

1 October 2024

**Position of the Latvian Support and Prevention Center “For Your Freedom” on
Notification of the Draft law ‘Amendments to the Handling of Alcoholic Beverages Law’
TRIS Notification Number: 2024/0351/LV**

The **Support and Prevention Center "For Your Freedom"** stands as Latvia's only NGO committed to transforming public perception of alcohol use. We strive to highlight the profound benefits of abstaining from alcohol for individuals, families, society, the environment, and the future of our nation. Originally launched as the unique project [1000 Days Sober](#) to provide tools and inspiration for individuals curious about an alcohol-free life, the NGO has since evolved into a mission dedicated to raising awareness about the harms of alcohol and the empowerment that comes from choosing to abstain. This is achieved through education, strong partnerships both locally and internationally, and a dialogue with policymakers. **Our vision is bold: a society free from alcohol-related harm, where people are empowered to lead healthy, fulfilling lives, unlocking their full potential and contributing to the well-being of their communities and the country as a whole.**

INTRODUCTION

On 1 July 2024, the Latvian government notified the European Commission of the “Draft Law ‘Amendments to the Handling of Alcoholic Beverages Law’” (TRIS 2024/0351/LV). This proposal aims to restrict the advertising and marketing of alcoholic beverages, limit the availability of alcohol, and provide consumers with information on ingredients, nutritional content, and the risks associated with alcohol consumption. Since the Draft Law introduces additional labelling requirements for alcoholic beverages, which constitutes a draft technical regulation under Directive (EU) 2015/1535, it requires notification to the Commission to prevent barriers to the internal market and ensure alignment with EU law.

THE DRAFT LAW

The Draft Law is Latvia’s response to the serious and tangible risks posed by alcohol use to public health. Latvia has exercised its rights under Article 36 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to derogate from the internal market freedoms outlined in Articles 34 and 35 TFEU. This is because the protection of internal market is not an end in itself; higher priorities, such as the protection of human health and lives, take precedence. Article 35 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU reinforces this argument by stating that [a high level of human health protection shall be ensured in all Union policies and activities](#).

[The measures proposed by Latvia align with the WHO’s 'best buy' policies and other recommended strategies](#), which are recognised as effective approaches to mitigating alcohol-related harm at the population level. These are evidence-based cost-effective policy solutions that yield a significant return on investment for governments. The [latest revision WHO’s 'best buy' policies](#) was approved by WHO member states at the 76th World Health Assembly in May 2023. The table below illustrates the

alignment between the WHO's 'best buys' and the measures proposed in the Draft Law, along with the rationale for these measures.

WHO recommends	Proposed measures in the Draft Law	Reasoning
RESTRICTING ADVERTISING & MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Prohibit the advertising of prices and discounts for alcoholic beverages, including in print media and online. ✓ Prohibit alcohol promotion tactics, including "2 for the price of 1" deals and offering free alcohol as a gift or compensation with the purchase of a product or service. ✓ Prohibit the promotion of discounted alcoholic beverage purchases through loyalty programmes. 	To reduce exposure to alcohol and protect vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and abstainers from the pressure to begin consuming alcohol.
RESTRICTING AVAILABILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Restrict alcohol sales: Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm, and Sundays from 10am to 6pm. ✓ Prohibit alcohol consumption in gaming arcades and casinos. ✓ Mandate a minimum six-hour delay for the delivery of alcohol purchased online. 	To prevent easy access to alcohol by young people and other vulnerable and high-risk groups.
INFORMING CONSUMERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mandate prominently displayed signs in retail locations warning consumers about the health risks of alcohol consumption, and stating that alcoholic beverages cannot be sold to minors, nor may minors purchase, consume, or possess them. ✓ Require alcohol beverage labels to include pictograms warning against consumption during pregnancy and while driving, as well as information on ingredients and nutritional value, including energy content. 	<p>To equip consumers with relevant knowledge and empower them to make healthier choices.</p> <p>To increase awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol on children and youth.</p>

The Latvian authorities present comprehensive data and relevant information in the impact assessment attached to the notified Draft Law. Thereby they have demonstrated that the proposed measures are appropriate to achieve better protection of public health and they do not go beyond what is necessary in order to attain this aim (see [Commission Notice Guide on Articles 34-36, TFEU](#)).

MINIMAL IMPACT ON CROSS-BORDER TRADE

The Draft Law is expected to have minimal impact on cross-border trade due to the flexibility it grants to producers, retailers, and wholesalers. It permits consumer information to be added via packaging or stickers, allowing imported products to be labelled before sale on the territory of Latvia. The presentation of information aligns with Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, governing food labelling across the EU. A three-year transition period until 1 January 2028, gives businesses ample time to adapt to the changes.

While the EU is reviewing food labelling regulations under Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, including for alcoholic beverages, this process is still in the early stages. Many [Member States](#) such as Austria and Lithuania already mandate ingredient disclosure, and countries like France and Lithuania require pregnancy health warnings on alcoholic beverages. Ireland has recently enacted legislation, set to take effect in May 2026, that mandates comprehensive health information labelling on alcohol products, including cancer warnings. These regulations have been accepted by the European Commission as necessary and proportional to the scale of the alcohol issues in Ireland.

MEASURES FALL SHORT IN EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING SEVERE ALCOHOL HARM

According to the WHO, the European Region has the highest levels of alcohol consumption and bears the [greatest burden of alcohol-related harm globally](#). Of the 10 countries with the highest per-capita alcohol consumption in the region, seven are within the EU. [Leading this list is Latvia](#), where alcohol consumption reached 12.4 Liters per capita in 2023, a significant increase from 9.8 Liters in 2010.

Per-capita alcohol consumption is closely related to the prevalence of alcohol-related harm. In 2022, [only half of Latvians reported being in good health](#). Nearly 80% of the population consumed alcohol in 2022. [Around 60% of men aged 35 to 44 engaged in heavy alcohol use](#), which presents immediate health risks. Alcohol use in the country is linked to a range of serious outcomes, including cardiovascular and liver diseases, cancers, road injuries, drownings, violence, and suicides. Driven by unhealthy behaviors and exacerbated by Latvia's low healthcare funding – one of the lowest in the EU – [mortality rates from preventable and treatable conditions](#) significantly exceed EU averages.

Alcohol use among children and youth is a special concern, as early consumption is a strong predictor of excessive alcohol consumption and related negative outcomes in adulthood. According to the 2019 ESPAD survey, 89% of 15-16 year olds in Latvia had tried alcohol once in their lifetime. [Around 38% had had consumed excessive amounts of alcohol in the past 30 days](#). Additionally, 2023 data from the Emergency Medical Service show an increase in calls related to children who have consumed alcohol, whilst the National Health Service reported [a sharp rise in the number of children receiving treatment](#) for alcohol-related mental and behavioural disorders. This aligns with data from the ESPAD survey, which revealed that 80% of Latvian youth reported being able to easily access alcohol if they wished.

Additionally, a 2022 study commissioned by the Latvian Ministry of Health estimated the costs related to alcohol use in 2021, revealing the substantial societal losses caused by its high prevalence. In the given year, up to 88,620 years in good health were lost due to alcohol use. [Around 1.3–1.8 percent of Latvia's GDP \(EUR 440 to 602 million\)](#) was lost due to alcohol related health-care expenses, reduced workplace productivity from absenteeism, presenteeism, and premature death, legal and crime-related costs within the judicial system, and increased social services expenditures. Revenues from the excise tax on alcoholic beverages in 2021 accounted only for 0.7 percent of the GDP.

The above mentioned health, social and economic burdens associated with alcohol consumption in Latvia are largely preventable. The Draft Law represents a significant effort by the Latvian government to address alcohol related harm at national level. However, to enhance the effectiveness of the Draft Law, **we strongly encourage the Latvian Government to better align the Draft Law with the WHO Best Buys:**

1. **Renew the National Alcohol Action Plan.** This will ensure a responsive, cross-sectoral approach to address alcohol harm as a public health priority.
2. **Prohibit all forms of alcohol advertising, not just prices, discounts and promotions.** There is a clear link between alcohol marketing and increased consumption, particularly among youth and other vulnerable groups.
3. **Mandate cancer warnings.** In addition to pictograms warning against consumption during pregnancy and while driving, and information on the ingredients and nutritional value of alcoholic beverages, there should be a mandated warning about the causal link between alcohol consumption and cancer. This will raise public awareness, as current knowledge is lacking; only one in four people in Latvia are aware that alcohol use can cause cancer.
4. **Avoid electronic labelling such as QR codes.** Research demonstrates that relying on QR codes for health information is largely ineffective, as many consumers are unlikely to access online content through these channels. Instead, clear, on-label warnings are considerably more effective in communicating health risks to consumers than electronic alternatives.
5. **Limit alcohol availability to youth.** Young people are especially vulnerable to alcohol's effects, leading to risky behaviours and long-term social and health issues. Therefore:
 - a. Introduce a complete ban on alcohol sales at events, including sports and cultural gatherings, where minors are present.
 - b. Limit the density of alcohol outlets. Currently, alcoholic beverages are widely available in Latvia, found not only in liquor stores but also in grocery stores, markets, and petrol stations.
 - c. Raise the minimum legal age for purchasing and consuming alcohol to 20, aligning it with tobacco regulations set to take effect in 2025.
6. **Establish regular evaluation mechanisms.** Continuous assessment will ensure that interventions remain effective and responsive to emerging public health challenges.

CONCLUSION

We urge the European Commission to support Latvia in its efforts to address the substantial harm caused by alcohol, and provide a detailed opinion on the Draft Law to facilitate its adoption, ensuring that the health and well-being of the Latvian population are prioritised over economic interests.