

# Hard-drinking Lithuania wages battle against vodka

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Behind a heavy wooden door next to a Vilnius church, a couple of dozen Lithuanian men are talking about their dependence on alcohol. The moderator is Kestutis Dvareckas, a priest and a decade sober.

The World Health Organization ranks Lithuanians as the world's heaviest drinkers.

WHO estimates published in May pegged average annual consumption at 18.2 litres (4.8 gallons) of pure [alcohol](#) per person in 2016, putting the small EU Baltic state ahead of Belarus, Moldova and Russia.

"Drinking on the job had been tolerated on various occasions since the Soviet era. Today, you still see alcohol at baptisms and burials," Father Dvareckas, 37, told AFP. Rather than being social, drinking on these occasions is often excessive to the point of passing out.

Poor mental health and coping skills play a role, especially among Lithuanian men. WHO statistics from 2014 show that 16.7 percent of them abused alcohol or were dependent on it.

Largely at fault is "Lithuanian pessimism", according to Visvaldas Legkauskas, a psychologist at Vytautas Magnus University in the central city of Kaunas.

"Life isn't too bad here, but we have this character trait and we drown our sorrows in alcohol or we commit suicide," he told AFP.

## Curbing consumption

Dvareckas says he managed to quit drinking and get his life back thanks to a 12-step programme similar to the one used by Alcoholics Anonymous and the support of friends and family.

Wanting to pass on what he learnt, he created the free programme As Esu ("I am" in Lithuanian) in 2009, whose combination of group meetings, prayer, therapy and work opportunities help alcoholics get back on their feet.

An association created this year forged a network allowing 20 such communities to share resources. Other initiatives such as Alcoholics Anonymous are also afoot.

Burdened by the high social costs of heavy drinking, the government is taking action to curb consumption, including tax hikes and a blanket ban on alcohol advertising.

Fighting alcoholism was among the key campaign promises that gave the Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union (LPGU) a surprise victory in 2016 elections. Its leader has been organising a booze-free cultural festival in his village for a decade.

Although parliament raised the tax on alcohol in March, consumption did not fall in the eurozone state of nearly three million residents.

Lawmakers then voted by a large margin in June to raise the [legal drinking age](#) to 20 from 18 and introduce a blanket ban on alcohol ads next year.

Whether these measures will work is another matter.

"Already back in 1998, Lithuania had adopted a strategy to curb consumption by 25 percent. But the reality is that it went up by 130 percent instead," Health Minister Aurelijus Veryga told AFP.

## Medical care

For Father Dvareckas, the new legislation is not enough: "Why do I still have to pass the alcohol shelf at stores before reaching the one with dairy products?"

At a local store in the village of Semeliskes, located 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Vilnius, a saleswoman named Ona is sceptical.

"Prices may have gone up, but no one really cares. People will continue to buy as long as they have money, and they'll buy five bottles instead of one to make sure they're stocked," she told AFP.

Many believe that to really be effective, the restrictions affecting sales must be coupled with other forms of help.

Medical treatment of alcoholics is still spotty in Lithuania, where the necessary medication is not paid for by the state, according to the national health insurance fund.

There are only five state-run alcohol rehab centres across Lithuania.

For Veryga, the health minister, it is critical "to ensure equal access to everyone concerned in the various regions".

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