

## **DAMAGES TO THE EUROPEAN BUDGET OF OVER A 3 MILLION 100 THOUSAND EURO WERE PREVENTED**

Contraband cigarettes valued at approximately 2 million BGN were seized in a specialized police operation in Haskovo. The joint work of officials from the National Service for Combating Organized Crime and the Haskovo Regional Directorate of the Interior - acting under the guidance of the District Prosecutor's Office - prevented the smuggling of a total of 8 million 560 thousand pieces of cigarettes of the English brand SuperKings. This operation illustrates the good co-operation between the Ministry of the Interior and the Customs Agency in the framework of the mobile customs groups.

The checks carried out by the National Service for Combating Organized Crime show that the containers carrying the cigarettes started in China, passed through Turkey and afterwards was transported to the Greek port of Thessaloniki. From there the cigarettes were loaded on a train travelling to Bulgaria. The cargo crossed the border at the Kulata checkpoint in the end of October. The documents presented to the customs authorities at the border claimed that the container was filled with Chinese goods made of glass. Later the goods were directed to the customs bureau in Haskovo. In this case of smuggling - like in many cases of VAT fraud - the organizers of the criminal network used the scheme of "buying" the identity of persons with financial difficulties or members of minority groups. For small sums of money these people can easily agree to present themselves as owners of companies or goods without realizing the financial or criminal liability they would be facing if their identity is used to commit a crime.

In the course of the police operation a 39-year-old customs official from the Haskovo customs authorities was detained on the basis of evidence suggesting that he was responsible for the problem-free clearance of the container carrying cigarettes disguised as glass objects. The mentioned official has committed an offence under Art. 70 of the Customs Act, according to which goods can be declared before the customs authorities only by an authorised person. In this case the customs official accepted the documents from an unauthorized person.

**The police operation against this smuggling attempt resulted in preventing damages to the national budget to the amount of 2 million BGN.**

**The biggest amount of damage would have been caused if the smuggled cigarettes had reached the markets of Western Europe, for which they were destined. The successful operation in Haskovo resulted in preventing damages to the European budget of approximately 3 million 100 thousand euro.**

All persons involved in the criminal network were identified; investigations against them continue.

**In the last few years the channels for smuggling cigarettes to Western Europe - some involving Bulgarian nationals - have gone around our country. This consignment of cigarettes is the first case that has been identified in a long time where an attempt was made to start using Bulgaria as a transit country for this purpose.**

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