

[Comment] When it comes to Vodka, the answer is clear

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - I wrote in these pages earlier in the year about wine. Now I am going to move on to vodka. On another occasion, it might be the making of a good night out, but just right now, it's the excuse to write about politics.

But the vodka story is a good one, though; bear with me.

The origin of the story is a demand by the countries of the Baltic region to protect the word "vodka". They want it reserved only for drinks made from potatoes or cereals. This is the traditional meaning of vodka, they say, and consumers deserve protection from inferior imitations. Scotch whisky is very tightly protected, and vodka should be similarly protected.

You may wonder whether it is more than mere coincidence that the countries making this demand are the countries where vodka is produced according to these traditional recipes. I prefer not to comment, merely to observe.

Member states where vodka is made from other agricultural products, for example grapes or sugar beet, were opposed to this proposal. Vodka is supposed to be a highly pure spirit and not carry the taste of its source material, say the makers. This is discrimination pure and simple, as a series of blind tastings held in the European Parliament have sought to prove.

There are several reasons why this is a good story, beyond the rather jolly round of lobbying that has surely been going on by the vodka makers on both sides.

First, for Polonophiles, it is good to see the Polish government putting up a good fight in the EU. They made rather a hash of the debate about sugar reform, and the twin former child stars now at the head of the government cut a rather unlikely dash on the European scene with their irrelevant interventions into the commemoration of history. A serious, down-to-earth advocacy of Polish commercial interests is most welcome and long overdue.

Second, let's watch what happens when the rules of qualified majority voting come into play. Compromise proposals suddenly start to surface. For example, perhaps vodka made from grapes can be called, in future, "vodka made from grapes". Sounds funny, perhaps, but this way a solution might be found. If enough member states can be persuaded to change sides, then this kind of deal might stick.

The alternative to QMV, if this decision were to be taken by unanimity, does not bear thinking about. QMV rewards the member states who form the majority behind a successful proposal, and game theory tells us that it is better for the opponents to trade their support for concessions than to fight on bloodily and still lose. Unanimity on the other hand rewards the bloody fight. QMV encourages the search for reasons to support a proposal; unanimity encourages the search for reasons to oppose it.

And the third reason is that the compromise solution will put consumers first. Drinks that we know as vodka today will remain served as vodka. But the material they are made from will be put on the label. Other types of food and drink have to carry ever-more extensive details about what they contain. There is no reason why alcoholic drinks should be an exception.

This is one of the things I like about the new Europe. Decisions formerly made on behalf of citizens by officials can now increasingly be made by citizens for themselves. This is true of purchasing decisions and commercial decisions, but also true of decisions about who should sit in the political institutions. Of all the international parliaments and assemblies in the world,

only the European Parliament is directly elected.

The power of consumers and voters is on the up, the power of vested interests is in decline. Information and choice are putting the citizen in charge. And that, I think, is something to raise a glass to.

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