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**Alcohol Consumption
in the Baltic States
Developments from 1994 to 1999**

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Preface

This paper presents and discusses recent developments in alcohol consumption in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The paper is based on analysis of data from the living condition surveys NORBALT I and II, which were conducted concurrently in the three Baltic states in 1994 and 1999 by Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science and local partners. The present project is sponsored by Rusfeltets samarbeidsorgan in Norway (former Avholdsfolkets Landsråd – AL), The Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS) and Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies. Thanks to Sturla Nordlund, Aadne Aasland, Kari Riisøen Hauge, Jon Pedersen and Guri Tyldum for constructive comments at various stages of this project.

Oslo and Montreal, December 2002
Anette Brunovskis and Trygve Uglund

Introduction

The developments in living conditions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have become subject to considerable attention during the last decade. The move away from the old state centrally planned system towards modern market-oriented economies has created many challenges, and a key question is in which ways the economic and political transition has affected the prevalence of health and social problems in these countries. These issues have not only been addressed from a national perspective, but they have also been viewed in a larger context. The Baltic states' relations to the European Union (EU) are central. After restoring independence in 1990 (Lithuania) and 1991 (Estonia and Latvia), each of the three countries applied for EU membership in the autumn of 1995. On receipt of these applications, the European Commission asserted that social reform ought to be pursued, and that the public health system needed to be significantly improved in order to qualify for EU membership (European Commission, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c). In the case of tobacco consumption, drug and alcohol abuse, the European Parliament summed up the situation in 2000 as "bad and getting worse" (European Parliament, 2000). The present paper focuses on the use of alcohol in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the second half of the 1990s.

Alcohol is recognized as an important factor in the burden of premature mortality in the Baltic States (WHO, 1998), but it is difficult to obtain reliable sources on the total alcohol consumption in the three countries. Smuggled and illegally produced alcohol make up a substantial part of the alcohol consumed, and doubts have been presented around the reliability of the official statistics (Simpura and Levine, 1997). However, Leifmann and Edgren Henrichson (2000) have estimated the consumption levels to be between 12 and 18 liters of pure alcohol per capita in the Baltic States in the mid 1990s. Latvia was estimated to have the highest consumption followed by Estonia and Lithuania (Leifmann and Edgren Henrichson, 2000: 259). Although interpreted with caution, these figures are among the highest in the world.

The trend of increased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems observed since the late 1980s has not yet led to the adoption of stricter alcohol control policies. This gives reason to follow the development closely. While most of the data available on the alcohol consumption in the Baltic states focuses on the situation leading up to the mid 1990s, this paper aims at taking a closer look at the development in drinking patterns in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the second half of the decade. More specifically, this paper analyses the development from 1994 to 1999.

This period is of particular interest because the development between these two years can be seen in relation to the perception of alcohol problems, as it appeared in a survey that was carried out in the Baltic States in 1994 (Moskalewicz and Tigerstedt, 1998). That year, drunkenness and alcoholism was perceived as the most threatening social problem in Lithuania, the second most threatening in Latvia and the fourth most

threatening in Estonia at the country level. The information on the development in self reported alcohol consumption in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from 1994 to 1999 will here be viewed against this background. Our focus will be on developments in general drinking patterns as expressed through the shares of non-drinkers and weekly drinkers in the population, as well as frequent drinking. We will also look into the issues of binge drinking and the composition of consumption with regard to different types of alcoholic beverages.

Material and methods

This paper presents data on alcohol consumption from the living condition surveys NORBALT I and II. These surveys were conducted concurrently in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the autumn of 1994 and 1999. At both times, more than 10 000 respondents were interviewed in their own homes (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted in both the national language of the country concerned and in Russian.

The sample consists of a combination of single stage stratified samples in the larger cities, and two stage stratified cluster samples in smaller cities and rural areas. The sampling of Randomly Selected Individuals (RSI) was based on population registers, and each RSI was taken to represent a household. These registers only contained individuals over the age of 18, meaning that all RSIs were above this age.

The sample design defined three types of respondents; the RSI, the household, and the individual within the household. The inclusion probabilities are not the same for the three types of respondents, and the sample is also not self-weighting within a respondent group. The estimates in this report are therefore weighted. For detailed information about the sample and weights, see Pedersen 1996.

Overall there was a non-response due to frame imperfections (non-existing or vacant buildings) of between 2 and 6 per cent. Non-response due to refusals and no contact was below 10% in all three countries, in all waves, but higher in 1999 than in 1994 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Description of sample and non-response.

Country	Year	Sample size (nr of households)	Non-response due to frame imperfections	Refusals and no contact
Estonia	1994	4883	(see next column)	8.8 % (total non response)
	1999	5500	5.0%	7.2%
Latvia	1994	3500	3.4%	7.1%
	1999	3500	4.0%	9.4%
Lithuania	1994	2700	3.3%	7.2%
	1999	3159	2.0%	9.3%

The response rates were consequently high in both years, in 1994 between 89 and 91 per cent, and in 1999 between 87 and 89 per cent.

The goal of the surveys was to obtain reliable information about living conditions across a broad range of indicators both at the individual and the household level. The survey design involved three units of analysis, and the questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part one concerned general information about the households, such as housing conditions. Part two consisted of a household roster, containing information about all

household members, such as demographic data and working conditions. The final and third part covered among other aspects health related issues and alcohol consumption.

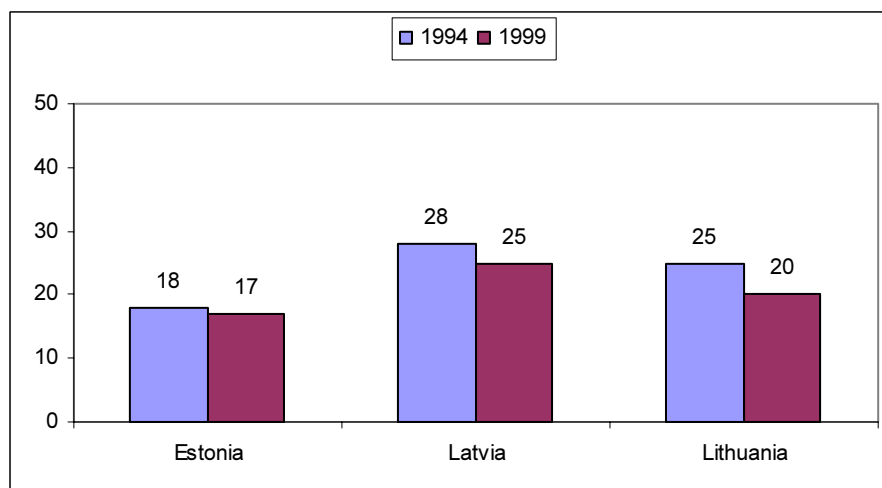
Three questions on alcohol consumption were posed to the RSI. The respondents were asked when they last had an alcoholic drink. Possible answers were last week, a week to a month ago, a month to three months ago, three to 12 months ago, and more than 12 months ago. Respondents who reported to have consumed alcohol in the last month were then asked on how many days in the past two weeks they had had alcohol. The group that had consumed alcohol in the last month was also asked about the type and quantity of their alcohol consumption, i.e. how many units of beer, wine and spirits they had consumed on their last drinking occasion. The alcohol units were defined in the following way; one unit is one half litre of beer, 8 centilitres of wine, or 4 centilitres/50 grams of spirits. In general, very few of the respondents replied that they “did not know” to the three questions, and very few refused to answer; varying somewhat between the questions, approximately 2 to 3 per cent at the most chose this option. In this paper all measures have been estimated in relation to the total population, unless otherwise stated.

Prevalence and frequency of drinking in the Baltic States, 1994 – 1999

Non-drinkers

The simplest indicator of drinking patterns is the prevalence of drinking, which can be presented through the rate of non-drinkers or abstainers in a society. In this study, those who replied “more than 12 months ago” to the question of how long ago they last had an alcoholic drink were defined as non-drinkers. The proportions of non-drinkers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1994 and 1999 are shown in Figure 1. Estonia had the lowest proportion of non-drinkers in both years. However, the proportion fell somewhat in both Latvia and Lithuania from 1994 to 1999, while it was more stable in Estonia.

Figure 1: Percentage of non-drinkers by country, 1994 and 1999



As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, there were clear gender differences in the prevalence of non-drinkers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania both in 1994 and 1999. In each of the three countries, between two and three times as many women reported to not having had an alcoholic drink during the 12 months preceding the interview.

Figure 2: Percentage of male non-drinkers 1994 and 1999

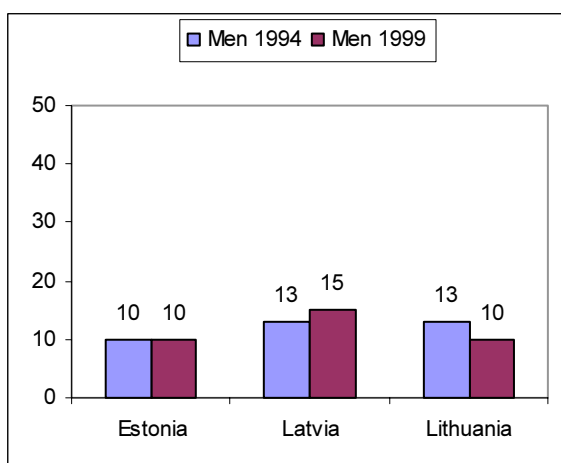
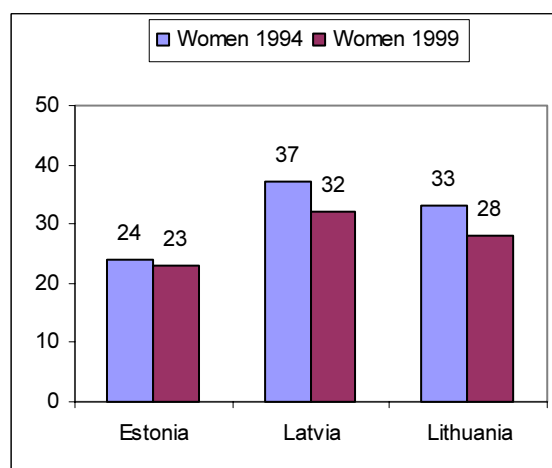


Figure 3: Percentage of female non-drinkers 1994 and 1999



The proportion of female non-drinkers declined in Latvia and Lithuania from 1994 to 1999. The proportion of male non-drinkers declined only in Lithuania between the two years. The gender differences concerning the proportion of non-drinkers were somewhat larger in 1994 compared with 1999, meaning that relatively more women drank alcohol in 1999. There was a relatively large difference of almost 10 percentage points between the proportions of female non-drinkers in Estonia and Latvia respectively in 1999, although the difference between the countries in this respect did diminish between the two years.

The Baltic countries are heterogeneous in terms of nationality, with large Russian minorities in both Estonia and Latvia. While Lithuania is more ethnically homogenous, there are also here ethnic minorities. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate that both in 1994 and 1999, there were no substantial differences between the titular¹ populations and the other nationalities in either Latvia or Lithuania in terms of proportion of non-drinkers. However, the minorities in Estonia and Estonians displayed differences in 1994, as Estonians had a lower share of non-drinkers. In 1999, the share of non-drinkers was more or less identical in the two groups, due to an increase in the proportion of Estonian non-drinkers.

¹ The term “titular population” signifies Estonians in Estonia, Latvians in Latvia and Lithuanians in Lithuania.

Figure 4: Percentage of non-drinkers by nationality 1994

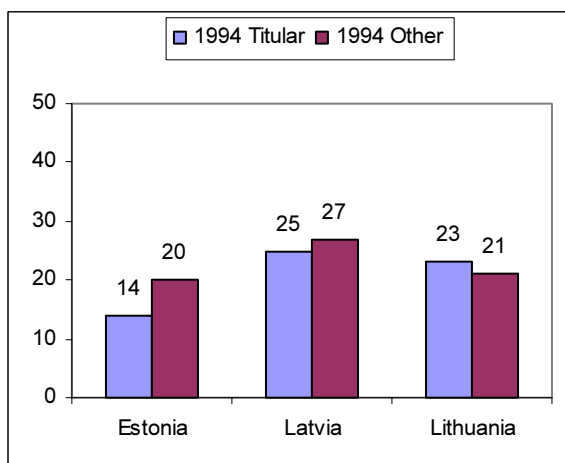
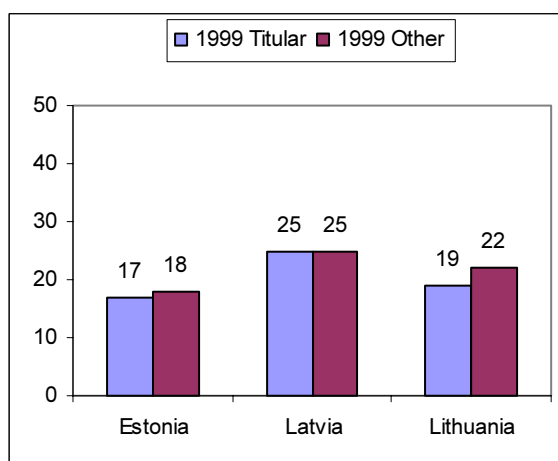


Figure 5: Percentage of non-drinkers by nationality 1999



Summing up, the main trend is that the overall proportion of non-drinkers has fallen in the Baltic States between 1994 and 1999, and especially the share of female non-drinkers. The development among women in Latvia and Lithuania may be of particular interest, bringing women in these two countries closer to their Estonian counterparts in prevalence patterns. The situation in Estonia, where there was a considerably lower share of both non-drinkers in general and female non-drinkers in particular in both years, is marked by stability. The ethnic minorities in Estonia were more likely to be non-drinkers than the titular population in 1994. In 1999, there were no major differences in terms of nationality in the share of non-drinkers.

Weekly drinkers

In addition to the proportion of non-drinkers, this paper will also take a closer look at the proportion that reported having had at least one alcoholic drink during the week preceding the interview.

Figure 6: Percentage of weekly drinkers

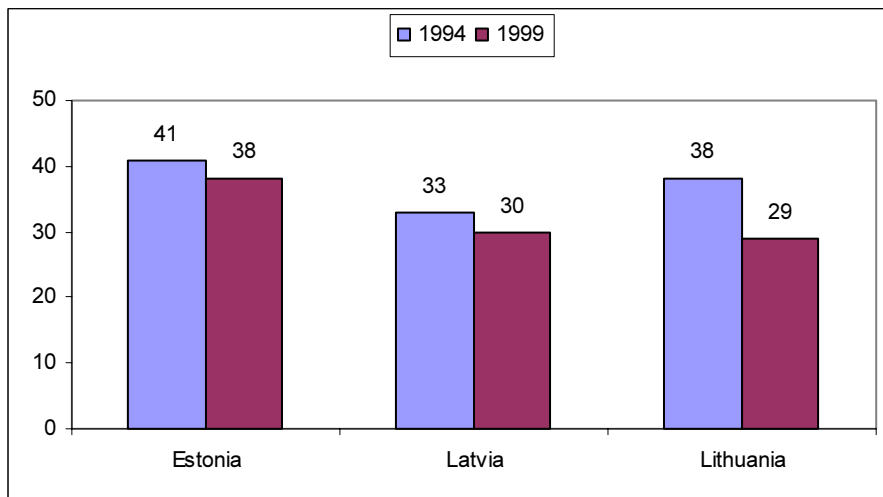


Figure 6 shows that Estonia had the highest share of people who reported having had at least one alcoholic drink during the week preceding the interview both in 1994 and 1999, with a small decline between the two years. In Lithuania, the decline in the share of people who reported drinking alcohol during the past week was quite substantial, from 38 to 29 per cent. In 1999, Latvia and Lithuania were quite similar with respect to this aspect, while the proportion of weekly drinkers was higher in Estonia. In the case of weekly drinkers there were also clear gender differences, as shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7: Percentage of male weekly drinkers, 1994 and 1999

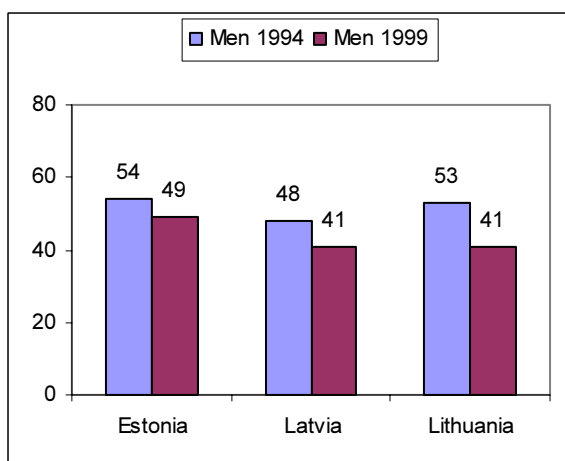
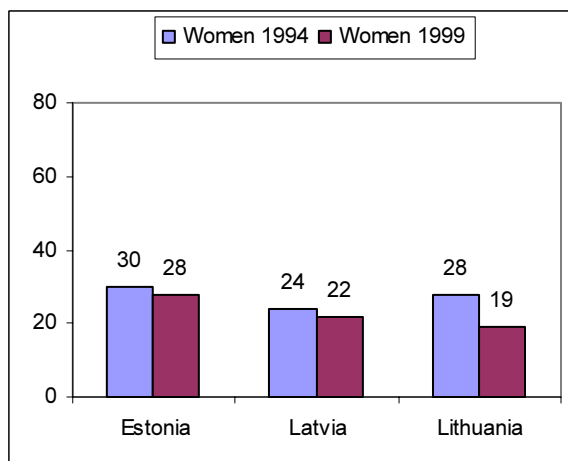


Figure 8: Percentage of female weekly drinkers, 1994 and 1999



As seen here, approximately twice as many men as women reported having had at least one alcoholic drink during the week preceding the interview. Interestingly, the proportion of male weekly drinkers declined in each of the three Baltic States from 1994 to 1999. In Lithuania this decline was quite substantial, from 53 to 41 per cent.

However, the share of female weekly drinkers declined noticeably only in Lithuania between the two years.

Figure 9: Percentage of weekly drinkers by nationality, 1994

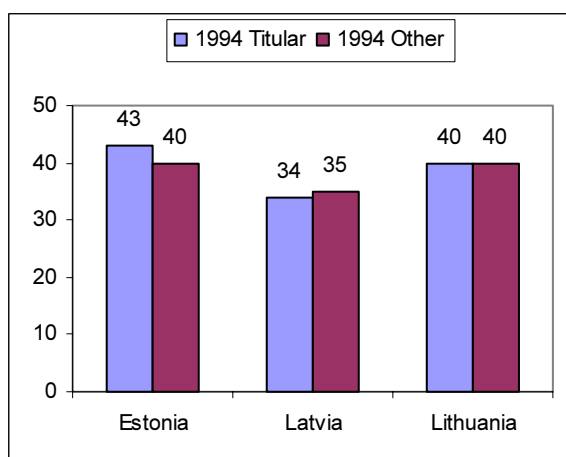
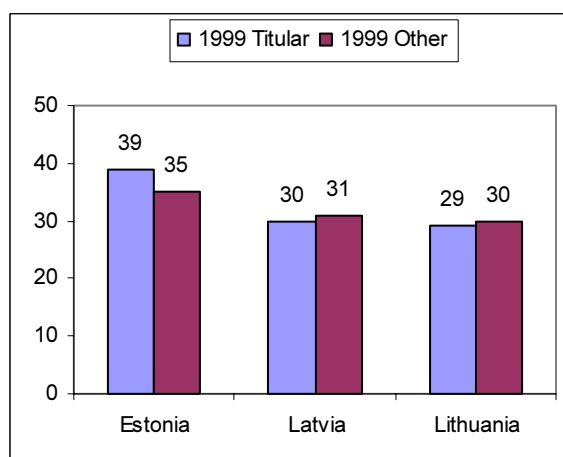


Figure 10 Percentage of weekly drinkers by nationality, 1999



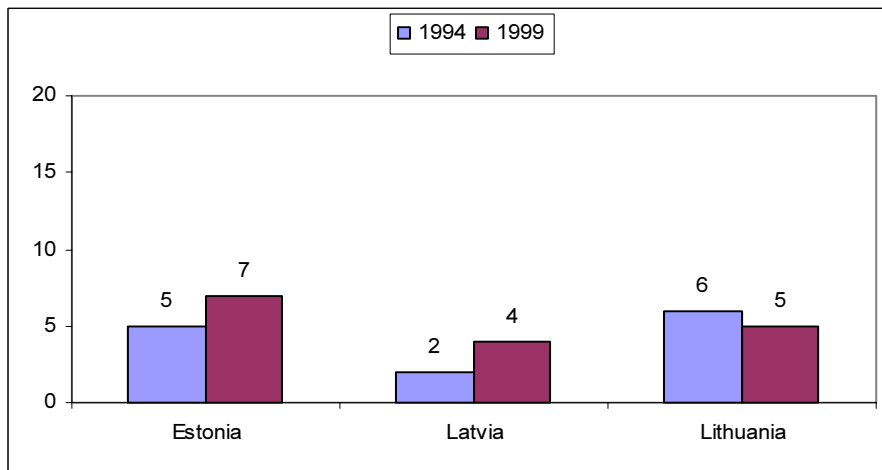
The ethnic minorities in Estonia and Estonians displayed differences both in 1994 and in 1999, as Estonians had a somewhat higher share of weekly drinkers. In Latvia and Lithuania, there were no substantial differences between the two groups.

Summing up, the proportion of people reporting having had at least one alcoholic drink during the week preceding the interview decreased in both Latvia and Lithuania between 1994 and 1999, while it seemed stable in Estonia. This decline comes mostly from men in all three countries, and also women in Lithuania. Both in 1994 and 1999, Estonians were somewhat more likely to drink weekly than are the inhabitants of other nationalities. In Latvia, there were little differences between the two groups both years.

Frequent drinkers

The frequency of drinking is here measured by the share of the population having had at least one alcoholic drink on four or more days during the past two weeks. Frequent drinkers as defined here does not necessarily indicate a level of problem drinking, but is merely a reflection of a general pattern of drinking in the population.

Figure 11: Percentage of frequent drinkers, 1994 and 1999



In Estonia and Latvia, there has been a quite small increase in the share reporting to have been drinking on four or more days during the past two weeks preceding the interview, and no real difference between the two years in Lithuania. While Lithuania had the lowest share of weekly drinkers in the population in 1999 (Figure 6), we here see that the share of frequent drinkers in the total population was very similar to what is found in Estonia in both years.

Figure 12: Percentage of male frequent drinkers 1994 and 1999

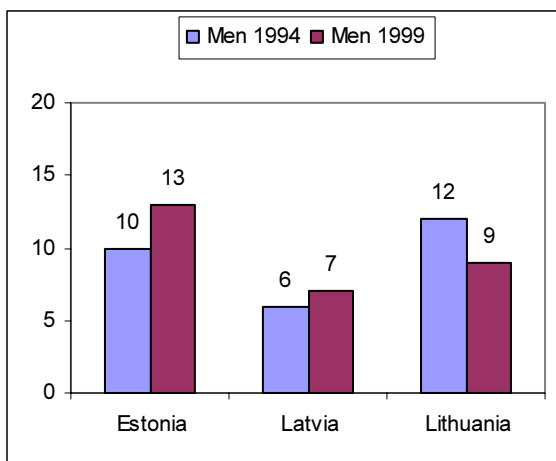
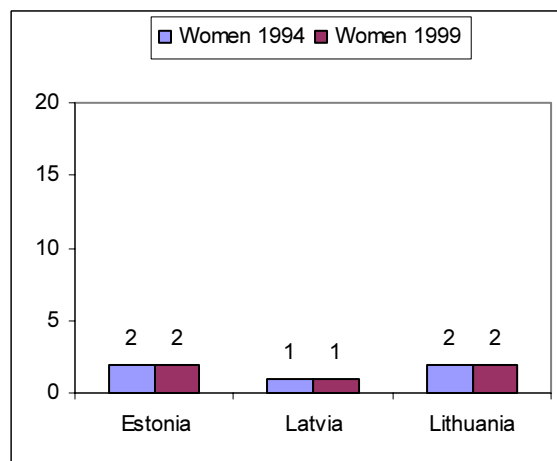


Figure 13: Percentage of female frequent drinkers 1994 and 1999



In 1994, Lithuania had the highest share of men drinking on four or more days, while Estonia came second. In 1999, the situation was reversed, both through a decline in the Lithuanian share, and an increase in the Estonian one. There were no changes in the share of female frequent drinkers between the two years. Latvia has both the highest

share of non-drinkers and the lowest share of frequent drinking among those who did drink in the female part of the population

In terms of nationality, there were practically no differences between the titular and minority populations in either of the three countries, see Figures 14 and 15.

Figure 14: Percentage of frequent drinkers by nationality, 1994

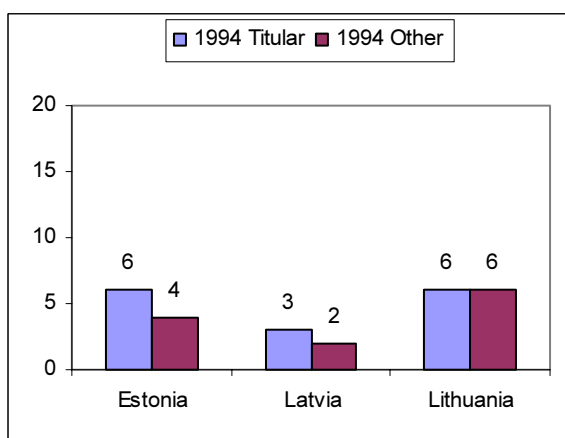
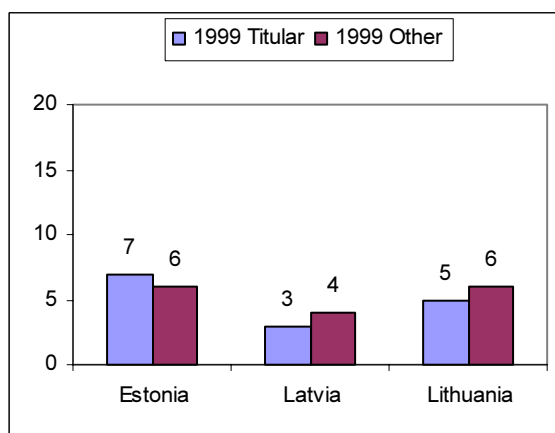


Figure 15: Percentage of frequent drinkers by nationality, 1999

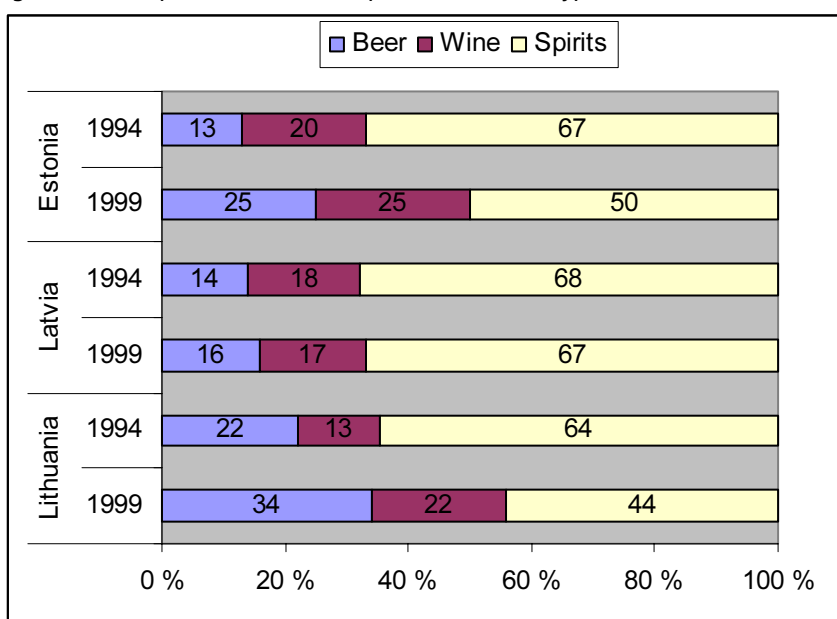


Summing up, Estonia had the highest share of frequent drinkers in 1999, followed closely by Lithuania. There was a higher proportion of frequent drinkers among the Estonian titular population compared with the ethnic minorities. There was an increase in the frequency of drinking among men in Estonia. The gender differences in frequency of drinking were larger in Estonia than in the other two countries. In contrast to the two other countries, in Lithuania there was a decrease in the share of male frequent drinkers. This means that in 1999, the gender differences in frequency among drinkers were smallest in Lithuania.

Composition of alcohol consumption

There seem to have been quite substantial changes in the composition of consumption of various alcoholic drinks in Estonia and Latvia as shown in Figure 16.

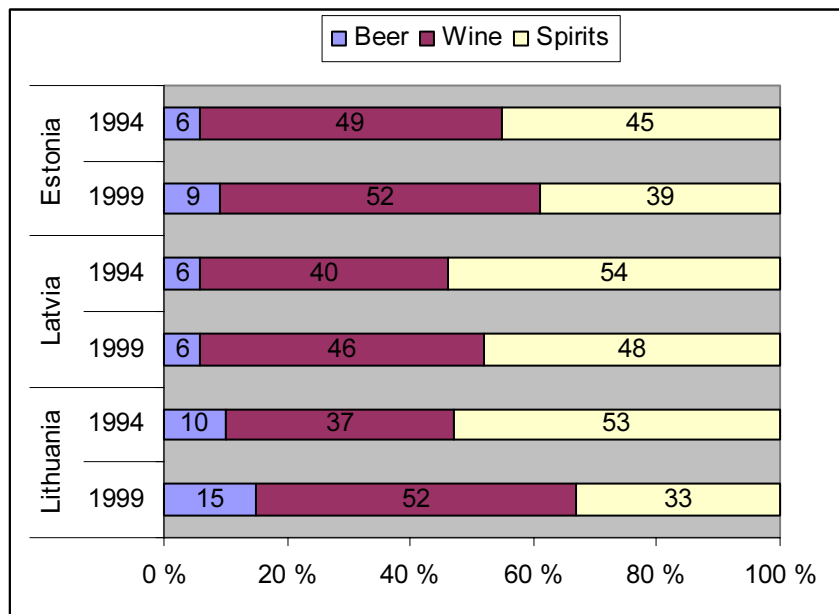
Figure 16: Composition of consumption, % of each type of alcohol in total consumption, 1994 and 1999



The composition of consumption clearly shows that spirits was the dominant type of alcohol in all three countries. As seen in Figure 16, the shares of spirits were rather similar in 1994 at between 64 and 68 per cent. However, between 1994 and 1999 the share of spirits fell quite substantially with around 20 percentage points in Estonia and Lithuania, while it remained at a stable and high level in Latvia. This development can most likely not be explained by the emergence of new groups of drinkers with different drinking patterns, for instance more women that are likely to drink less spirits and more of the “softer” types of alcohol, as the share of non-drinkers was stable between the two years in Estonia, while it decreased in Lithuania and Latvia.

There are clear gender differences in the composition of alcohol consumption; men in all three countries have a much higher share of spirits in their total consumption than do women. There have however also been substantial changes in the make-up of alcohol consumption within the gender groups.

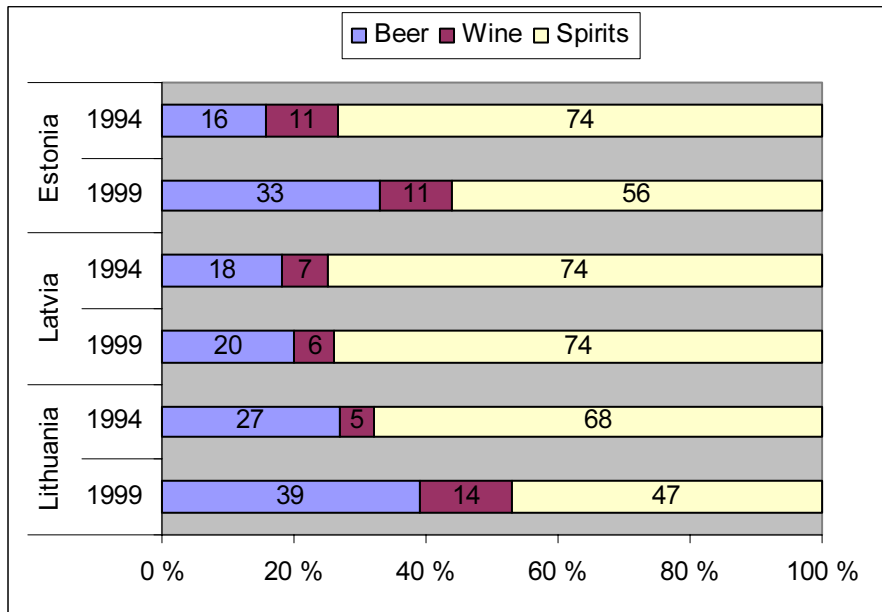
Figure 17: Composition of consumption among women, 1994 and 1999



As shown in Figure 17, spirits were the dominant form of alcohol consumed by women in Latvia and Lithuania in 1994, while women in Estonia were slightly more likely to drink wine. However, the share of spirits in the total consumption declined in all three countries between 1994 and 1999, and particularly so in Lithuania, where the share of spirits went from constituting more than half of the total consumption in 1994 to one third in 1999. At the same time, the relative share of wine in Lithuanian women's consumption increased quite substantially from a little over a third to more than half. While wine was clearly the dominant form of alcohol among women in Estonia and Lithuania in 1999, wine and spirits constituted approximately equal shares among women in Latvia in the same year, and the share of spirits was higher than among women in Estonia and Lithuania. The situation in Latvia is consequently that although the country has the lowest share of female drinkers, women are more likely to drink spirits than women in the two other countries.

Further, there were also changes in the drinking patterns of men in Estonia and Lithuania with respect to composition of alcohol consumption as shown in Figure 18.

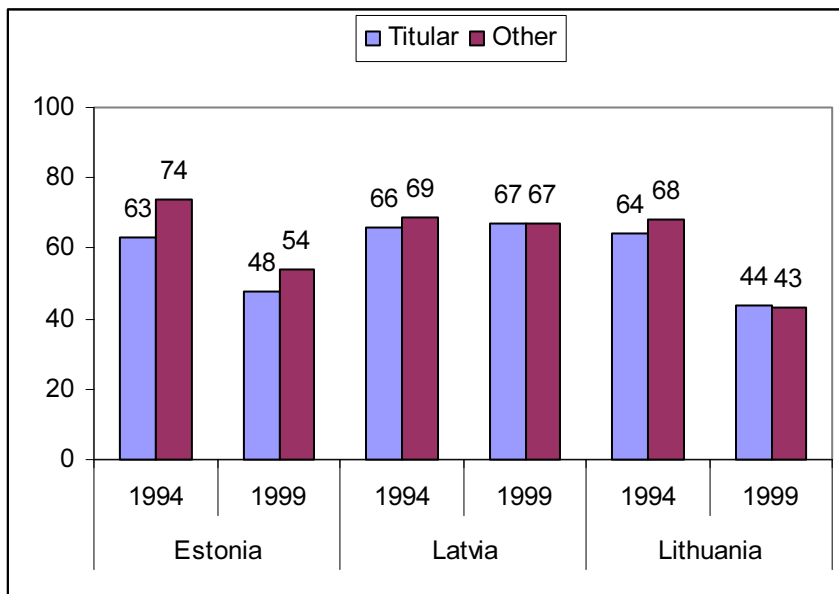
Figure 18: Composition of consumption among men 1994 to 1999



Spirits were clearly the dominant form of alcohol in both years in the male populations. However, while the share declined substantially in both Estonia and Lithuania, with close to 20 percentage points in each country, this development was hardly mirrored in Latvia. While the share of spirits in the total consumption had fallen to around half in Estonia and Lithuania in 1999, it remained at around three quarters in Latvia.

Some differences along the lines of ethnicity may be observed, in particular in Estonia, where the shares of spirits were higher among the minorities both in 1994 and 1999, as seen in Figure 19. The difference was larger in 1994 than in 1999. In Latvia and Lithuania the shares of spirits in were somewhat higher among the minorities in 1994, while this had evened out in 1999.

Figure 19: Spirits as percentage of total consumption by nationality



All in all, there have been substantial changes in the composition of consumption in Estonia and Lithuania in the period from 1994 to 1999, as the relative share of spirits has declined. The situation in Latvia is marked by stability.

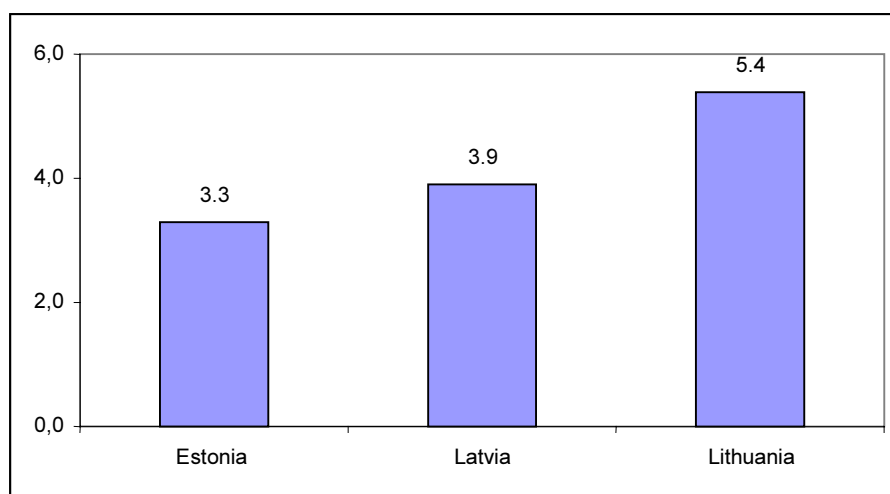
Size of consumption on last drinking occasion

The NORBALT data do not allow for a direct comparison of the size of consumption on last drinking occasion in 1994 and 1999. In 1994 the question regarded how many units of beer, wine and spirits the respondent had had *on average* on the days he or she had consumed alcohol in the past two weeks. In 1999, the respondents were asked specifically about how much they had consumed of the same categories as above on the *last occasion* they had consumed alcohol. As the results consequently are not directly comparable, this paper includes the number of alcohol units consumed only for 1999.

Average number of alcohol units consumed on last drinking occasion among drinkers and in the total adult population

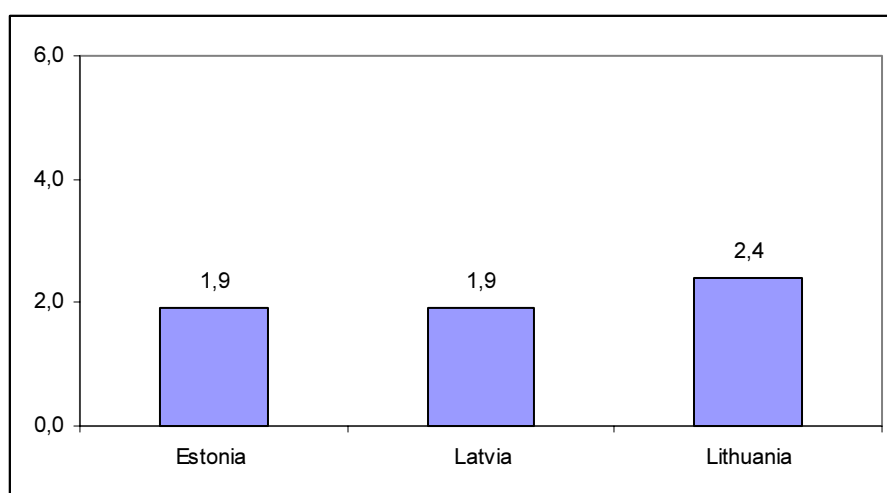
As illustrated in Figure 20, there are clear differences in average size of consumption between the three countries among those who drank during the last month before the interview. Estonia has the lowest average self-reported consumption at 3.3 alcohol units on last drinking occasion among drinkers, Latvia comes second at 3.9, while Lithuania has a considerably higher consumption with the mean number of alcohol units at 5.4.

Figure 20. Average number of alcohol units consumed on last drinking occasion among those having had at least one drink during the last month, 1999



The measure above is only informative with regards to the consumption pattern of those who did drink in the month before the interview. As will be remembered, there are quite substantial differences in the prevalence of alcohol consumption between the three countries, as Estonia has a considerably higher share of drinkers in the total population. However, the impression of a higher level of consumption persists when the mean number of alcohol units consumed at the last drinking occasion is estimated in relation to the entire population, including all drinkers and non-drinkers, see Figure 21.

Figure 21. Average number of alcohol units consumed on last drinking occasion in total population, 1999

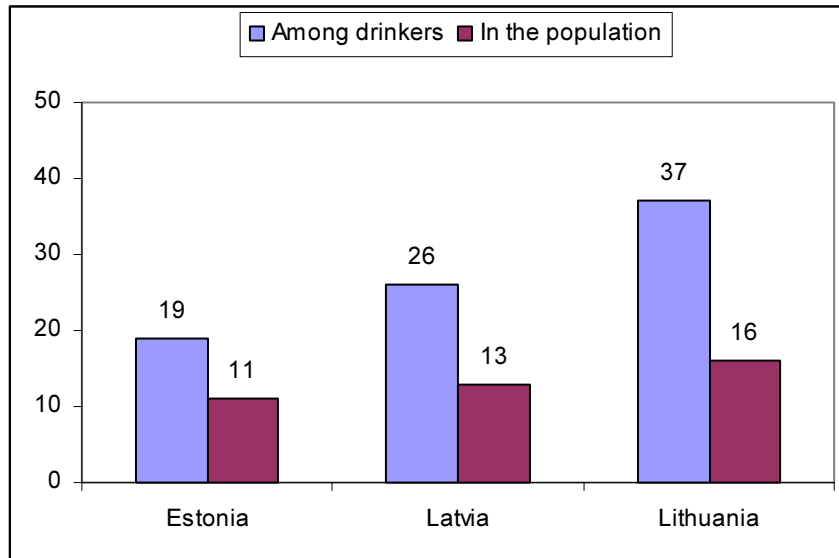


While the average number of alcohol units in relation to the total population is identical in Estonia and Latvia, the average consumption is 0.5 units higher in Lithuania.

Binge drinking among drinkers and in the total adult population

The findings above should also be viewed in relation to a measurement of binge drinking in the three countries. Here, binge drinking is defined in terms of having had five or more drinks on last drinking occasion, which is one of the commonly used definitions (see Hibell et al., 2001: 68). As shown in Figure 20, the average number of alcohol units consumed at the last drinking occasion among last month drinkers in Lithuania was actually above this amount. Binge drinking as defined here does not necessarily indicate problem drinking, and should not be interpreted in that way, as the definition does not take into account for instance the time span during which the drinking has taken place, the body weight of the drinker, negative consequences of drinking, and so on. In this paper, we use the simple definition of binge drinking as an indicator of possible different patterns of drinking in the three Baltic States.

Figure 22: Percentage having had 5 or more alcohol units on the last drinking occasion, 1999



Estonia has the lowest share of binge drinkers among drinkers, while Lithuania has the highest share, with more than one third of those drinking during the two weeks preceding the interview reporting having had 5 or more alcohol units on that last drinking occasion as shown in Figure 22. This pattern persists when binge drinking is estimated in relation to the entire population, and not only among drinkers, even though Latvia and in particular Lithuania has a lower share of drinkers overall.

Summary and discussion

Before discussing the results, it should be emphasized that surveys on alcohol consumption are problematic. People's underestimations and distortions of their own consumption is a much-debated issue (see Embree and Whitehead, 1998). However, as emphasized by McKee et al. (2000) in their study of survey data on alcohol consumption in the Baltic countries, the social stigma of admitting the true consumption levels may be lower in countries where heavy drinking is common. Bearing this in mind, several observations can be made, and the main findings in this study can be summarized in the following points.

- **First, the overall proportion of non-drinkers varied notably by country, with the lowest rates found in Estonia both in 1994 and 1999.** However, the proportion of non-drinkers declined in Latvia and Lithuania, while the situation in Estonia seemed more stable. One reason for this decline in Latvia and Lithuania can be found by looking at the development among female non-drinkers. During the five year period examined here, the proportion of female non-drinkers declined in both countries. Estonia had the largest proportion of female drinkers both years, but the development from 1994 to 1999 was marked by stability. The development in Latvia and Lithuania can be compared with what happened in the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s, when the proportion of non-drinkers, and especially female non-drinkers, declined substantially (Mäkelä et al., 1999). In Finland for instance, the proportion of female non-drinkers fell from about 40 per cent in the 1960s, to a level around 20 per cent in the 1970s (Simpura and Karlsson, 2001). In terms of non-drinkers, only in Estonia did the consumption among the ethnic minorities and the titular population differ, and Estonians had a considerably lower share of non-drinkers than did the minorities in 1994. In 1999, the share of non-drinkers was the same in the two groups also in Estonia.
- **Second, the proportion of weekly drinkers varied by country, and Estonia had the highest rates in both 1994 and 1999.** The same result was reported by McKee et al. (2000) in their study of survey data on alcohol consumption in the Baltic countries from 1997. The proportion of people reporting having had at least one alcoholic drink during the week preceding the interview decreased in both Latvia and Lithuania between 1994 and 1999, while it seemed stable in Estonia. Both in 1994 and 1999, Estonians were more likely to drink weekly than the minorities in Estonia. In Latvia and Lithuania, there were little differences between the two groups in both years.

- **Third, the overall proportion of frequent drinkers was relatively stable in the Baltic States from 1994 to 1999.** The proportion reporting to have had a drink on four or more days during the past two weeks increased somewhat in Estonia and Latvia, while there was no notable difference between the two years in Lithuania.
- **Fourth, both the average number of alcohol units drunk on last drinking occasion and the share of binge drinking on last drinking occasion among drinkers as well as in the population seems to be substantially higher in Lithuania compared with Estonia and Latvia in 1999.** For both of these measures, Latvia was number two, while Estonia had the lowest average of self-reported consumption on last drinking occasion, as well as the lowest share of binge drinking. These findings may cautiously be taken as an indication of that in spite of the lower share of the population who drink alcohol in Lithuania, drunkenness in Lithuania may be more prevalent than in the other Baltic States, and in particular if comparing with Estonia.
- **Fifth and finally, the share of spirits declined in relation to beer and wine from 1994 to 1999 in Estonia and Lithuania, but not in Latvia.** In particular, self reported consumption of beer has increased. However, spirits was still the dominant alcoholic drink in all three countries in 1999. Again a comparison with earlier developments in the Nordic countries may be pertinent. Finland, Norway and Sweden can all be classified as former spirits countries. However, from the 1960s and 1970s, beer has been the dominant alcoholic beverage (Simpura and Karlsson, 2001).

Although the three Baltic States are similar in many respects, the development in self reported alcohol consumption in the Baltic States from 1994 to 1999 is marked by complexity. On some measures, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have experienced similar developments, while the trends are different in relation to other aspects. The most clear cut differences can be found between Estonia and Lithuania. Estonia is marked by having the highest prevalence and frequency of alcohol consumption in the population, and also among women. However, it seems that although a larger share of the population drinks, they tend to drink less on each drinking occasion than what is the case in Lithuania in particular. This cannot be ascribed to a larger share of moderate drinkers bringing the average level down, as the pattern also persists when the share of the population that are drinkers is taken into account. Estonia has the smallest prevalence of binge drinking both among drinkers and interestingly, a smaller share of the total population engages in binge drinking, even though there are more drinkers in the population than there are in Lithuania.

The case of Lithuania is particularly interesting with regards to the size of the consumption of alcohol, as shown in the average number of alcohol units consumed as well as binge drinking, while at the same time, the prevalence of alcohol consumption in the population is smaller than in Estonia. It is interesting to view this finding in relation to the previously mentioned 1994 survey on the evaluation of social problems in the

Baltic States. In 1994, drunkenness and alcoholism was perceived as the number one problem on the country level in Lithuania in terms of former and current prevalence, as well as concerning the threatening nature of the problem (Moskalewicz and Tigerstedt eds, 1998; Simpura and Tigerstedt eds, 1999). The comparatively higher self-reported consumption of alcohol on last drinking occasion may provide one explanation of why drunkenness and alcoholism was regarded as a more serious and threatening problem in Lithuania compared with in Estonia and Latvia. In a recent study, Chenet, Britton, Kaldediene and Petrauskiene (2001) suggest that the marked increase in deaths from accidents, violence, and alcohol poisoning at the weekends in Lithuania can be attributed to a possible pattern of binge drinking. However, they do not have data on alcohol consumption that this hypothesis can be tested against. In this context, the present paper suggests that binge drinking is at least more common in Lithuania than in Estonia and Latvia.

Latvia seems to be in a more intermediate position, in some cases similar to Estonia, e.g. with regards to the size of the consumption of alcohol among drinkers and in the population, and in other cases more similar to Lithuania, as for instance with regards to the developments in drinking in the female population.

The data analyzed in this study are not suited to answer the question of whether alcohol problems have increased in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the period from 1994 to 1999. It does however seem that the use of alcoholic beverages has become more common in the Baltic States, as the over-all proportion of non-drinkers has decreased. Further, the data may indicate that Lithuania has a more explosive drinking culture than Estonia and Latvia. The average number of alcohol units consumed on last drinking occasion, as well as the share of binge drinking is higher than in Estonia and Latvia, suggesting that a higher level of alcohol consumption is concentrated in a smaller share of the population in Lithuania than in Estonia in particular.

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