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In fear of a reversal back to the spirits-drinking era – the 2004 decrease of Finnish alcohol taxes in public discourse

MATILDA HELLMAN & THOMAS KARLSSON

ABSTRACT
AIMS – The study investigates how the dissimilar tax reductions for different alcoholic beverages (spirits, wine and beer) were debated during the large tax decrease on alcoholic beverages in Finland in 2004. DESIGN AND DATA – The material comprises parliamentary proceedings and discussions, as well as daily press items (=105) from 2003–2004. Content analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, were performed. RESULTS – The parliament’s discussion on the unequal treatment of different beverage types concerned mostly the overall framing of a public health perspective, differentiating between consumption of “spirits” and “non-spirits”. The mass media framed the question mostly from the industry’s point of view. Neither a clear support of the total consumption model (excluding specification of beverage sort), nor a strong liberalisation model for alcohol policy were expressed in the materials. Varying stances were merely motivated within a paradigm of “changing drinking patterns”. CONCLUSIONS – The differing treatment of different beverage types, especially the large reductions in spirits taxes, was crystallised as the fundamental public health concern surrounding the decision to lower alcohol taxes. In the end of the article the authors ask whether the lack of clear stances other than the drinking pattern framing could imply that the Finnish alcohol policy debate has become more heterogeneous, neutralised or resigned in its basic nature.
KEYWORDS – alcohol tax decrease, Finland, alcohol policy and harms, mass media

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Introduction
The Finnish EU exemption on national quotas for private travellers’ imports of alcoholic beverages was lifted in 2004. Soon after, in May 2004, Estonia entered the European Union. In the summer of 2003, the prospects of large amounts of privately imported cheap spirits from Estonia taking over the Finnish alcohol market and raising the total alcohol consumption led the government to submit a parliamentary proposition to cut taxes on alcoholic beverages. The proposition was backed by a clear parliamentary majority some months later, and substantially lower alcohol taxes were introduced in March 2004. On average, taxes were reduced by 33%, but different beverage types were nowhere near equally treated. In order for Finland to compete with Estonian prices, the tax adjustment favoured vodkas and distilled spirits (tax reduction 44%). This led to a lot of media discussion and political debate during the autumn of 2003 and the spring of 2004 (Karlsson et al. 2004). This
study analyses how the uneven treatment of different beverages was tackled in the public debate at the time of the tax decrease.

Finnish drinking culture has historically been dry, dominated by intoxication-oriented consumption of spirits and beer and with a low consumption of wine (Mäkelä 2011). Alcohol policy has traditionally favoured lower alcohol content beverages: lighter alcoholic beverages (less than 4.7% alcohol by volume, mostly beer and cider) are available in grocery stores, kiosks, and petrol stations, whereas stronger products are only sold off-premise in the monopoly stores. Also, advertising is forbidden for products with an alcohol content exceeding 22%, and the purchase age for alcoholic beverages is lower for beer and wine than for distilled spirits (18/20 years). Protecting the young from strong spirits has been one argument for treating the different alcohol beverages differently, but there is a general lack of research into the rationales behind and effects of the different treatment of different beverages (see Mäkelä et al. 2011).

There are two strong views of conceptualising the effects of alcohol policies on consumption levels and harms. One holds that interventions into the consumption level of whole populations is generally a more efficient way of influencing alcohol-related harm, compared with care of serious individual cases. This thought was explicitly expressed in Bruun et al.’s classic book *Alcohol control policies in public health perspective* (Bruun et al. 1975) and has been a guiding light for interventions in the name of public health. Regulations within such a paradigm are made in terms of abstract risks defined on an aggregate level (Tigerstedt 1999). Another way of approaching the steering of consumption among populations is viewing policy effects in a paradigm of drinking patterns. This paradigm involves attempts to specify the relationship between particular ways of drinking and particular forms of alcohol-related harm, also taking into account implications of these relationships for policy options and strategies (Ibid.). This paradigm distinguishes between low-risk, hazardous and harmful consumption of different beverages and by different groups of the population.

The idea that drinking patterns can be changed in a more favourable direction (oriented towards wine and light beverages) is an important ingredient in the long-lived Nordic "dream" of a better order. This goal is epitomised by the wine-drinking cultures of Southern Europe (Olsson 1990, 193; Horverak in the present journal issue). In this vision, alcohol would play a central yet less dramatic role, with less intoxicated drinking and alcohol-related violence. Research has shown that during the 1990s the Finnish daily newspapers had to some extent supported the liberalisation of alcohol policy in terms of such a scenario (Törrönen 2002).

In the 10–15 years prior to the tax reduction, the alcohol policy debate had merely circled around liberalisations of control mechanisms. Initiatives of such a dissolution of alcohol policy tools were suggested either by domestic actors or imposed by novel international policy situations (EU membership). The situation in 2003–2004 was presented as the nation facing an inevitable threat. The dispute therefore entailed the assessment of risk and of technical solutions including the favouring
of stronger products by the tax reduction. The public nourishing of a myth of a transformation towards a more civilised (Europeanised wine-) drinking pattern in a liberalised context (see Törrönen 2002) came to a head. Now that spirits were to become cheap, was the boozing clodhopper Finn encouraged to return just as Finland had entered the liberalised EU era and was hoping to embrace a more civilised drinking pattern?

In order to establish the different perspectives, we have analysed parliamentary debates and press reporting from 2003 and 2004. We look into how different voices negotiate the question of accessibility and availability with an emphasis on how the dissimilar tax reductions for different strengths of alcoholic beverages were framed, counter-argued and motivated. The objective is to discern the governing views and interests represented in the Finnish alcohol question at a time when the alcohol policies were fluctuating. Before accounting for the study setup and results, we will discuss the alcohol political situation and earlier views on how to counteract alcohol-related harm.

**Alcohol policy changes and discourses**

The threat of mass private import of alcoholic beverages in 2004 was far from the first challenge imposed on the Finnish alcohol policy system. The biggest restructuring had taken place some ten years before: Finland’s EU membership in 1995 had dissolved the state monopoly on the production, import, export and wholesale of alcoholic beverages. Only the off-premise retail alcohol monopoly Alko was maintained for alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content exceeding 4.7% by volume (Alavaikko & Österberg 2000). After 1995, alcoholic beverages became more widely accessible, and many changes in the alcohol administration have further led to weakening of the Finnish alcohol policy structure.

The Government Resolution on Strategies in Alcohol Policy, which has been directing the national alcohol policy for the past decade, was issued on October 9, 2003. The explicit purpose of the resolution was given as the development of a future alcohol policy for a situation in which alcohol consumption and harmful alcohol-related social and health effects were on the increase. Six weeks prior to the adoption of the resolution, the government had submitted the bill to the Parliament proposing the large reduction of alcohol taxes in 2004, averaging 33 per cent (Government Bill 80/2003). The propositions of the bill were an overturn of previous policies of alcohol availability. For most of the second half of the twentieth century, real prices of alcoholic beverages were practically kept at the very same high level that they had already reached back in 1951 (Mäkelä & Österberg 2009). The different percentages of the alcohol tax reductions in March 2004 are displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcohol Beverage</th>
<th>Before Tax Cuts</th>
<th>After Tax Cuts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vodka</td>
<td>69 cents</td>
<td>45 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortified Wines</td>
<td>55 cents</td>
<td>36 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Wines</td>
<td>51 cents</td>
<td>33 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Beer</td>
<td>67 cents</td>
<td>46 cents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the tax cuts in 2004, one centilitre of ethyl alcohol bought off the premise cost at least 69 cents in vodka, 55 cents in fortified wines and 51 cents in table wines. For medium beer the corresponding figure was 67 cents when the bottle was bought from the monopoly store, but considerably cheaper when it was bought from an ordinary grocery store. After the tax cut, the cheapest prices of ethyl alcohol bought off
the premise were found in fortified wines and in vodka (41 and 42 cents, respectively), whereas ethyl alcohol in table wines cost 48 cents per centilitre. For medium beer, which is predominantly sold through ordinary grocery stores, the corresponding figure was at its lowest 25 cents, and prices below 40 cents per centilitre are quite common (Mäkelä & Österberg 2009, 555–556).

The government’s interpretation of the situation was a question of imperative coercion, the worst-case scenario being a high consumption of alcohol from the Estonian market at the expense of domestic business. Even if many critical voices were raised against the tax reduction (such as those pointing out that Sweden was not reacting to the abolition of quotas in the same manner), the threat of growing imports was perceived as serious enough to be viewed as a real one.

We assumed that the public discussions on the tax reduction in 2004 would make fruitful investigative material for two main reasons: a) the opinions and views formulated were likely to channel presumptions that reveal some governing conceptualisation of the harm caused by the products, and their position in commerce and drinking culture in Finland at the time of the tax reduction; b) on the basis of the thought that public myths and images in the mass media play different roles in different times depending on where the policy process and the public understanding of the matter is historically situated (see Storgaard 2000), we assumed that the perspectives and voices of political debate and media texts would have different functions depending on the progress of the question. The second point applies both to opinions about the broader picture of how alcohol policy should be handled and to specific views on the tax decrease on alcoholic beverages.

The object of our study, conceptualised as ‘public discussion’, can naturally be tracked to a Habermasian idea of a public arena in which different parties negotiate different ways of handling societal issues. Different interest groups will have different views on and interests in any given question. In the parliament, the political

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Table 1. Reductions in alcohol excise duties and prices of alcoholic beverages in the alcohol monopoly outlets in March 1, 2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beverage category</th>
<th>Tax reduction</th>
<th>Decrease in off-premise price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vodkas</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other distilled spirits</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate products</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long drinks*</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cider</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Long drinks are a type of pre-mixed drinks.

Source: Government Bill 80/2003; Mäkelä & Österberg 2009 (Table 1)
representatives of the citizens discuss and decide how to handle specific questions in accordance with different world views. The mass media’s role in the public arena is strongly disputed, but in view of our very question, we should mention the basic roles of checking on the government, furthering societal objectives, representing and counterpoising (see Curran 1997, 28). The media gathers and brings to the fore certain specific voices – in the best of scenarios, lots of them. It informs about circumstances and happenings, but it should, in line with a basic journalistic ethical code, also question the hegemony of the power and the elite, although this is accomplished with variable success (Alt- heide 1984).

Previous research has shown that during the 1970s and 1980s, the Finnish press was rather supportive of the state governed restrictive alcohol policy and its aim to curb total consumption. By the end of the 1980s, a change was noted in the press reporting (Pii spa 1991). Törrönen (2002) has demonstrated how during the 1990s the main newspapers started to support a more liberal alcohol policy, presenting the most fundamental moral oppositions as those between state and market. In this context, the abolition of import quotas was also expressed as an important means of liberalisation (Ibid, 12). Emphasis was put on a strived-for alcohol political structural change. This is a trend evident also in other Nordic newspapers at the same time (Simpura et al. 1999). In the late 1990s, however, the Finnish press begins to show less confidence in the idea that more liberal alcohol policies could help make drinking patterns more continental. The consumption and related harms had continued to rise after Finland’s entry into the EU, and people did not seem to get drunk to a lesser degree than before (Tör rönen & Karlsson 2004). The public debate thus appears to have been moving back to favouring a more restrictive alcohol policy structure in order to modify overall consumption. Although the trends discerned in Törrönen’s (2002) study are based on a material solely consisting of editorials, which is not directly comparable to ours, it is safe to say that by the time of the 2003 tax decrease proposition, the press should potentially have developed a large palette of conceptualisations, journalistic codes and narratives, for portraying and analysing alcohol policy scenarios.

Material and proceedings

To map the actors and turns in the public discussion on the different treatment of distinct alcoholic beverages, we have studied the arguments applied in public documentation for motivating and opposing the decision to treat beverages of varying strength differently. Parliamentary proceedings and discussions1 and daily press items2 (n=105) from 2003–2004 constitute our material. By content and discourse analyses we have discerned the primary lines of reasoning.

The parliamentary texts regarding alcohol taxation were gathered from the parliament’s archives3. The key phrase “alcohol beverage tax” was inserted in the search engine for the years 2003–2004. The search rendered 28 hits: 3 Government Bills, 3 Private Member’s Bills, 1 Proposal for action, 5 Oral questions, 8 Written questions and 8 Committee reports. Of the Government Bills, we included only the proposition to lower alcohol taxes (Gov-
ernment Bill 80/2003). In addition to the proposition itself, we studied the legislative proceedings of the bill and concentrated specifically on analysing the plenary debates. The speakers and addresses of the plenary debates on alcohol taxation were categorised according to their faction and whether they represented the parties in power or in opposition. We also classified their standpoints towards the bill and examined them to see if beverage type appears in the argumentation. The overall aim was to map the references made to the differing treatment of different strengths of beverages and to flesh out the reappearing discourses of the debate.

The mass media texts were selected from Alko’s systematically collected press archive from two different periods: the first sample (=63) is from the period of 12 August to 26 August, 2003, which coincided with the time of the governmental budget proposition including the decrease of alcohol taxes. The second corpus of texts (=42) is from 20 February to 2 March, 2004, or the time around when the tax increase was carried out. A majority, 70%, of the press items are from daily newspapers (including unaffiliated, politically affiliated and local newspapers), while 19% were published in tabloids and 11% in financial newspapers. The texts were grouped according to whose perspective they represented as well as by the voices channelled through citations. We then singled out texts referring to different treatment of the different strengths of alcoholic beverages (34 texts or 32% of all items) and analysed them separately in order to find how the treatment of different strengths of alcoholic beverages was referred to in the material, but also how the discussions of the two text samples differed from one another regarding actors and their standpoints in this specific question. We view all the published items under study as a result of editorial consideration regardless of their genre (articles, short notices, editorials, or letters to the editor). Most of the texts were journalistic articles or editorials. A minority consisted of letters to the editor or were chronicles that expressed a personal stance on the matter (=14 of the texts were chronicles or letters to the editor, of which only one was found in the spring sample).*

In the stage of the analysis we started out by concentrating on quantifiable aspects in the texts by counting perspectives and voices in the reporting. After that we conducted a more meaning-based analysis of the ways in which the different stances were expressed in the texts. The units that we discerned in the quantitative inquiries were a) the main perspective applied,
and, b) the voices channelled through the reporting. When it comes to the perspectives applied we hold that each journalistic text includes some sort of overarching perspective on the matters discussed, a core point or dominating theme (Sulkunen & Törrönen 1997). We discerned this perspective through our interpretation of the idea of the text as a whole, including the choice of headline, inserts, pictures and tone of text. When it comes to the voices channelled in the press items we have counted the people cited directly in the texts counting each speaker only once. Both the overviews of perspectives and the speakers are separated between different types of newspapers (daily, tabloid, financial) and between the two samples (autumn 2003 and spring 2004). The importance of separating newspaper genres and time frames is obvious in view of the institutional, economic, professional and political circumstances influencing the selection, processing and shaping of journalistic content (e.g. Altheide & Snow 1979). The perspectives applied can be seen as results of journalistic assessments of a certain “general interest” of the matter in view of the characteristics of the news channel and the presumed and targeted audience. When it comes to the reporting on a single political event or question (in this case the tax decrease), the press reporting will serve different functions in conceptualising the state of affairs in the different stages of progress of the question (see Hellman 2011).

To begin with, we discerned general trends in both the parliament debates and newspaper items. We then investigated the discussion which specifically addressed the different treatment of different beverages. We will account for the results in the same order of appearance.

Actors and standpoints in the policy discussion

The governmental proposal created a parliamentary debate. Before the law proposal (Government Bill 80/2003vp) was submitted to the parliament in October 2003, alcohol issues and the possible lowering of alcohol taxes had already been brought up by MPs in parliamentary debates and written questions to the government. In 2003 and 2004, eight written questions were submitted that in some way concerned the government’s bill to lower alcohol taxes.

In addition to written questions, two Private Member’s Bills were submitted to the parliament in October 2003 to compete with the government proposition. Both bills voiced concern over the large reduction in spirits taxes and instead proposed more moderate tax reductions. One of the bills (Bill 122/2003vp) proposed that spirits taxes should not be reduced at all, whereas the other (Bill 123/2003vp) advocated a more gradual and reasonable reduction. The main concern in both bills was that lighter alcoholic beverages would lose ground if the taxes on spirits were to be decreased to the extent that the government proposed. In 2004 another Private Member’s Bill proposed increased alcohol taxation, especially on spirits taxes (Bill 115/2004vp). The main argumentation in these bills was that a continued favouring of lighter alcoholic beverages is preferable in view of public health.

The government proposal was put to the parliament on October 8, 2003. The proposition raised strong emotions in the preliminary debate already, and as many as
40 MPs (of 200) took the floor. Altogether 55 addresses were made in the preliminary debate, divided equally between the opposition (Koskinen 2003) and the parties in power (Iltalehti, August 22, 2003). The centre-left government defended the proposition by stating that the lowering of alcohol taxes was unavoidable in the current situation: the alternative would lead to even greater problems such as increased and organised bootlegging, especially in the capital area, as well as to a loss in the alcohol tax base to the Estonian market. Tax rates on different beverage categories were already discussed, although this topic did not dominate the debate. One third of the MPs taking part in the debate mentioned the consumption of different beverage types, alcohol strength and the large tax reduction on spirits.

During the first debate on the proposition in parliament on November 26, 2003, the discussions were lively, although fewer MPs voiced their opinions on the proposition than in the preliminary debate (27 vs. 40). This time, however, beverage types and the large tax cuts on spirits had become pivotal in the debate. Almost half of all addresses commented on the differing tax reductions by different beverage type, and the opposition was particularly concerned about the large tax cuts on distilled spirits. Even those defending the government’s proposition recognised the decision as problematic, but maintained that the alternative – that bootlegged and “dangerous” spirits from Estonia would be sold on the black market in the capital area of Helsinki – would be an even worse scenario.

The second and decisive debate on the government’s proposition was held on December 2, 2003. This time, the passing of the bill was more or less a fact. Although the government’s proposition had by then been criticised both in the mass media and the parliament and two parallel bills had been put forward as alternative options, the passage of the government’s bill was never seriously jeopardised. However, different beverage types and the large reductions in spirits taxes had crystallised as the fundamental question in the passing of the bill. The favouring of spirits and vodka was the strategy opposed the most by the MPs. All the addresses of the final debate concerned the large reduction in spirits taxes. Six out of the seven MPs who addressed the parliament during the final debate criticised the government’s bill in this respect. The final vote was, however, very decisively in favour of the bill, which was passed with an almost two-thirds majority.

Actors and standpoints in press reporting

On 21 August 2003, the Finnish press published the first news on the government’s 2004 budget proposal. The biggest daily, Helsingin Sanomat, underscored the suggestion of a tax decrease on different alcoholic beverages by headlining its main piece as “Government to reduce tax on spirits, beer and wine” (Ahtiainen & Hautamäki 2003). That day the Finnish newspapers were filled with descriptive tables and diagrams on how the tax decrease would affect actual prices on different beverages. This was portrayed as a new situation for the alcohol consumer (Ahtiainen & Hautamäki 2003; Heikkilä & Varjus 2003; Iltalehti 21 August 2003; Kauhanen 2003). The proposition was the starting shot of extensive speculation, on how the tax reduction would influence purchase behaviour.
On the basis of reading the texts and assessing the idea of the articles as a whole (content, heading, picture, etc.), we grouped the one main governing perspective represented in the reporting. In 6 of 105 cases more than one perspective was equally portrayed to the extent that we ascribed them more than one perspective. The grouping of texts into perspectives answers the question of “Whose interest does the text predominantly serve and/or represent through its information; framing; core theme and narrative?” The perspectives found in the texts were: i) the consumer’s perspective, ii) the industry’s perspective (Alko4, retail sale, shipping companies, beverage industry, restaurants), iii) politics and society (questions of “general interest” concerning politics, public health, societal issues) and iv) research (statements of article substantiated by referring to scientific knowledge). The “politics and society” group includes basically all perspectives which do not contain a consumer or industry angle and which do not advocate a research-based perspective. All perspectives are naturally to some extent overlapping and results of the researchers’ interpretations. We have strived at utmost consistency when ascribing the perspective(s) to the texts.

In the press material as a whole, the public health perspective on the consequences of consumption and developments of harm played a rather diminutive role. The dominating perspective is that of the commercial constellation of consumer + industry, or how the consumer and the industry perceive, work out, or adjust to the new situation. This perspective (industry + consumer) applied to 61% of the cases. An overview of the composition of the different types of perspectives within this frame of interpretation and grouping the material is displayed in table 2.

The different emphasis on the different perspectives in the data sets displayed in table 2 may reflect an acceptance of the policy strategy in the public consciousness over time. In the first set of reporting, the meaning-making role of the media is more important: journalistic texts describe and explain why the proposition has been made, who is affected and what will be the consequences and the prospects of tackling alcohol import. All future scenarios are still open for discussion and opinions. The situation is described and explained more or less to the same extent within the category of “politics and society” as in the combined consumer and industry perspectives. Considering the number of different types of questions grouped into the framing of “politics and society”, the dominance of the first two categories becomes even more obvious. On the whole,
the press coverage frames the question as a matter of the industry and the consumer almost twice as often than as a question of politics and society (61% compared to 33%).

Different options for curbing the developments, both in terms of consumption and private import, were still being discussed at the time of the first sample of press items. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, for example, suggested imposing a compulsory reporting system on people exceeding certain quotas when they arrive from Tallinn (Turun Sanomat, 22 August 2003; Hyvärinen 2003). The National Product Control Agency (STTV), which oversees and steers the implementation of the Alcohol Act feared that Estonia’s EU membership would lead to a big black market of alcohol sold to the restaurants (Elonen 2003). The STTV discussed measures to increase supervision. The liberalisation perspective of the 1990s in the dailies’ editorials (Törrönen 2002) is absent, and serious concerns are voiced about the impaired alcohol political tools of the state and the possible harmful effects of the decrease in prices.

The consumer’s perspective is especially visible in tabloid reporting, in which the future prices and possibilities of buying large amounts of cheap alcohol are discussed in terms of price changes in the Alko retail stores and grocery shops and in relation to other countries (Ilta-Lehti, 22 August 2003), but also in terms of consequences for the restaurant business (Laitinen 2003). The industry actors represented in the texts are mostly breweries disappointed with the favouring of stronger alcohol content beverages. What they had hoped for was a 70 per cent decrease in beer taxes. The director of the Olvi brewery calls the rationale of tax reductions a setback for the brewing industry (Sahiluoma 2003).

By the time of the second data set, the future consequences, which are most discussed within the framing of “politics and society”, have already been covered in the public for some time. The reporting now concentrates on the concrete consequences for retail shops, producers and the shipping industry. The role of the media becomes increasingly that of corroborating and harmonising. This is achieved by focusing on practical arrangements. It is reported that the retailers will show a huge loss if they are stuck with large stocks of beverages bought under the old tax regime, so they need to sell as much of their stock as possible before 1 March (Iisalmensanomat, 20 February 2004). This will lead not only to a perceived increased consumption but also to a huge amount of beverages being delivered during the night of 1 March. The breweries will use every single truck that they have. One piece mentions that even the managing director at Hartwall brewery is personally involved in the distribution during the historical "tax night" (Haapio 2004; Herrala 2004). The restaurants’ situation is described as especially tricky: because they have other expenses and they cannot directly decrease the prices to the extent that would attract a lot of customers. They therefore fear that people will start drinking more in their homes (Arvinen 2004; Aitamurto 2004). Also, some pieces discuss the prices to be adjusted on cruise ships by the shipping industry (Filpus 2004; KauppaLehti, 26 February 2004, 64).

The division of angles in the report-
ing varies according to the profiles of the newspapers. The differences are displayed in Figure 1. Not very surprisingly, the dominating perspective of the financial newspapers is that of the industry, whereas the tabloids concentrate on the consumer perspective, what the new prices will be, where it will be most affordable to buy alcohol and how much one can import as a private person.

More than half of the reporting angles in the newspaper pieces were those of the consumer and/or the industry, and there was a clear correlation between the profile of the publication and the reporting angle. In the parliamentary discussions, the division of “roles” between the standpoints of various sectors (economic interests, consumption friendliness, public health) and stances (party adherence, geographical representation, etc.) was not that obvious. Here, all the foci served the general political assignment to curb consumption, harms and other negative consequences, although there was an awareness of the market-political motivations of the decision. That beverages of different strengths are treated differently receives more attention in the parliamentary discussion (43%) than in the media debate (32%).

Table 3. The voices channelled through the reporting in the two samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOICES IN THE TEXTS</th>
<th>12.8–26.8.2003</th>
<th>20.2–2.3.2004</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>38 (35%)</td>
<td>34 (35%)</td>
<td>72 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officials /government</td>
<td>24 (22%)</td>
<td>11 (11%)</td>
<td>35 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alko</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>24 (25%)</td>
<td>30 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>16 (16%)</td>
<td>19 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers and experts</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
<td>14 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>10 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>13 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others*</td>
<td>19 (18%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>23 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>108 (100%)</td>
<td>98 (100%)</td>
<td>206 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The group of “Others” consists of representatives of NGO:s, labor unions, writers of letters to the editor, the newspaper itself.
Reporting voices

In order to discover whose views were directly represented through the texts and who was given space in the reporting, we mapped the speakers in each newspaper text. By speakers we refer to people directly cited or expressing a view in the texts (interview object, author of a letter to the editor, newspaper expressing its own views in an editorial, etc.). We categorised and counted the different voices into different groups of actors. Table 3 portrays the voices channelled through the texts in the two samples.

On the whole, the picture correlates rather well with the analysis of the perspectives applied. The analysis further supports the view of the functions of reporting at different times. In the first sample civil servants, politicians, experts and other people who work with these questions in a non-profit context state their views and knowledge on the proposition. Later, when the law was being passed, their voices had less to contribute, as the background and explanations were already quite well known. In the second sample, the consumers, the industry and ALKO are in the centre, adjusting to the new situation. Here, the perspectives of public health and overall alcohol consumption and harm remain in the background. The question arises whether the media should accept the outcome of the process once the parliamentary decision has been made, or if it should continue to question, criticise and present competing scenarios.

As the reporting perspectives varied a lot between the different newspaper genres, we also separated the material on the persons expressing their views according to the different types of newspapers. This categorisation is displayed in table 4.

Most varying voices are channelled in the daily newspapers, where civil servants and other authorities (18), researchers (8) and politicians (8) make up 34% of the speakers. The corresponding sum of these categories in the financial newspapers is 9% and in the tabloids, 25%. The dominance of the consumer perspective in the tabloids is even more obvious considering that we left the tabloids’ many interactive web questions and mobile phone questions out of the material. This data would have represented an additional group, which did not feature with the dailies and the financial newspapers, namely the readers of the papers.

Discourse on beverage type

It is hardly surprising that the strongest
opposition to the excise tax cut came in the parliament from the political opposition. Several of the MPs of the parties in power also voiced their concerns over the bill, especially about the big cut in spirits tax. At the same time, however, they maintained that Finland was in a true Catch-22 situation and had only bad options to choose from. According to the defenders of the bill, the big tax reduction was the lesser evil. This argument seemed to "settle in" and was accepted by a majority of the parliamentarians by the time of the voting.

As the bill was prepared by the Ministry of Finance, public health and social welfare issues were secondary in the preparation. They had to be considered, but they were not the main concern. This becomes clear in the preamble but also in the speech by the Minister of Finance, when he presented the bill in the plenary. According to Minister Antti Kalliomäki, the two most important objectives of the bill were to keep the tax revenue as high as possible and to maintain as many of the jobs related to the drinks industry as possible. Kalliomäki states that: ".../ employment, including economy, public economy and economy in a wider sense as well as the prevention of a grey-market economy and downright criminality are the reasons, the straitjacket that ties the government to these propositions of tax decreases" (PTK 73/2003 vp). The large decrease in spirits taxes is thus motivated by the huge differences in spirits prices between Finland and Estonia. Since this was the point of departure for the proposition, it may be that the parliamentary debate was framing dissentients by a critical public health discourse.

Among the members of the opposition, the main argument against the government proposition was the drastic cut in spirits tax. The opposition's standpoint is clear in the Greens MP's Osmo Soininvaara's address in the Parliament: "There is also another substantial change to the current alcohol policy buried in this proposition, and its effects might be as big [as the large tax reductions]. [T]his seems to be that the government has determined to turn Finland again into a spirits-drinking country" (PTK 73/2003 vp). Other critique raised against the bill deplored that taxes were cut at once and not stepwise, and that public health and social welfare aspects had not been taken into consideration when preparing the bill. As a more dangerous drink, the opposition claimed, spirits caused violence, poisonings and deaths. There was also the fear that lighter beverages, such as beer and especially wine, were in danger of becoming less popular. This could stop the Finns' drinking habits from evolving in a favourable – continental and less binge-oriented – direction. At the one end of the spectrum we find continental, civilised and less dangerous drinking, which Finland is portrayed as having already ‘achieved’ or being close to achieving to some extent. At the other end we find a troubled past with barbaric spirits drinking, and this is what the society does not want to and should not return to.

The MPs' fear of making spirits cheaper than ever before was nevertheless not big enough to generate any greater opposition when the future of the bill was finally in the ballot. Only 22% voted against it in the final vote. The result does, however, give a somewhat skewed picture of the debate in the plenary, as most of the addresses viewed the sizeable tax cut on spirits as especially problematic.
At the same time as the policy arena discussed the tax cut and its public health consequences, a great many journalistic texts only concentrated on comparing the prices. We excluded these items from our material for the second round of analysis because they did not contain any information about the motives or consequences of treating different sorts of alcoholic beverages differently. Press items discussing the pros and cons of a differing treatment of the different strengths of alcoholic beverages were singled out of the media texts samples. These 34 (=n) texts were analysed separately.

Overall, references to beverage types pertain almost solely to two sorts of drinks. First and foremost: beer, the interests of which are represented by the largest Finnish alcohol producers, the breweries, but also by retail sale, marketing and the shipping industry. The other beverage type mentioned throughout the material is the Finnish national vodka of Koskenkorva, a benchmark product in relation to which prices and prospects of increased drinking are discussed.

There are slightly more texts discussing the unequal treatment of different beverage types in the first data set (38%) than in the second one (24%). This is perhaps because the discussion on the logics to treat beverages differently is part of an explanatory debate when the decision to lower alcohol taxes was being taken (the first data set). It might also be more relevant for stakeholders to make their voices heard in the media during a political process when there is not yet a decision but only a proposal. This is also supported by that only one of the 14 letters to the editor expressing the author’s opinions was found in the second sample.

Discussing alternatives and expressing opinions may be considered “outdated” at the time of the reporting of the second data set, when society needs to adapt to the consequences of the decision.

Press items of great interest for our objectives were those speculating about the future of alcohol consumption, purchase behaviour and alcohol-related harm in the wake of different treatment of the different beverages. The future scenarios concern levels of alcohol consumption (purchase), drinking behaviour or patterns (how, where, what sort); amounts of private import; development of the alcoholic beverage industry; and consequences of alcohol-related harms.

A researcher at the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) reckons that the change will be more significant for those about to be introduced to new drinking habits at the time of the price changes. These include young people (Leppänen 2003). Alcohol-related harm will increase, predicts another alcohol researcher (Pirilä-Mäntäri 2003). However, it is not the types of drinks consumed that are decisive in terms of harms, but the total consumption, her colleague points out, foreseeing an increase in alcohol poisonings (Länsi-Suomi, 22 February 2004). This is the only time in the media material that the total consumption model is explicitly referred to. In another interview an alcohol researcher expects purchases from abroad to rise during the summer months but calm down with the autumn storms (Heikkilä & Varjus 2003).

The main threat predicted in terms of drinking behaviour is that people will start drinking more spirits, while the cut...
in beer taxes is believed to result in increased alcohol consumption among the youth (Pirilä-Mänttäri 2003, Toivonen 2003), which might be a gateway to alcoholism (Berggren 2003). Changes in the way that people drink is also feared by the restaurant sector; their worst fear is that people will stay at home and drink, or that large amounts of alcohol are imported and sold at restaurants which neglect to pay taxes and social insurance contributions (Laitinen 2003). One restaurant owner expresses the view that taxes on wine should be lowered so that Finns would start consuming alcohol in a different manner (Airaksinen 2004).

A district superintendent of the Alko stores estimates that there will be visible changes between various sales points in the different geographical areas of Finland. Consumption always rises when spirits are cheaper, he says, also pointing out that Finns seldom purchase alcohol for months in advance but rather for a week at a time (Kauhanen 2003). Another Alko representative thinks the reform will affect purchase patterns. He says that lighter products have had something of a boom recently, but this could be affected by the heavy tax reduction on other products (Arvinen 2004). While Alko estimates a small increase in the consumption of spirits, the director of the company is satisfied with the tax cut, as their biggest fear had been that organised crime would start smuggling alcohol and act as an intermediary. In such circumstances, illegal sale points would win ground if the taxes had remained unchanged (Nurmi 2004).

The conceptualisation of policies and consequences in terms of a drinking pattern-model is especially expressed by representatives of the drinks industry. The director of Finlandia vodka argues that a Europeanisation of Finnish drinking habits – away from binging – is a favourable development (Säntti 2003). The logistics director of the Swedish-owned V&S Group is pleased with the tax reform, but argues that it would have been even better if grocery stores could sell wines so that the threshold to import from the Estonian market would be even higher (Turkki 2003). On the whole the industry sector advocates a wide availability of alcohol and lighter drinks in particular.

The breweries estimate that the industry will be adversely affected by the 32% decrease in beer taxes; they had hoped for a 70% decrease in order to be able to compete with the Estonian prices. They predict higher import levels overall because the tax cut is not big enough to tackle private alcohol import (Pimiä 2003; Rönkkö 2004; Komulainen & Pantsu 2003). In the worst case, according to alcoholic beverage producer Altia, the producers, restaurants and tax payers will lose out in the end (Heikkilä & Varjus 2003). "It is a peculiar alcohol monopoly system where young people are encouraged to drink more spirits”, says a representative of the Brewing Industry Federation (Tuuri 2003).

To conclude, the parliamentary discussion on the unequal treatment of different beverage types concerns mostly the overall framing of a traditional public health perspective of the Finnish alcohol policy. However, when the different percentages of the tax decreases are discussed, fears emerge with an underlying assumption of spirits causing more harm to public health. Alcoholic beverages are consequently grouped into two categories,
"spirits" and "non-spirits". The beverage category with the biggest tax cuts was also the one which all political parties considered the most dangerous for public health and order. In the mass media, the question is strongly framed as an industry sector issue, and there is plenty of reporting on how the market players involved in the selling of different beverages will meet the new challenges.

Discussion and conclusions

Our study examines a turbulent time in Finnish alcohol policy. The aim of actively counteracting private imports from Estonia made the discrepancies in prices between different alcoholic beverages – and a conceptualisation of their effects on public health – an obvious focus of the debate.

In the two sets of material (parliamentary debates and newspaper texts) we found a general awareness of and an expressed fear over the consequences of favouring strong alcoholic beverages. There was a clear underlying assumption that cheap spirits would lead to a general increase in alcohol consumption; in youth consumption; in consumption among high consumers; and would cause more alcohol-related harm. However, the two materials emphasise different aspects of the question. This is because the different public arenas have different roles and because the material reflects different time frames of the tax-cutting process.

We found that the role division between the opposition and the ruling parties is vague in the political debate. This did not come as a huge surprise as Finnish politicians are known to vote “according to conscience” and not according to party adherence in alcohol policy matters. The opposition expressed the most fear that lighter beverages, such as beer and especially wine, were in danger of losing popularity to distilled products. This was seen as hindering the Finnish drinking habits from evolving in a favourable direction, that is, stop them becoming more continental and less binge-oriented. The parliamentary debate repeatedly made the point that the decision to favour spirits in the tax reduction could again make Finland into a spirits-drinking country. Throughout the parliamentary discourse we see the MPs taking the role of potentially steering and affecting alcohol consumption and harms by objecting to the favouring of strong beverages and by arguing for a more restrictive policy and more efforts to curb a negative development. The MPs are aware of a need to consider many aspects, such as the threat of tourist imports of cheap alcohol from Estonia and the fear of an emerging black market of alcoholic beverages. It is therefore quite surprising that although the adverse effects of a large decrease in spirits taxes was clearly articulated in the debate, the decision to lower the taxes was still made with such a large majority (two thirds). Nevertheless, public health justifications are raised in all the parliamentary addresses.

For their part, the newspapers channel a range of standpoints, but the public health and alcohol political views (=included in the perspective of politics & society) are fewer than those of the industry and the consumers. Overall, only 33% of the perspectives belong to the category of "politics and society", which is an enlightening and educative perspective of general interests. Such views are mostly expressed in the first sample of texts, which precede
the parliamentary vote in favour of the tax decrease. The journalistic mechanism of creating an audience through certain discourses and combinations of perspectives is especially obvious in the correlation of the newspaper profiles with the news angles.

The most striking difference between the policy documents and parliamentary discussions on the one hand, and newspaper coverage on the other hand, was hence the dominance of the industry and consumer perspectives in the media reporting. What the media highlighted in both sets of press items were the consequences of the consumer’s possibilities to buy cheap alcohol and the repercussions on the beverage and restaurant industry both in terms of business prospects and more practical issues (storage, distribution, pricing, etc.).

In the parliament, the discussion is framed by an abstract “bigger picture” (harms at a population level), whereas the details of different sorts and brands and small practical questions are discussed in the newspapers. The difference stems partly from the different roles of the two arenas (representative legislative power versus informing and enlightening the broad masses). Also, it matters at what stage of the process the discussion takes place, as this will impact the amount of critique expressed towards the governmental bill. For example, by the time of the second parliamentary debate, the outcome could already be seen, and in the second media material the decision had already been taken. What the reporting could do was portray and mediate the practical consequences.

There is little public debate in terms of the total consumption model. While public health and social welfare considerations were articulated in the parliamentary debate and the bill itself, they remained clearly secondary in the law-drafting process. At the same time, neither parliamentary debates nor the mass media material show any clear stances in favour of a liberalisation. They do not advance any such concrete suggestions that were found in an earlier study about press editorials in the 1990s. A possible explanation is that in 2003–2004, such a liberalising perspective is channelled into and solely motivated by the drinking pattern discourse. Openly to suggest techniques to liberalise the availability of alcohol may just not be judged correct (politically or morally) when a large price cut is on its way. The role of the mass media – and of the daily press in particular – in critically judging political power agrees rather better with a discussion on the rationales underlying the political decision. After all, the government’s proposition and the whole process already entail a huge liberalisation of availability, which the press could not swallow without considerations and justifications of some sort.

In the absence of a clear stance arguing for a total consumption restriction model or for a distinctly liberalising design, the question arises whether the material actually shows that alcohol policy matters have become a more heterogeneous mixture of stances and voices in contemporary Finland. A natural follow-up question is if this implies some overall neutralisation or moderation of a national alcohol policy paradigm, or maybe a resignation over the question’s complexity and multiple perspectives. It could also be that since the tax decrease was framed as a fiscal question from the beginning, the focus on the
differences between types of beverages became the centre of attention and the public health perspective was doomed to be channelled through the drinking pattern perspective.

On the basis of the material analysed for this study, the general opinion seemed to settle into an acceptance of the government’s view that lowering the spirits taxes was in the end the only way to keep the tax base in Finland and to secure domestic jobs related to the drinks industry. Paradoxically enough, favouring lighter products is seen as an effective alcohol political tool for curbing consumption and negative consequences in the material as a whole. The different treatment of different beverage types and the large reductions in spirits taxes were crystallised as the fundamental questions in the passing of the bill. Even if these ideas resonated in the public debate in 2003–2004, alcohol taxes have since been raised four times: in 2008, 2009 and 2012. This is partly for fiscal reasons, but also due to increased alcohol consumption and higher levels of alcohol-related harms.

Declaration of Interest None.

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NOTES
1 These include written and oral questions on alcohol taxation posed in parliament in 2003 and the Government proposition to lower alcohol taxation (80/2003) and two parallel Private Member’s Bills.
2 Press items from the Alko press archive from August 12 to August 26, 2003 and February 20 to March 2, 2004. The material was collected from 12 daily newspapers, and a complementing collection of press items was conducted by Oy Observer Finland Ab.
3 Accessible on the Internet: http://www.eduskunta.fi
4 Alko, the retail sale monopoly for beverages over 4.7% alcohol content, is state-owned.
5 STTV is currently called The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira)

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