

A Case of Strange Bedfellows: An Institutional Perspective on French-Swedish Cooperation on Alcohol Control

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A Case of Strange Bedfellows in the EU: An Institutional Perspective on the French-Swedish Cooperation on Alcohol Control

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There is an old saying that goes: Politics makes strange bedfellows. This article will focus on one such relationship in modern European politics, and ultimately make an attempt to make it appear less strange.¹

The notion of Nordic alcohol control policies has generally been applied as a collective term, and it accentuates the similarities between Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden in this specific area of public policy. Both the aim of reducing alcohol related harm in society, as well as the strategies employed in order to achieve this aim are extensively shared among these four countries. However, the resemblances between Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden provide only one aspect of the explanation of why this notion has emerged. The flip side of the coin is that the alcohol control policies of these countries have been regarded as distinctively different from that of other countries, including the more alcohol liberal Nordic country Denmark (Holder et al. 1998).

Since the early 1990s, Nordic alcohol control policies have become subject for significant adaptations and changes. This development should be viewed in connection with the process in which European integration has become an increasingly more relevant and important point of reference for actors and institutions in the Nordic countries. Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden became partners of the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement from 1994, and Finland and Sweden became full members of the European Union (EU) from 1995. Since then, central aspects of Nordic alcohol control policies have become challenged by reference to the EC Treaties (Ugland 2000; 2002).

However, this article does not deal with the impacts of Europeanisation on Nordic alcohol control policies. Instead, focus will be on what might be referred to as a case of strange bedfellows; that is, the emerging French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control. The French government has actively supported the Swedish government on several occasions in discussions and disputes over alcohol control policy issues at the EU-level, and the aim of this article is to further understanding, and suggest a frame-work for how this support can be interpreted.

Although focus is on the cooperation between France and Sweden within a specific policy sector, this article may also shed light on more fundamental puzzles of European integration. Research on strange bedfellow phenomena may for instance be suitable in addressing questions of whether trends of homogenisation and convergence are becoming more dominant, and gradually reducing the diversity in European politics. Increased cooperation between France and Sweden in relation to alcohol control may support such a homogenisation hypothesis. Whether this article can shed light on this question will be discussed in the conclusion.

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The article proceeds in the following steps. In the next part, three different empirical cases illustrating the French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level are presented. Subsequently, three competing arguments to understand this cooperation are outlined and discussed in part three. Part four views the main findings in relation to an institutional perspective, while part five concludes.

The French-Swedish Cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-Level

The State Alcohol Monopolies

In the autumn of 1997, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that the Swedish state retail monopoly on sale of alcoholic beverages could be maintained (Case C-189/95 *Public Prosecutor vs. Harry Franzén*). The Court held that the monopoly could be upheld as it was considered to be neither discriminatory nor liable to put imported products at a disadvantage. This case arose after a Swedish shopkeeper sold wine in his grocery shop, with reference to the principle of free movement of goods within the EU. Swedish law prohibited this kind of activity, but the District Court of the Swedish town of Landskrona referred to the ECJ for a preliminary ruling on whether the monopoly on retail sales was compatible with EU law.

When a case like this is brought before the Court, all parties, the member states and the Community institutions are welcome to submit written observations on the matter to the Court. This is normally done by member states that have special interests in the particular subject matter. The state alcohol monopoly system has been regarded as one of the main pillars of Swedish, as well as Nordic alcohol control policies (Holder et al. 1998), and written observations supporting the state retail monopoly system were submitted to the Court by the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish governments. In France, sale of alcoholic beverages is not subject to monopoly control, but despite this, the French government supported the maintenance of the Swedish retail monopoly in a written observation in October 1995.² None of the other EU member states submitted opinions on this specific case. In addition to the retail monopoly system being regarded as non-discriminatory according to the origin of products and the nationality of traders, the support from the French government was justified with reference to public health and social policy considerations.

The Ban on Alcohol Advertising

In the spring of 2001, the ECJ ruled in another case with direct relevance to Swedish alcohol control policies. This time, the Stockholm District Court had referred to the Court for a preliminary ruling on whether the EC Treaty precluded the Swedish ban on advertising of alcoholic beverages in certain types of printed magazines (Case C-405/98 *Konsumentombudsmannen and Gourmet International Products*). The Court ruled that it was for the national court to determine whether the prohibition on advertising met the condition of proportionality, which is required in order to be justified.

In both written observations and oral hearings, the Finnish, French, Norwegian and Swedish governments stood again shoulder to shoulder in their support for the Swedish prohibition on advertising. Also in this case, opinions from other EU member states were not submitted. Considerations of public health were strongly emphasised, and in a letter delivered to the Court in June 1999, the French government considered that a ban

on advertising was proportionate given the objective of reducing alcohol related harm in society.³

The Swedish Presidency and a Common Alcohol Strategy

The extent of the potential of the Presidency of the Council of the EU in terms of policy developments should not be exaggerated (Nugent 1999), but still, the presidency can be considered as an opportunity for hosting member states to put issues and topics of special interest on the EU policy agenda. In 1993, the Council's rules of procedure stated for the first time that the presidency should submit a program for the six-month period in office (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 1997). The need for stricter alcohol control was mentioned in the work programme of the Finnish Presidency that was held during the second half-year of 1999 (Finnish Presidency of the EU 1999). The preceding German, Austrian and UK presidencies of the EU did not raise this issue in their respective work programmes. However, in the work programme of the French presidency during the second half of 2000, alcohol abuse was again identified as a public health issue under the heading "Protection of Consumers, Users and the Public" (French Presidency of the EU 2000). Focus was here on young people's alcohol consumption, and the French government expressed hopes for adopting a Council Recommendation on this issue.

In connection with the handing over of the presidency to Sweden, the French government encouraged the Swedish government in political talks to use the experiences from Swedish alcohol control policies to put alcohol control more firmly on the political agenda in the EU.⁴ Swedish politicians were somewhat surprised about this initiative, but the Swedish initiative to develop a comprehensive common EU strategy to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol should be viewed in this context (Swedish Presidency of the EU 2001).

Summing up, it has here been illustrated how the French government on three different occasions actively has supported the Swedish government in discussions and disputes over alcohol control policy issues in recent years. Due to this support, it seems justified to talk about French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level. The next steps in this article will be to present a framework and subsequently discuss how this cooperation can be interpreted.

A case of Strange Bedfellows: Three Interpretations

The role of alcohol in France and Sweden is marked by more contrasts than parallels, and some important cultural and economic differences will be illustrated below. These differences should also be taken into account when reflecting on the French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level. Figure 1 gives a picture of the total alcohol consumption levels in the EU member states and Norway (See annex). As can be seen here, France and Sweden are located at opposite ends of this scale.

The high consumption level in France reflects a deep-rooted culture of more or less daily consumption of wine in connection with meals. Although this description is still applicable, both the overall level and frequency of alcohol consumption has decreased substantially since the 1950s. In 1995, per capita wine consumption in France was approximately half of the amount consumed in 1955. Further, the percentage that reported drinking on a daily basis decreased from 33 per cent in 1980, to 19 per cent in 1990

(Hurst, Gregory and Gussmann, 1997). The Nordic drinking culture, of which Sweden is a part, has been summed up as the Nordic trauma of “drinking the least, but boozing the worst” (Johansson 2000, 29). The traditionally low consumption in Sweden is due to the fact that large quantities are drunk on few occasions, and that daily drinking has not been widespread. Beer has been the dominant drink in Sweden since the 1960s and 1970s. Before that, spirits were the most favoured alcoholic beverage. Swedish alcohol control policies should be viewed against an intoxication based or “explosive” drinking culture.

Also by studying more economic aspects in relation to alcohol, the contrasts between France and Sweden in relation to alcohol are striking. Compared with Sweden, a relatively high percentage of the French population depend economically on production and trade in alcoholic beverages, and Figure 2 illustrates the dominant position of France in the world alcohol market (See annex). In 1998, France accounted for close to 30 per cent of world exports alone. Sweden on the other hand was the 20th largest exporter of alcoholic beverages in the world the same year, with less than 1 per cent of total world trade.

Overall, France is the leading alcohol consumer, producer and exporter in the world, and alcohol must be regarded as an embedded and central aspect of French culture. In Sweden, alcohol is primarily viewed from a health and social policy perspective, i.e. something that needs to be controlled. Intuitively, France and Sweden may be perceived as strange bedfellows in relation to their cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level. Nevertheless, this article will present three different interpretations of the health and social policy justified French support of the Swedish government in the cases presented above. The first interpretation views the French support as a kind of hypocrisy, where the health and social policy arguments are subordinated French economic motives and interests. The second one focuses on the domestic approach towards alcohol and alcohol control in France during the last decade, and possible similarities and matches with Swedish alcohol control policies during this period are sought identified. The third interpretation brings history in as a factor, and the French support is viewed in relation to longer historical trends in France.

While the first two interpretations are based upon a view of history as efficient, i.e. history follows a course that leads inexorably and relatively quickly to a unique outcome dictated by exogenously determined interests and resources, the third interpretation assumes that the match between political institutions and their environments is less automatic, less continuous, and less precise, i.e. history is viewed as inefficient (March and Olsen 1989; 1995; 1998). Although often implicit, the assumption of historical efficiency is widespread in social sciences research. Political outcomes are here seen on the basis of the *immediate* environments confronting the actors. Ideas of inefficient histories, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of historical paths and institutions, where institutions can be viewed as a relatively stable collection of practices and rules defining appropriate behaviour for specific groups of actors in specific situations. Institutions may in this way refer to an abstract regulatory prescription that is supposed to govern a certain sphere of conduct, as well as to historical attempts to put such abstract ideas into practice (March and Olsen 1989).

French Support as a Hypocrisy: Economic Motives

The question here is whether the French support of the Swedish government in alcohol control policy questions at the EU-level can be understood based on fundamental eco-

conomic interests, where the health and social policy justification only can be interpreted as a façade. In other words, can Swedish alcohol control policies be regarded as beneficial for France viewed from a market perspective?

Drawing the attention towards the case dealing with the Swedish state monopoly system, it should be a matter of investigation to find out whether the French support can be viewed as economically motivated. The Swedish retail monopoly, *Systembolaget*, is one of the single largest importers of French wine in the world, and the question here is whether the Swedish company gives preferential status to French products. This question can be elaborated upon by studying the sales and product statistics from *Systembolaget*. The three countries with the largest market shares for wine is presented in Figure 3 (See annex).

As we can see from this figure, the market share for French wine has decreased substantially since the late 1980s, while products from other countries have become more popular. In 1997, at the time when the ruling in Case C-189/95 was given by the European Court of Justice, the largest volume of wine sold by *Systembolaget* came from Spain. Spain accounted for about 28 per cent of total volume of wine sales in 1997, but also Italy had a bigger market share than France this year. Based upon these sales statistics, it may be difficult to understand why France in 1995, as the only EU member state apart from Finland and Sweden, supported the maintenance of the Swedish state retail monopoly system. However, if one looks at *Systembolaget*'s product range, another picture emerges.

Systembolaget offers products from more than 30 countries. In 2001, 2378 different wine products were included in *Systembolaget*'s ordinary assortment. 34 per cent of those were French, while 15 per cent were Italian, and 13 per cent were Spanish.⁵ Based on these figures, *Systembolaget*'s actual sales figures do not seem to correspond with the assortment, and French wines appear to be over-represented relative to wines from other countries. However, there is here one important element that must be taken into consideration. *Systembolaget* does not have an import license and therefore buys the products from licensed producers and importers. Therefore, at any given time the assortment depends upon what is offered by those independent producers and importers. The purchase procedures of *Systembolaget* are based on a system whereby a large number of domestic and foreign production and wholesale licence holders are invited to submit their offers to the company.⁶ A preliminary selection is then made on the basis of economic or commercial criteria, such as price competitiveness and commercial history, followed by a "blind" tasting trial. The products selected are then included in the assortment. As long as the tasters do not know the origin of the product it seems difficult to claim that the over-representation of French wines is a result of an intentional and purposive policy by *Systembolaget*.

All in all, it is difficult to see the French support of the Swedish retail monopoly system based upon purely economic motives. *Systembolaget*'s sales statistics illustrated that the market share for French wines had dropped substantially since the 1980s, and that the company sold more Spanish wines at the time when the French government offered its support for maintaining the state alcohol retail monopoly. Further, due to the blind tasting procedure, the dominant position of French wines in the assortment of *Systembolaget* does not seem to be a result of an intentional and discriminatory act. It is here important to emphasise that the European Court of Justice considered this aspect in 1997, and the Court regarded the Swedish retail monopoly's practices in relation to the

criteria and selection methods as non-discriminating according to the origin of products and according to the nationality of traders.

The French initiative to put the issue of alcohol control on the political agenda in connection with the Swedish presidency of the EU in 2001 is also difficult to conceive of in terms of economic motives. Alcohol was here viewed and addressed in a public health context. As will be returned to later in this article, the need for a common alcohol control policy strategy at the EU-level was already expressed in the early 1980s by French political authorities. Moving on to the French support in the case dealing with the Swedish ban on advertising, it is possible to imagine economic motives coming into play. For instance, a ban on advertising can be viewed as a strategy in order to preserve the traditional stronghold of French wines on the Swedish markets in terms of assortment. However, in the case of alcohol advertising, the French and the Swedish approaches were during the 1990s to a large degree comparable. Instead of viewing the French support in light of economic motives, the question is rather whether the support may be a product of matching policies, which leads us over to the second interpretation.

French Support as a Reflection of Shared Interests: Alcohol Control Policy Match

The question here is whether the French approach towards alcohol control during the last decade matched with the Swedish health and social policy oriented alcohol control policies, and moreover whether this match can be viewed as sufficiently strong in order to understand the French support in the three cases presented above?

Concerning Case C-405/98, the French and Swedish policies on alcohol advertising are highly similar. In Sweden, advertising of alcoholic beverages has been banned since 1978. In January 1991, a new health and social policy oriented law on alcohol was adopted in France, and the so-called *Loi Evin* introduced a general ban on alcohol advertising on TV, and a number of legal restrictions in other types of media. This was the most restrictive law on alcohol advertising in the EU at the time of adoption. Prevention of alcoholism and excessive consumption by young people were singled out as the main motivations behind this law. The *Loi Evin* became effective in 1993, and the campaign that led to the adoption of this law has been characterised as the first lobby victory within the public health field in France (Sulkunen and Ugland 2002).

The *Loi Evin* is named after the French Minister for Health in 1991, Claude Evin. According to the law, alcohol related sponsorship of cultural or sporting events is banned, but advertising is permitted in certain printed magazines, billboards, and radio channels. However, also within these media the messages are controlled and subject to a number of restrictions. For instance, it is not permitted to show images of people drinking in the printed advertisements. The messages given can only refer to the characteristics of the products such as origin, composition, means of production, and patterns of consumption etc. In addition, a health message must be included in each advertisement.

The *Loi Evin* is highly controversial, and various branches of the French press and alcohol business have persistently challenged the legality of this law since it became effective. One of its immediate effects was namely to deprive the press about one fifth of its advertising revenue (Dorozynski 1995). The *Loi Evin* has also been regarded as an infringement of the single market rules, and during the summer of 1996 the European Commission sent a reasoned opinion concerning this matter to the French government. However, in a meeting of the full Commission in March 1997, the health aspects behind

the *Loi Evin* were said to outweigh the single market considerations (European Voice 1997). Despite opposition from the Internal Market Commissioner, the full Commission maintained the decision to not proceed with legal action against the French government in June 1998 (European Voice 1998). In spite of this, the new Internal Market Commissioner, Fritz Bolkestein, declared his intention of pursuing the Commission's investigation of the *Loi Evin* in March 2001. This time, the Commission made an attempt to resolve the dispute by trying to make it explicit that the law would not be applied beyond French borders (European Voice 2000).

The aim of the Commission has been to reach an agreement with France, without bringing the matter before the Court. However, the *Loi Evin* was referred to the European Court of Justice by an order for a preliminary ruling by the High Court of Justice in the UK in July 2000 (Case C-318/00).⁷ The question that was referred to the Court concerns whether the French ban on broadcasting of sporting events taking place in other member states at which there is advertising of alcoholic beverages is compatible with the EC Treaty. This case stems from complaints by two drinks firms, which were told to remove their adverts from a match at Newcastle United Football Club's ground because the game was to be broadcast in France, even though the billboards were legal under UK law. The ECJ is currently seeking comments from member states on this case.

Based upon this, it seems natural to view the French support for the Swedish ban on advertising in light of the rules on alcohol advertising in France, and more specifically the health and social policy oriented *Loi Evin*. Despite the similarities between France and Sweden concerning this issue, when then Minister for Health, Claude Evin, presented his proposal to the French Parliament, he underlined that "In the case of alcohol, only abuse is dangerous" (Hennon 1997). In Sweden, focus is on reducing overall consumption and not only what can be referred to as inappropriate consumption. This is an important difference, which illustrates that the resemblances concerning the rules on advertising between France and Sweden should not overshadow important differences in other aspects related to alcohol and alcohol control. For instance, alcoholic beverages are far more accessible in France than in Sweden, both physically and economically. In Sweden, sales of strong beer, wine and spirits are only sold in a restricted number of state monopoly outlets. In France, alcoholic beverages are sold by a great number of private licensed actors. The French support for the state monopoly systems may therefore still be regarded as puzzling. Further, prices and taxes in France are very low compared with in Sweden, as can be seen from Figure 4 (See annex).

Based upon this, it seems insufficient to view the French support of the Swedish government in alcohol control policy questions at the EU-level as a result of closely matching policies. Swedish alcohol control policies are far more comprehensive both in terms of policy measures and goals. In Sweden, focus is on the whole population through a formalised network of statutory regulations aimed at reducing the total consumption of alcohol in society. In France, focus is to a greater extent given to reducing alcohol related harm in specific contexts or for specific social groups in society through more informal, self-regulatory and self-imposed codes of regulations. Despite this, there exist awareness about the harm that can be attributed to use and misuse of alcohol in France, but in order to increase the understanding of the French support of the Swedish government in the cases presented above, it seems required to take a closer look at this awareness from a historic perspective. As will be illustrated in the next section, France has successively adopted stricter policies on alcohol control since the 1950s.

French Support in a Historical Perspective: Small Steps Towards Stricter Alcohol Control

The alcohol consumption in France increased substantially during the 19th century. In terms of pure alcohol per capita, the consumption has been estimated to increase from 7,3 litres in the 1830s to 20,5 in the 1890s (Ledermann 1956; 1965). The consumption remained at a high level until the 1950s, for then to show a slow sustained fall. Despite dramatic health and social damages, the responses to this high consumption have been described as curiously restrained during the 19th century, both from the political authorities and social groups in French society. However, at the turn of the century, more attention was given to health and social policy aspects related to alcohol consumption. The focus, as in Sweden, was at that time on distilled spirits. Absinthe, in particular, became a scapegoat, and became prohibited in 1915. Consumption of wine was not regarded as harmful and even temperance leaders could themselves be large wine makers (Brennan 1989).

Few alcohol control measures were however introduced in France before the 1950s, but since then, the French political elites have become increasingly more active in their attempts to reduce alcohol related harm. During his short term as Prime Minister (June 1954-February 1955), Pierre Mendès France introduced more than 20 decrees and proposals related to the objective of reducing alcohol production and consumption (Prestwich, 1988). Although most of his proposals were defeated, the attention about alcohol related harm was raised, and this awareness was institutionalised through the High Committee for Study and Information on Alcoholism (Haut Comité d'Etudes et d'Information sur l'Alcoolisme) which was established in 1954. This committee was originally an agency of the Prime Minister, and its main task was to provide information on alcohol abuse. This High Committee was in December 1991 transformed into the High Committee for Public Health, and the new committee was to report to the Minister for Health. The committee also included a permanent commission on alcohol problems, and its main tasks were to give advice to the government on policy and regulatory actions concerning alcohol from a public health perspective. An objective of the Committee was to encourage moderate consumption of alcohol as opposed to general abstinence (Hurst, Gregory and Gussmann, 1997).

At the beginning of the 1980s, a working group was set up on request from the French President in order to define a ten-year programme against alcoholism (Moser 1992). In its report, the group concluded that the main objective of an alcohol policy should be a considerable reduction in the French population's alcohol consumption. This objective should be achieved through a number of different strategies. The group also mentioned the need for the development of a common alcohol strategy at the EU-level. It is interesting to view the French encouragement of the Swedish government to put alcohol control more firmly on the political agenda in the EU in 2001 in this historic perspective.

The objectives and values that have been identified by the different committees that have been described here have led to the introduction of a number of concrete alcohol control measures in France. Legislation concerning age limits for purchasing alcohol was in a piecemeal manner introduced from 1954 to 1959. From 1959, production of alcoholic beverages has been subject to a set of rigid rules, and also the French licensing system for on- and off-premise sale of alcoholic beverages dates back to 1959 (*Code des*

Débites Boissons). After this system took effect, the number of establishments selling alcoholic beverages decreased substantially. From 1960 to 1992, the number declined by about 85 000, or 34 per cent (Hurst, Gregory and Gussmann, 1997). A number of health and social policy motivated regulations were adopted in connection with this system in order to limit the number of establishments selling and serving alcoholic beverages. For instance, it was decided that the total number of outlets in towns should not exceed one per 450 inhabitants, and in more urban areas, one license per 3000 inhabitants. Further, no new bars were to be established, within a distance set by the local authorities, near schools, hospitals, sport facilities, recreation areas for youth etc. Since 1959, driving under the influence of alcohol has been an offence. The blood alcohol level has been lowered, and legislation has become strengthened on several occasions after this. As has been illustrated above, advertising of alcoholic beverages has become restricted or banned, and public information and prevention campaigns aimed at reducing alcohol related harm have become more frequent since the 1980s.

These qualitative observations indicating an incremental move in a more restrictive direction have also been reflected and revealed in more formalised quantitative research. For instance, the EU funded project, the European Comparative Alcohol Study (ECAS), analysed the similarities and differences in alcohol control policies in the EU member states (excluding Luxembourg) and Norway during the 1950-2000 period (Karlsson and Österberg 2001).⁸ A quantitative scale, consisting of six sub groups was constructed for the purpose of measuring and comparing the strictness in alcohol control in the 15 countries: “control over production and wholesale”, “control over distribution”, “personal control”, “control over marketing”, “social and environmental control” and “public policy”. Based on these subgroups, the individual countries were given a total score (ranging from 0-20) for 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 (See Table 1 in annex).

The results of this study illustrate that Finland, Norway and Sweden were by far given the highest scores for each year. However, of the 15 countries, only these three Nordic countries adopted stricter alcohol control policies in 1950 than they did in 2000. In the remaining countries, control of alcohol had become more restrictive. Of the 12 EU member states that had moved in a more restrictive direction, France had the highest increase in absolute figures, from a score of 1 in 1950 to 12.5 in 2000. This increase seemed quite stable over time, but stricter alcohol control was particularly adopted in France during the 1950-1970, and the 1990-2000 periods.

These rankings are crude measures, and one should be very careful not to draw too far-reaching conclusions based solely on the results of this quantitative scale (Karlsson and Österberg 2001, 126-127). The total scores over time will reflect different and perhaps even opposite trends, and it is important to be aware of the fact that perhaps the most efficient policy instrument to control consumption, the high alcohol taxes and prices has been excluded from this scale. However, this quantitative scale illustrates that the policies on alcohol control in France have become increasingly stricter over an extensive period of time, thus supporting the impression acquired from the qualitative analyses. By bringing history in, a better understanding of the recent French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level can be gleaned. It has here been illustrated that alcohol has not solely been viewed as an economic commodity, but that health and social policy considerations stepwise have become more important in the French approach on alcohol since the 1950s.

According to the results from the quantitative analysis presented above, most EU member states moved in a more restrictive direction concerning the control of alcoholic beverages during the 1950-2000 period, and Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK were all assigned higher scores than France in both 1990 and 2000. One may then ask why none of these countries supported the Swedish government in the cases presented above? This question cannot be addressed based on the analytical framework adopted in this article. Despite this, one possible explanation may be that the level of alcohol related harm in France is higher than in Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. As illustrated in Figure 1, per capita alcohol consumption in these three countries is significantly lower than in France. Further, it would also be of interest to investigate more systematically whether there exists a stable French-Swedish cooperation at the EU-level in other areas of public policy, for instance in the fields of health and social policies. In this context, Kurzer (2001, 121) indicates that France and Sweden constitute the core group of countries that “unconditionally rejects drug toleration” in the EU. On the other hand, in their study of EU coalitions, Elgström, Bjurulf, Johansson and Sannerstedt (2001) found that France seldom were approached by Swedish participants on EU committees for coalition-building purposes. However, these are aspects that should be subject to further research. In this article, focus has been on increasing the understanding of what was referred to as a case of strange bedfellows, i.e. the French-Swedish cooperation on alcohol control at the EU-level. Based on the discussion of the three competitive interpretations, it is concluded that this cooperation should be viewed in a longer historical perspective, rather than in light of current economic calculations or closely matching policies.

Institutionalization of Alcohol Control in France

The main argument in this article is that it is necessary look beyond *current* economic and health and social policy motives and interests in order gain a deeper understanding of why the French government has supported the Swedish government on several occasions in discussions and disputes over alcohol control policy issues at the EU-level from 1995 and onwards. French products were not given preferential status compared with products from other EU member states, and important differences between French and Swedish alcohol control policies were also clearly identified during this period. Based upon these two interpretations, the French-Swedish cooperation still seems strange. The third interpretation focuses on the implications of historical experiences.

The story that has been told here illustrates how alcohol control has become increasingly institutionalised in France over an extensive period of time, where institutionalisation refers to the process in which resources step by step have become bound to the value of reducing alcohol related harm in the French society (Stinchcombe 1968). Although that this process exhibits elements of “experimental learning” based on trial and error and cyclic change, some enduring practices, rules, structures of meaning, and resources have emerged. Most important here, alcoholic beverages have to a growing extent been recognised as commodities that must be exempted from the norms of free market competition, and instead be subject to a set of distinct commercial principles based upon health and social policy considerations.

However, the fact that the awareness about alcohol related harm in France has increased does not automatically leads to the adoption and implementation of formal regulations in the alcohol field. Sulkunen and Ugland (2002) have for instance illustrated the severe

obstacles associated with getting the French law that restricts alcohol advertising adopted and implemented on the domestic arena. The *Loi Evin* has been systematically maimed by powerful actors representing the alcohol and advertising business interests during the last decade. As a result of the domestic opposition from various groups in the French society, there seems to be a mismatch between the awareness about alcohol related harm that has emerged in a stepwise manner on the political level since the 1950s, and the actual practices and regulations that has been adopted in France. This observation illustrates the aspect of historical inefficiency, characterised by lags in matching (Olsen and March 1989; 1995; 1998). Despite this mismatch, the French support of the Swedish government in alcohol control policy questions at the EU level during the last decade should be viewed in relation to a historical path where alcohol control has become gradually institutionalised in France since the 1950s.

Conclusion

People as well as modern nation states are made up of numerous rule-sets, norms, identities and loyalties. Although this article has illustrated how alcohol control policies stepwise have become institutionalised in France during the last 50 years, this does not necessarily imply that the identity and pride associated with being the leading producer and exporter of high quality alcoholic beverages has become less relevant. Instead, this is yet another example of how different and perhaps even competing objectives and principles can be pursued simultaneously in politics. The duality between health and social policy considerations on the one hand, and commercial and economic interests on the other, is apparent in relation to alcohol. It has for instance been illustrated elsewhere that also in Sweden, the approach on alcohol and alcohol control is less consistent than often has been presumed (Ugland 2002). However, while commercial and economic aspects to a greater degree have infused the area of alcohol control policy in Sweden during the last decades, in France, the pendulum has oscillated in the other direction, and health and social policy motivated alcohol control measures have stepwise become introduced and institutionalised since the 1950s. The French-Swedish cooperation should be viewed in relation to both of these trends, and in this perspective, the bed-fellowship between France and Sweden in relation to alcohol control may seem less strange.

On a more general level, this article has identified trends of homogenisation and convergence in relation to alcohol control in the EU, and not only in the relationship between France and Sweden. Although the alcohol control policy systems in Finland and Sweden still are the most comprehensive in the EU, they were less unique in 2000 than they were in earlier periods. Table 1 illustrated that the control of alcohol became less strict between 1990 and 2000 in the EU members Finland and Sweden, as well as in the EEA partner Norway. At the same time, the awareness about the need for alcohol control increased in other EU member states, as well as on the EU level during the last decades. The French-Swedish cooperation seems to have played an important role in putting alcohol on the political agenda in the EU in recent years (Ugland 2002).

Soon the French-Swedish cooperation in relation to alcohol control will be put to a new test. Again the European Court of Justice provides the venue (Case C-318/00). However, this time the roles may be shifted, and the question is whether Sweden will support France, and their ban on alcohol advertising in televised sporting events.

Notes

- ¹ Thanks to Johan P. Olsen, Grethe Veiåker Nilsen, Franck Orban, Frode Veggeland, and three anonymous referees for constructive comments and suggestions on the issues raised in this article.
- ² Written Opinion from the French government to the European Court of Justice in Case C-189/95, 10 October 1995.
- ³ Written Opinion from the French government to the European Court of Justice in Case C-405/98, 7 June 1999.
- ⁴ The source here is Ingrid Hjelt af Trolle, Secretary General, EU-Unit, Prime Minister's Office in Sweden (Personal conversation, Oslo 29 November 2000).
- ⁵ The assortment of *Systembolaget* changes frequently and the figures presented here are from the ordinary assortment as of 10 December 2001. The figures are based on the number of products that *Systembolaget* offers within each category, and not the number of brands offered. This means a product that is offered in different bottle sizes will be counted more than once.
- ⁶ Before the abolition of the import, export, production and wholesale monopolies from 1 January 1995, the state owned *Vin and Sprit* was the sole supplier of strong beer, wine and spirits to *Systembolaget*.
- ⁷ Official Journal of the European Communities, C 302 of 21 October 2000, p. 20.
- ⁸ The ECAS project was initiated in negotiations between the Commission DG V (Employment, Health and Social Affairs) and a number of national governments of the EU member states in 1995, and it was funded by a grant in 1998. The project was completed in 2001.

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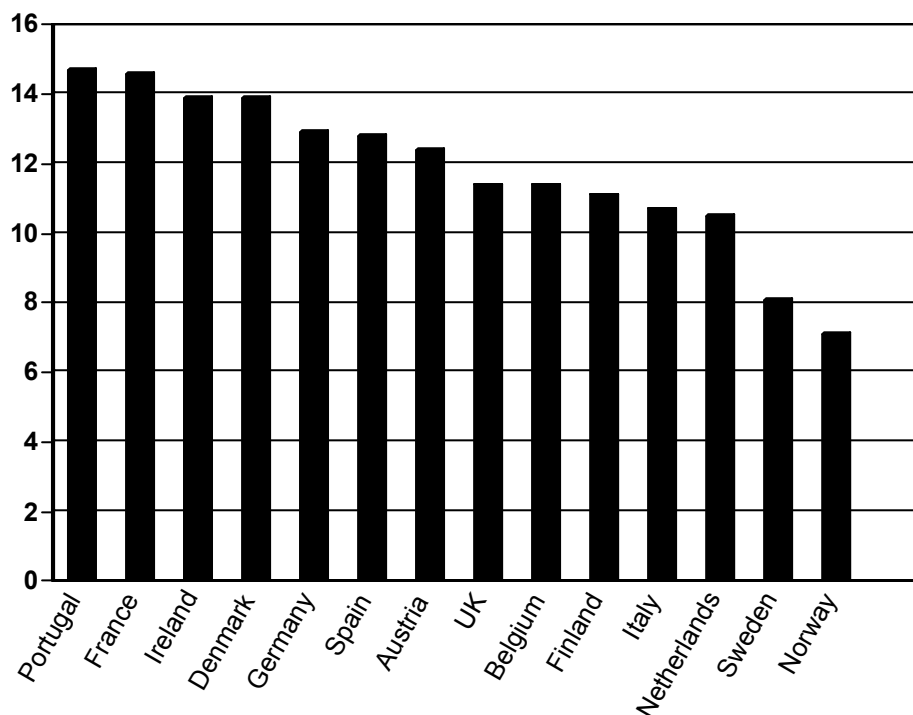
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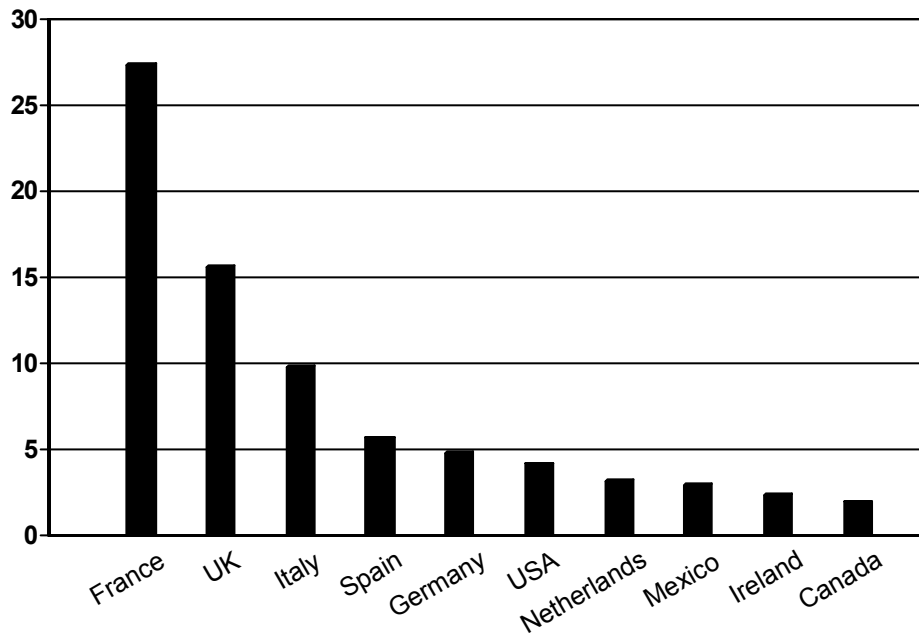
Annex

Figure 1. Per capita alcohol consumption (recorded and unrecorded) in 15 European countries per year 1996-98 (litres of pure ethanol).



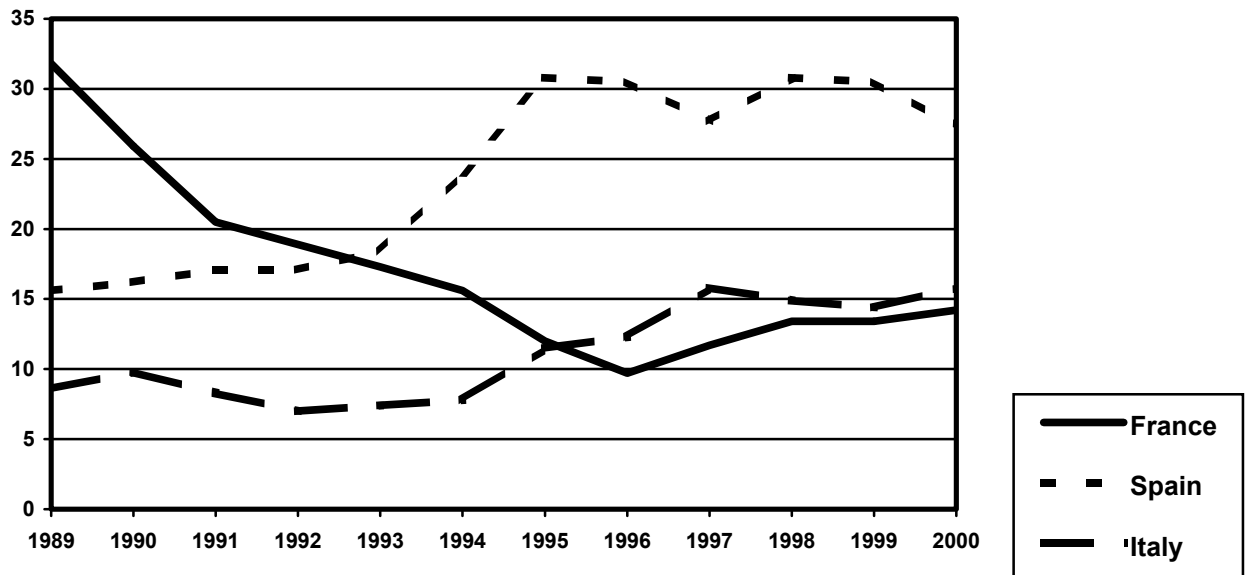
Source: Leifmann (2001).

Figure 2. The top 10 exporters of alcoholic beverages in the world in 1998 (value of total world export in %).



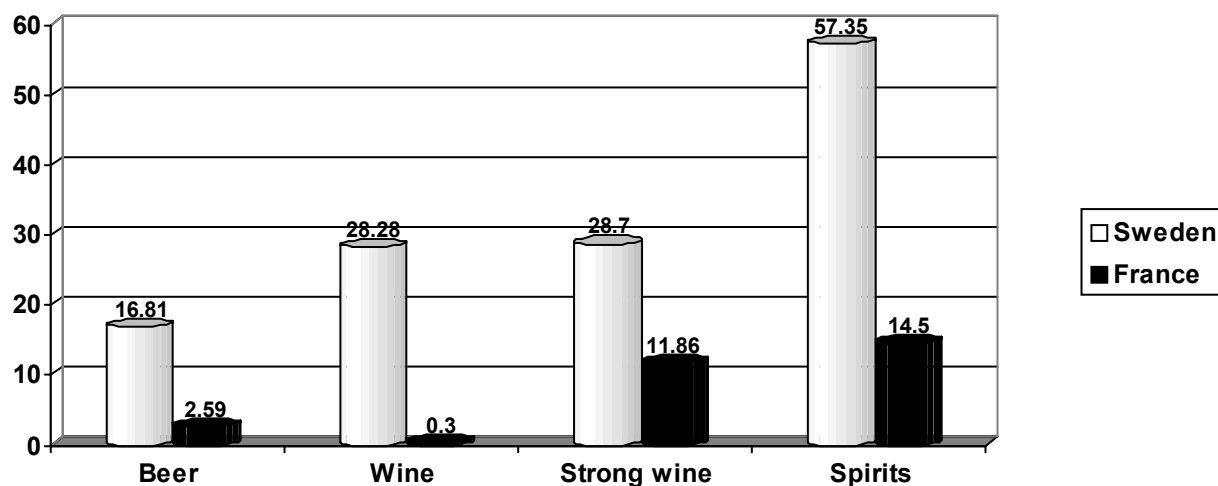
Source: United Nations (1998).

Figure 3. Systembolaget's sales of wine 1989-2000 (in per cent of total).



Source: Systembolaget.

Figure 4. Alcohol excises in France and Sweden, 2000 (Euro per litre pure alcohol).



Source: European Confederation of Spirits Producers (CEPS).

Table 1. The strictness of alcohol control policies in 14 European countries, 1950-2000.

Country	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Austria	4	7	7	6	7	7
Belgium	6	7	8	8,5	10,5	11,5
Denmark	4	4	6	7	7	8,5
Finland	17	17	15,5	18,5	18,5	14,5
France	1	6,5	9,5	9,5	10,5	12,5
Germany	4	4	5	6	7	8
Greece	2	2	2	2	6	7
Ireland	8	8	12	12	12	12
Italy	7	7	8	12	12	13
Netherlands	6	6	6	11	13	13
Norway	17	17	17	19	19	17
Portugal	1	2	2	4	6	8
Spain	0	0	0	4,5	10	10
Sweden	17,5	18,5	18,5	18,5	18,5	16,5
UK	8	9	14	14	14	13

Source: Karlsson and Österberg (2001).