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Evolution of alcohol policy in Poland during the transition period

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The 1980s and 1990s witnessed turbulent changes in the social, political, and economic life of Poland. Those changes affected also alcohol consumption, its associated problems, as well as alcohol policy. The Solidarity movement already had on its banners the alcohol question in the early 1980s. The working class apparently blamed the government for pushing alcohol to manipulate drunken society and to discredit its demands for a better life and freedom. In the long series of negotiations between Solidarity and the government a new law on upbringing in sobriety and counteracting alcoholism was adopted in 1982. The law introduced a centralised system of control measures with the aim of restricting alcohol affordability and availability as well as prohibiting alcohol advertising. Compulsory treatment of alcohol dependence was replaced by the so-called obligation to undergo treatment, the aim of which was to liberate the alcohol treatment system of involuntary patients who had to be strictly supervised. By the end of the decade the consumption levelled off at six litres of ethanol per capita annually, which was moderate by international standards of those times.

At the beginning of the transition towards a multi-party political system and market economy the control system was totally rejected as a remnant of socialism, and most restrictions were lifted. Strict rules limiting the number of alcohol outlets were withdrawn. The licensing system was decentralised to a local community level; licensing fees supplied local budgets for upbringing in sobriety and counteracting alcoholism. In that way, local stakeholders of alcohol policy supported the extension of alcohol supply networks in their communities. Their number increased from about

40 thousand in the late 1980s to more than 200 thousand a few years later. The borders became practically open for private importers who claimed that they brought virtually millions of litres for their own use to avoid customs. Privatisation of alcohol industry was followed by numerous scandals but secured an undisturbed flow of alcohol with a substantial share of unrecorded spirits. Recorded consumption figures seemed to be flat. However, problem statistics soared, suggesting a 50% increase in consumption over just a few years. In parallel, the brewing industry expanded its capacity, doubling and then tripling consumption in less than 10 years.

The alcohol policy paradigm then fundamentally changed. Alcohol control was replaced by school education and treatment. Available data do not confirm the benefits of this change. The number of people in alcohol treatment doubled, both in out- and in-patient units, but alcohol-related mortality did not change. School education seems to fail too, because the prevalence of drinking among 15-16-year-olds doubled and is currently approaching levels recorded among the adult population.

Key words: alcohol policy, alcohol consumption, school education, law.

DISCLOSURE

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