

Advertising of Dutch gin at the expense of the EU

Lise Witteman, Follow the Money ; 9-06-2020

The European Union, which is home to the world's largest boozers, has a variety of programs to discourage alcohol consumption. But helping Americans with an EU subsidy to help the Dutch neutral does not seem to be a problem. The Dutch State Secretary Blokhuis of Health thinks the subsidy is therefore inappropriate, he says in a response.

The bar of an American café has a whole row of bottles of spirits: "Enjoy, it's from Europe!", It is a sign to promote the tasting of gin from the Netherlands and Belgium. On another sign - with the stars of the European flag: "Campaign financed with aid from the European Union." The tastings are part of a campaign by SpiritsNL, the Dutch trade association of importers and producers of spirits, according to research by Follow the Money. When asked, chairman Joep Stassen says that his association for the promotion of producers Bols, De Kuyper, Herman Jansen, Bobby's and the Belgian Smeets has applied for a 1.5 million euro European subsidy. The money is intended for an advertising campaign in the United States, which runs from 2018 to 2022 and will cost a total of 1.9 million euros. In doing so, the club hopes to meet the shrinking demand for distilled spirits on the European market, something the bank ABN AMRO warned the sector in 2013: 'The best opportunities lie for exports, especially outside the EU.' The bank called "proper marketing and distribution" indispensable for the success of "international expansion".



Promotional tasting of Dutch and Belgian spirits brands in a café in America

Cocktail workshops

In the meantime, a subsidy of more than a million euros has been provided to SpiritsNL. The affiliated companies have to contribute a total of 400,000 euros themselves. "We have hired a campaign agency to contact journalists who would like to write something about gin," said Stassen. "A number of articles have already been published. We have also taken part in trade fairs, and there are ambassadors for our brands who set up cocktail workshops or organize online training with bartenders in a number of cities. "

The fact that European taxpayers' money sometimes ends up in remarkable places, so that spending sometimes even completely goes against other European goals, should not be news. However, the fact that the distilled drinks sector is also benefiting from this is, as far as we know, a novelty. Particularly because the European Union, which is home to the world's biggest booze-blowers, simultaneously runs all sorts of programs to discourage alcohol consumption. As are the Member States, which are responsible for approving European grant applications. For example, Paul Blokhuis (ChristenUnie), the State Secretary for Health, concluded a National Prevention Agreement with more than 70 civil society organizations last November, for which a few tens of millions of euros are allocated per year, including agreements to further restrict alcohol advertising.

The National Prevention Agreement allocates tens of millions of euros per year to curb alcohol advertising, among other things.

However, there is no mention of the fact that more than a million euros are now flowing towards the promotion of our gin brands. While a party member of Blokhuis is responsible for this subsidy. After all, Minister of Agriculture Carola Schouten must ensure that European agricultural funds are properly provided by the implementing organization RVO (Rijksdienst van Ondernemend Nederland). This also includes the scheme that the Dutch spirits lobby makes good use of: the so-called information and promotion subsidies that have been created to promote European agricultural products.

These schemes have been under attack from environmental and health organizations for years. The meat promotion was recently under a magnifying glass, when it appeared that the latest plans for European agricultural policy had narrowly preserved the advertising spots for animal products. Despite the intended sustainability policy of the European Union, which is difficult to reconcile with the promotion of the meat industry. The animal welfare organization Wakker Dier is therefore strongly opposed to the roughly 60 million euros per year that flows through these subsidy pots to the meat producers.

Joep Stassen: "We are an agricultural product, besides grain there can also be corn or cranberry in gin"

[The anti-alcohol lobby](#) has also been targeting agricultural schemes for a long time, as they are used to market European wines. But when asked, both the European anti-alcohol activists from Eurocare and their Dutch counterpart [STAP](#) have no idea that producers of spirits are also entitled to claim those pots.

"Absurd," responds STAP director Wim van Dalen when he heard about the gin campaign. "I suspect that even the Ministry of Health does not know this. It is very contradictory if, on the one hand, you invest more money in the prevention of alcohol problems, but at the same

time keep this scheme in the air. It is good that this is now being reported. I hope something happens to it. "

SpiritsNL chairman Stassen finds it perfectly logical that producers of spirits are also eligible for this type of subsidy. "We are an agricultural product. In addition to grain, there may also be corn or cranberry in gin, for example. "

Stassen, also active within the liberal party the VVD, got to know the European subsidy programs well when he was chairman of the European umbrella organizations SpiritsEUROPE from 2014 to 2018. "We have claimed a subsidy specifically aimed at promoting products outside the European Union," he says. "Then you choose countries that you think are most likely to succeed. In our case, those are the United States. "

Not happy

When asked, the Ministry of Health does indeed seem unfamiliar with the gin campaign and is, to put it mildly, not happy with it. "Our Dutch policy aimed at combating problematic alcohol consumption does not include government support for the promotion of alcoholic beverages," said State Secretary Blokhuis. In his view, the Netherlands is in any case not in favor of co-financing promotional activities by the EU. In 2013, the government therefore voted against the regulation that regulated this.

But now that it is there, the State Secretary would rather see the subsidy go to better goals. Blokhuis: "Given the existence of the EU subsidy for promotion, the Cabinet believes that it should only be used to finance programs to promote the consumption of healthy and sustainably produced food." Together with his colleague Schouten van Landbouw, The State Secretary therefore argues in the upcoming evaluation of the promotion scheme that it should be limited to 'subsidy for the promotion of sustainably produced and healthy agricultural products.

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