Public opinion and alcohol policy: Trends and developments in the Nordic countries

NINA KARLSSON & NINA REHN-MENDOZA

This Thematic issue contains articles and reports from the five Nordic countries on alcohol policy-developments and available parallel data on the public’s opinions on alcohol policy from the last 20 years.

Four out of five Nordic countries have had a restrictive alcohol policy since the days of the Prohibition. Generations of people have lived with state monopolies, high prices and very restricted marketing. What is the public’s opinion about this, how much public support is there for this policy? Since the alcohol policies have changed during the last 20 years, generally in a more liberal direction, it is especially interesting to study the changes in public support for the restrictive alcohol policy. Do opinions matter? Are policymakers considering public support, or lack thereof, when making decisions about alcohol policies? These were some of the research questions the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues Finland posed at the beginning of this project in 2012. Researchers in all five Nordic countries studied these questions and the results are published in this issue.

There are close similarities in the development of the public’s opinions on alcohol policy during the past 15 years in Finland, Norway and Sweden: the support for a restrictive alcohol policy has grown steadily stronger. In Norway and Sweden the increased support is a continuing trend, whilst in Finland the increase has levelled off, but remains at a significantly higher level than 15 years ago. Iceland has seen continuous strong support for the existing alcohol policies.

In comparison, Denmark has always had a liberal alcohol policy and there has not been the same public support for the cornerstones of Nordic alcohol policy. However, there is an increasing number of Danes who think that young people drink too much and that alcohol harms are on the rise. It is perhaps a Danish paradox that this does not translate into support for more restrictive policies. People still consider alcohol consumption a private consumer issue. Consumption is therefore regarded as a matter of self-control and self-discipline and not a target for political intervention.

Considering price development and increased availability, it appears that alcohol policy-making has been mainly heading in a more liberal direction. In Finland, Sweden and Norway the liberalisations reflect the EU’s and EEA’s effect on the Nordic restrictive alcohol policy measures. But changes in policies are not only caused by external factors. In addition to the external demands on national policies, there has been internal political and industry-based pressure to liberalise. The attempts at liberalisation have been challenged by a number of agents; the temperance movement in Sweden continues to be an active supporter of a restrictive policy, whereas in Iceland, attempts at liberalisation were stopped not once but several times by the country’s Parliament. In other words, there
seems to have been a growing discrepancy between policy initiatives and the opinion of the general public throughout the turbulent aftermath of the “Europeanization” of restrictive alcohol policies, which began in the mid-1990s.

There are different theories as to what are the reasons for the increasing support for a restrictive alcohol policy. The restrictive turn in the public’s opinion correlates closely with the policy-liberalisations of the mid-and late 1990s. In this issue, Lindeman, Karlsson and Österberg suggest that the liberalisations resulted in increased consumption and, as a consequence, in more visible harms and nuisances, such as public drunkenness and third party harms in particular with regard to children and families.

Despite the overall shift towards greater support for restrictive alcohol policy measures, levels of support vary within different population segments. It appears that women, older age groups and persons living in rural areas tend to be stronger supporters of a restrictive alcohol policy compared to men, younger age groups and people living in urban areas.

 Alcohol policy changes, such as taxation and availability, tend to result in animated debate especially in Finland, surfacing rather polarised opinions about the fairness of employing restrictive policy measures in order to reduce harm brought on by risky or heavy drinking. The division between “regular” non-problematic and “heavy” problematic drinkers may indicate that people do not necessarily support a restrictive alcohol policy because it improves their own health, but rather as a necessary policy measure to control the harm and costs to society caused by the drinking of the perceived “problematic drinkers”.

It is difficult to establish to what extent the public’s opinion has an influence on the political decision-making. Leimar, Ramstedt and Weibull conclude that the restrictive turn in opinions in Sweden around the year 2000 does not appear to have had much influence on the political decision-making. However, Sweden and Norway did not follow Finland in introducing significant tax cuts upon increased possibilities of importing alcohol from other EU member states in the mid 2000’s. The Finnish tax cuts and the consecutive increase in consumption and harm were widely reported and debated in both Sweden and Norway as both countries considered the need for similar tax cuts. It could be that the Finnish experiences and the public’s support for a restrictive policy did influence the decisions not to introduce tax cuts in Norway and Sweden. In other words, it is equally important to consider liberalisations that were not introduced as it is to consider the policy liberalisations that did take place. Finland has since the tax cuts of 2004 increased its alcohol taxes on several occasions, and the level of taxation for alcohol is overall higher today than it was before the initial tax cuts. It could be speculated that these financial decisions could be made, or were easier to make because of the growing support for a restrictive alcohol policy.

It is difficult to pinpoint a definite explanation for the general increase in the public’s support for a restrictive alcohol policy. The effect of the general liberalistic trends and a growing focus on the individual can have affected the public’s view of the welfare society, and the general public’s expectations of decision-makers. The modern-day abundance of available health information and an increased focus on the individual’s capacity to make informed choices may have contributed to an increased awareness and support of public health measures.