Background on the tobacco epidemic in the EU

**Tobacco consumption** is the single most important preventable cause of morbidity and mortality in the European Union (EU), responsible for 700,000 premature deaths per year\(^1\). In 2017, 26% of the EU population reported being current smokers\(^2\).

The revised European Union (EU) Tobacco Product Directive (TPD) has a number of measures aimed at reducing tobacco consumption and its deadly impact. One such measure is a ban on “characterising flavours” in cigarettes and roll-your-own (RYO) tobacco, which went into effect in May 2016, with the exception of menthol-flavoured tobacco products which will be banned in 2020.

A "characterising flavour" means a clearly noticeable smell or taste other than one of tobacco, resulting from an additive or a combination of additives, including, but not limited to, fruit, spice, herbs, alcohol, candy, menthol or vanilla, which is noticeable before or during the consumption of the tobacco product. The banning of such flavours from tobacco products is expected to have a marked impact on public health in the EU. According to the 2017 Eurobarometer, approximately 8% of regular cigarette smokers in the EU used cigarettes of menthol flavour and 7% of other flavours\(^2\), with significant variation across EU Member States.

Research has shown that flavours play an important role in drawing in new users of tobacco products and sustaining long-term use. Flavours are particularly appealing to youth and young adults, especially fruit and candy flavour\(^3\). Historically, the tobacco industry has added flavourings to maximise its attractiveness to young people, using advertisement strategies to directly target this population\(^4\). Additionally, research indicates that by lessening the harshness of cigarette smoking, such as cooling effects of menthol or sweetness of other flavours, flavoured tobacco products can reduce harm perceptions of these products.

Use of flavoured cigarettes in the EU

Data from the EUREST-PLUS ITC Europe Surveys, which aims to evaluate the EU TPD\(^5\), shows that in 2016, on average, menthol and other flavoured cigarette smokers from six EU Member States were more likely to be younger (ages 18-24), as compared to older age groups\(^6\). Furthermore, in 2018, 13% of adult smokers from six EU MS believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than regular cigarettes\(^6\).
**In order to make the EU TPD fully operational**, the European Commission (EC) can set forth the procedures for determining whether a tobacco product imparts a characterising flavour. The main purpose of the EUREST-FLAVOURS project, is to provide the EC with scientific, economic and technical expertise to assist in decisions on whether tobacco products impart a characterising flavour other than tobacco. The results of the EUREST-FLAVOURS project will culminate in a clear science-based decision criteria to support the EC in the development of uniform rules for the procedures to determine whether a tobacco product imparts a characterising flavour.

**References**

6. EUREST-PLUS ITC Europe Surveys, 2016, 2018

**Note:** The results shown are weighted, but unstandardized estimates (i.e. they do not control for potential differences in the age-sex distribution between countries).