



## **Tobacco smuggling: over 600 million illicit cigarettes seized thanks to OLAF in 2023**

**During 2023, international operations involving the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) led to the seizure of 616 million illicit cigarettes, 140 tonnes of raw tobacco and 6 tonnes of water pipe tobacco. OLAF investigators took part in multiple operations with customs and law enforcement authorities worldwide to counter tobacco smuggling, preventing losses of over 150 million euro to the EU and national budgets.**

OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä said: *"These seizures averted over 150 million euro of damage to public revenue, shielding taxpayers from bearing the burden. Crucially, OLAF's work against tobacco smuggling is also a blow to the criminal networks behind it. Their business model remains diverse: production inside and outside the EU, different means of transportation, various kinds of products. OLAF's investigators cooperate closely with national authorities in the EU and in third countries alike. We stay ahead of evolving trends in illicit tobacco and support national authorities in their fight on the ground. Intelligence provided by OLAF investigators often results in raids, seizures and criminal networks dismantled."*

331.1 million illicit cigarettes – from the overall total of 616 million – were intercepted at EU borders, before they could be smuggled into the European Union. Proving again that tobacco smuggling is a global issue, some of the countries involved were Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Montenegro and Indonesia.

In addition, OLAF's tip offs led to the confiscation of 144.2 million cigarettes outside of the European Union.

Cigarettes seized thanks to OLAF from illicit production inside the EU amounted to 140.6 million units. These seizures contribute to fighting an evolving pattern in the illicit production of cigarettes inside the EU where traffickers and illicit producers have been fragmenting their production lines, with smaller reserves of raw tobacco or finished cigarettes. Their aim is to be able to move their production tools and goods faster, and to try to limit losses caused by law enforcement busts and raids.

Tobacco smugglers often operate as part of international trafficking networks, changing their business models swiftly to adapt to ongoing developments. Together with its partners, OLAF remains consistent in its efforts to analyse new trends and patterns.

### **Background**

The fight against tobacco smuggling is a central part of OLAF's investigative activities. OLAF identifies and tracks lorries and/or containers loaded with cigarettes misdeclared as other goods at EU borders. OLAF gathers intelligence from a range of sources, including the industry, and exchanges its information in real time with EU Member States and third

countries. If there is clear evidence that shipments are destined for the EU contraband market or that there are illicit production activities inside the EU, national authorities are ready and able to step in and stop them.

**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.

Once OLAF has completed its investigation, it is for the competent EU and national authorities to examine and decide on the follow-up of OLAF's recommendations. All persons concerned are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in a competent national or EU court of law.

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