

Results of the public consultation by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Bulgaria

Through its official Internet site, the Ministry of Health (MH) of the Republic of Bulgaria provided access to the EU Green Paper “Towards a Europe free from tobacco smoke: policy options at EU level”, which was proposed by the Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou. The Bulgarian citizens were invited to express their opinions on the issues raised in the paper. Various printed and electronic media distributed the information from the MH site to the public. 328 letters were received during the period from 5 March to 15 April 2007.

Members of different age and professional groups from all over the country, as well as Bulgarians from Portugal, France, Spain, England, Belgium, Scotland and USA, took part in the public consultation. Those who joined actively were school boys and girls, university students, actors, computer specialists, producers, singers, architects, bartenders, waiters, doctors, journalists, engineers, state employees, managers, web-designers, etc.

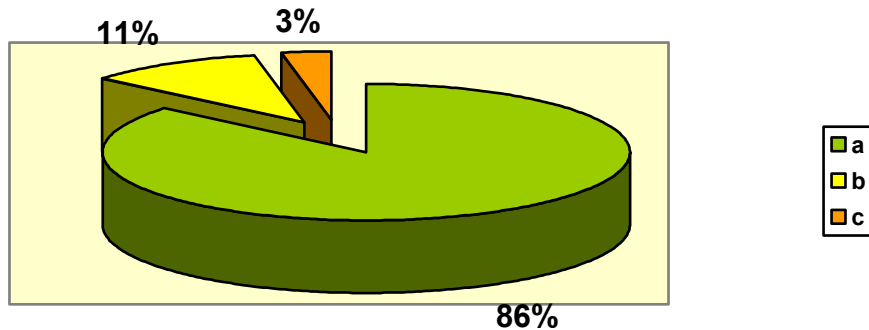
The majority of Bulgarians, who voted “electronically”, preferred to respond to the first question only, which media announcements focused on: a total ban on smoking in public spaces or a ban with exemptions. Citizens gave an extremely great number of arguments “for” and “against”. Most of the rest questions were left without answer by the majority of participants or they showed quite low activity. Yet, position on them was expressed by professionally involved specialists.

Responses to the questions:

(1) Which of the two approaches suggested in Section IV would be more desirable in terms of its scope for smoke-free initiative: a total ban on smoking in all enclosed public spaces and workplaces or a ban with exemptions granted to selected categories of venues? Please indicate the reason(s) for your choice.

Over 86% of the citizens, who sent letters, insist on a total ban, while around 11% - on a ban allowing exemptions (partial) about smoking in public spaces. 90% of the non-smokers, who voted, support a total ban, and 10% - a ban with exemptions. It is impressive the vote of former smokers – 4.9% and current smokers – 6.7% of all who voted. The most uncompromising body of citizens is being formed amongst former smokers – 94% of them voted for a total ban on smoking in public spaces, including in workplaces. Only 6% of former smokers support a ban with exceptions. Current smokers are on the opposite pole with 40.9% of them objecting to any ban on smoking by arguing for personal freedom. Obviously, even the majority of Bulgarian smokers, who voted (59.1%), have already become aware of the enormous harm caused by cigarette smoke, since 27.3% of them stand up for a total ban on smoking in public spaces and 31.8% - for a ban with exemptions.

Voters for a total ban (a), for a ban with exemptions (b) and against any ban (c) to limit smoking in public spaces



In 32 of the total letters received, the Bulgarian citizens or groups of citizens cited the Green Paper. The most of them are professionals engaged with the issue to limit smoking. 100% of them support a ban on smoking – a total or partial one.

The Ministry of Health rewarded three Bulgarian citizens, for the letters they sent, with nicotine bands to gift to their friends who wish to abandon smoking.

In their letters, the citizens give the following arguments:

1. Regarding the need of a total ban on smoking:

- any ban allowing exemptions is a way out to non-compliance with legislation or to various interpretations, which produces vicious practices of disregard of official legal documents;
- Bulgaria has long-standing traditions in tobacco processing and use of cigarettes – a ban with exemptions would be ineffective;
- quite often, the rights of non-smokers are infringed by smoking chiefs who believe themselves to be unpunishable;
- ventilation systems do not operate effectively;
- “young people drink and smoke as if for the last time”;
- more and more citizens are concerned about their own health;
- mothers are concerned about their young children who suffer from asthma, allergies, bronchitis, etc.;
- the supervising bodies cannot manage everywhere and apparently there is no respect for legislation;

- semi-measures are not for Bulgarians; people with a lot of money have learned to purchase lawlessness;
- people smoke at lectures at the universities, at hospitals, in surgery rooms, in consulting rooms, in university corridors;
- places intended for children, having meals, dancing, sports, must certainly be free from tobacco smoke;
- smoking must be prohibited at homes, whether private or public, where there are children;
- the total ban is not an infringement of anyone's right but a protection of the right to a healthy environment and financial interests of non-smokers;
- non-smokers disagree to have their health insurance contributions used for treating people, who abuse their health;
- the current state of separating tables at eating and drinking establishments is extremely inefficient;
- it is disgusting to have meals while breathing tobacco smoke;
- it is disgusting to smell of cigarettes;
- it is disgusting to have someone smoking next to you at the bus stop.

2. Regarding the need of a ban allowing exemptions:

- it takes time to promote awareness about harm from active and passive smoking;
- the total ban discriminates smokers by infringing their human rights;
- the Bulgarian does not respond positively to administrative bans;
- the total ban is inappropriate for restaurants, bars, discotheques where people stay for longer than an hour because they are there at own initiative;
- following the initial period on the ban in Ireland and Scotland, the number of smokers did not fall as it was expected;
- tobacco products are sold legitimately and their use is not illegal as the case with drugs is;
- a lot of eating and drinking establishments will go bankrupt and unemployment will increase;
- "how do you imagine a smoker passing a whole day at work without smoking?!";
- "when I was hired at work, I was not required to refrain from smoking; why should I be banned now?; I have rights as well".

(2) Which of the policy options described in Section V would be the most desirable and appropriate for promoting a smoke-free environment? What form of EU intervention do you consider necessary to achieve such an environment?

Most of the citizens, who have read the Green Paper – **57.1%**, prefer a combination of political options:

- the most preferred is the combination of political options 3 and 4*,
- followed by the combinations 3 and 5; 4 and 5; 3, 4 and 5, which have the same percentage of preference;
- the lowest percentages are of combinations 2 and 5; 2 and 3; 5 and 1.

Each of the rest **42.9%** citizens has pointed out just one political option: the highest percentage goes to option 3, followed by option 5, while political options 1 and 4, as chosen separately, make up the lowest percentages.

The imposition of restrictive quotas on tobacco is suggested as a particular form of intervention by the European Union.

Experts from the Ministry of Health support political option 4 with a trend for political option 5 to be taken on within several years, while at the same time amending the Dangerous Substances Directive (67/548/EEC) to classify second-hand tobacco smoke as carcinogenic, Directive 2004/37/EC for carcinogens and mutagens (to cover second-hand tobacco smoke) and Directive 89/654/EEC to increase the protection of workers from second-hand tobacco smoke.

In the case of Member States where tobacco smoking is widely common as it is in Bulgaria, it is very difficult to obtain support from the population for implementing compulsory measures in a relatively short period of time. This presupposes a combined use of the benefits of at least two approaches – the development of a recommendation to prepare the population for implementing a subsequent directive. The initiative of the European Commission for undertaking measures to reduce tobacco smoking in public spaces is fully sustained but there should be a smoother transition from imposing limitations to reaching the ultimate measure – a Directive on total ban of tobacco smoking in public spaces.

* The numbering corresponds to the sequence, in which the political options are set out in the Green Paper:

1. No change from the status quo.
2. Voluntary measures.
3. Open method of coordination.
4. Commission or Council recommendation.
5. Binding legislation.

(3) Are there any further quantitative or qualitative data on the health, social or economic impact of smoke-free policies which should be taken into account?

Resolving the issue of reducing tobacco smoking is a matter of way, culture and style of life – as soon as living standards improve, when stress lessens, when changes in the most important spheres of the state take on a positive sign, then the Bulgarian would reach out for a cigarette more rarely.

We offer scientific research results to the attention of European citizens, drawn by Bulgarian scholars. We hope you will appreciate their achievements (see appendix).

(4) Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the Green Paper?

Some citizens suggest that cigarettes be banned such as drugs are prohibited: “*Why, being the substance most quickly and easily causing addiction, save the heroine, the tobacco is sold almost everywhere but the marihuana is forbidden? Shouldn't it be the opposite?*”

Appendix

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