COUNTERFEIT CRACKDOWN HITS TWO ORGANISED CRIMINAL GROUPS WITH MORE THAN 30 SUSPECTS ARRESTED

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Press Release

More than 4.7 million counterfeit products seized, over 16 400 social media accounts suspended and 3 300 websites closed in the EU-wide operation Aphrodite II against trafficking of counterfeit goods.

A joint investigation carried out by law enforcement authorities from 18 countries and supported by Europol, resulted in the seizure of 4.7 million counterfeit products. During the operation, 16 470 social media accounts and 3 400 websites selling counterfeit products were closed. The online fake goods marketers were selling a large variety of counterfeit items including clothes and accessories, sports equipment, illegal IPTV set-top boxes, medicines, spare car parts, mobile phones, miscellaneous electronic devices and components, perfumes and cosmetics.

The operation led to the arrest of more than 30 suspects and reported 110 others to respective judicial authorities. A select number of suspects are part of two distinct criminal networks responsible for producing and trafficking counterfeit products online. Several investigations are still ongoing.

Europol's Intellectual Property Crime Coordinated Coalition (IPC3) and the Italian Finance Corps (Guardia di Finanza) coordinated the joint investigation, with cooperation from the private sector. The European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) supported the activities of IPC3 with a grant. Law enforcement agencies from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Ukraine and the United Kingdom are all involved in the operation.

Digital platforms – no safe haven for counterfeits

Criminal groups continuously abuse the communication opportunities of digital platforms such as websites, social media and instant messaging to traffic and sell counterfeit products. The exponential growth of internet platforms has also affected the development of online marketplaces (known as e-stores) that are considered as alternative retail channels. These new markets also take advantage of social channels to perpetrate illicit activities.

Law enforcement, supported by the private sector, is therefore extending its response to online trafficking of counterfeit products. To counter the threat, Europol is examining the scale of the problem, gathering evidence and monitoring social media and sales platforms.

Selling fakes on social media

Sellers can advertise counterfeit goods through overt social media posts – with photos of the product and price – or through hidden links to other marketplaces located outside the EU. In the latter case, details of the transaction are arranged through other communication channels such as instant messaging applications or even by telephone under different names. Couriers deliver the packages while the payment is made with prepaid cards, money transfer companies or other forms of electronic payment and web-based services.

Fake products sold on social media can be extremely dangerous. Lacking any quality control and not complying legal norms, fake toys, medicines, body care products, fake spare car parts, inks and material used to produce imitation luxury products and clothes can be harmful to consumer health.

IPC3 intends to promote their recurrent operation, operation Aphrodite, to encourage more countries and private countries to get on board and contribute their expertise and explore new operational methodologies.

CRIME AREAS	Intellectual property crime • Counterfeiting and Product Piracy
TARGET GROUPS	General Public • Law Enforcement • Academia • Professor • Students • Researcher • Press/Journalists • Other
SUPPORT & SERVICES	Operational coordination • Operational support • Information exchange

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