

# Over €1 million in cash seized as part of investigation into tobacco smuggling ring

An international law enforcement operation coordinated by Europol and Eurojust with the involvement of 3 countries has resulted in the arrest of 12 suspects, including the masterminds, belonging to a Russian-speaking organised crime group involved in the illegal cigarette trade. The arrests took place in Belgium (11) and France (1) and included the leaders of the criminal organisation.

Between 4 and 5 May, some 28 premises belonging to the crime gang were searched in Belgium (17), France (10) and the Netherlands (1). The investigators seized over €1 million in cash, alongside 11 vehicles and hundreds of counterfeit cigarette cartridges. The necessary supplies to make 1.8 million cigarette packages were also discovered at one of the searched locations. Two of the individuals arrested in Belgium are awaiting surrender to the French authorities under a European arrest warrant.

This international sweeps follows a complex investigation initiated in July 2020 by the Belgian Federal Judicial Police of Leuven (Federale Gerechtelijke Politie Leuven), in close cooperation with the Belgian Customs (Douane), the French Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Nationale), the French Judicial Customs (SEJF), the Dutch Fiscal Information and Investigation Service (FIOD), with international activities coordinated by Europol and Eurojust. This operation was carried out in the framework of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

The criminal syndicate, composed mainly of Chechen nationals, was involved in the large-scale production and distribution of counterfeit cigarettes. It is believed that this organised crime group is responsible for the distribution of at least 100 million cigarettes since the autumn of 2020, with an estimated value of more than €45 million.

The counterfeit cigarettes were stored in warehouses in Tienen, Belgium, before being subsequently distributed among buyers from France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

## **European coordination**

Europol's Analysis Project SMOKE coordinated the international activities between the involved Member States by providing its secure communication platform, running cross-checks against its database and providing analytical support and operational expertise.

Europol also organised operational meetings to prepare for the action day. Experts of its European Financial and Economic Crime Centre (EFECC) were deployed to Leuven to support the Belgian authorities during the action day.

A [Joint Investigation Team](#) (JIT) was set up by Eurojust between the Belgian and French authorities

The investigation is still ongoing into the money laundering allegations.



In 2010 the European Union set up a [four-year Policy Cycle](#) to ensure greater continuity in the fight against serious international and organised crime. In 2017 the Council of the EU decided to continue the EU Policy Cycle for the 2018 – 2021 period. It aims to tackle the most significant threats posed by organised and serious international crime to the EU. This is achieved by improving and strengthening cooperation between the relevant services of EU Member States, institutions and agencies, as well as non-EU countries and organisations, including the private sector where relevant. [Excise fraud](#) is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.