

24th Task Group Cigarettes Conference: International efforts to fight cigarette smuggling

The annual Task Group Cigarettes Conference took place in Zagreb on 9-12 September. It was organised by the European Anti-Fraud Office ("OLAF") in close cooperation with Croatian Customs Administration. The event brought together around 90 experts from all 28 EU Member States as well as from third countries such as Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia and Turkey.

The conference, opened by Mr Ernesto BIANCHI, Director, Directorate B and Mr Hrvoje ČOVIĆ, Assistant Minister of Finance and Director General of the Customs Administration provided an excellent opportunity for participants to share views about the fight against illegal cigarette smuggling in practice. Discussions focused on trends and results, objectives and strategies in joint fight against the illicit tobacco trade, as well as on the possible coordinated solutions for tackling this criminal activity.

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.

Several law enforcement authorities presented operations they had conducted in recent months and examples of practical cooperation between OLAF and Member States' authorities were presented.

One of the most debated topics was the significant increase in traffic and seizures of water pipe tobacco. The participants also discussed the implementation of the Tobacco Products Directive at national level. Developing cooperation between experts from Member States and third countries and OLAF's role in preventing this type of fraud are major elements in a strategy to better fight cigarette smuggling.

Representatives of several international organisations such as EUBAM, Europol, FRONTEX and World Customs Organization attended the conference.

The conference was funded from the Hercule III financial programme which is specifically dedicated to fighting fraud, corruption and any other illegal activities affecting the financial interests of the EU.