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The structured multidisciplinary cooperation in the fight against illicit cigarette and water pipe tobacco factories in Europe has been very successful in 2021!

Thanks to a structured multidisciplinary cooperation in the fight against organised crime and international serious crime, no less than 74 illegal cigarette factories and 28 water pipe tobacco factories have been dismantled in 2021 across Europe. Since 2018, it represents an increase of 57.4 % in the number of dismantled cigarette factories and an increase of 75% in the number of dismantled water pipe tobacco factories.



These figures have been presented today by the Belgian Minister of Finance, Mr. Vincent Van Peteghem, the Polish Secretary of State, Head of the National Revenue Administration, Mrs Magdalena Rzeczkowska, the Belgian Administrator of Customs and Excise, Mr. Kristian Vanderwaeren, the Head of the European Financial and Economic Crime Centre (EFECC), Mr. Burkhard Mühl, and the divisional advisor of the Lithuanian Customs Criminal Service and person in charge of the priority fight against excise fraud at EMPACT, Mr. Adas Eidukevičius.

The structured multidisciplinary cooperation in the fight against organised crime and international serious crime is managed by the Member States and supported by the EU institutions and agencies according to their respective mandates, through the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

At first, only the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and EUROPOL were involved in the

operational cooperation. In 2022, twenty-three European Member States, the WCO (World Customs Organisation), EUROPOL, OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office), the United Kingdom and Ukraine are now members of EMPACT.

As excise fraud is one of the 15 priorities in the fight against serious and organised crime, the aim of EMPACT is to improve international cooperation between the partners of these operational actions in order to increase the detecting and dismantling of illegal tobacco production sites in the European Union and the United Kingdom.

The success of this operational cooperation is demonstrated by the excellent results of 2021. A production site dismantled in a given country is indeed the result of intense and meticulous cooperation between the various members of the action group.

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Looking at the results by Member State, Poland is in first place in 2021 in terms of the number of dismantled illegal cigarette production sites, with no less than 32 sites. Belgium, with 9 dismantled cigarette factories, is in second place ahead of the Netherlands, where 8 factories have been closed down.

As far as illegal water pipe tobacco production sites are concerned, Germany is in the lead with 11 sites dismantled, followed by Sweden with 8 sites and Belgium with 3 sites.

Some trends noticed by EMPACT members:

- Production sites are becoming more professional, with new machinery, air purification, printing facilities, better storage capacity, etc.;
- Criminal groups are becoming more professionally organised with “regional managers”;
- Logistic hubs are used to send tobacco items all over Europe;
- Production sites are often mobile so that they can be moved quickly;
- Some production sites are very well hidden (e.g. the underground site in Malaga or the centre of Brussels);
- New countries of destination (Greece and France) for products outside the United Kingdom.

Based on these recent years’ successful projects, EMPACT cooperation certainly has a bright future ahead.

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