

Reference	ASA EG 30/2
Title	Meeting Minutes
Submitted by	NDPHS Secretariat

Venue: Ministry of Social Affairs, Suur-Ameerika 1, Tallinn, Estonia

Wednesday, 17 June

ASA EG Meeting (CET+1)

1. Opening and welcome 13:07 – 13:12

The meeting was opened by the host country, Estonia (Brigitta Õunmaa), and the NDPHS Secretariat. Participants were welcomed to Tallinn and online.

2. Adoption of the agenda 13:12 – 13:15

The agenda was adopted without amendments.

3. Updates from WHO (tobacco and alcohol) 13:15 – 14:00

Tobacco

Dr Angela Ciobanu, Technical Officer for Tobacco Control at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, shared the latest developments in WHO's efforts to protect children and young people from nicotine addiction.

A major focus in 2026 is the World No Tobacco Day (WNTD) theme, “Unmasking the Appeal: Countering Tobacco and Nicotine Addiction.” As part of this work, WHO has published and is preparing a series of new resources, including:

- a report on nicotine pouches and their marketing strategies;
- supplements to the Tobacco Control Playbook covering flavour bans and the extension of smoke-free protections to electronic cigarettes;
- an analysis of trends in tobacco use prevalence across the WHO European Region; and
- an information sheet on tobacco and nicotine addiction.

WHO has also developed communication materials to support the WNTD 2026 campaign and is preparing new educational resources for schools. These materials are designed to facilitate

the implementation of tobacco- and nicotine-free school policies through practical tools, evidence-based guidance and training resources.

As nicotine products continue to evolve, policies and interventions must evolve with them to safeguard the health and well-being of the next generation.

Alcohol

Daša Kokole (Alcohol, Illicit drugs and Prison Health team, WHO/Europe) presented updates on alcohol policy developments, including:

- An updated overview of alcohol per capita consumption based on most recent data in the UN SDG database (2024)
- Recent IARC handbooks on alcohol and cancer prevention and policy interventions;
- Ongoing work on alcohol labelling, taxation and pricing toolkits, and a new resource platform on reducing alcohol-related harm through screening and brief interventions.

WHO also presented evidence from a new paper evaluating Lithuanian comprehensive alcohol marketing ban, showing association with significant reductions in adolescent drinking and intoxication.

A policy update comes from Belgium, whose proposed decree aimed at restricting alcohol advertising targeting minors, introducing mandatory health warnings, prohibiting free offers, and strengthening enforcement measures, is currently being notified at the EU-level.

After Daša's presentation, Participants discussed the WHO alcohol policy best buys and the need to update those, to better reflect the Nordic experiences in alcohol policy, such as alcohol retail monopolies, age limits being recognised as alcohol policy best buys and the language of the best buy on banning or comprehensively restricting alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion needing to be improved to become more accurate, based on the Nordic experience.

Coffee Break 14:00 – 14:10

4. Policy change updates and impact of alcohol policy changes in Latvia 14:10– 15:00

Ginta Egle presented recent alcohol policy reforms introduced in response to increasing alcohol consumption and concerns regarding the normalization of alcohol use. The presentation highlighted the strong influence of industry lobbying and the challenges associated with advancing public health-oriented alcohol policies.

Recent reforms include:

- Reduced alcohol retail hours (10:00–20:00 Monday–Saturday; 10:00–18:00 Sunday);
- A mandatory six-hour waiting period for distance sales;
- Prohibition of bundle offers and multi-buy promotions;
- Prohibition of loyalty card discounts for alcohol products;
- Restrictions on the promotion of discounts, allowing only neutral price information.

The presentation highlighted several implementation challenges. Brand advertising remains permitted, including in public spaces such as supermarkets and public transportation. Digital marketing, particularly through influencers and social media, continues to create regulatory

grey areas. Enforcement remains difficult due to limited monitoring capacity, and concerns were raised about continued promotional practices despite existing restrictions.

Industry stakeholders have argued that stricter regulations may negatively affect rural businesses and increase illicit alcohol sales, although evidence supporting these claims remains limited. Public support for restrictions has fluctuated in recent years, influenced by media coverage, social media discussions, and industry-backed narratives. Participants emphasized the importance of effective communication, evidence-based advocacy, and regional cooperation to strengthen support for alcohol control policies.

The Ministry of Health, together with WHO, plans to evaluate the impact of the Alcoholic Beverages Handling Law on public health, while the Ministry of Economics and the Ministry of Finance will assess its impact on the national economy.

Latvia also presented a pilot project introducing integrated addiction care pathways for minors through multidisciplinary hospital-based teams. The initiative aims to address previously fragmented addiction services for young people. Due to limited resources, the programme currently focuses on more severe cases and is complemented by family support measures implemented by the Ministry of Welfare.

Participants also discussed challenges related to the long-term financing of prevention and health promotion activities, which currently rely heavily on European Structural Funds.

5. Policy change updates and impact of alcohol policy changes in Finland 15:00 – 16:00

Saara Karttunen presented recent alcohol policy developments and outlined the current government's ongoing efforts to liberalize the alcohol market. While alcohol policy has traditionally been approached primarily as a public health issue, the current government has increasingly framed alcohol regulation in terms of market competition, consumer choice, and economic considerations. This policy shift began following the formation of the current government in 2023.

The presentation focused on two major legislative reforms that have already been adopted, as well as in legislative proposals that are still under consideration, including:

- allowing home delivery of alcoholic beverages;
- clarifying cross-border distance sales;
- permitting online marketing of strong alcoholic beverages; and
- extending the opening hours of Alko stores.

Under the proposed home delivery framework, both Alko and licensed retail operators would be permitted to deliver alcohol directly to consumers. Deliveries would remain subject to existing restrictions, including prohibitions on sales to intoxicated persons and minors, and age verification would be required upon delivery. The proposal would also create opportunities for third-party delivery services.

The government has also proposed clarifying the legal framework for cross-border distance sales, allowing consumers to purchase alcohol from other countries through licensed delivery arrangements.

Regarding marketing, Finland is considering amendments that would allow online marketing of stronger alcoholic beverages. The proposal aims to improve domestic producers' ability to market their products to consumers in other EU countries. A proposed ban on influencer marketing was discussed during the legislative process, but was ultimately not included in the current proposal.

Additional reforms would allow small producers below a specified production threshold to sell alcoholic beverages directly from production sites, subject to certain conditions.

Participants discussed the potential impact of the proposed reforms. Although total alcohol consumption in Finland has generally declined over the past fifteen years, concerns were raised regarding increased availability and accessibility. Government impact assessments estimate that the proposed amendments would have a relatively limited effect on overall alcohol consumption at the population level.

The reforms may, however, have significant implications for Alko's retail monopoly. Participants noted that the previous increase in the retail sales limit to beverages containing up to 8 percent alcohol appears to have shifted sales away from Alko outlets. Concerns were expressed that allowing wine sales in grocery stores could further weaken the financial viability of the monopoly system.

Monitoring the effects of cross-border distance sales was identified as a particular challenge for authorities.

The presentation also included findings on public attitudes toward alcohol policy. Survey data suggest that a majority of respondents consider current alcohol restrictions appropriate, while smaller shares support either stricter or more liberal regulation. Discussions around wine sales continue to receive considerable public attention.

Participants noted that public discourse increasingly emphasizes individual responsibility and consumer choice, while the public health impacts of alcohol consumption, including alcohol-related mortality, receive less attention.

Coffee Break 16:00 – 16:10

6. Updates from the Nordic Welfare Centre 16:10 – 16:25

Pia Nevala Westman provided updates on its ongoing work related to alcohol and public health in the Nordic region.

Participants were informed about PopNAD, a platform disseminating Nordic research on alcohol, drugs, doping, tobacco, gambling, and related public health issues. This includes Nordisk alkoholfakta, which provides comparative information on consumption trends, statistics and a summary on alcohol policies in the Nordic countries.

An update was also provided on the scientific journal Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs (NAD). Following changes to prior cooperation arrangements, a new association has been established to ensure the journal's continued publication.

The NWC presented its project "A Guide to Guidelines", which compares national alcohol consumption guidelines across Nordic countries. The project highlights substantial

differences in how alcohol-related risks are communicated and discusses the potential benefits of clearer and more coherent public guidance.

Finally, participants were informed about a new project focusing on the prevention of nicotine use among young people in the Nordic countries.

7. Country overview: Sweden 16:25 – 16:45

Nina-Rehn Mendoza presented recent trends and policy developments related to alcohol, tobacco, nicotine, drugs, and gambling.

Alcohol consumption among young people continues to decline, while the use of nicotine products, particularly nicotine pouches, has increased. Drug use is decreasing across age groups and substances. Among adults, similar trends were reported, with alcohol consumption declining among younger adults and tobacco use remaining closely linked to socioeconomic factors. Drug-related deaths have decreased, particularly among men.

Nina highlighted a new joint governmental plan to strengthen prevention and addiction care, including 12 objectives covering the continuum from prevention to recovery, with a particular focus on children, young people, and families.

Recent alcohol policy developments include:

- A government inquiry into the cost-effectiveness of public health initiatives;
- The abolition of the requirement to serve food in conjunction with alcohol service;
- A proposal to reduce taxes for small-scale alcohol producers.

Participants were also informed about the implementation of the farm sales reform and plans to evaluate its impact.

Additional updates included ongoing work related to tobacco and nicotine policy, regulation of nitrous oxide and new psychoactive substances, and the development of a national wastewater monitoring system for illicit drugs.

8. Updates from NordAN 16:45 – 17:05

Lauri Beekmann provided reflections on current developments in alcohol policy across the Nordic and Baltic region. As a network connecting national member organizations, NordAN emphasized the value of viewing national developments from a regional perspective in order to identify common patterns, shared challenges, and opportunities for cooperation.

The presentation focused on whether public health actors are losing influence in alcohol policy debates. While the evidence supporting effective alcohol control measures remains strong, Lauri noted that evidence alone is often insufficient to shape policy outcomes. Political priorities, public opinion, industry influence, cross-border trade, and changing social norms all affect how policies are implemented and perceived.

Lauri highlighted the importance of learning not only from successful policies but also from setbacks and challenges. Particular attention was given to cross-border effects, in which regulatory differences between countries can weaken national measures.

The presentation also noted a broader shift in political discourse, with alcohol policy increasingly being framed through market and economic perspectives rather than public

health considerations. Participants discussed how evidence is often filtered through ideological and political lenses before influencing policy decisions.

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9. Updates from Movendi International 09:05 – 09:30

Maik Dünnbier provided an update on the work of Movendi International, which supports civil society organizations and governments in developing and advocating for alcohol policies in more than 50 countries. He highlighted the organization's efforts to produce policy briefings, evidence summaries, and practical resources aimed at supporting decision-makers and facilitating evidence-informed policymaking.

The presentation focused on the societal and economic burden of alcohol consumption. Referring to recent international analyses, it was noted that alcohol-related harm continues to generate substantial costs for society, often exceeding revenues generated through alcohol taxation. Participants discussed how healthcare, social, and productivity costs associated with alcohol use are largely borne by society rather than the alcohol industry.

Maik Dünnbier also addressed ongoing discussions surrounding the "no safe level" message for alcohol consumption. While alcohol industry actors continue to challenge this framing, recent public health recommendations and cancer prevention guidelines increasingly reflect the evidence linking alcohol consumption to health risks, including cancer. Participants noted that newer dietary and health guidelines have moved away from earlier suggestions that low levels of alcohol consumption may provide health benefits.

10. Country overview: Estonia 09:30 – 10:20

Aive Telling from Estonia reported declining smoking rates over the past decade, particularly among younger age groups, while smoking prevalence among older adults has remained relatively stable. At the same time, the use of nicotine products, especially e-cigarettes, has increased and remains a particular concern among young people.

Participants were informed about:

- A Supreme Court ruling supporting the ban on flavoured e-cigarettes and preventing the separate marketing of flavourings as a means of circumventing existing regulations;
- Ongoing work on new tobacco policy guidelines, expected to begin in late 2026;
- Preparations of draft regulations concerning permitted e-cigarette flavourings, restrictions on distance sales, and the review of penalties and fees related to tobacco products.

Regarding alcohol policy, Kristiin Mikko reported that alcohol consumption has declined during the past two years, although longer-term trends remain relatively stable. Alcohol-related mortality has remained relatively stable, with some recent increases observed. Participants

were informed that the estimated societal costs of alcohol consumption amount to approximately 1.3% of GDP, excluding broader social costs.

Current policy developments include:

- Continued negotiations on a new national alcohol policy strategy between the Ministries of Health and Economy;
- Proposed amendments to the Alcohol Act that would allow individuals aged 16 and above to prepare and sell alcohol in hospitality settings;
- Ongoing studies concerning alcohol and tobacco sales permits and participation in an EU-funded project on health risk prevention and reduction.

Kristiina also reported on developments in drug policy, including the establishment of an early warning system, a mid-term evaluation of the national drug policy framework, and measures to prohibit groups of semi-synthetic cannabinoids.

Coffee Break 10:20 – 10:30

11. Country overview: Lithuania 10:30 – 11:15

Brigita Rašimaitė presented recent developments in alcohol control and regulatory measures in Lithuania. Participants were informed that overall alcohol consumption has declined since 2016, although the share of spirits in total alcohol consumption has increased while the share of beer has decreased. Retail alcohol prices increased between 2024 and 2025. At the same time, mortality from diseases directly attributable to alcohol use has increased in recent years.

Brigita highlighted its comprehensive alcohol control framework, including:

- A licensing system for the production and sale of alcoholic beverages;
- A minimum legal purchasing age of 20 years;
- Restrictions on alcohol sales hours and locations, including a prohibition on sales at petrol stations;
- A prohibition on sales to intoxicated persons;
- Mandatory pregnancy warning labels on alcoholic beverages;
- A comprehensive ban on alcohol advertising, with limited exceptions;
- Restrictions on the promotion of price reductions;
- Prohibitions on alcoholic beverage imitation products and most forms of home production.

Participants were also informed about Lithuania's approach to e-commerce. Online alcohol sales are permitted only through retailers with a physical sales location and are subject to the same restrictions as offline sales. Strict age-verification requirements apply, including mandatory identity checks for purchasers who appear to be under 25 years of age. Online alcohol advertising remains prohibited.

Current policy discussions include the possible introduction of expanded health warning labels and proposals to restrict the sale of non- and low-alcohol beverages to minors. Participants noted that these discussions have generated significant industry opposition.

Finally, Brigita reported ongoing challenges related to illicit tobacco trafficking from Belarus.

12. Country overview: Norway 11:15 – 11:35

Anniken Therese Sand provided an overview of recent developments in alcohol, tobacco, nicotine, and drug policy. The country continues to maintain a restrictive alcohol policy framework, including a comprehensive ban on alcohol advertising, restrictions on sales, and the retail monopoly system.

Participants were informed about:

- Continued enforcement of a comprehensive ban on alcohol advertising, including in digital and social media environments;
- Strong restrictions on nicotine vaping products, while the use of snus and other nicotine products has increased among young people, particularly girls;
- Persistently low smoking rates;
- Recent and proposed alcohol policy changes, including extended serving hours during Cup in Football and a proposed expansion of farm sales for certain alcoholic beverages, with more than 4,7% alcohol.
- Ongoing discussions regarding digital age- and sobriety verification mechanisms in staffless stores.
- Preparations for a consultation on alcohol warning labels, including warnings related to health harms and alcohol-related violence.

Anniken reported that the current government has introduced some liberalization measures while maintaining the overall objective of preserving the existing alcohol control system and retail monopoly. Participants also discussed the limited political support for increased alcohol taxation and the need to strengthen early intervention measures within healthcare settings.

Finally, Norway reported increasing levels of cocaine use, particularly among certain population groups, while noting a decline in self-reported drug use among younger age groups.

13. Update from the NDPHS Secretariat 11:35 – 12:00

Ülla-Karin Nurm provided an update on recent developments within the Partnership. Participants were informed that Estonia has decided to withdraw from the NDPHS from 1 January 2028, citing financial and human resource constraints as the primary reason. The withdrawal prompted broader discussions about the future direction and sustainability of regional cooperation. Participants were informed that discussions among partner countries are ongoing regarding how to proceed and further strengthen collaboration within the Nordic-Baltic region.

The Secretariat highlighted the important role of the NDPHS as Policy Area Health, in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), supporting regional cooperation and facilitating access to funding opportunities. Available funding mechanisms include mainly programmes of Interreg and the Swedish Institute, but potentially also ESF

Ülla-Karin also highlighted the continued focus on collaboration with Ukraine through its involvement in projects, such as the ArtWell Network, participation in events including the

EUSBSR Annual Forum, and Ukraine's previously expressed interest in participating in the ASA Expert Group.

Participants discussed opportunities to further align NDPHS activities with the EUSBSR framework, including the possibility of strengthening cooperation across policy areas and supporting the development of regional project consortia. It was noted that the NDPHS could play a facilitating role in identifying funding opportunities and bringing together partners around topics of common interest, including those discussed within the ASA Expert Group.

Finally, participants were informed that mental health, resilience, and a "Mental Health in All Policies" approach are currently among the key priorities shaping regional cooperation efforts.

14. Final discussions 12:00 – 12:15

The discussion considered whether future meetings should place a stronger emphasis on prevention and health promotion and whether more time could be dedicated to thematic discussions on specific topics of common interest. Participants emphasized the importance of identifying areas where regional cooperation can contribute unique value and avoiding duplication of work already carried out in other formats.

The rotating chairship for future meetings was also discussed.

Participants agreed that cross-border issues remain a key area where the Expert Group can contribute through knowledge exchange and regional cooperation. Further discussion focused on how to strengthen the strategic role of the group and ensure its continued relevance for partner countries.

It was agreed that a questionnaire would be distributed among members to gather views on the future of the ASA Expert Group, including meeting frequency, preferred topics, working methods, overall objectives, and the value of continuing the meetings in their current or a revised format. The results will inform planning for future activities and meetings.

15. Closing of the meeting 12:15

Lunch 12:20

Annex: List of Participants

Expert Group on Alcohol and Substance Use (ASA EG)

Thirtieth Meeting
17 – 18 June 2026
Tallinn, Estonia



List of participants

Brigitta Õunmaa (Chair)
Kristiin Mikko
Aive Telling
Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonia

Saara Karttunen
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland

Ginta Egle
Agnese Kaulakane (online)
Sanita Lazdina (online)
Ministry of Health, Latvia

Brigita Rašimaitė
Ministry of Health, Lithuania

Anniken Therese Sand
Ministry of Health and Care Services, Norway

Ülla-Karin Nurm
Lukas Lorenzen
Mai Peksen
NDPHS Secretariat

Angela Ciobanu (online)
Daša Kokole (online)
Maria Neufeld (online)
WHO, Regional Office for Europe

Nina Rehn-Mendoza
Public Health Agency, Sweden

Kārlis Rupainis (online)
Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia

Maik Dünnebier
Movendi International

Lauri Beekmann
Nordic Alcohol and Drug Policy Network (NordAN)

Pia Nevala Westman
Nordic Welfare Centre