

JCO VAPE: OLAF and international customs authorities crack down on illegal trade in e-cigarettes

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), together with customs authorities from 30 countries, has successfully carried out a large-scale operation targeting the illicit trade in e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products. The Joint Customs Operation, (JCO) VAPE resulted in the seizure of over 94 million pieces and over 2,500 kg/l of tobacco products, e-cigarettes, devices, and related goods.

This operation (which ran from 14 November to 15 December 2025) marks the first EU and international Joint Customs Operation specifically focused on this rapidly growing commodity. Its results clearly demonstrate both the effectiveness and the necessity of coordinated cross-border action to tackle an increasingly complex and evolving form of fraud.

Led by OLAF, with Italian and Lithuanian customs as co-leaders, JCO VAPE brought together authorities from 23 EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and 7 non-EU partner countries (including Ukraine, Türkiye, Australia, Egypt, China (including Hong Kong), Norway and the Philippines).

The seizures made during JCO VAPE were substantial with over 1.9 million e-cigarettes, 1,551 pieces of liquids for e-cigarettes and almost 61,000 pieces of heated tobacco products seized. Belgium reported the largest seizure of e-cigarettes, with 1.7 million pieces confiscated by its custom authorities.

A growing threat driven by rising demand for e-cigarettes

The operation took place against the backdrop of the rapidly increasing popularity of e-cigarettes, particularly among young people. This trend comes hand in hand with a surge in illicit trade, posing serious risks to public health, undermining national revenues, harming the environment, and enriching criminal networks.

Illicit products often bypass regulatory safeguards and quality controls, exposing consumers to potentially dangerous substances. At the same time, governments face significant tax losses, while illegal production and disposal practices contribute to environmental damage.

Fraudsters used a wide range of deceptive practices to evade detection. The consignments were misdeclared under a broad variety of goods, with no predominant category. These included toys,

towels, clothing, shoes, shelves, earphones, glass cups, and essential oils, illustrating the adaptability and sophistication of smuggling methods. Most of the seized goods were non-compliant with national laws. Violations included banned flavours, excessive nicotine levels, and unauthorised accessory devices. Some products also failed to meet safety, labelling, or composition standards.

These findings highlight the serious risks posed to consumers. Users of illicit e-cigarettes may unknowingly inhale harmful or unregulated substances, with potentially severe health consequences.

“The results of JCO VAPE confirm that the illicit trade in tobacco and e-cigarettes is a serious and growing threat to public health and public finances,” said Petr Klement, Director-General of OLAF. *“Consumers should remain vigilant about what they smoke or inhale, as illicit products may contain harmful substances. This operation shows the added value of strong international cooperation, and we will continue working with our partners to address these evolving threats.”*

Beyond the seizures, JCO VAPE also enhanced participants’ understanding of this emerging field of fraud. The operation helped uncover how illicit goods are declared, transported, and introduced into markets, as well as the techniques used to conceal them. Its findings have contributed to mapping new trafficking patterns, identifying key routes and modus operandi, and strengthening the foundation for future enforcement actions and risk analysis.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF’s mission is to detect, investigate and stop wrongdoings related to 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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