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Invited commentary

Stanton A Glantz, in ‘Pinocchio shows how to end the tobacco epidemic’,¹ wishes for better insulation of the policy-making process from interference by tobacco companies. Poland provides a vivid example of how important this is. The parliamentary debate (2008–2010) about the revision of Poland’s Tobacco Act revealed how strong the influence of the tobacco industry on public health policy remains in Poland. Although great strides were made in increasing smoke-free areas, particularly in hospitality venues, this progress was undermined by a weakening of the enforcement provisions. Requirements for enforcement and fines for violations were actually stronger in the original Act. During the course of 2011, the tobacco industry has also orchestrated a campaign in Poland against the revision of the European Union Tobacco Products Directive and pictorial warnings’ regulation² and also organised mass media campaigns on the growing problem of smuggling in Poland with the cooperation of Customs Service and Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Interior and Administration.³ They are making the argument that effective tobacco control measures encourage illicit tobacco trade along with devastating Polish tobacco farmers’ incomes. These arguments have clearly been persuasive to key government departments and journalists alike. Although Poland is a party to the WHO

Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and is thus bound by Article 5.3, awareness of tobacco industry tactics and history of dishonesty is low among decision makers, opinion leaders and the general population. The tobacco industry is still regarded by decision makers as a credible and reliable partner for discussions about public health and tobacco control regulations—definitely not as a vector that spreads disease and corrupts the policy-making process.

The Ministry of Health announced⁴ that it is now in the process of drafting further revisions to the Tobacco Act to try to address some of the weaknesses introduced by the tobacco industry and its supporters. Unless the issue of tobacco industry interference in health policy is confronted, this effort will be seriously undermined. Because of the country’s leading position in the region, this is of critical importance not only to Poland but to its neighbours as well.

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Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Tobacco Control 2012;**21**:297–298. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2011-050410

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