHS strategy. The group will also discuss the activities for the next year, as soon as the decision on the EU project proposal will be made and proposal accepted.

Adoption of the meeting minutes

The ASA EG Chair proposes that it would send out draft ASA EG Twenty-First Working Meeting minutes to the participants on November 14 and that comments on the draft would be due, at the latest,

on November 21, 2020. The revised minutes would be distributed on November 28, 2020, to be adopted per capsulam if no further comments are submitted within one week.