

# Tobacco Industry Lobby Infiltrates Advisory Process on EU Tobacco Tax Directive

Press release - 17 March 2026

**Sixteen European NGOs are sounding the alarm over the ongoing revision of the EU Tobacco Taxation Directive (TTD). A key advisory body to the EU, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in its recent report has echoed tobacco industry arguments and is affected by verifiable conflicts of interest, threatening to weaken proposed EU taxation measures proven to reduce smoking.**

In this context, the conclusions of the [EESC report on the revision of the TTD](#) - published few days ago - **cannot be considered a legitimate contribution to the debate on this crucial directive**. Moreover, the [draft report of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs \(ECON\)](#) from the European Parliament on the revision of the TTD, published on 9 March, also appears to suffer from a similar permeability to the tobacco industry's misleading narratives.

With Europe still facing the highest smoking prevalence in the world, causing over 1.1 million deaths in the European Region each year, and with rising rates among women and young people, as revealed last month by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup>, NGOs warn that only an ambitious reform can effectively protect public health and contribute to achieving a Tobacco-Free Generation by 2040.

## **Industry Arguments Resurface in EU Advisory Body**

The EESC, an advisory body representing workers, employers, and civil society, was formally consulted on the TTD revision. Although its opinions are not binding, the Committee holds political authority within the EU institutional framework. While the EESC recognizes the need to revise the framework for tobacco products, **its recent opinion echoes several narratives long promoted by the tobacco industry, undermining well-established public health evidence, including:**

- Calls for **“risk-proportionate taxation”** for new products such as heated tobacco or nicotine pouches, promoting a **“less harm, less tax”** principle.
- Claims that rapid or significant **excise increases would fuel illicit trade**.

## **Independent scientific evidence directly contradicts these claims.**

Behind the promise of harm reduction lies a misleading marketing strategy that distorts a concept originally used in addictology. **New products perpetuate nicotine addiction, undermine cessation, and primarily serve industry interests**. Regarding heated tobacco products, independent research shows they emit aerosols containing nicotine and toxic

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<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. [Tobacco crisis: WHO European Region projected to remain worst globally by 2030](#). 26 Feb 2026.

substances; although some emissions may be lower than in cigarette smoke, **they are not risk-free and their long-term health effects remain uncertain**<sup>2</sup>. The rapid uptake of these products among young people in several countries reveals a clear intention to capture new consumers driven by high-tech designs, diverse flavors, and modern marketing strategies, raising the risk of initiation and normalization of nicotine use<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Swedish Case Used to Mislead on “Reduced-Risk” Products**

The tobacco industry often cites Sweden’s 5.4% daily smoking rate as evidence that smokeless or alternative nicotine products, such as snus, are responsible for declines in smoking. Nevertheless, **there is no evidence these products reduce smoking prevalence, and they may even increase the risk of starting smoking or dual use**<sup>4</sup>.

**According to the Public Health Agency of Sweden, these figures are the result of a long-term, comprehensive tobacco control policy, including measures such as smoke-free environments, bans on tobacco advertising, and tobacco taxation**<sup>5</sup>.

**Another common tactic of the tobacco industry is to claim that any increase in tobacco taxes will trigger a surge in illicit trade. However, independent research and European experience show these warnings are unfounded: when tobacco prices rise, the share of illicit sales remains stable**<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the WHO identifies increases in tobacco prices as the most effective measure for reducing smoking prevalence - and therefore the most threatening to tobacco companies<sup>7</sup>.

The EESC report itself cites France as an example of a potential explosion of the illegal market due to higher excise rates. Official data tells a different story. Between 2014 and 2022, the average price of a cigarette pack in France rose from €7 to €10.50. A study by French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction **OFDT** on consumer purchasing patterns found that illicit trade remained below 6% throughout this period, showing **no significant shift toward illegal channels despite substantial price increases**<sup>8</sup>.

#### **Conflict of Interest at the Core of EU Advisory Body**

**The rapporteur of the EESC opinion on the TTD** Matteo Carlo Borsani, is the Director of European Affairs at Confindustria, Italy’s main business federation. In this role, he **represents**

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas D. *Le tabac chauffé est-il un outil de réduction des risques ?* Santé Publique. 2023;35(5):61–67.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). *Hooking the next generation: how the tobacco industry captures young customers*. Geneva: WHO; 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). *The misleading and industry-friendly narrative of Sweden’s “smoke-free” status*.

<sup>5</sup> Public Health Agency of Sweden, *Towards a smoke-free Sweden*.

<sup>6</sup> Jovanovikj B, Ross H, Fidanovski K, Kungl N. *Tobacco taxes and illicit trade in the EU*. HEPA Policy Note No. 6. Feb 2026.

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). *Raising taxes on tobacco*.

<sup>8</sup> Lalam N, Weinberger D, Lermenier A, Martineau H. *Monitoring the illicit tobacco market in France*. French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT); 2012.

**member companies including Philip Morris International and other tobacco and nicotine producers<sup>9</sup>.**

In a transparency document published by Philip Morris International, the company lists the business and trade associations in which it held a leadership role in 2024 through seats on the Board of Directors or Executive Committee, as well as its ten most significant memberships funded that year. **Confindustria appears on this list.<sup>11</sup> This connection raises serious concerns about potential conflicts of interest and impartiality, particularly as the EESC report reproduces several long-standing tobacco industry arguments opposing public health measures, including higher tobacco taxation - positions that contradict the well-established scientific consensus on the effectiveness of such measures.**

***“This clear conflict of interest violates Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which requires public health policies to be protected from tobacco industry influence. The conclusions of this report cannot be considered a legitimate contribution to the debate on this crucial directive. We demand that the EU fully uphold its obligations under the WHO FCTC, raise awareness of tobacco industry tactics used to influence policy-making, limit contact with the tobacco industry to what is strictly necessary for regulation, and make every interaction public”, states Cassandre Bigaignon, European and International Advocacy Officer at Contre-Feu, the French alliance against the tobacco industry.***

Tobacco taxation is one of the most effective tools to reduce smoking and save lives. Yet recent evidence shows that Europe is losing its leadership in tobacco control. ***“The WHO European region has the highest tobacco and nicotine use rates in the world, including worrying trends in nicotine use among young people. The revision of the TTD is a crucial opportunity to reverse this trend. The TTD must be ambitious, future-proof, and guided by independent scientific evidence and public health priorities, not by narratives promoted by the tobacco industry. EU institutions have a responsibility to ensure this process remains strong, transparent and protected from industry influence, and to deliver a directive that meaningfully reduces tobacco and nicotine consumption across Europe,” states Erin Roman, Director, Smoke Free Partnership.***

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<sup>9</sup> Confindustria Ancona. [Italian Tobacco Manufacturing S.r.l.](#)

<sup>10</sup> ANAFE – [Associazione Nazionale Autorizzazioni Fabbrianti Esportatori.](#)

<sup>11</sup> Philip Morris International (PMI). [Membership transparency.](#) 2024.

## Signatories:

- Alliance pour une Société sans Tabac – Belgium
- Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL) – EU
- Belgian Foundation Against Cancer – Belgium
- Contre-Feu, l'alliance contre l'industrie du tabac – France
- Comité National Contre le Tabagisme (CNCT) – France
- Danish Cancer Society – Denmark
- European Heart Network (EHN) – EU
- European Respiratory Society – EU
- Fondation Cancer – Luxembourg
- Health Funds for a Smokefree Netherlands – Netherlands
- Irish Heart Foundation – Ireland
- National Committee for the Prevention and Control of Tobacco Use in Spain (CNPT) – Spain
- No Fumadores – Spain
- Smoke Free Partnership – EU
- Sociedad Aragonesa Libre de Tabaco – Spain
- Smoking Cessation Group of the Spanish Society of General Practitioners – Spain

