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MANUSCRIPT TITLE

Lobbying against tobacco tax increases in France: arguments and strategies of the tobacco industry and tobaccoists analyzed through their trade press

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Taxes, Lobbying, Tobacco industry, Tobaccoists, France

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Raising taxes is one of the most cost-effective measures to reduce tobacco use. France has a unique profile: it has high tobacco use prevalence and a state monopoly on tobacco sales for tobacconists who are both agents of the customs administration and a recognized tobacco-industry (TI) front group. In this paper, we investigate the lobbying tactics and arguments against tobacco taxation mobilized by the TI and tobacconists in France.

Methods: We conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the two leading French tobacco trade media outlets (*La Revue des Tabacs* and *Le Losange*) between 2000 and 2020. We performed manual thematic content analysis based on existing conceptual models of TI political activity, including the Policy Dystopia Model.

Results: Tobacconists actively lobbied against tobacco taxation, using traditional arguments highlighted in conceptual models (i.e., the claim that “taxation increases illicit trade and is ineffective”), but also France-centric arguments (i.e., tobacconists denounced the impact of cross-border shopping and highlighted their role as pivotal to community life in rural areas). We also found lobbying strategies mirroring those identified previously (i.e., coalition, information management, and direct influence in public policy).

Conclusions: Tobacconists in France hold a specific status that gives them privileged access to government bodies that can be exploited to successfully lobby against tobacco taxation. NGOs need to expose these lobbying activities and alert the public authorities to Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control that requires countries to protect policies from TI interests.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

- The TI lobbies against tobacco taxation, one of the most cost-effective measures for reducing smoking prevalence.
- Most of the literature on anti-tax arguments and tactics comes from Anglosphere countries and focuses on the TI rather than on its front groups.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

- Our analysis of the trade press shows evidence of lobbying against tobacco taxation by the TI and its front group, tobacconists who hold the monopoly on tobacco sales in France.
- We identify lobbying strategies and arguments previously highlighted in conceptual models of TI political activity, as well as French context-specific arguments mostly spread via tobacconists.
- French specific arguments are focused on the negative impact of taxation on tobacconists' sales due to cross-border purchases, and on the crucial social role tobacconists play in rural areas.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

- This research underlines the importance of analyzing lobbying against tobacco taxation by both the TI and its front groups.
- This paper shows that the status of tobacconists as custom agents with access to government bodies may work against moves to adopt effective taxation measures.
- Given Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control signed and ratified by France, tobacconists cannot be allowed to lobby on behalf of the TI.

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is responsible for 8 million deaths a year worldwide [1]. To tackle this pandemic, Article 6 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control compels signatory countries to raise tobacco prices and taxes, one of the most cost-effective measures for reducing tobacco consumption [2], through high tax increases repeated over time [3]. A minimum 10% price increase is expected to reduce tobacco consumption by about 4% in high-income countries [1].

To counter this effective measure, the tobacco industry (TI) uses various anti-tax arguments and tactics identified in the Policy Dystopia Model (PDM) and in the literature [4–9] (Table 1). It claims that higher tobacco taxation increases unanticipated costs (Table 1, I), generates unintended benefits for undeserving groups (Table 1, II) and unintended costs to public health (Table 1, III), and is ineffective (Table 1, IV). To support these arguments, the TI creates coalitions (Table 1, A), produces information to discredit taxation (Table 1, B), lobbies politicians (Table 1, C), engages in litigation to undermine taxation (Table 1, D), and facilitates illicit trade (Table 1, E), which is a key argument against tax increases.

Table 1. TI political activity against tobacco taxation based on the PDM and the literature [7,9]

Categories of arguments	Arguments
Unanticipated costs to the economy, the TI and society (I)	Taxation leads to lost sales/jobs for the TI and unreliable tax revenue for the State (negative economic impact).
	Taxation increases illicit and cross-border trade .
	Taxation leads to organized crime .
	Raising tobacco tax is a regressive measure that is inherently unfair and punitive to poorer and more vulnerable groups.
	Government acts beyond its legal remit (breach of trade agreements); it is anti-free-enterprise , a “Nanny state,” unreasonable and unaccountable .
Unintended benefits to undeserving groups (II)	Smugglers (due to illicit trade) profit.
	Privileged groups profit (taxes generate extra income for wealthy doctors, hospitals, insurance companies, etc.).
Unintended costs to public health (III)	Taxation is counterproductive (it increases illicit trade and cross-border trade, and thus increases access to tobacco for youth and young adults).

Intended public health benefits (IV)	Taxation is ineffective (taxation is not evidence-based, does not work, and is not needed).
Categories of strategies	Tactics
Coalition management (A)	Coalition-building (internal, external).
	Credible and representative allies (police fighting against illicit trafficking).
	Front groups (to conceal the TI as source of the origin of the arguments being spread).
Information management (B)	Producing a skewed evidence base to ‘corroborate’ projected policy failure.
	Disseminating misleading industry-sponsored information and evidence against taxation (to politicians and media) => data on illicit trade.
	Disseminating messages in mass media (to drum up support for TI positions).
	Contesting and suppressing public health evidence.
	Silencing and discrediting its enemies in the public health sphere.
	Rehabilitating industry reputation (corporate social responsibility campaigns that show the TI is concerned about people and the economy).
Direct involvement and influence in public policy (C)	Direct lobbying (meetings with politicians, proffering incentives or threats).
	Being an actor in legislative processes and in government decision-making.
Litigation (D)	Taking legal action against the State.
Illicit trade (E)	Organizing and facilitating illicit trade (a key argument against tax increases).

Previous research on lobbying against tobacco taxation has mainly been conducted in Anglosphere countries and has mainly focused on the TI [7,9]. Few studies have analyzed lobbying by front groups despite such groups being considered key players [10]. They are created and/or financed by various industries, including the chemical [11], alcohol [12], and tobacco industries [10,11]. Front groups claim to represent the “public interest” but in reality enable the parent group to discreetly engage in public debate (as the links between parent group and front group are not publicly disclosed [11,13]), and hide behind the better image of front groups to better circulate their arguments.

Our paper analyzes the lobbying tactics and arguments against tobacco taxation in France mobilized by both the TI and tobaccoists, an important TI front group [14,15, page 97]. French tobaccoists hold an ambivalent status. As tobacco retailers, they have links with the TI. Their governmental license to sell tobacco (for which they hold the monopoly) means they also have

links with the customs administration and public authorities [16]. In addition, as retailers, tobacconists engage with many tobacco buyers in France, where smoking prevalence is high (in 2022, 31.8% of 18–75-year-olds were smokers, and 24.5% smoked daily [17]).

Over the last two decades, France has alternated between periods of tobacco taxation favorable to public health policy (marked by increases above 10% [3]) and periods more favorable to the tobacco sector [14] (Table 2).

Table 2. Retail price per pack of the biggest-selling cigarette brand in France from 2000 to 2020 (based on references [14,18])

Period	Date Range	Context	Increase (€)	Increase (%)	Retail price per pack of the biggest-selling cigarette brand (€)	Total tobacco sales in France (tons)
1	2003	<i>First National Anti-Cancer Program (2003-2007)</i>	+0.48€	+13.3%*	4.08€	78,700
	2004		+0.92€	+22.5%*	5.00€	65,025
2	2005	Tobacco tax moratorium	Stable		5.00€	64,771
	2006					65,728
	2007					64,682
3	2008	Slow but continuous price increases	+0.17€	+3.3%	5.30€	63,390
	2009		+0.05€	+0.9%	5.35€	64,664
	2010		+0.30€	+5.6%	5.65€	64,759
	2011		+0.33€	+5.8%	5.98€	64,317
	2012		+0.32€	+5.4%	6.30€	62,133
	2013	+0.40€	+6.3%	6.70€	58,309	
	2014	<i>First National Tobacco Control Strategy (2014-2018)</i>	+0.30€	+4.5%	7.00€	55,415
4	2015	Prices reached a 7€ plateau	Stable		7.05€	56,323
	2016					55,728
	2017					54,525
5	2018	<i>Second National Tobacco Control Strategy (2018-2022)</i>	+0.83€	+11.8%*	7.88€	49,740
	2019		+0.90€	+11.4%*	8.78€	46,273
	2020		+1.17€	+13.3%*	9.95€	46,041

*: increases above 10% (the minimum tobacco price increase threshold for an efficient public health strategy)

This paper analyzes lobbying against tobacco taxation in order to better understand these alternating situations. It addresses three questions: i) What are the anti-tax lobbying tactics and arguments of the TI and tobaccoists in France?; ii) Are these lobbying tactics and arguments similar to those identified in existing models of TI-led political activity against tobacco taxation?; iii) Do these lobbying tactics and arguments show specificities related to France ?

To answer these questions, we analyzed the tobacco-sector trade press spanning a 21-year period. This timeframe enabled us to measure and analyze volumes and peaks in coverage during this long period and integrate this research into the first French research program to analyze TI lobbying against effective tobacco taxation policies (FELITAF).

METHODS

Ethical approval was not required for this analysis, as no human subjects were involved.

Media analysis is a relevant method for identifying lobbying tactics and arguments used by different actors [19]. In particular, the trade press is an important resource for researchers, as it captures internal exchanges and discussions which are often more frank and transparent than what may be reflected in the mainstream press [20,21].

We analyzed two leading French tobacco trade journals with broad readership among tobacco professionals (more than 30,000 copies each). First, *La Revue des Tabacs (LRDT)* targets tobacco-sector professionals (manufacturers, tobacconists) and political leaders [22]. *LRDT* features numerous interviews with actors in the tobacco sector (mostly tobacconists and the TI) on business-related topics (i.e., developing sales, modernizing the business) [22]. *LRDT* also has financial links with the TI through its advertising on new brands and products [15, pages 105 and 106]. Second, *Le Losange (LL)* is a magazine released by the French “Confederation of tobacconists” that targets tobacco-sector professionals [23]. Jean-Paul Vaslin, the current editor-in-chief, is also a lobbyist (“director of public affairs”) for the “Confederation of tobacconists,” which he headed for 17 years [24]. The Confederation has financial links with the TI through remuneration to its members (tobacconists) from tobacco sales and gifts offered (illegally) by the TI [15, page 179]. *LL* has financial links with tobacco companies through advertising, interviews with TI executives, and the “Losangexpo” trade fair organized by the Confederation and attended by the TI [15, page 179]. These two monthly magazines are distributed to tobacconists and tobacco manufacturers as well as ministerial offices and members of parliament (MPs) [15, page 105;22].

We analyzed these journals over the period 2000–2020, which covers five phases of alternating fiscal measures [14] (Table 2): *period 1* (2003–2004), marked by significant repeated tobacco tax increases (First National Anti-Cancer Program [25]) to an average price of €5 per pack in

2004; *period 2* (2005–2007), where protests by tobacconists prompted a tax moratorium (i.e., tax increases were capped at 10%, and authorities need to consult the TI on any price increase [26,27]); *period 3* (2008–2014) spanned the launch of the First National Tobacco Control Strategy (2014–2019) [28] in which price increases stayed below the 10% threshold (which is ineffective at reducing consumption [3]); *period 4* (2015–2017) where prices held steady at around €7 per pack [18]; *period 5* (2018–2020) where repeated sharp tax increases took the best-selling tobacco brands up to €10 per pack in 2020 (second National Tobacco Control Strategy 2018–2022) [29].

We screened all issues of *LRDT* and *LL* published from January 2000 to December 2020 (461 issues). Only one issue (*LRDT* No. 541, April 2007) was unavailable and could not be included in the analysis. Issues were accessed either online or, if not available, at the *French National Library*, the NGO *National Committee Against Tobacco* offices, or the *French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction*, which subscribes to print versions.

The first stage of the analysis was a quantitative census of all articles dealing with tobacco price increases and taxation. In total, 3,398 articles were collected, scanned, uploaded, and compiled into an Excel® spreadsheet with key article-related information, i.e., source (*LL* or *LRDT*), issue number and pages, date published, and title.

The second stage of the analysis involved a full read of all 3,398 articles and extraction of all passages narrating the arguments and/or lobbying tactics deployed by the tobacco sector to counter tax increases. A coding grid based on the PDM and the literature (Table 1 [7,9]) was created, and thematic content analysis [30] was used to complete it. When arguments were found that matched the PDM and the literature [7,9], they were included in the grid. When new and French-centric arguments emerged, these new items were added to the grid. Number of occurrences was counted for each argument or tactic. One researcher (AM) carried out both

stages of analysis. When questions arose about how to classify particular arguments/tactics, the research team met to discuss the issue and reach agreement.

RESULTS

Volume of articles

Out of the 3,398 articles collected from 2000 to 2020, 1,223 were published in *LRDT* and 2,175 in *LL*. The number of articles dealing with tobacco taxation showed three peaks (Figure 1 and Table 2):

- 1) During *period 1* and early *period 2* (2003, 2004 and 2005), when significant and repeated tobacco tax increases were included in the First National Anti-Cancer Program;
- 2) At the end of *period 3* (between 2011 and 2014), when tobacco price increases were well below the 10% threshold and there was heated debate around the implementation of the First National Tobacco Control Strategy and whether tobacco taxation increases should be included;
- 3) At the end of *period 4* and early *period 5* (2017 and 2018), with the launch of the Second National Tobacco Control Strategy, when strong repeated tobacco tax increases took the pack price of the best-selling brands up to €10 in 2020.

Main arguments and lobbying strategies

We inventoried a total of 1,456 occurrences of lobbying strategies (1,139 in *LL* and 317 in *LRDT*) and 5,966 occurrences of arguments (3,883 in *LL* and 2,083 in *LRDT*).

The most common arguments and strategies are discussed below and synthesized in Table 3. More marginal themes are reported in Appendix 1 (arguments) and Appendix 2 (strategies). Appendices 3 and 4 report examples of verbatim content that illustrate the major themes addressed in this research.

Arguments

Unanticipated costs to the economy, the TI, and society (5,229 occurrences, 87.6%) (Table 1, I and Table 3)

The claim “taxation will increase illicit trade, cross-border trade and organized crime” (2,739 occurrences in total, 52.4%) was found in France, as in the PDM and the literature [7,9]. Trade press articles cited illicit trade (191 occurrences) and cross-border purchases (131 occurrences) due to high taxes. The trade press often mentioned that tobacco tax increases would encourage parallel markets (322 occurrences), but without specifying whether such markets were legal (permitted cross-border purchases) or not (counterfeiting, smuggling, illicit trade). France-specific arguments emerged in connection with cross-border purchases. France was cited as one of the EU countries that taxes tobacco products the most (73 occurrences), resulting in higher tobacco products in France compared to neighboring countries (287 occurrences) and prompting a substantial increase in cross-border shopping (legal or not) (420 occurrences). Articles often foregrounded tobacconists who worked in border areas, asserting that the higher prices were unfair to them (83 occurrences), as they lost potential customers to neighboring countries (206 occurrences). The articles advanced several solutions to deal with this issue, such as pan-European tax harmonization (175 occurrences), strengthening measures to combat parallel markets (226 occurrences), limiting individual allowances on the amount of cigarettes consumers could carry across borders (194 occurrences), stopping further tobacco tax increases in France (96 occurrences), and introducing financial aid for border-area tobacconists (90 occurrences). Moves by neighboring countries to increase their tobacco taxes (notably in Spain) were seen as an important and positive measure (70 occurrences). Tobacconists facing insecurity with attacks and burglaries (because higher prices made tobacco a more tempting item for thieves and illicit trade) was another emerging argument (75 occurrences) against tobacco tax increases.

Another anti-tax argument cited in the trade press was that “taxation will have negative economic impacts” (2,081 occurrences in total, 39.8%) with a loss of income or jobs for the TI (116 occurrences) and lower tax revenue for government (236 occurrences). In France, it was claimed that tobacconists in particular would be economically harmed by tax increases (483 occurrences), especially those located near borders (706 occurrences), and would therefore require financial aid from the government (158 occurrences). This argument was also extended to other tobacco-sector actors such as manufacturers (350 occurrences), with articles citing a combination of TI actors and tobacconists or citing tobacco-sector actors in general, which was new compared to the PDM and the literature [7,9].

The French trade press made the claim that “taxation is unfair” (161 occurrences in total, 3.1%), particularly for the poorest smokers (72 occurrences), but to a lesser extent than in the literature [7,9].

A specific argument that emerged in our analysis, i.e. “market consequences of tax measures” (116 occurrences in total, 2.2%), asserts that tobacco tax increases would destabilize the market (110 occurrences). With a sharp increase in the price of manufactured cigarettes, the trade press claimed that smokers would turn to cheaper alternatives like roll-your-own cigarettes, making stock management more difficult for the tobacco sector.

Intended public health benefits (279 occurrences in total, 4.7%) (Table 1, IV and Table 3)

The argument previously identified in the literature that “taxation is an ineffective measure” (251 occurrences, 90%) [7,9] was not particularly prominent in the French trade press. Articles claimed that tobacco taxation was ineffective but without explaining why (52 occurrences), or that it was not a relevant way to decrease smoking prevalence (73 occurrences).

Unintended benefits for undeserving groups (166 occurrences in total, 2.8%) (Table 1, II and Table 3)

The trade press occasionally argued that the French government (74 occurrences, 44.6%) or neighboring countries (67 occurrences, 40.4%) were undeserving beneficiaries of higher tobacco taxes in France, getting richer at the expense of consumers.

The two arguments below were not found in the PDM nor in the literature [7,9] on tobacco taxation.

Negative impact on social-community role of tobacconists in French society (165 occurrences in total, 2.8%) (Table 3)

Tobacconists were presented as important actors in social and community life in France (128 occurrences, 77.6%) and as local shopkeepers that provided a vital social service, mainly in rural areas where they helped promote regional development and served as a community anchor. Increasing tobacco taxes, it was argued, would therefore jeopardize this important social role.

Positive effects of moderate tobacco tax increases (92 occurrences in total, 1.5%) (Table 3)

The positive effect of “moderate tax increases” (37 occurrences, 40.2%) was a rare but emerging argument that asserted a positive effect of moderate rises on revenues for tobacconists, manufacturers, and the State. The trade press claimed that “some economic actors are in favor of moderate tax increases” (31 occurrences, 33.7%) as they would increase revenues for retailers who receive a percentage of tobacco sales.

Strategies

Coalition management (649 occurrences in total, 44.5%) (Table 1, A and Table 3)

Creating internal alliances in general (i.e. within the tobacco sector) (538 occurrences, 82.9%) or for tobacconists in particular (504 occurrences) was identified in the trade press as a key coalition management tactic. The “Confederation of tobacconists” (that distributes *LL* and federates 23,300 retailers [31]) explained that it organized events (such as street demonstrations of tobacconists) to put pressure on politicians. Associations created by tobacconists to help defend border-area tobacco sellers were also mentioned as a tactic deployed against tobacco tax increases.

The trade press also cited a strategy of creating external alliances (i.e., outside the tobacco sector) (111 occurrences, 17.1%) with political decision-makers (MPs, Senators, Ministers, etc.) who defended the interests of the tobacco sector, in particular tobacconists in border-area regions, when opposing tax increases.

Information management (407 occurrences in total, 28%) (Table 1, B and Table 3)

The strategy of producing and circulating evidence to support claims that cross-border tobacco shopping is a serious problem (278 occurrences, 68.3%) was found in France, as previously found elsewhere [7,9]. Tobacconists spread arguments through mass media campaigns (134 occurrences).

The trade press also attempted to silence and discredit enemies in the public health sphere, through personal attacks (73 occurrences, 18%) using derogatory language such as a “anti-smoking sect” or “ayatollahs.”

Direct involvement and influence in public policy (339 occurrences in total, 23.3%) (Table 1, C and Table 3)

Traditional direct strategies (263 occurrences, 77.6%), which consist of meetings between economic actors and policymakers, were described in the trade press. What was French-specific was that such meetings were overwhelmingly conducted by representatives of tobacconists through their Confederation (246 occurrences). It was explained that these meetings allowed tobacconists to voice their position concerning tax measures and to inform politicians of the difficulties they were facing (notably concerning cross-border purchases).

For the tobacco sector in general, being an actor in legislative processes and in government decision-making through collaborations and negotiations with public authorities got far less mention (76 occurrences, 22.4%). This strategy was mainly used by tobacconists (58 occurrences) in France, whereas the literature reports it as specific to the TI [7,9].

Table 3 summarizes the most important (in number of occurrences) arguments and lobbying tactics against tobacco taxation disseminated via the French trade press.

Table 3. Synthesis of the most prominent lobbying tactics and arguments against tobacco taxation vectored in the French trade press

Categories of arguments*	Examples*
Unanticipated costs to the economy, the TI, and society (5,229 occurrences, 87.6%)	Taxation will increase illicit trade, cross-border trade, and organized crime (2,739 occurrences, 52.4%)
	Taxation will have negative economic impact (2,081 occurrences, 39.8%)
	Taxation is unfair (161 occurrences, 3.1%)
	<i>There are market consequences of tax measures</i> (116 occurrences, 2.2%)
Intended public health benefits (279 occurrences, 4.7%)	Taxation is an ineffective measure (251 occurrences, 90%)
Unintended benefits for undeserving groups (166 occurrences, 2.8%)	<i>Taxation benefits the French State</i> (74 occurrences, 44.6%)
	<i>Taxation benefits neighboring countries</i> (67 occurrences, 40.4%)
<i>Negative impact on social-community role of tobaccoists in French society</i> (165 occurrences, 2.8%)	<i>Tobaccoists are important actors in social and community life</i> (128 occurrences, 77.6%)
<i>Positive effects of moderate tax increases</i> (92 occurrences, 1.5%)	<i>Moderate tax increases (less than 10%) can have positive effects</i> (37 occurrences, 40.2%)
	<i>Some economic actors are in favor of moderate tax increases</i> (31 occurrences, 33.7%)
Categories of lobbying strategies	Examples
Coalition management (649 occurrences, 44.5%)	Creating internal alliances (538 occurrences, 82.9%)
	Creating external alliances (111 occurrences, 17.1%)
Information management (407 occurrences, 28%)	Producing and circulating evidence to support claims that cross-border tobacco shopping is a serious problem (278 occurrences, 68.3%)
	Personal attacks (73 occurrences, 18%)
Direct involvement and influence in public policy (339 occurrences, 23.3%)	Meetings with politicians (263 occurrences, 77.6%)
	Being an actor in legislative processes and in government decision-making (76 occurrences, 22.4%)

**Italics highlight emerging French-specific lobbying tactics and arguments.*

DISCUSSION

This research used trade press analysis to investigate lobbying against tax increases in France by the TI and tobaccoists. The analysis covered the past two decades that alternated between periods of pro-tax and no-tax policy. We found three peaks in the volume of tax-related articles published in this press: a period of high tobacco taxes (2003-2005: around the First National Anti-Cancer Program), a period of debate around high taxes (2011-2014: around the First National Tobacco Control Strategy focused on various measures, including taxation), and a second period of high taxes (2017-2018: around the Second National Tobacco Control Strategy). These three peaks aligned with the peaks identified by the FELITAF research program analyzing arguments against tobacco taxation in the mainstream French press, where tobaccoists served as the main spokespeople [14]. This is a worrying fact given how punctuated equilibrium theory posits policy changes when problems are reframed and reconceptualized [32], which can be done via the media. We cannot confirm that this process explains the alternating periods of pro-tax and no-tax policy in France, but note that another FELITAF study on parliamentary documents revealed that French MPs spread very similar anti-tax-rise arguments to those spread by the TI and tobaccoists in the French mainstream and trade press [33].

Beyond the volume of articles, we also studied the anti-tax lobbying tactics and arguments used by the TI and tobaccoists in France in the trade press and analyzed whether they were different to those identified in existing models. We found arguments specific to the French context, such as lower tobacco prices in neighboring countries that incentivize cross-border shopping and thus threatens incomes and jobs for border-area tobaccoists. As 41% of tobaccoists work in towns smaller than 3,500 inhabitants [31], they framed the taxation debate around their social role as providers of vital services for rural community life, which is an argument likely to resonate with MPs for rural French constituencies. Tobaccoists also depicted themselves as

victims of attacks and burglaries, which ‘humanized’ the debate by using storytelling and emotional tones liable to influence politicians [34]. A French specific tactic was the key role played by tobacconists in all of the lobbying strategies deployed against tobacco taxes. In relying heavily on tobacconists to serve as a front group, the TI appeared to be hiding behind the positive image of tobacconists.

Beyond the French specificities, our research revealed that most of the anti-tax arguments and tactics used were very similar to those identified in the literature and in the PDM (Table 1) [7,9]. The tobacco sector mainly argued that tobacco tax increases would create unanticipated costs to the economy, the TI, and society, which was by far the most cited category of arguments (5,229 occurrences, 87.6%). The trade press highlighted illicit and cross-border trade driven by higher prices. The tactics identified in our research that were similar to those identified in the PDM included coalition management, information management by producing and spreading studies designed to discredit tobacco taxation, and direct involvement and influence in public policy.

Lobbying by tobacconists on behalf of the TI is worrying because of tobacconists’ ties to the French government. France delegates tobacco retail exclusively to tobacconists as part of a State monopoly, which makes them agents of the customs administration. This system carries advantages, such as controlling the supply chain, retail sales and facilitating tax recovery for government. It can also hold back effective taxation policy by facilitating coalition management tactics and direct influence on politicians. For instance, our research revealed that the Confederation of tobacconists has regular contact with ministers, MPs and the President of the Republic through alliances and meetings on tobacco taxation (for example, see the article in LRDT #504, December 2003, pp.6-7, Appendix 4).

Although this research adds to the literature, it also has limitations. We analyzed the trade press to gain a better understanding of the lobbying processes mobilized by the tobacco sector, but

this may be insufficient to uncover all the lobbying strategies employed. Other methods should be studied, such as interviews with tobaccoists, ex-TI actors and/or politicians that had contact with tobaccoists [35]. Furthermore, our research only focused on lobbying against tobacco taxation. Other topics should be investigated, such as smoke-free spaces and regulations governing the marketing of new tobacco products, to analyze whether tobaccoists play similar roles or whether new TI front groups have emerged. Finally, as countries like Spain and Italy share a similar tobacco distribution monopoly system to France [36], it would be instructive to investigate whether they are exposed to comparable TI and tobaccoist-led lobbying strategies and arguments.

Despite these limitations, our research can help consider ways to prevent tobaccoists and the TI from actively influencing policymaking on taxes. We propose four recommendations for public health actors. First, there is a need to clarify the ambiguous status of tobaccoists in France. As agents of the customs administration, they cannot be allowed to have financial links with the TI, whether individually or through their Confederation. These relations must be transparent and limited to what is strictly necessary to the sale of tobacco and new nicotine products (for ordering and delivery). In concrete terms, it means no commercial gifts, no relations with tobacco sales representatives, no tobacco ads in the tobaccoist trade press, and no TI involvement in tobaccoists' meetings. Second, to counter the need to increase profits from tobacco sales, tobaccoists could be given State-backed incentives to decrease their tobacco sales. Third, the customs administration should enforce on compliance with Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control signed and ratified by France in 2004. Whereas this Article states that tobacco policies must be protected from commercial and other vested interests of the TI [37], our research finds that in France, tobaccoists, as a front group for the TI, are the main actors circulating the tobacco sector's arguments against taxation. As agents of the customs administration, they should be asked to enforce Article 5.3. If they do

not, then the State should rule that tobaccoists' economic interests are irreconcilable with general public health interests, and consequently withdraw their tobacco sales licenses. Fourth, NGOs should publish editorials and reports to inform policymakers and journalists on the relationships between tobaccoists and the TI. NGOs should also work to debunk the positive image of tobaccoists, for instance by exposing how most tobaccoists do not respect the ban on sales to minors [15, page 210].

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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CONTRIBUTORSHIP STATEMENT

KGM is principal investigator. AM, KGM and EB designed the methodology. AM conducted the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data. AM and KGM drafted the manuscript. MP and EB critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content.

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