

Social responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic: Tobacco industry's trojan horse in Europe

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Smoking causes more than 8 million deaths every year¹. Recent studies suggest that smokers suffer more severely and have worse outcomes from COVID-19^{2,3}, highlighting that evidence-based practices to support patients to quit smoking should be a public health priority¹. COVID-19 may be an emergency, however we should not suspend our vigilance against Tobacco Industry's (TI) subversive tactics used to improve its image through corporate social responsibility activities⁴. To identify any 'goodwill' tactics or new TI campaigns promoting 'safer' products during the pandemic, the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention (ENSP) distributed an online questionnaire among its members around Europe. Responses were received from 22 countries, 14 (63.6%) of which reported some kind of country-specific TI interference during the pandemic.

The potential development of a tobacco-leaves-based vaccine against COVID-19 by British American Tobacco (BAT) has been widely covered by media globally, with ENSP members reporting extensive coverage in Belgium, France, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Spain the Netherlands, and the UK. Similarly, pre-prints of studies claiming that nicotine is protective against COVID-19⁵, received disproportionately wide media attention in many countries.

Targeted and country-specific TI activities during the pandemic include: In Bulgaria, Philip Morris (PM) Bulgaria (BG) donated BGN 320000 (EUR 150000) to the BCause Foundation to fight COVID-19. Media coverage of this donation were accompanied by articles praising the leadership of Philip Morris International (PMI) and PM BG with regard to Heated Tobacco Products (HTPs). PM BG also supported the popular artistic ArtAction initiative.

In France, BAT and PMI have also tried to sponsor or offer financial aid to communities or bodies mobilized to fight against COVID-19.

In Georgia, PMI, BAT and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) donated around USD 30000 each to the special Governmental Fund 'StopCov' while BAT distributed face shields to 300 journalists and 500 emergency service workers.

In Greece, the subsidiary of PMI 'Papastratos' and the Greek TI Karelia donated 50 ventilators each to the Greek healthcare system.

In Italy, PMI donated EUR 1000000 to the Civil Protection for medical supplies, medical equipment and first aid goods and launched the campaign #DueVoltePiùVicini (#TwoTimeCloser) to raise additional funds with a commitment to double donations by their employees, tobaccoconists and consumers registered with IQOS Club.

In Lithuania, PM Baltic donated EUR 110000 to a COVID-19 relief fund, headed by the former president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, which is illegal in the country. In addition, PM Lithuania announced that they are providing food for people in need in Klaipėda municipality in cooperation with the Klaipėda municipal social services center.

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In Romania, PMI donated USD 1000000 to the Romanian Red Cross Affiliate to purchase ventilators, medical and protective equipment. Additionally, Daruieste Viata, a major Romanian NGO, received support to produce a video tutorial on washing hands, featuring various celebrities, branded with IQOS's Creative Hub in Romania (Qreator by IQOS). Ahead of the deadline of 20 May when menthol cigarettes would be removed from the EU market, online campaigns by BAT and PMI to push consumers towards HTP's, still available in menthol versions, have intensified.

In Switzerland, BAT offered to provide free smokeless tobacco products to members of the Swiss army currently deployed around the country.

In Turkey, PMI and JTI made donations to the national COVID-19 help campaign (USD 675000 and USD 180000 respectively).

Although many physical shops were closed, online sales continued across Europe offering free delivery (e.g. in Cyprus, Romania, and Ukraine), while TI activities in all countries have been heavily promoted by a number of traditional and social media.

All the above reveal a series of deliberate tactics through which TI is exploiting media attention to improve their corporate profile, break down opposition, present themselves as socially responsible enterprises, engage with governments and promote products such as HTPs or even attempt to renormalize tobacco consumption.

We recognize that governments around the world are fighting the pandemic with limited resources and in the face of a major recession any support may be valuable. However, we are urging them to uphold their commitment to Article 5.3 of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which requires governments to take measures to protect health policy 'from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry'⁶, while supporting smoking cessation. Any other action would jeopardize their capacity and credibility to protect their people from a leading cause of death, which is also associated with more severe outcomes of COVID-19^{3,7}. Civil society, media and the entire public health community should remain alert and contribute to protecting population health. Continued tobacco use is likely to kill many times more people than the current pandemic, which only shows the devastating impact of smoking in European countries and globally¹.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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