

Fighting crime in real time: OLAF and Belgium customs lead international cyber patrol to stop online traffickers

A ground-breaking European operation led by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and Belgian Customs busted online criminals trafficking drugs, counterfeit goods – including medicine – and endangered animal and plant species (CITES). The international operation, code-named Postbox II, took place in March 2019 and involved customs experts from 22 Member States and Europol. Focusing on criminals working on both the open and the Dark Web, Postbox II led to 2320 seizures, the opening of 50 case files and identification of 30 suspects in Member States.

Spearheaded by OLAF and Belgian Customs, operation Postbox II was carried out in cooperation with customs services from 22 Member States and Europol. The set-up and use of an international cyber patrol with customs services as the main actors makes the operation a first for Europe.

In the initial phase of the operation, customs authorities checked mail and courier service packages for prohibited items. More than 500 packages were seized in Belgium only, followed by Italy with 460 and Ireland with 304 seizures. OLAF provided participants with access to its Virtual Operation Coordination Unit, a secure communication system facilitating intelligence exchange in real time.

What followed was the assembly of an expert cyber patrol which raided both the open web and the dark net, as well as social media sites, in search of the perpetrators of the crimes. Investigators used special software and techniques to pierce the sellers' online veil of anonymity.

The main findings reveal that Asian e-commerce platforms are still responsible for the majority of counterfeit sales. Drug trafficking takes place mainly through the Dark Web, where technology is used to keep buyers and sellers anonymous.

The success of operation Postbox II is built on the shared expertise of all participating parties. Law enforcement bodies, working together at a pan-European level, make it increasingly difficult for fraudsters and traffickers to break the law and evade justice.

Background

The illegal trade in endangered animal and plant species (CITES) damages the environment and threatens the biodiversity of our planet. CITES is a priority area for European customs authorities. Investments made in new technology to identify online platforms used for this type of traffic are vital to facilitating legal and sustainable trade, whilst ensuring that illicit trade can be identified and intercepted.

The trade of counterfeit products results in vast illicit profits and significant losses of tax revenues. The smuggling of counterfeit products harms the European economy, damages legitimate business and stifles innovation, putting many jobs at risk. Counterfeiting also poses serious risks to health and safety, as well as the environment.

OLAF is competent to conduct investigations related to the smuggling of counterfeit goods, thereby protecting the EU and its Member States from customs and tax revenue losses. OLAF particularly focuses on the smuggling of potentially dangerous products.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF's mission is to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud and corruption involving EU funds, so as to ensure that all EU taxpayers' money reaches projects that can create jobs and growth in Europe;
- contributing to strengthening citizens' trust in the EU Institutions by investigating serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU Institutions;
- developing a sound EU anti-fraud policy.

In its independent investigative function, OLAF can investigate matters relating to fraud, corruption and other offences affecting the EU financial interests concerning:

- all EU expenditure: the main spending categories are Structural Funds, agricultural policy and rural development funds, direct expenditure and external aid;
- some areas of EU revenue, mainly customs duties;
- suspicions of serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU institutions.

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