

Major anti-tobacco conference in Moscow aims to bolster taxes

October 13 2014, by Anais Llobet

A major anti-tobacco conference opened in Moscow on Monday aimed at agreeing higher taxes on cigarettes, a move being fiercely opposed by the tobacco industry.

Russia, which has introduced strict anti-smoking legislation, was hosting a five-day World Health Organization conference that has brought together some 1,500 delegates from signatory countries of the international body's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The summit—held once every two years—has been hit by the fallout over the Ukraine crisis, with both the United States and Canada boycotting the meeting amid a standoff with Moscow over its support for separatist rebels in the ex-Soviet nation.

Officials at the gathering are pushing for tougher taxes on smoking in a bid to curb a habit that they blame for 6 million deaths worldwide each year.

"I am proud to be the enemy number one of the [tobacco industry](#), that is a badge of honour for me," the WHO's Director General Margaret Chan told the gathering.

Chan was scheduled to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin later Monday.

Activists argue that ramping up duties on cigarettes represents the best

chance of cutting smoking rates around the globe despite concerns that it could see the black market for [tobacco](#) products increase.

"The guidelines do not impose a minimum tax rate on cigarettes, but will be a tool that will allow each state to pursue a policy to determine the appropriate tax level," Martin Logan, a spokesman for the Framework Convention Alliance, an NGO promoting [tobacco control](#), told AFP.

Tax proposals 'fiscally unsound'

Tobacco groups—which are banned from attending the meeting over lobbying concerns—strongly oppose any moves to bolster taxation levels across the globe.

A spokeswoman for tobacco giant Philip Morris blasted the proposals put forward at the conference, saying they "infringe on national sovereignty, and are fiscally unsound."

"One size does not fit all when it comes to tax policy, and governments don't need international organisations to tell them which tax structure and tax level best match the domestic economic and social conditions," the Philip Morris spokeswoman, Iro Antoniadou, told AFP in emailed comments.

Also on the agenda for the conference was a discussion on introducing possible curbs on electronic cigarettes after a WHO report recommended banning their use in closed public spaces and preventing their sale to minors.

The issue has proved controversial, with some experts saying that [electronic cigarettes](#) represent far less of a health risk than normal cigarettes.

According to WHO figures, the worldwide use of e-cigarettes both among adults and teenagers doubled from 2008 to 2012.

More than 40 percent of the adult population in Russia are believed to be smokers, and Putin last year signed off on a law banning smoking in public places in a bid to curb those rates.

On June 1, the ban was stepped up to include hotels, cafes and restaurants in what has become a major lifestyle change for many Russians.

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