WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY

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Anti-tobacco campaigners from across Europe today (31 May) called on their national governments to use the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals to drive forward tobacco control legislation.

Although the European Union’s Tobacco Products Directive which limits the sale and merchandising of cigarettes is being implemented across the bloc, harnessing the SDGs could bring stricter legislation in the future, they said in Brussels.

The SDGs are sets of targets and indicators that UN members have committed to use to shape their policy over the next 15 years. There are 17 in total and aim to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity, health and well-being for all.

EU Health Commissioner Vytennis Andrukatis called for the creation of a “tobacco free world”.

The former doctor used a video message to throw his weight behind the push to get national governments inside and outside the EU to implement the tobacco control framework in the SDGs.

Although developing countries are particularly vulnerable to Big Tobacco, the SDGs are designed for both developing and developed nations.

Tobacco was branded a threat to sustainable development at The Race Against Tobacco meeting held on World No Tobacco Day (31 May). The event was hosted by the World Health Organisation, the European Respiratory Society and the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco

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Prevention.

Smoking not only kills about 700,000 Europeans a year and six million people worldwide but the healthcare costs are a huge drain on budgets at both national and household level.

In 2015, 1 in 10 deaths worldwide was caused by smoking said, Professor Guy Joos, the president of the European Respiratory Society.

Europe needed to unite to end the devastating effects of tobacco, Joos said, and set an example for the rest of the world to follow. “Every day should be World No Tobacco Day,” he added.

“This is a public health crisis,” said Francisco Rodriguez Lozano, president of the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention, which co-hosted the event with the World Health Organisation, and the European Respiratory Society.

“Extraordinary times call for extraordinary action,” he added at the event for more than 50 European countries, both inside and outside the EU.

Sonja von Eichborn accused tobacco companies of encouraging child labour on farms in poorer countries such as Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and Brazil.

Big Tobacco pays low prices for crops which encourages family run farms to use their children as unpaid labour, she said. 90% of tobacco is grown in the Global South, the term now preferred to the Third World.

There was criticism of tobacco companies’ habit of using legal action in national and international courts to slow the progress of laws designed to curb smoking.

Kristina Mauer-Stender, program manager for tobacco control at the WHO office for Europe, said the lawsuits could discourage smaller countries from drafting legislation in the first place.

But she added every victory in the courts had strengthened the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, bolstering it by setting legal precedents.

Europe was on the right track, she added, pointing to Georgia’s decision yesterday to press on with anti-smoking legislation. 60% of men smoke in Georgia.

Oxana Domenti is president of the Republic of Moldova’s Committee for Social Protection, Health and Family. Moldova this year launched smoking cessation initiatives and laws.

“They [tobacco companies] may be more powerful and have more money,” she said, “but we must be stronger.” That strength would come through international unity on tobacco control, she added.

There was also criticism of the lobbying tactics used by Big Tobacco. One veteran campaigner addressed the “undercover” tobacco lobbyists he was certain had attended the event under false pretences.

Andrew Hayes, who received an award for his tireless anti-tobacco work, said he had seen the consequences of tobacco in his earlier work in cancer care.

“They are killing us. They are killing their clients and they know it,” he said, adding that no good person could work for the tobacco industry.

The 2030 deadline for the SDGs led to the drive being described as a race. But, campaigners said, although there had been landmark successes, the race was a marathon and not a sprint.

Delegates from the 52 countries were handed detailed information to aid their efforts to hitch onto the momentum of the SDG commitment.

EURACTIV.com has asked Brussels representatives of tobacco companies to comment.
What would the world be like if tobacco control NGOs did not exist? What kind of society would we live in? How would our lives be different if the tobacco industry had its way?

The European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention is a network of over 60 organisations working in tobacco control.

To find the answers to those questions, we probably do not need to go very far. Just one generation back in time and there you are.

Remember the way we all used to put up with tobacco smoke, despite the tears, the cough and the itch? Now just imagine it is happening today, in 2017.

Each of us would have to go to work every morning with the risk of getting burnt on public transport. Your fellow commuters, standing next to you with their cigarettes up in the air, in the crowded train carriage. Arriving at the office, you can start your working day smelling of cold tobacco and all day long, your co-workers would light up at their desks and in meetings.

In the evening, you would be socialising in smoky bars and eating with the family in restaurants, where people would be puffing away. Airplanes of course would have smoking and non-smoking areas, separated by a thin curtain, which gets pushed aside every time the flight attendants need to go through or a passenger needs to use the bathroom.

Your children would come back from school with chocolate cigarettes, which they would use to playfully pretend to suck on like adults do.

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And everywhere you go, whichever TV channel you watch or magazine you read, there will be beautiful women telling you how successful and sexy they look while smoking, while manly men live a life of adventure and feel powerful with a white stick in their hands.

Fortunately, this reality now belongs to the past for most of us, living in Europe. This of course would not have happened without the tirelessness, the conviction and the passion of those men and women working in public health NGOs, often operating in the shadow, fighting for the right, for the basic human right to breath clean air.

This year, ENSP – the most important network of civil society organisations working in tobacco control in Europe – is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

This would just be a number if it were not for the fact that this celebration is also paying tribute to the dedication, the sweat, blood and tears of all the experts, decision makers and advocates, who have been working tirelessly to tackle this pandemic of modern times.

It is also an amazing testimonial of the journey of all the achievements and the incredible progresses in our right to protect ourselves but above all to protect our children from the harmful effect of tobacco use.

Thanks to the effort, the work and the passion of those unsung heroes, we do not have to put up with it anymore.

Looking back at the last 20 years, it is almost impossible to talk about tobacco control in Europe without mentioning the involvement of at least one ENSP member.

At every stage, from international to the very local level, ENSP members have played a vital role in changing policies, but above all, generate a cultural revolution.

The work has always been a concerted effort for a common accomplishment. This is the very essence of a network, an interconnected group, a community, a family that acts in a consistent and coordinated way. Each node adds value, each link adds strength.

We have come a long way. Like a history painter, the life of ENSP reflects the changes in tobacco control, including the battles, the struggles and the victories.

It also mirrors the progress and the changes in the European Union, as well as the wider region.

As the EU grew, new countries joined. Catering for 15 member states in 1997 and now for 28 in 2017, ENSP has managed to provide tailored support for all members, old and new, by changing its priorities, tailoring its activities and partnering with a wide range of international organisations that includes the World Health Organisation, Campaigning for Tobacco-Free Kids and the European Respiratory Society.

But the journey has been, of course, far from smooth. Funded by the European Commission, the network negotiated florid and challenging times but ENSP resisted well in the hardest periods thanks to the dedication and perseverance of those who believed and supported its ideas.

The road ahead remains even bumpier, with an industry that now has many faces, incredible financial and political power, and above all, an aggressive survival instinct.

It will fight back, no matter what, more belligerent than ever. There are still many high mountains to move, many deep rivers to cross.

In this challenging context, the community needs to prepare for future attacks because the tobacco companies have already launched their next moves.

We need to roll up our sleeves, join forces and fight the good fight in the name of European citizens, in the name of our children and most importantly for the health of future generations.

Let’s come even closer, let’s stand united, and let’s remain powerful.
A
nti-smoking campaigners heavily criticised the Greek government for not implementing a 2008 law that prohibits smoking in public places. EURACTIV.com reports from Athens.

Speaking on Wednesday (24 May) at the International Conference on Tobacco Control 2017 organised by the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention (ENSP) in Athens, Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos stressed that the anti-smoking campaign has a national character.

“Without underestimating the methods used so far against smoking, for me, the issue of tackling smoking is a matter of education,” he noted.

Pavlopoulos said that special attention should be given to teenagers, who should be aware not only of smoking’s health impact but also, but that it has no social value.

“When you give in to it, you show a weakness that sends bad messages for the future. Because if you cannot cope with this challenge, whose implications you are aware of, then you cannot deal, in these difficult times we are experiencing, with other bigger challenges.

“Young people should learn what it means to resist this temptation, to be the first victory of their life,” he noted.

Regarding smokers, Pavlopoulos said that in addition to the health implications, they should be educated and informed that this habit does not affect only them but their families and society as a whole.

“Consequently, the obsession with smoking has wider effects that show the man who persists in smoking does not understand the elementary duty of solidarity he has towards all his fellow human beings,” the minister pointed out.

However, Pavlopoulos made no reference to the controversy regarding the government’s failure to implement the smoking ban.

GREEK GOVERNMENT UNDER FIRE

According to a World Health Organisation report, Greece's...
compliance with the smoke-free environments framework is quite poor. A law adopted in 2008 that prohibited smoking in public places has never been implemented.

In an interview with EURACTIV.com, Vytenis Andriukaitis, the EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, admitted that citizen exposure to cigarette smoke in public places varies greatly across the EU and that it is particularly high in countries like Greece.

“From our perspective, there is little value in having laws if they are not enforced,” he said.

Professor Panagiotis Behrakis, Director of Institute of Public Health of the American College of Greece, noted that smoking was a mistake of the 20th century that will be corrected in 21st.

He said that Greece was leading the scientific initiative to tackle smoking. However, passive smoking in the country is not being addressed.

“There is a clear lack of political willingness to do so [...] many successive governments have claimed that they cannot enact the law,” he emphasised.

“Over 80% of Greek people are angry about what is happening today and consider it a cultural degradation of the country,” Behrakis added.

Professor Theofilos Rosenberg, Head of the Hellenic Center for Disease Control and Prevention, noted that the tobacco legislation is “brutally abused.”

“Smoking is tolerated even in healthcare facilities. Within our own hospitals and surgery. Some doctors even smoke in front of their patients,” he said, underlining that the existent legislation is extremely progressive and clear but its implementation is an absolute failure.

EURACTIV has repeatedly asked the Greek ministry of health for a comment but it received no response by the time of this article’s publication.

Sources said that considering the tough austerity measures it managed to pass over the last few years, Greece’s leftist government has the power to implement the anti-smoking law as well.

The same sources also emphasised that Philip Morris recently announced a significant €300 million investment in Greece, to produce cigarettes for export to more than 30 countries by the end of 2017.

**TOBACCO INDUSTRY IS A “TREMENDOUS” ENEMY**

ESNP President Dr Francisco Rodriguez Lozano said that there were excellent tools like the World Health Organisation’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the EU’s Tobacco Product Directive but they have to be implemented.

“We must be very strong as tobacco is a very toxic and addictive product [...] we don’t fight only against it but also against the tobacco industry, which is a tremendous enemy for us,” he said.

“They are very powerful because they have the money [...] but we are powerful too because we fight for the public health right on behalf of the citizens,” Lozano emphasised and agreed that the anti-smoking campaigns should focus on young people “as the tobacco industry does too”.

Dr Mina Gaga, who is the president-elect of the European Respiratory Society, stressed that the mindset about smoking needed to change and stop connecting it with pleasant moments but only with morbidity.

She explained that in a restaurant one can drink freely and get drunk but no one can drive because it is dangerous for others, as there are fines and controls.

“On the other hand, it is considered an inalienable right of a smoker to smoke in public place, in a restaurant where there could be even children. Why? Because the danger is slower? The danger is there and it brings enormous human pain as well as costs to health systems,” she warned.
Member states should prioritise laws that protect public health because there is little value in having them if they are not enforced, the EU’s health Commissioner told EURACTIV.com in an interview.

Vytenis Andriukaitis is EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety. He responded in writing to questions by EURACTIV’s Sarantis Michalopoulos ahead of World No Tobacco Day on 31 May.

What is the current state of play regarding the implementation of the tobacco products directive at national level? Have all member states effectively complied with the new rules?

The vast majority of member states (25) have notified full transposition of the Directive. The Commission is currently checking these transposition measures. The Commission also regularly discusses the implementation of the Directive with member states, including in the context of the Expert Group on Tobacco Policy.

One year after, does the Commission have figures regarding tobacco consumption? Do Europeans smoke less as a result?

The 2017 Eurobarometer survey on Europeans’ attitudes towards tobacco is due to be published on the eve of World No Tobacco Day. We do not expect any significant change in smoking rates only one year on.

The new rules have not been in effect long enough, transposition checks are still under way, and don’t
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forget that manufacturers have been given a 12-month window until May 2017 to use up old stock – which means packs without picture warnings in many member states. The next survey is planned for 2019-2020, which will be the moment to assess the first impact of the Directive.

In countries like Greece, people still smoke in public places, despite a national ban. It’s not a Commission competence, but how does it look like for an EU member state to ignore the implications of passive smoking?

It is true that citizens’ exposure to cigarette smoke in public places varies greatly across the EU and that it is particularly high in some countries like Greece – the extent of the differences will be revealed in next week’s Eurobarometer. From our perspective, there is little value in having laws if they are not enforced.

This is particularly the case with laws that protect public health – we know that the positive effects of properly enforced smoke-free legislation are immediate and include a reduction in the incidence of heart attacks and improvements in respiratory health. We urge countries to make enforcing these laws a priority.

The Commission is committed to continuing working with the member states in their implementation and enforcement of the Council recommendations and also raises this issue in bilateral meetings, as appropriate. The Commission is also monitoring the situation, including citizens’ exposure to smoke in public places through Eurobarometer surveys. It regularly discusses progress in this area with member states’ representatives.

Why does the Commission believe that e-cigarettes should be treated as tobacco products? The industry claims that they are less harmful and help people quit traditional smoking.

E-cigarettes are relatively new and the long-term effects on public health are not yet known. It is still also unclear whether using e-cigarettes can lead to experimentation with other tobacco products.

The Tobacco Products Directive only covers e-cigarettes containing nicotine, a substance that we know is addictive and toxic. The EU has not banned e-cigarettes, but we do believe that it is appropriate under the TPD to include rules on quality and safety requirements as well as on packaging and labelling of e-cigarettes.

There is an ongoing discussion about the proper track and trace system that would tackle illicit tobacco trade and its wider implications. It seems the Commission is running behind on this file. How do you expect the supply chain to implement an EU-wide system in less than 16 months?

Firstly, according to the indicative timeline published on the Commission’s website, adoption of the relevant secondary legislation is foreseen for the end of 2017. A detailed internal timeline has been prepared (including extensive consultation with stakeholders) and good progress is being made: we are currently on schedule.

I can assure you that the Commission is aware of the concerns of stakeholders in relation to the timeline, and providing adequate time for technical roll-out in the sector has been a top priority for us from the beginning (preparatory work began immediately following the adoption of the TPD). It is for this reason that we are working with such an ambitious deadline, and the Commission is fully committed to doing its utmost to delivering the acts on time.

Given that the main requirements are set out in the TPD itself, stakeholders already have a good indication of the types of technical steps that will need to be taken. It is, therefore, important that they do not wait until the final adoption of the secondary legislation before beginning preparations.

Is the Commission moving toward a purely third-party system?

First of all, allow me to stress that no final policy decisions have been made and the consultation and preparatory processes are still ongoing. At a recent stakeholder meeting (15 May), the Commission presented a set of preliminarily preferred policy options, which it had identified based on feedback received from its extensive consultation process and internal analysis.

The European Commission recently closed a public consultation on excise duties applied to tobacco, with a view to possibly raising them. The Council seems supportive, saying in March last year that tobacco represents “an avoidable health risk” and that the directive was “an adequate tool for combating this threat”. Does this mean it’s a done deal and excise duties at European level will be raised eventually?

The Commission has not yet taken a position on this matter. DG SANTE is closely monitoring the impact assessment process led by DG TAXUD to ensure that health objectives of Directive 2011/64/EU are taken fully into consideration.

I also remind you that this Directive sets minimum excise rates and in the majority of the member states the actual rates are well above those minimal rates.
From Twitter

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