

ALCOHOLISM IN ROMANIA IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

Although alcohol consumption has been described from the earliest times, alcohol abuse has grown significantly since the mid-nineteenth century as a consequence of the industrialization progress.

Due to the socio-economic profile of Romania, which was considered to be agrarian, the idea of developing mainly the industry branches belonging to agriculture was considered. Amongst these branches, the production of alcohol appeared to be the most appropriate.

The political state leaders from Romania enjoyed the taxes collected from alcohol commercialization, disregarding the costs involved in alcoholism which went far beyond them.

Keywords: health care, assessment, alcoholism, prevention

Aims and background

Over the time alcoholism represented a major problem of the population health, raising major issues in the medical system resource usage.

The study aims to provide social and economic impact of alcohol on the population of Romania in the period studied, along with the solutions found in the fight against alcoholism, based on documents from that period.

Discussion

Although alcohol consumption has been described from the earliest times, alcohol abuse has grown significantly since the mid-nineteenth century as a consequence of the industrialization progress on an international level, which included the production of industrial alcohol, causing the emergence of much cheaper alcoholic products on the market. Prior to its appearance, although alcoholic beverages were available, access to them was quite limited, resulting mainly from domestic industry, having low levels of alcohol and not being allowed to be marketed, given the lack of storage means.

Romania was one of the European countries which owned one of the most ancient vineyard practices.

Strabon of Amaseia (63 BC÷19 AD), an erudite historian, geographer and ethnographer, communicated, in his paper, that the order given by Burebista, on the advice of the priest Daecaenaeus (70 BC) was concerned with vine destruction. This leads to the conclusion that an important vine culture existed in the Romania territory long before the Romans came to invade Dacia (106 AD) [1].

This economic development (as an inevitable consequence of the socio-economic development) had found fertile ground in social conditions present at that time in Romania: impoverished proletarians, overworked and poor peasants, especially after the agrarian reform of 1864, when peasants had to resort to great debts (to become owners of the land they worked), living in wretched conditions. For these people alcohol sold at attractive prices was a way of relaxation, of socialization. "The Tavern" represented for the peasant, who had no other alternative, the only place for fun, because there he would meet his friends, he would get together with other villagers, on holidays, and also there was the place where he could find a temporary place of employment while the agricultural activity was suspended.

At the mentioned time, namely at the beginning of the 20th century, Romania was essentially an agrarian country, agriculture being the main source of income for more than 80% of the population. Rich in vineyards and orchards, Romania was at the end of the 19th century and

the beginning of the 20th century an important producer of wines and distilled beverages.

Due to the socio-economic base, which was considered to be agrarian, the idea of developing mainly those industry branches related to agriculture was taken into account. Amongst these branches, the production of alcohol appeared as the most appropriate in the convictions of men and was also favoured by the Romanian Government [2].

Wine was evaluated not only as an important alcoholic drink but also as a vital end product of viniculture [3].

This explains the permissive attitude of the society and of the state towards alcohol consumption, a fact that favoured in time its expansion.

Comparison between alcohol consumption in Romania and other countries

The estimated alcohol consumption at the end of XIX century was about 9-10 liters of pure alcohol/year/inhabitant, which placed Romania somewhere in the first half of the ranking in a comparative statistics with other countries [4], a value also reported for 1895 in the general report of the Sanitary Direction, compared to other European countries as seen in figure 1 [5].

Compared to other European countries, Romania may be noticed for the predilection for strong beverages and wine.

Although the greatest amounts of alcohol were consumed in the countryside, comparing to the number of inhabitants, it shows that major consumers of alcohol were the town people, and the idea that peasants were the major consumers was erroneous. Additionally it seems that in the

big cities the consumption was even greater. Thus:

- 4,800,000 rural inhabitants were consuming 36,675,410 liters of wine, 1,227,060 liters of beer and 2,248,190 liters of spirits;
- 1,300,000 urban inhabitants were consuming 35,011,950 liters of wine, 6,695,050 liters of beer and 19,506,360 liters of spirits [4].

The economic impact of alcohol consumption

Unfortunately, for the production of such large amounts of alcohol, peasants sacrificed a good part of the fruits and grains harvested at the expense of their food and their families.

Until 1916, 92% of plums were turned into plum brandy and only 8% were consumed as fresh fruits. At the same time, plums were imported from Austro-Hungary. In 1924, 60% of the corn was transformed into alcohol [2] and 111,000 wagons of food (cereals) were converted into brandy and respectively plum brandy [6].

At the same time the population was willing to spend significant percentages of their material revenues on alcoholic products, in conditions in which a large part of the population was poor, and the state was spending significant financial resources to offset the effects of alcoholism: hospitalizations, lawsuits, pensions, lost working days. In the early 1920s, in Romania, there were spent approximately 15 billion lei/year for trade in alcohol, for hospitalizations, days not worked and judicial expenses, accidents and deaths [7].

In 1924 it was estimated that the amount of bread consumed in our country was of 17,550,000,000 lei and in the same year 11,627,000,000 lei were spent for

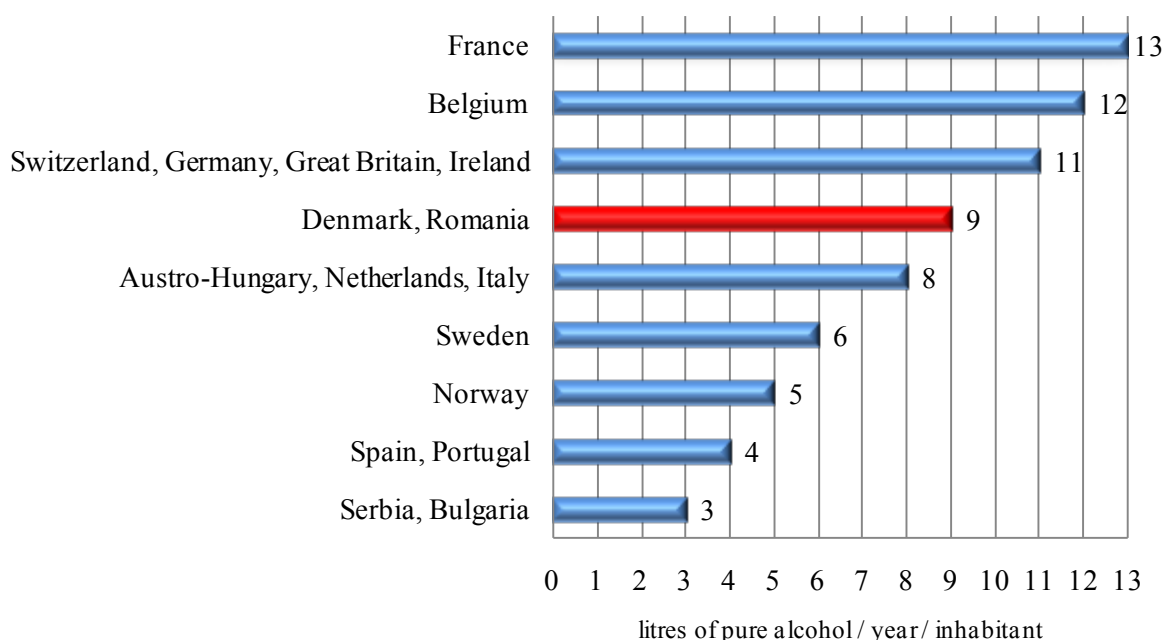


Figure 1. Romania ranking regarding alcohol consumption in 1895 in comparison with other European countries [5].

alcohol. Furthermore, the state losses were estimated at 7,000,000,000 lei which mainly derived from lost working days, which would be supplemented with costs related to hospitalization expenses, lawsuits, reaching over 20 billion lei annually. With this money 6,000 rural schools could have been built, 1,500 hospitals and 9,000 baths [8]. It is interesting to compare this value with the budget of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare which was 763,216,908 lei for 1924, significantly higher than in previous years: 348,045,751 in 1920, 293,887,574 in 1922, and 325,776,626 in 1923 respectively [9].

It is estimated that in 1929, 16 billion lei were spent on beverages, an amount representing half of Romania's exports of that year. The 245 alcohol factories were producing brandy amounting to 3 billion lei, which they managed to commercialize, although people savings from the country were only 600,000 million lei in banks and 220,000 million lei at the *Casa de Economii* [10].

In 1939, 133,000 wagons of wine, 7,200 wagons of plum brandy and 4,800 wagons of spirits were consumed, whose value was estimated at 20 billion lei, which exceeded 50% of the country's income [6,11].

Even at an international level, the expenses related to alcohol consumption were impressive.

In Germany in 1903, for example, the state had the following expenses: for the army and navy: 900 million marks; for labour insurances: 500 million marks; for schools: 420 million marks; on beverages 900 million marks (money that could cover the country's public debt of that year).

For alcohol consumption the German citizen was spending about 15% of its budget (percentage that could reach up to 50% of revenue of forestry workers), 50% for food, 20% for housing, 8% for clothing, and only 1% for culture. At the same time, in Romania, alcoholics preferred to spend more on drinks than on food [12].

In England, a statistic regarding population expenditure on food in 1919 revealed that they spent 386 million pounds on alcoholic beverages (1 pound = 165 lei), more than for any of the other foods: 195 million pounds for meat; 165 million pounds for cereals; 125 million pounds for milk; 85 million pounds for butter; 50 million pounds for sugar; 45 million pounds for tea [12].

In Italy, in 1931 they spent 6.5 billion Italian liras on wine, while the State budget was 18 billion Italian liras [7].

In France, where the volume of alcohol consumed had increased vertiginously (from 1 liter of alcohol/capita in 1830 to 3.8 liters in 1912 and to approximately 12 liters in the early 1920s) the expenditure on alcoholism (in Romanian lei equivalent) was about 30 billion lei/year, out of which: 16 billion lei on alcohol trade; 13,400,000.000 lei for lost work days; roughly 700,000,000 lei for medical care; 50,000,000 lei for suicides and accidental deaths and 90,000,000 to fight crimes [12].

In the early 1920s, around the world (Europe) the

drinking was around of 120 billion lei/year [12].

Strategies to fight alcoholism worldwide

To fight the effects of alcoholism, different strategies have been imagined in different parts of the world.

The most radical was the strategy adopted by the United States in January 16th 1920, by the "Volstead Act", which provided the establishment of constitutional prohibition. To be effective, this law needed a very well organized administrative and police apparatus and an educated population, disciplined and with the moral power of consistency with the decisions taken.

Although the alcohol industry brought in 1914 about 1 billion USD to the American state, by means of which 72,000 jobs were created in factories and another 206,000 jobs through alcoholic beverages trade, still prohibition-related measures did not shake the economy and the number of jobs increased. Already in 1918 many of the breweries (1,092) and 236 distilleries had changed their destination into factories for food, industrial alcohol, food production for cattle, the alcoholic shops turned into restaurants, etc. In July 1919 178,000 shops of alcoholic beverages, 669 breweries and 74 distilleries were closed [12,13].

A second anti-alcoholism strategy was to restrict alcohol consumption. This method was applied in the Nordic countries, where in the early nineteenth century huge amounts of alcohol were consumed. For example, in Sweden, in 1829, 46 liters of brandy/year/capita were consumed. In 1855 the "Gothenburg system" was introduced through which the sale of spirit drinks was leased to a charitable society that incumbent 5% of the incomes obtained, the remaining incomes reverting to the State, commune or charitable societies. This system led to the sale of cheap quality drinks, low in alcohol, in clean locations. In 1912 to these measures the ones stipulated by the "Bratt system" were added, involving the sale of alcohol to people through a purchase register, the law prohibiting wholesale to private individuals. Through these measures alcohol consumption decreased from 46 liters of brandy/capita/year to less than 2 litres, these measures being considered the most effective in that period [14].

A third possibility to combat alcoholism was considered to be the state's monopoly on the production of alcohol and alcoholic beverages, a measure that did not work because states, constrained by financial depression to increase their revenue, ended up encouraging alcohol consumption, alcoholism becoming a convenient source for state revenues [15].

Strategies for fighting alcoholism in Romania

By analyzing the local situation and the anti-alcoholic strategies from other countries it may be concluded that in Romania the conditions were detrimental to any

prohibitive measure: the lack of an educated population, lack of discipline and responsibility of the executive and control authorities, lack of skills and responsibility of the leadership factors; the geographical situation facilitated smuggling from all sides, and with the production of alcoholic beverages representing an important branch of Romanian agriculture and industry, this one could not be abandoned without consequences. To this was added the important capital brought by the alcoholic industry which turned any prohibitive measure into an illusory attempt [16].

The first law passed at national level which aimed to limit alcohol consumption was the 1867 "Law regarding the tax on spirituous beverages", a law that established differentiated taxes with the types of alcoholic beverages and that was further amended depending on political interests. Thus, in 1910, these fees were: 0.03 lei/alcohol grade for wine, 0.2 lei/alcohol grade for spirit and 0.5 lei/alcohol grade for beer, with a disproportionately high tax on beer, which discouraged the consumption of this beverage because of its high price, although it displayed the lowest alcohol content [16].

An effective measure against the anti-alcoholic fight, which resulted in a decrease of alcohol consumption, was recorded in the period 1884÷1887 and consisted of taxing per grade or 1 leu/bucket and not on one acre. Although effective, this measure was dropped, having as consequence the increase of the number of liters consumed after the abolition of this fee [17]. These fees accounted for about 10% of the state budget and the budgets of rural and urban communes were even more dependent on the taxation of the trade with alcoholic beverages [18].

In 1908 "The Spirituous Beverages Monopoly Law in Rural Communes and Measures against Drunkenness in the Rural Communities" was issued. It should be noted that there existed a draft law about the monopoly regarding the sale of alcohol since 1895, project initiated by A.C. Cuza, D. Orbescu, C. Popovici, Ion C. Grădișteanu as representatives [11,15,16,17].

The Law of 1908 was adopted at the initiative of the National Temperance League, being called Costinescu Law, who was the Finance Minister at the time. By this law the number of alcoholic shops was limited according to the number of inhabitants, as well as the number of opening hours, while the sale of spirits was forbidden to people under 16 or already under the influence of alcohol. Also, the owner of an alcoholic shop had to meet a number of moral and hygienic conditions: to be a Romanian citizen, to be over 25 years, to be married, to know to read and to have no vices. At the same time, the law supposed to place the pubs under the control of communal authorities, giving them the right to approve the opening or the closing of pubs, thus encouraging the emergence of temperance societies and granting them the exclusive right to exploit more than one pub. The law represented a heavy blow to innkeepers,

but it was not enforced, suffering repeated amendments in 1909, 1910, 1914, 1932. This law also provided penalties for those who were intoxicated and "will quarrel, will cause disorders or fall on the road", and if the culprit was a voter he would lose his right to elect or be elected.

During the same period, in Transylvania there were also anti-alcoholic stipulations, this time under the Hungarian legislation. These stipulated that boys under 15 and girls under 14 were not allowed in pubs, pubs could not operate near schools and churches, and had to be closed during religious services and that the innkeepers could not give products by a credit that exceeded the value of 4 crowns. Also, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Public Education by circular no. 1125 of 24 April 1903, requested the help of the private initiative in the formation of temperance societies. Due to the idea which stipulated that public education could become an important weapon against alcoholism, it was foreseen that school manuals had to be printed with attached brochures against alcoholism and, by ministerial order, in every school there had to be one day reserved for exposing the consequences of alcohol consumption, actions verified by royal inspectors [19].

In 1925, the Finance Minister finished a new draft for a law that was designed to regulate alcohol consumption. Through this project the governors proposed that within 12 days "the spirits from food should be extinguished for the benefit of beverages", the alcohol in fruits should be regulated to allow its better consumption in human nutrition, spirituous beverages which were consumed in pubs should be limited to a maximum of 25° strength, giving preference to fermented beverages. It was also proposed that "Costinescu's Law" be enforced all throughout the state, by changing the current taxes to differentiate strong beverages, which had to be limited in circulation as compared to those which could still remain on the market without any danger, suggesting the establishment of some institutions of control in villages, districts, centres. To help those actions, the above draft law was proposing the disposal to these centres and communes of a portion of the revenues. This proposal remained only a draft [16].

A new measure regarding the fight against alcoholism was the action taken in 1930 by Article 339 of the "Health and Care Law" which allowed the hygienist doctor to intervene in reducing the number of taverns, if alcoholism was too present in that area.

Another measure, essentially political, but which decreased significantly the number of alcoholic shops, was the withdrawal of the spirituous beverages patent from the Romanian Jews in 1940. Taking into account that they had 30.3% of the total pubs, according to a statistic made in 1920 in Transylvania, and that in Moldova the percentage was even higher, this measure should have been followed by the decreasing of alcoholic shops [11].

In parallel with the legislative measures several anti-

alcoholic societies were established and functioned, trying to complete the anti-alcoholic actions of the state, societies in which medical, legal and theological personalities of that time were actively involved.

The first anti-alcoholic society was founded in 1897 in Iasi, under the name of "Romanian League against Alcoholism", followed, in 1908, by "The National Temperance League". Afterwards, "The Temperance Society" was founded in 1927.

In Transylvania, the most important was "The Anti-alcohol Temperance Meeting of Blaj Theologians", founded in 1910. In 1924 in Brasov the society named "Enemies of Alcohol and Tobacco" was established [11].

Because women experienced the most powerful effects of alcohol, those under "The Civil and Political Emancipation Association of Romanian Women" fought against this calamity [5,20].

These societies have carried out their activity by delivering lectures, conferences, including radio broadcasting, editing magazines with anti-alcoholic message ("Antialcoolul" magazine and "Temperanța" magazine), supporting the anti-alcoholic education while still at school, starting from the idea that an anti-alcoholic education of the population and raising the awareness on the issue of alcoholism was the basis of success in the fight against it. Also, these societies stimulated the adoption of some legislative measures with an anti-alcoholic purpose (1908 Law), by sending representatives to conferences and international congresses, organizing national conferences on this issue, opening alcohol free shops linked to cultural, musical and physical amusements. At the same time, these societies sought means for self-financing because the state support was minimal.

Conclusions

Romania, a predominantly agricultural country in the early twentieth century, found a profitable market for fruit and cereals in the alcohol industry.

The state leaders enjoyed the taxes collected from alcohol commercialization, disregarding the costs involved in alcoholism which went far beyond them.

While there have been legislative measures, these were applied only partially, depending on the interests, some of them being adopted and enforced only after several years from their inception. Unlike other countries that have found effective strategies (Sweden, Finland, USA) in Romania the measures have been relatively few and were only supported by the initiative of anti-alcoholic societies.

Though the quantities of alcohol consumed were impressive, Romania occupies a middle position among the

European countries with reference to alcohol consumption.

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