

Fight against tobacco smuggling: International Task Group Cigarettes meets in Riga

Against the backdrop of international efforts to fight tobacco smuggling, the Annual Task Group Cigarettes Conference took place in Riga, Latvia on 29-30 June 2016. The event, organised by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) in close cooperation with the State Revenue Service of the Republic of Latvia, brought together over 85 anti-smuggling experts from all EU Member States and third countries such as Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Norway. Europol, the World Customs Organisation and the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine also took part in the discussions.

Member State enforcement authorities and OLAF exchanged expertise on high profile operations carried out in the last months which led to substantial seizures of illicit tobacco products. Experts pointed out that around 4 billion cigarette sticks were seized in the EU in 2015. In many cases, the cigarettes had travelled between many ports around the world for several months before they were smuggled into the EU. Participants highlighted the need for continued exchange of information and operational support among all the agencies involved in the fight against tobacco smuggling.

In her opening remarks, the Latvian Minister of Finance, Ms Dana Reizniece-Ozola, noted that the smuggling of illegal cigarettes takes away considerable resources from the EU and Member States' budgets. She recalled the importance of promoting international cooperation in solving this problem which goes beyond national borders.

Background:

Cigarette smuggling causes huge yearly losses to Member States and the EU in evaded customs duties and taxes. Smuggled tobacco respects no rules and poses great risks to both consumers and businesses. It undermines anti-smoking and public health campaigns and violates the strict rules that the EU and Member States have on manufacturing, distribution and sale. OLAF investigates case of customs fraud as they are financially damaging the EU taxpayer. OLAF has an explicit mandate to fight cigarette smuggling as part of the EU efforts to fight this phenomenon.

In 2015, OLAF helped seize more than 600 million cigarettes, preventing the loss of EUR 120 million in unpaid duties and taxes.