



INTERPOL



# OPERATION OPSON IX

ANALYSIS REPORT



JANUARY 2021

# OPERATION OPSON IX

TARGETING COUNTERFEIT AND SUBSTANDARD FOODSTUFF AND BEVERAGE



# 77

**countries**  
participated  
in Operation  
OPSON IX



**OPSON IX**  
Targeting  
counterfeit and  
sub-standard food  
and drink



**12,000 tons**  
products seized



**USD 40 million**  
total value of illicit  
goods seized



**779,342**  
units in total



**27,579**  
inspections



**19**  
organized crime  
groups disrupted



**407**  
arrest warrants  
**235**  
search warrants  
executed



**408**  
criminal cases  
**2,980**  
administrative cases



**USD 5.8 million**  
Considering the value,  
alcoholic beverage represent  
the first category of  
seized goods



**2 million**  
litres of fake and  
sub-standard drink



**2,000 tonnes**  
of fruits,  
vegetables and  
legumes



**Animal food**  
is the most seized product

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## Executive summary

- In the light of the recent global health crisis, countries need to re-evaluate their approach in tackling the security of the food supply chain by looking into new strategies, increased controls, safer procedures, and preventative measures, while ensuring better protection for law enforcement personnel.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has probably triggered increased organized crime activity involving medicines and medical devices, alongside with a decrease in organized crime involvement in food crime during the first months of 2020.
- The results of OPSON IX highlighted that both illicit livestock and meat products remain a threat for public health and potentially add additional risks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as infection clusters can form and spread rapidly amongst the workers of meat processing plants or in specialized markets.
- Virtually every edition of OPSON saw seizures of modest amounts of expired products. However, this year the number of seizures involving expired food items are higher than in previous years.
- The participant countries reported around 12,000 tonnes of illegal and potentially harmful products seized and removed from the consumption market, with an estimated retail value of about USD 40,046,068.
- The 27,579 checks carried out during OPSON IX, resulted in 408 criminal and 2,980 administrative cases, 407 arrests, 235 search warrants and the disruption of illicit activities of 19 OCGs involved in food fraud and other criminal areas.
- The number of checks are about 39 per cent of what the countries reported in the last year's edition, while criminal cases are 13 per cent of what OPSON VIII saw last year. The number of administrative cases, although dropped slightly, maintained a close level at 91 per cent compared to last year.
- Most probably, this drop in numbers reflects the efforts that the countries have made in addressing the problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lock down measures implemented, while the transport challenges the supply chain have of also affected the criminals involved in food-related crimes.
- Excluding the side seizures, during OPSON IX, raw animal feed, alcoholic beverages and fruits/vegetables/legumes were the most seized items, confirming the threat associated with alcohol products observed during previous years and also bringing to light other threats.
- As a regional trend, Namibia and South Africa were the main entry points of illicit foodstuff (but also other consumer goods), which are probably distributed northwards, to neighbouring countries.
- OPSON IX re-confirmed a previous trend relating to alcohol smuggling from Eastern European countries to the EU, which takes place in small quantities but with higher frequency of transports, probably towards western and northern European countries.

- **Regarding Intellectual Property Rights, most of the criminal activity is connected with the illicit use of trademarks and protected designations of origin. The level of counterfeiting reported this year is about 8 per cent of the total seizures.**
- **Amidst the global health crisis, increasing international cooperation by exchanging reliable operational information is essential in understanding the new developments and the real impact that the pandemic is having on the global food chain security.**
- **Operation OPSON should remain global, however with a more pronounced regional focus. It is recommended for the member countries to ask for or participate in regional case meetings organized by INTERPOL and in similar events organized by EUROPOL, whenever international assistance is needed, taking full advantage of new, officially-authorized tools for organizing virtual meetings.**

# 1. Objectives, timeline, legal framework and participating countries

## 1.1 Objectives, timeline and legal framework

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the OPSON IX operational plan was extended beyond the originally planned five months (from 01 December 2019 to 30 April 2020) until 30 June 2020. The objectives of the Operation, consisted of:

- protecting public health;
- fighting against organized crime groups involved in the trade of fake and substandard food;
- enhancing international cooperation;
- enhancing national cooperation between LEAs and food regulatory agencies; and
- enhancing cooperation with private partners from the food and beverage industry.

Both international and national legislations concerning Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and food safety were enforced during the Operation.

Based on the threat assessment done for OPSON VIII, alcohol, meat, cheese and olive oil were confirmed to be the most targeted goods by criminal organizations. The countries from the European Union, based on their own risk analysis, additionally targeted wine, alcohol, milk, dairy products and horses' passports.

## 1.2 Participating countries, Europol and INTERPOL

The following countries<sup>1</sup> participated in OPSON IX<sup>2</sup>:

Albania, Angola, Argentina, **Armenia**, Austria, **Azerbaijan**, Belarus, Belgium, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Brazil, Bulgaria, **Burkina-Faso**, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, **Canada**, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, **Dominican Republic**, Ecuador, Eritrea, Estonia, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, **Kazakhstan**, Kenya, Korea (Republic of), **Kyrgyzstan**, Lesotho, Lithuania, **Mexico**, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Nigeria, **North Macedonia**, Norway, **Pakistan**, Paraguay, Peru, **Philippines**, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Seychelles, **Sierra Leone**, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania, The Netherlands, Togo, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, **Uzbekistan**, **Vietnam**, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The particularity of this year's edition of OPSON is that most of the operational phase ran in parallel with the developments related to the COVID – 19 pandemic. In this context, the participating countries had to prioritize their interventions/resources on other criminal/security areas, especially related to medicines and medical equipment, which have posed additional threats and increased significantly during the first six months of 2020, according to INTERPOL's observations.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Annex 1 for the list of participating countries and involved agencies. The countries in bold letters are countries participating for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> EUIPO financially supports Europol IPC3's activities in the fight of IP crime.

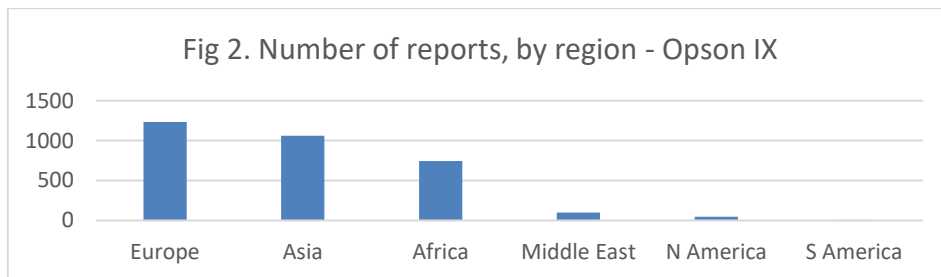




Fig. 1. Participating countries

INTERPOL and Europol, with the agreement of the participant countries, drafted the operational plan and supported the countries with database crosschecks, international assistance requests, and coordinated the dissemination of intelligence in order to support on-going actions.

Of note is that in comparison with the last two editions of the Operation and, although most of the contributions come from Europe, the participation from Africa and Asia increased for this edition, which potentially shows that the INTERPOL regional strategy was successful for these areas. (Please see Fig. 1 below).



### 1.3 Private partners

Private partners were asked to join based on their presence in the different markets (Europe, USA, Middle East, Africa, South America, Asia), prioritizing those most affected by the threat of counterfeiting. The involvement of the private partners (Annex 2) does not constitute any preferred relationship with Europol or INTERPOL. Their association was made on a voluntary basis and did not imply any specific action from the law enforcement agencies involved in OPSON regarding their brands or products. Europol and INTERPOL are willing to develop partnerships with private partners of the food industry in order to reinforce cooperation and the exchange of operational information. Countries are also invited to implement such partnerships at the national level if deemed relevant.

The participation consisted of:

- Providing intelligence and risk assessments on their products during the pre-operational phase, including during training sessions tailored for law enforcement services;
- Participating in preparatory meetings organized at the national level;
- Providing expertise in legal proceedings when needed.

Each private partner made available a list of relevant contact points according to the concerned geographical area.

## 2. Schedule of the operation

Similar to last year, the Operation was divided into three phases, which are described below.

### 2.1 Preparatory phase

Operation OPSON IX was launched during a meeting hosted by Europol and INTERPOL in Athens, Greece, from 7 to 8 November 2019. The event debriefed operation OPSON VIII, by presenting the results and discussing the implementation of the operational phase. It also officially launched OPSON IX with a discussion on new challenges, based on the results of the previous edition and further analysis.

According to OPSON VIII results, specific emerging trends have been illustrated, INTERPOL recommending to all countries to include checks, amongst others on illicit alcohol and meat, commodities which were found to pose a higher threat for human life and health based on the information from previous phases of the Operation.

The event gathered more than 130 representatives from LEAs, regulatory agencies, academia and international bodies with competence on food related issues together with private firms coming from almost every European country (on behalf of Europol) and non-European countries (on behalf of INTERPOL). Countries from every region of the world (Belarus, North Macedonia and Moldova for Europe, Armenia and Indonesia for Asia; Nigeria and Congo for Africa, Peru and Canada for the Americas together with Jamaica and Santo Domingo) were represented.

A specific training and planning meeting for Operation OPSON IX was organized from 11 to 12 of December 2019 in Lviv (Ukraine) for the countries from the Eastern Europe and the Central and Western Asian Regions. The purpose of the meeting was to increase countries' participation and sustain their capacity to fight against this type of trafficking by providing a more tailored workshop with local brand owners. The meeting was attended by more than 30 representatives from various international institutions, agencies, authorities and law enforcement departments with competence on food related issues and economic investigations, coming from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine. Representatives from several private firms operating in the region also attended the event.

The operational plan was disseminated via appropriate channels, SIENA and EPE (Europol channels) and the I-24/7 system to the National Central Bureaus (INTERPOL channels) for all participants in December 2019.

### 2.2 Operational phase

The operational phase spanned nearly seven months between 1 December 2019 and 15 June 2020. The former timeline, closing on 30 April 2020, was extended due to the sudden COVID 19 outbreak. As in previous editions, checks and investigations were carried out on high-risk entities in the food and beverage supply chains. Each participating country independently decided on the type and timing of controls established in a national operational plan.

#### **Role of INTERPOL and Europol**

During the operational phase, INTERPOL and Europol performed crosschecks against their databases and coordinated the dissemination of intelligence in order to support on-going actions. The INTERPOL Command and Coordination Centre (CCC) provided round-the-clock support from 1 December 2019 to 15 June 2020, via the I-24/7 system. The INTERPOL's Illicit Goods and Global Health Programme liaised with the National Central Bureaus (NCBs) in the participating countries exchanging information through INTERPOL channels.

The operational center supported OPSON IX at Europol Headquarters during the entire operational phase. At the end of the operational phase, participating countries sent all available results to INTERPOL and Europol for analysis.



## 2.3 Post operational phase

The results of the operational phase were to be sent to INTERPOL and Europol before 30 June 2020. Most of the participating countries respected this deadline. From June 2020 to October 2020, both organizations analyzed the data transmitted, in order to assess the threat and identify best practices and areas of improvement. A virtual debriefing meeting was held on 19 November 2020 to present the results and adopt this report, which was sent to all countries via the appropriate communication channels.

## 3. Analysis

This section comprises an overview of the seizures reported during OPSON IX. However, the particularity of this edition of OPSON was rather an unexpected one, namely that the Operation took place during the COVID-19 crisis, which has affected the LEAs response and, in many cases, resources were diverted towards crisis management and public order in general. On the other hand, movement restrictions and other rules imposed in some countries have affected both the response of LEAs but also the normal flow of goods at national and international levels<sup>3</sup>, aspects that operationally, have translated into atypical results for this edition of OPSON.

Based on other INTERPOL operations<sup>4</sup>, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light a potential correlation between an increase in organized crime activity targeting medicines and medical devices and a decrease in the activity of OCGs in some other crime areas. This seems to be supported by the results of OPSON IX, during which a significantly lower number of OCGs were associated with food crime than in previous editions of OPSON.

### 3.1 General Results

All participating countries carried out checks throughout their national territory. Of note is that the whole chain of supply received attention, seizures being made at production sites, during the transport phase or at the distribution and selling points of illicit foods and drinks. Law enforcement actions targeted all channels of distribution, including online sales and the activities carried out in the framework of OPSON IX are as presented below.

<b>Illicit Goods Seized during OPSON IX</b>	
<b>Unit of measurement</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Tonnes	7,457
Liters	2,050,773
Units	779,342

In total, the participating countries seized and removed from the consumption market more than 12,000 tonnes of illegal and potentially harmful products, with an estimated retail value of about USD 40,046,068.

The total number of checks carried out during the OPSON IX increased to 27,579, which represents only about 40 per cent of the total controls carried out last year. The 408 criminal cases initiated this year represent a serious decrease in comparison with nearly 3,000 cases started during the last edition of OPSON. However, there were 2,980 administrative cases reported for OPSON IX which represent only a slight decrease (approximately 9 per cent) with regard to the administrative cases recorded for OPSON VIII.

The countries also reported 407 arrests, 235 search warrants and 19 OCGs impacted by these measures, which represents a significant decrease compared to last year. Excluding side seizures, this year, the most seized products were animal food, with more than 5,000 tonnes of product seized, alcoholic beverages more than 2000 tonnes, fruits, vegetables and legumes with more than 440 tonnes of product seized and non-alcoholic beverages with about 403 tonnes of illegal products seized.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on INTERPOL information the various movement restrictions imposed at national level during February – June 2020 have affected the international shipments of goods, which dropped in some cases with up to 70% (especially in Asia).

<sup>4</sup> Targeting illicit medicines and medical devices.

Another notable type of product seized was saffron, which was reported by Spain (90kg) and Belgium (7kg) with an estimated value of more than USD 350,000, while in the USA authorities seized 147 kg of raw apricot kernel seeds, which were being sold as a cure for cancer with high market prices.

In every edition of OPSON, seizures involve a certain amount of expired products. However, this year the number of seizures relating to expired products, repackaged food items or directly falsifying the date of expiration are higher than in previous years.

## 3.2 Types of illicit products seized

### **Raw animal feed**

Although seizures of this type of product were reported mainly by Portugal, the overall quantity seized in several warehouses was more than 5,000 tonnes, being the main type of good seized in OPSON IX and indicating that this type of products should be given more attention in the future as it has the potential to affect the food chain.

### **Alcoholic beverages**

In terms of public health and revenue for state budgets, the threat level related to illicit products in this category continues to be high, making alcoholic beverages one of the most significant threats to the life and health of consumers worldwide, state income and IPR.

Reported in 589 cases during OPSON IX, alcohol was the second most seized commodity, totaling about 1,613 tonnes of products seized, which is lower than last edition. However, from an operational perspective, it still represents a significant quantity. Of the total seized, almost 1,300 tonnes were wine. The other types of alcohol present in higher quantities amongst seizures were vodka and whiskey respectively.

Countries who reported notable seizures in this regard were France with more than one million liters of wine, Italy with more than 45,000 litres of wine in two larger seizures, Portugal 21,000 litres of wine in one higher seizure, Greece more than 70,000 liters of wine, ethyl alcohol and whiskey in five larger seizures and Spain one larger seizure of 18,000 liters of wine. In all other cases the average was about 94 litres per seizure.

In total, 54 arrests, 31 search warrants and 4 OCGs were reported in connection with this illicit commodity and the total value of the goods seized is around USD 20,317,547.

### **Fruits, vegetables and legumes**

In terms of public health, this type of illicit product continues to be a threat, however at moderate level. Seizures of this type of illicit product were reported in 98 cases and increased to about 440 tonnes almost double the number of cases from the previous edition of OPSON, while the total estimated value of the products seized is about USD 665,243. Amongst the highest seizures in this category, Portugal reported 284 tonnes of sweet potatoes and 42 tonnes of honey pumpkin, Italy 76 tonnes of olives in brine, and Hungary 4.1 tonnes of unknown parsley roots.

Four arrest warrants and two search warrants were issued in connection with this category of product and in most of the cases the seizures were carried out because of food safety reasons, relating to the presence of possible contagious organisms, irregularities about labelling, presence of animal origin substances, expired products or generally lack of sanitary inspection documents.

### **Nonalcoholic beverages**

This type of illicit product continue to pose a moderate threat in terms of public health but an increasing threat for the IPR environment, being susceptible for counterfeiting, especially in Africa and Asia.

Illegal products seized in this category were present in 104 reports, totaling more than 422 tonnes, with an estimated value of about USD 348,699.

Notable seizures, amongst others, have been reported by Italy, 373,800 litres of unspecified nonalcoholic beverages, Indonesia 19,586 litres in several large seizures of nonalcoholic drinks and bottled water, Burundi 5,500 litres of ginger juice, Jordan 2,000 litres of energy drinks and 4500 litres of soda pops.

A highlight for this category of product seized is that the authorities have issued 89 arrest warrants, 29 search warrants and one OCG was reported in connection with nonalcoholic beverages, which suggests that criminality related to non-alcoholic beverages was at high levels, especially in Africa.

### **Dairy products**

This category of illicit product remains a significant threat in terms of IPR and public health, especially in Europe, particularly when a brand or designation of origin is associated with it. Illicit dairy products have been reported in 69 seizures with a total quantity of about 423 tonnes<sup>5</sup> of products seized, estimated at around USD 10,606,787.

Italy reported several notable seizures, which were about 246 tonnes of illicit products and referred mostly to cheese, seized for food safety and food fraud reasons. Jordan, in several cases seized more than 11.8 tonnes of rotten milk and cheese, Bulgaria seized 7.6 tonnes of dairy products of which some samples tested positive for E.coli, while Portugal, in one case, seized almost 54 tonnes of cheese which was deceiving consumers about the characteristics of the product.

Amongst the irregularities discovered, worth mentioning are the use of UHT milk containing foreign substances, false labelling, cheese made of pasteurized milk after the producer discovered a bacterial contamination, production in plants with serious structural hygiene problems, discharging residual waters illegally, contamination with rodent excrement or damaged packaging, to name a few.

### **Meat and meat products**

Illicit products in this category remain a high risk for public health, while their wide demand is a pull factor in terms of IPR crime, especially because the sale of these products involves a brand or a designation of origin. Furthermore, open sources indicate that this type of product poses additional threats in the context of the COVID-19<sup>6</sup> pandemic, which proved that zoonotic<sup>7</sup> infection clusters can form and spread rapidly amongst the workers of meat processing plants or specialized markets where these products are sold.

Compared to the last edition of OPSON, in 2020, participants reported about 169 cases involving roughly 255 tonnes of meat and meat products, estimated at USD 1,086,144. This is a bit more than half of the number of cases and quantity reported last year, however the value of seizures increased by roughly 20 per cent, suggesting that this category of product remains a high risk in terms of illicit activity, especially during crisis situations.

Higher seizures were reported by North Macedonia with 21 tonnes of frozen chicken, Hungary with 15.2 tonnes of meat products, Portugal with 16.7 tonnes or Italy with 9.4 tonnes, while the average seizure weight in his category was about 1.5 tones and one arrest and eleven searches have been connected with this type of product.

Many of the illicit activity discovered for this category relate to species substitution, false halal certification, false labelling, expired, products originating in avian influenza areas, illegal slaughtering of horses and pigs, hazardous hygiene condition, no traceability or labels, but also to processing in unapproved establishments or meat infested by mold, in all cases the products being taken out of the consumption market.

### **Cooking oil (All types)**

This type of illicit product poses a moderate threat to public health and IPR environment. The 116 cases of this category gathered about 149 tonnes of illicit product seized, with an estimated value of roughly USD 912,339. Notable seizures were reported by Italy 66.5 tonnes of olive oil, Ethiopia 46,000 liters of unspecified cooking oil, Jordan (in two larger seizures) about 11.16 tonnes of olive oil, Greece 3,230 liters of sunflower oil or Portugal about 1,593 liters of olive oil, while for the rest of the cases the average was about 146 kg/seizure. In addition, Slovenia has carried out extensive checks on olive oil samples and took administrative measures, when illicit products encountered.

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<sup>5</sup> This quantity includes a report from USA, when 5 containers of dairy and powder milk were seized, however it appears that also other food products were present and the quantities were not clearly individualized.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6927e2.htm>, Update: COVID-19 Among Workers in Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities Centers for Disease Control, USA, accessed 21 October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Zoonotic = about a disease which is transmitted to humans from animals (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/zoonosis>).

Fifteen arrest warrants and three search warrants have been issued, while the main type of infringements for this category are food safety and smuggling, but also deceiving consumers. In only three cases reported by Greece, IPR infringements were detected regarding olive oil, namely illicit use of Protected Denomination of Origin and in one of these cases the olive oil was offered for sale online.

Amongst the main reasons for seizures, the country reports indicated adulteration, expired products, illegal certification, failing organoleptic laboratory tests or falsification of labels.

### **Sugar and sweet products**

Illicit products in this category continue to pose a medium threat to public health and it appears to be an increasing threat for the food-related IPR environment. In this category, the participants reported 139 cases, amounting to about 193 tonnes of illicit products seized with an estimated value of USD 479,296, while two arrests and two search warrants were carried out.

Noticeable seizures were reported by Italy, 72 tonnes of refined sugar, Belarus 20 tonnes of chocolate, Canada in two higher seizures more than 14 tonnes of honey, Indonesia in several seizures about 33,200 pieces of jelly cups and jelly sticks and additionally about 48 tonnes of sugar made of molasses. Portugal reported about 21 tonnes in three higher seizures of mixed sweet products and Eritrea 1,500 pieces of coffee flavored candy, while the average for all the other seizures was about 114 kg.

A problematic product in terms of deceiving consumers but also for smuggling seems to be adulterated honey as this was reported in various quantities by Canada, Croatia, Italy, Spain and Denmark, but also during the previous editions of OPSON. In most of the cases, the adulteration took place before the importation by adding C3 or C4 sugars and was connected in most of the cases with the producer, especially if the latter was processing/producing also glucose in the same factory, which can constitute a risk indicator for counterfeiting or adulteration of natural honey.

Most of the infringements in this category were related to food safety but also deceiving consumer and fiscal infringements. The products were seized because of IPR violations, expiration dates, substandard quality, poor storage conditions, potentially causing poisoning or diarrhea and containing carcinogenic substances.

### **Seafood**

The threat related to this category of product is increasing and becoming more complex, as it might involve concurrent illicit deeds, such as illegal fishing, food safety issues but also IPR crimes especially related to products subjected to the designation of origin.

Illicit seafood products were reported in 79 cases, and, according to the data, the quantity seized was around 42.6 tonnes of products, estimated at around USD 591,094. Two arrests and two search warrants have been carried out in connection with this category of product. Higher seizures were reported by Portugal, who in several higher seizures totaled about 29.8 tonnes of cod, sole, manta fish, bivalve mollusks, cuttlefish and octopus. Italy 3 tonnes of unspecified seafood, Jordan, 1.9 tonnes of unspecified fish and Belgium one ton of dried shrimp, the average for all the other seizures being somewhere at around 116 kg/seizure.

Food safety and deceiving consumers were the main infringements reported this year. The food items were seized when turned out to be species substitutions, for example Alaskan plaice instead of sole fish, various types of other fish posing as Atlantic/Pacific cod, packaging issues (adding water to frozen scallops to increase weight), mislabeling the product (generic commercial name instead of the exact species) or expired products.

In Italy, in one seizure, the authorities found in a marketplace counterfeit labels falsely stating that the fish products were coming from a certain plant, while in South Africa the invoice of several seafood products stated personal protection equipment (masks and gloves) related to COVID-19. The investigation revealed that the foreign citizen dealing with the goods had no import permit and was illegally staying in South Africa.

## **Livestock**

The data reported during OPSON IX is insufficient in order to clearly assess the global threat associated with this category of product. In the light of the recent events regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this threat needs to be seriously assessed in order to potentially prevent another zoonotic virus<sup>8</sup> potentially triggering a new global health crisis.

In total, sixty-seven units of livestock were seized, with an estimated value of around USD 133,610 and in this regard horses were the most reported category. However, smaller numbers of sheep and cattle were also seized. As a result of the targeted action regarding horse passports, inspections have been carried out mostly in Europe. Illicit activities have notably been reported by Italy and Denmark.

In Denmark, the inspection of several slaughterhouses and horse dealers and stud farms showed lack of awareness towards falsified passports. Around 250-300 already slaughtered horses were included in the inspections and 20 per cent of foreign passports from already slaughtered horses showed signs of adulteration, but also a few Danish passports showed signs of adulteration. In around half of the inspections the authorities encountered insufficient paper trails/traceability documentation and several substantial flaws.

Additionally, it was discovered that in several cases the transponders or passports were not destroyed and that the required analysis for the detection of trichinosis was missing. The inspections at horse dealers/stud farms showed that ownership of horses are not transferred in case of sale, particularly for foreign horses and in many cases, deceased horses are not reported dead and the passports remain with the last known owner, creating premises for illegal use.

In Italy, investigations revealed problems with the certificates of origin for horses, lack of traceability by either non-existence of tracing devices, documents or inputs in official databases or by fraud carried out by horse breeders who, for example, imported horses for sports competitions, however the animals were actually intended for slaughtering. In addition, several stolen animals were identified and returned to their owners.

In another case in Italy, 72 fake horse passports were seized, and two search warrants executed in connection with an OCG involving three business operators (2 slaughtering houses and a freight forwarder) of horse meat from animals unsuitable for human consumption and placed on the national market using falsified documents.

## **Mixed food and drinks**

Based on the reported data, it was not possible in all cases to clearly distinguish between the goods seized<sup>9</sup>, therefore this category will contain general information about food products in mixed seizures. About 245 tonnes of products from this category were seized in 884 cases, with a total value estimated at around USD 696,798.

Fifty-two arrest warrants and twenty-three search warrants were reported as well as eighteen OCGs involved in food crime. Most of the arrests and organized crime activity was reported in Africa and Asia and was connected with packed food products, usually sweets, cheese, canned food, soft drinks and coffee.

Regarding the types of infringements reported the majority was related to expired products, however a smaller part of reports indicated also food safety and deceiving consumers, because of lack of traceability, labelling irregularities, substandard products, containing potentially poisonous ingredients or ones that affect the gastro-intestinal tract.

## **Food supplements/additives**

The participants reported 40 seizures, totaling about 52 tonnes of illicit products with an estimated value of USD 2,468,966. Notable seizures were reported by USA, who, in one case seized 300,000 pieces and additionally, in several other cases seized a total of 147,636 and almost 3 tonnes of supplements under the form of pills or powder, North Macedonia seized about 5,400 "*black seed oil and olive oil*" capsules, while Ecuador seized 3,400 units of yeast.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 6 and further details here: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf#:~:text=All%20available%20evidence%20for%20COVID,be%20handled%20by%20humans> ; WHO, Situation Report, Covid-19 Pandemic, April 2020 (accessed 02 Nov 2020)

<sup>9</sup> For example seizures of 2,000 kg of "unhealthy food products", etc.



In correlation with this category, 26 arrests, 16 search warrants and 3 OCGs have been reported. A new type of product present this year amongst seizures was 67 kg of food glue seized by North Macedonia in a failed smuggling attempt. These illicit goods were seized mostly for being smuggled, expired, for contained illegal ingredients or because they lacked proper accompanying documents.

#### **Other food products**

**Poultry products** remain a threat, especially for food safety reasons. About 49,729 pieces and additional 358 kg of eggs, estimated at around USD 7,400 have been seized in a few countries. However, most of the reports are coming from Italy and Portugal. These products were seized because they were expired, but also under the suspicion of food fraud involving IPR. In this regard, during an inspection in Italy, it was ascertained that a company purchased eggs from a packaging center and then reconditioned them for subsequent marketing by providing false information on the label regarding the place of packaging and printing a different expiration date from the one originally indicated by the producer.

**Cereals, grains and derived products** are still a threat for the health of the consumers, mostly because of food safety reasons. In this category about 15.2 tonnes of products were seized, in 64 case with an estimated value of around USD 16,057, while four arrests warrants have been issued together with six search warrants. Notable seizures have been reported by Belgium 9 tonnes of cassava in about 5 bigger seizures, Eritrea, 2.5 tonnes of wheat flour, South Africa about 1.2 tonnes of rice, while in all other cases the average of product seized was about 61 kg/seizure.

Many of the products were expired or unauthorized and amongst the risks to human health worth mentioning were potential to cause food poisoning or gastro-intestinal problems. In South Africa, after checks on a woodhouse shop manufacturing and selling branded rice, the authorities have seized expired products, packaging and weighting equipment used for illegally packing the rice, which was sold locally, including to several local supermarkets.

**Coffee and tea** remain a threat for public health and IPR environment as these products are still targeted by counterfeiters especially due to the large distribution at population level. This year, the participant countries reported about 10 tonnes of product seized, in 24 cases and estimated at around USD 82,000. Most notable seizures were reported by Portugal, eight tonnes of tea containing pesticides and Greece, 1.8 tonnes of branded coffee, associated with smuggling and counterfeiting. For the rest of the cases the average per seizure was about 122 kg.

The infringements reported in connection with this category were mostly expired, substandard and counterfeit or the products were found to be potentially poisoning when ingested.

**Condiments** remain a threat especially in terms of deceiving consumers and the IPR environment and in total about 1.7 tonnes of products have been seized in 37 cases, with a total estimated value of almost USD 360,000. Notable seizures of this product were reported by Jordan, 480 litres of lemon substitutes, South Africa 300 kg of mixed spices and Portugal 335 kg of salt. However, in terms of value, Spain reported seizures of 90 kg of saffron, which was intended to deceive the consumers, as it was mixed with other types of plants and the total estimated market value for these products is at least USD 270,000.

#### **Side seizures**

Side seizures are illicit goods, which were not directly targeted during operation but seized when found to be illicit. In this regard, in about 671 seizures roughly 2,383 tonnes of illicit products were seized, with an estimated value of about USD 3.1 million. More than 80 per cent of these products were illicit medicines and medical devices, for example, Ethiopia reported seizures of more than 28,000 N95 masks, Ecuador more than 17,000 testing kits for SARS-Cov-2 virus and Namibia 51,000 units of corticosteroids.

Other goods seized in this category included disinfectants and cleaning products, luxury shoes and clothing, perfumes, car spare parts, cigarettes, empty bottles, electronics or plastic bags and in total six OCGs were reported in connection with this type of illicit goods, 149 persons arrested and 100 search warrants issued.

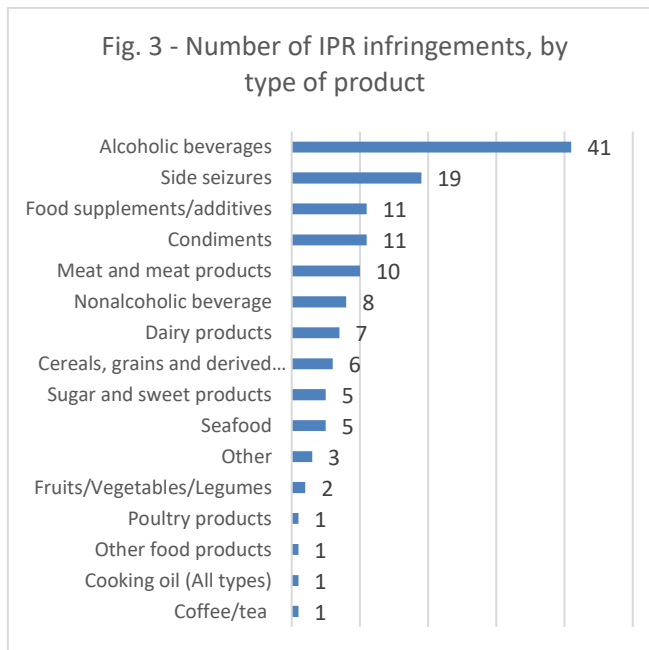
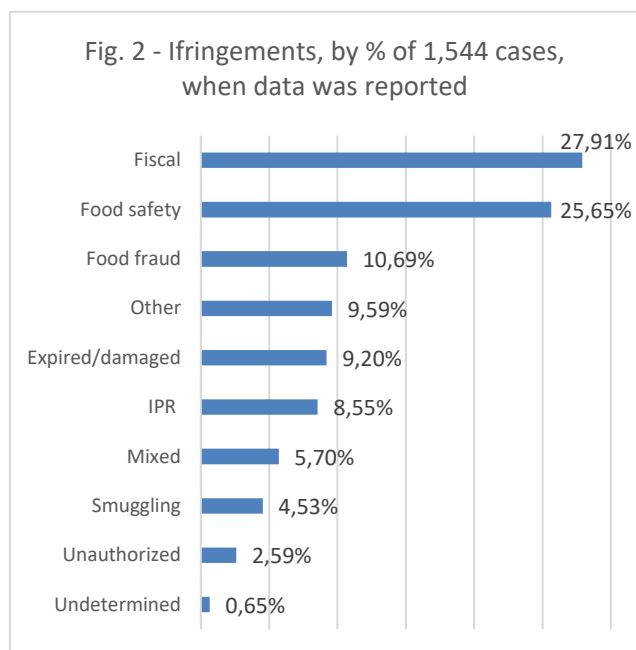
Regarding the presence of a high number of medicines and medical devices amongst side seizures in OPSON IX, in every edition there were such products in small numbers. However, in 2020, some of the countries participating in this year's edition raised their level of controls and took advantage of the operational phase of OPSON IX to enhance and scrutinize better the threats for public health, including by monitoring online marketplaces and removing illegal products and adverts.



## IPR crime related to food products

OPSON IX looked in particular at IPR crime this year and relevant information about the type of infringement was reported in about 1,544 cases which shows that fiscal and food safety infringements remain at higher levels, similar to previous years, while generally IPR infringements are at around eight per cent (details in Fig. 2).

While detailed descriptions regarding IPR infringements were reported in about 132 reports, context in which the charts below reflect only the data reported which had some information gaps, they offer however, a hint into the potential distribution of IPR crime by type of infringement and type of product. In this regard, most of the IPR infringements are connected with alcoholic beverages, condiments and meat products, however other products are affected (details in graph 3 below). The IPR violation, in 92 cases remained undetermined, however in 25 cases it was related to a trademark, while 10 cases to geographic indication of origin and in 5 to copyright.



## 3.3 Targeted actions

The following targeted actions were performed during the operational phase of OPSON IX:

### Dairy products

Participating countries: Bulgaria, Italy, France, Greece, Portugal, Switzerland

The project resulted in the seizures of 320 tonnes of smuggled or substandard dairy products. National authorities seized rotten milk and cheese which posed a threat to consumer health. Additionally, 210 tonnes of cheese were seized, which did not meet the conditions to be labelled with a protected geographic denomination.

A Bulgarian investigation into an unregistered warehouse revealed seven samples of cheese tested positive for starch and E.coli. The authorities seized 3.6 tonnes of unsafe dairy products which were supposed to be processed into melted cheese.

## **Olive oil**

Participating countries: Albania, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Iceland, Jordan, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Spain

A total of 149 tonnes of cooking oil was seized as a result of this targeted action led by Greece. About 88 tonnes from the seizures were olive oil and were reported by Albania, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Lithuania, Portugal and Spain.

In Italy, during a check on a company producing olive oil, inspectors found a surplus of product whose foreign origin was unknown and not registered in the official documents of the company, thus more than 66 tonnes of olive oil were seized.

## **Alcohol and wine**

Participating countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Czech Republic, Greece, France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, UK.

Targeted Enforcement Action on wine and alcoholic beverages, one of the targeted action coordinated by OLAF with the support of Europol and with the participation of EU Member States and some non-EU countries targeted the trafficking on counterfeit wine and alcoholic beverages.

Illicit, counterfeit and adulterated alcohol constitute a considerable damage to the law-abiding manufacturers and traders in the European Union and have a negative impact on EU's financial interests as well as deceiving and endangering the safety of consumers in the European Union. Because of its toxicity, methanol is sometimes added to ethanol products with industrial uses, such as solvents, to rule out their potential as beverages. However, bootleggers sometimes use these deliberately poisoned products to cheaply pad out liquor.

OLAF led the targeting action and coordinated activities of 17 EU Member States and two non-EU countries that took part in it. During the targeted action, OLAF facilitated the cooperation between the participants and with the right holders, crucial for fighting counterfeit goods especially during the on-going investigations and operations.

In the framework of this targeted action, customs and police authorities of the participating countries seized 1.158,199 litres of wine, mostly champagne, and 109,267 litres of various alcoholic beverages, mostly vodka and rum that infringe intellectual property rights. The targeted action revealed that the quantities of counterfeit wine for illicit market, in particular champagne, are increasing in comparison with the previous years while the quantities of counterfeit alcoholic beverages remains high but stable.

## **Horses' passports and horse meat**

Participating countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Ireland, Spain, UK

As a response to this dangerous criminal trend, Europol launched a dedicated project to support national authorities in combating the sale of illegal horse meat, led by Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands and supported by DG SANTE.

The operational activities focused on checks of documents of more than 157 000 horses from eight countries and about 117 tonnes of horse meat. Live animals and more than 17 tonnes of horse meat were seized from several slaughterhouses. Inspections of slaughterhouses in several countries showed that about 20% of the foreign passports used for these horses showed signs of forgery. Competition horses with forged documents were also sent to slaughterhouses.

### 3.4 Case examples

The following cases reported by the participating countries during OPSON IX illustrate the illicit modus operandi used and also underline the efforts of the participating law enforcement agencies in the fight against food fraud.

#### Belarus

In Belarus, the controls of road transports in several regions brought to light the same modus operandi used mostly by Belarusian nationals who transported alcohol (vodka, ethyl alcohol) in bottles or cans without excise stamps, using personal vehicles, minivans or trucks. The alcohol was intended for local market and/or possibly for transit to Belarus towards neighbour countries. In total, more than 14,000 liters of illicit alcohol were seized.

#### Ecuador

Road checks in Ecuador led to seizures of non-alcoholic beverages (energy drinks), vegetables, fruits and legumes and also yeast. Private vehicles transported the merchandise originated abroad, and the drivers could not provide any documents of origin for the goods transported.



Energy drinks, vegetables, legumes and yeast seized during the operation

#### Eswatini

In Eswatini, the controls carried out at the borders during OPSON IX revealed counterfeit alcohol, especially whiskey and vodka, and counterfeit condiments. In all cases, the actors involved were locals, with international connections.



Illicit condiments and alcohol seized

#### Eritrea

Following inter-agency planning and operational cooperation, the authorities in Eritrea have carried out searches in several locations, especially in a local port for containers transporting food products and warehouses storing such goods. Although restrictions in moving from one region to another were imposed due to the COVID-19 situation,

the control measures led to the recovery of various quantities of expired products, while in the same time, enforced the legislation regarding the standards set for control mechanisms.



Checks in a local port and a warehouse

## Greece

### Olive oil case

The results of OPSON IX, shows that the cases with abnormal samples of olive oil were many in spite of the luck situation of the pandemic, which did not allow the competent authorities to do further checks and investigations.

After the first lock down in Greece, the checks continued and we found again cases with artificially coloured seed oil of unknown origin (added with chemical colours in order to look like olive oil), which was presented on the market as extra virgin olive oil coming from famous Greek areas.

In particular 3 persons were arrested and 565 litres and 110 plastic containers of counterfeit olive oil were seized, during the controls conducted by the Hellenic Police in domestic market.

The containers had labels with the absence of the mandatory indications of the specific producers and other characteristics of the containing product, which was presented as extra virgin olive oil.

From the chemical analysis of the samples it was found that the oil was not olive oil but artificially coloured seed oil, unsuitable for consumption and dangerous for human health.

### Alcohol case

The case concerned an OCG importing alcoholic beverages and raw materials (ethyl alcohol) for the production of the fake spirits in order to put them in the domestic market as genuine.

In particular, they were producing counterfeit alcoholic drinks in their own labs, using special infrastructure. They bottled the drinks in similar to famous brands bottles, with forged brand name labels on them, in order to sell them as genuine products in liqueur stores, grocery shops, bars and night clubs, in the Greek territory.

The members of the OCG were using international transport trucks vehicles to import illegal alcoholic beverages among legal products, in order not to be easily detected by the LEA.

During the investigation, it was revealed that the OCG had a hierarchical structure, distinct roles and continuous action and it consisted of two subgroups. The first subgroup was primarily responsible for the storage of the products, the replacement of the foreign labels with fake Greek logos. Then, they were selling them as Greek products with virtual invoices in lower prices, gaining large profits from the financial difference of the taxes imposed. The second one was responsible for the production, storage and distribution of the dangerous for the public health substandard alcohol.



The members of the OCG, in order to ensure their illegal activity they had set up two fully equipped laboratories and they used four warehouses in Attica. On 20th of February 2020, F.P.D. conducted a police operation, at the same time in a number of houses, laboratories and warehouses.

The operation resulted to fourteen (14) individuals arrested, including the leading member of the OCG and 21.901 bottles of alcoholic beverages and 22.500 liters of raw materials (ethyl alcohol) were seized.



## Italy

Operation “Vuoti a rendere” is an Italian investigation started by NAS Carabinieri of Florence in January 2018, in the framework of Op. OPSON VII and finalized during Op. OPSON IX. The case involved Italian criminals responsible of food fraud, concerning the counterfeiting of prestigious PDO wines (Typical Geographical Indication) and international high cost wines.

The investigation revealed a fraud based on the reuse of original primary packaging (empty wine bottles) and secondary packaging (wooden boxes). The empty authentic bottles were gathered from restaurants and mainly managed by two individuals working in the food industry. The bottles were refilled with poor products from different origins, purchased online or at hard discount stores. Afterwards the bottles were refilled with cheap wines, sealed with corks and counterfeit capsules of a different or similar colour to the original. Packaging films and false masking guarantee seals were finally applied to conceal the lack of distinctive signs on the capsules used for the counterfeit units. Once a contact with a buyer was established via a big e-commerce platform, the counterfeiters expanded even further their promotional offers, setting prices way below the ones seen usually on the market. A magnum format (1.5 l) of some of the counterfeit wines typically exceeds € 1000 per bottle. The fraudulent products were sold as genuine in Italy and abroad. Therefore, a completely uncontrolled market, based on the absolute lack of traceability, was identified.



The Italian NAS Carabinieri of Florence, supported by Europol, took down the network of wine counterfeiters. Carabinieri carried out raids in eight Italian provinces. After the action day, an illegal storehouse, where the refilling activity was being performed, was found. Moreover:

- 15 house searches and 11 individual searches performed;
- 11 individuals reported to the Judicial Authority for participation in wine counterfeiting and food fraud;
- Almost 1,200 bottles seized (the most expensive one was a Bordeaux worth 4,200.00 euro).

## Portugal

The Economic and Food Safety Authority (ASAE) in Portugal, through the Southern Regional Unit, under the actions framed in OPSON IX, held on February 7 2020, a surveillance operation directed to an illegal warehouse with storage of Live Bivalve Molluscs (clams). The aim of the action was investigate food fraud, economically motivated adulteration, and also food safety requirements. As a result of the action, it was found that the warehouse had no licensing to clearance and storage activity or veterinary control number, resulting an administrative proceed for lack of licensing. Were also seized about 2 tonnes of “Japanese clams” without legal requirements, totalling € 12 000.00. Since they are Live Bivalve Molluscs resulting from harvesting in a forbidden area and thus considered as an unsafe product, the activity of those warehouse facilities was also suspended.

The operation had the collaboration of the Customs Authority (AT) and was also requested support from the Republican National Guard (GNR).

ASAE will continue to develop actions to verify compliance with legal obligations and ensure food safety and public health and combat fraudulent practices.





## South Africa

During the checks, the authorities seized more than 6,000 liters of alcohol transported by sea containers. The alcohol had foreign origin and most of the products were traditional Asian alcoholic beverages, which were intended for illegal importation into South Africa.



Alcoholic beverages of Asian origin

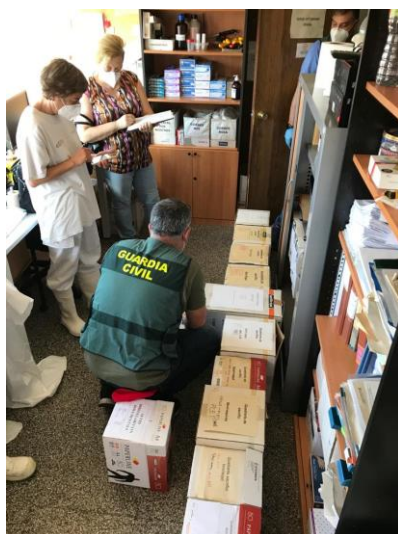
## Spain

### Operation Babieca18

During the period between May 2018 and January 2020, the SEPRONA of Barcelona carried out an investigation into a criminal organization that sold horsemeat not suitable for human consumption to those who their identification documentation was falsified and later introduced to the food chain, proceeding to the arrest of 17 targets and the investigation of another 13. The falsified equine passports are Spanish.

### Operation Bucefalo20

During the investigation of OPERATION BABIECA18, there were indications of another criminal organization that showed a similar modus operandi to the previous one that operated in a slaughterhouse closed to the one used by the organization dismantled in OPERATION BABIECA18. The passports used to enter the horses to slaughter illegally were both Spanish and from other countries of the European Union.



## 4. Intelligence and information gaps

In spite of valuable achievements and given the circumstances, areas for improvement remain and mostly relate to data reporting like in previous years. In addition, the disruptions created by the pandemic have generated information gaps, which need to be addressed in order to complete the picture regarding how the food supply chain was affected. Considering the last COVID 19 related events, their deep impact on the international economy and taking into the due account several indicators, Op. OPSON IX also played an important role to have a better understanding of the possible problems which could affect the genuine food supply chain. Europol and Interpol managed to develop predictive models with indicators of possible shortage of raw materials, whose production could have been compromised by the continuation of the current epidemiological situation.

The pandemic created critical shortages of basic necessities and other ones (e.g. maize, wheat, dairy products, rice, soybeans, sugar, tomatoes, vegetables). As block downs increased, there were seemingly countless ways the food system to be tested and strained in the coming weeks and months. For instance, agriculture experienced tough times due to the lack of workers, gathering fruit and vegetables in the fields. This generated a domino effect, with the later involvement of the food industry, especially for processed food. In lack of genuine raw material, whose cost raised a lot, dishonest producers used low quality or unsuitable ingredients. Consequence has been an increase of illegal, counterfeit and potentially unsafe food on the market.

## 5. Conclusions

OPSON IX generally reached the objectives established and removed from the consumption market important quantities of potentially dangerous foods and beverages, in the same time bringing to justice the persons proved to be involved in crimes and disrupting organized crime dealing with illicit foods and beverages. Please find several other conclusions below.

1. The disruption caused by the pandemic showed that opportunistic crime is ready to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of the regional and global supply chains and that contingency planning is of crucial importance in order for LEAs to respond in a timely manner.
2. Data reported during the operation points out that participating countries have different needs, which can potentially be better tackled by addressing food crime, illicit transportation routes, patterns and trends at regional level first, while still targeting global criminal connections and advancing international investigations.
3. During OPSON IX but also during previous editions, alcohol proved to be a highly targeted product for smuggling, adulteration and counterfeiting, and, in terms of food crime, it continues to be one of the main global threats to the health and life of the consumers, but also to the revenues of state budgets.
4. Seizures of potentially unsafe animal food have been a constant presence during previous OPSON editions, in rather insignificant quantities; however, OPSON IX showed a regional increase of such seizures, in Europe and this type of illicit products have the potential to affect the food supply chain.
5. The controls carried out regarding horse passports and in a wider sense the controls in meat processing factories, indicate a potentially wider problem, namely that meat which has no traceability is inserted into the supply chain, exposing the final consumers to serious health risks.
6. During OPSON IX, IPR crime related to food products affected mostly alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, condiments, additives/food supplements, but also meat and dairy, especially when these products were processed.

## 6. Closing points - Opson format

Since 2011, OPSON developed following the same structure with a common period of action for all countries, supported by operational centers at Europol and INTERPOL. This operational phase expanded from a week to four months and adapted during the 2020 edition in order to ensure flexibility and adjustments to the needs of the countries, international situation and other planned operational activities.

A new format for OPSON was proposed and discussed during the launch meeting of OPSON IX, keeping the operation global, but with a regional focus. This approach allows better establishment of international cooperation on a case-by-case basis with a stronger operational focus, especially in the context of online meeting tools that proved very efficient in coordinating information exchange.

In this regard, the initiatives adopted in different regions according to specific needs (local operational situation, seasons, religious holidays or other local specificities) coordinated at global level on an annual basis could improve the current format for an enhanced and more effective fight against food crime.

**Considering all the information above, the general assessment of OPSON is satisfactory, given the global context, and leads to the conclusion that the initiative should be continued, enhanced and fine-tuned in order to respond to the new realities while producing the best results possible.**

## 7. Annexes

**Annex 1:** Participating countries/agencies

**Annex 2:** Categories of products

**Annex 3:** INTERPOL/Europol Press release

**Annex 4:** Acronyms and Abbreviations

## *Annex 1: Participating countries/agencies*

The following agencies/administrations of each country participated in OPSON IX.

In total, this represented 77 countries.

<b><i>Countries/Institutions</i></b>	<b><i>Administrations/LEAs</i></b>
<b>European Member States/EU Institutions (Exchange of information via Europol)</b>	
Austria	Federal Police; Customs; Food Administration Vienna
Belgium	Customs; Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC)
Bulgaria	Ministry of Interior: General Directorate of the National Police; Customs; Bulgarian Food Safety Agency
Croatia	Customs
Cyprus	Health Services; Police
Czech Republic	Police; Customs, State Veterinary Administration; Czech Agriculture and Food Inspection Authority
Denmark	Veterinary and Food Administration
Estonia	Veterinary and Food Administration
Finland	Customs; Finish Food Safety Authority (EVIRA)
France	DNRED (Customs); Central Office for Coordinating Environment and Health Crime (OCLAESP – Police, Gendarmerie); Directorate for Competition; Consumption and Fraud Control (DGCCRF – Ministry of Finance); Food Directorate (Ministry of Agriculture).
Germany	Food Control Authorities of the Federal States of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Brandenburg, Hamburg, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, Rhineland-Palatinate and Schleswig-Holstein; Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA); Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL); Customs (ZKA); Friedrich-Loeffler - Institut (FLI) and the Max Rubner-Institut (MRI/NRZAuthent).
Greece	Financial Police Division - Hellenic Police, Economic and Financial Crime (SDOE); Directorate of Strategy for Customs Controls & Offences, Customs Services; General Chemical State Laboratory of Greece (GCSL);

	Hellenic Food Authority (EFET); Ministry of Rural Development and Food; Region of Attica – Directorate of Rural Economy, Veterinary Services & Fisheries; Directorates of Rural Economy and Veterinary Services – Regional Units of Greece
Hungary	National Tax and Customs Authorities (NAV); International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre (NEBEK)
Ireland	Food Safety Authority of Ireland; Customs; Police (An Garda Síochána), Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Italy	Arma dei Carabinieri (NAS); Guardia di Finanza; Guardia Costiera; Customs (Agenzia delle Dogane), ICQRF
Lithuania	Customs; State Food and Veterinary Service
The Netherlands	Dutch Food and Product Authority (NVWA)  Dutch Customs
Portugal	Customs and Tax Authority; Food and Economic Safety Agency (ASAE)
Romania	Police
Spain	Guardia Civil (Unidades de policía judicial, Servicio de protección de la naturaleza, costas y fronteras, Unidades de seguridad ciudadana); Policía Nacional; DAVA (Customs Unit); Regional Food Safety Agencies (Consejerías de Sanidad y de Alimentación de las Comunidades Autónomas).
United Kingdom	Intellectual Property Office (IPO); Food Standards Agency (FSA) – National Food Crime Unit; Food Standards Scotland – Food Crime and Incidents Unit; Welsh Food Fraud Coordination Unit; UK Port Health Authorities; Trading Standards Authorities (TSA); Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC); Police and Police Scotland; National Crime Agency (NCA); Border Force (UKBF);  Scottish Local Authority Environmental Health; Marine Scotland; Scottish Public Analysts; Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority; Immigration Enforcement
European Commission	European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), EUIPO, DG Sante
<b>Countries exchanging information via Europol (Operational agreements)</b>	
Norway	Customs; Norwegian Food Safety Authority



Switzerland	Customs; Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO)
United States of America	Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
<b>Countries exchanging of information via INTERPOL</b>	
Albania	Police
Angola	Police
Argentina	Police
Armenia	Police
Azerbaijan	Police
Belarus	Police; Customs
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Police
Brazil	Police
Burkina Faso	Police
Burundi	Police; Customs; Public Health; Bureau of Standards
Cambodia	Police
Cameroon	Police
Canada	Food Inspection Agency
Dominican Republic	Police
Ecuador	Police; Prosecution Office; Ministry of Public Health and Agriculture
Eritrea	Police; Customs; Directorate of Public Prosecutions
Eswatini	Police
Ethiopia	Police
Ghana	Police
India	Police
Indonesia	Police; Customs; National Agency of Food and Drug Control (NAFDC)

Jordan	Police; Customs; Jordan Food and Drug Administration
Kazakhstan	Police
Kenya	Police; Customs; Kenya Bureau of Standards; Anti-counterfeiting Agency; Pharmacy and poison board; Office of the director of public prosecution; National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Drugs Abuse
Korea	Korean National Police Agency; Ministry of Food and Drug Safety
Kyrgyzstan	Police
Lesotho	Police
Mexico	Police
Moldova (Republic of)	International Police Cooperation Centre, General Police Inspectorate; General Inspectorate of Border Police; Customs Service; National Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Moldova
Montenegro – ME	Police; Customs
Namibia	Police
Nigeria – NG	National Agency for Food and Drug Administration (NAFDAC)
North Macedonia (Republic of)	Customs
Pakistan	Police
Paraguay	Police
Peru – PE	Police; Customs, Tax Administration; Immigration
Philippines	Police
Russia – RU	Police
Rwanda – RW	Police; Customs; Bureau of Standards; Ministry of Health and Agriculture
Seychelles	Police
Serbia	Customs
Sierra Leone	Police

Singapore	Police
South Africa	Police
South Sudan	Police
Tanzania	Police; Customs; Tanzania Food Drug Authority; Tanzania Bureau of Standards; Director of Public Prosecutions; Fair Competition Commission
Togo	Police; Customs; Ministry of Agriculture department
Uganda	Police
Uruguay	Police
Uzbekistan	Police
Vietnam	Police; Customs; Ministry of Public Health; Local Police forces (according to their provincial plan)
Zambia	Police; Public Health Department of Lusaka City Council; Food and Drug Laboratory, Ministry of Health; Zambia Bureau of Standard
Zimbabwe	Police

## Annex 2: Categories of products

<b>Name of Category</b>	<b>Examples of contents reported</b>
Alcoholic beverages	Branded and unbranded wine, whiskey, vodka, rum, wine, cognac, beer, brandy, tequila, home/locally made brews, ethyl alcohol and unspecified/unknown alcohol/spirits
Cereals, grains and derived products	Various types of flour and bread, wheat, rice, corn, couscous, pastries, noodle, spaghetti and other unspecified and processed cereals
Coffee/tea	Various types of coffee beans and mixed minced coffee, black tea, green tea, flower and herbal tea.
Condiments	Unspecified sauces, grape vinegar, yeast, various types of sault, tomato, mustard, chili sauces, pepper, saffron, spices and (raw) seasoning mixtures, unspecified spices and condiments, traditional condiment mixtures, excluding cooking oil.
Cooking oil	Olive oil, pomace olive oil, vegetal oil, cotton oil, sunflower oil, unspecified cooking oil, oil fat spread, lampante oil.
Dairy	Different types of milk and cheese, cheese cream, milk, milk cream, milk powder, yogurt, unspecified dairy products, baby formula.
Eggs	Unspecified eggs
Food Supplements/additives	Unspecified supplements and capsules, slimming syrup, herbal supplements, food glue, unspecified nutrition products, protein powder, food dye, flavoring
Fruits/Vegetables/Legumes	Apples, bananas, beans, citrus fruits, onions, cucumber, solanum macrocarpum, olives, pumpkin, cantaloupe, dates, figs, grapes, passion fruits, hibiscus, potatoes, various types of nuts, mushrooms, tomatoes, peppers, sunflower seeds, garlic, apricot kernels, cabbage, peaches, unspecified (mixed) vegetables, other legumes and fruits.
Meat and meat products	Chicken, duck, various frozen meat, frozen chicken mechanically separated, halal chicken, ham, turkey, lamb, pork, goat, lamb, internal organs, salami and sausages, mixed minced/cured meat, meat for kebab, unspecified meat and meat products.
Non-alcoholic beverages	Branded juice, energy drinks, mineral water, soda, fruit juices, fruit tea, fruit cocktail, guava juice, honey drinks and unspecified juice.
Seafood	Various types of fish (salmon, tuna, mackerel, bass, cod, blue cod, pacific cod, sole, kingfish, plaice, sole, sardines), bivalve mollusks, abalone, bivalve mollusks, unspecified fish and seafood.
Mixed products/Other	Mixed packed food products, unidentified finished products and raw materials for food production, various canned food, rice, flower, candies, meat products, alcoholic and non/alcoholic drinks, dairy, olive oil, powder milk, noodles, seafood, packed food, pickles, various fruits and vegetables.
SIDE SEIZURES	Medicines, testing kits for COVID-19, cigarettes, shoes, car spare parts, cosmetics, clothing, electronics, cleaning products, kitchen knives, unspecified non-food items.
Sugar and sweet products	Sugar, honey, various fruit based/candies, chewing gum, chocolate, biscuits, various fruit jams assorted sweets and cakes, lokum confectionary, chocolate spread, cotton candy, sugar syrups, confectionary, unspecified sweets.

## *Annex 3: Press releases*

### *a. INTERPOL press release<sup>10</sup>*

22 July 2020

Thousands of tonnes of fake food and drink seized during Operation OPSON IX

LYON, France – More than USD 40 million worth of potentially dangerous fake food and drink was seized in the latest Operation OPSON, which also saw the disruption of 19 organized crime groups and the arrest of 407 individuals worldwide.

Among the items discovered were dairy products contaminated with bacteria, meat from illegally slaughtered animals and food products falsely labelled as medicinal cures.

In Bulgaria, an investigation by the police and Food Safety Agency into an unregistered warehouse uncovered cheese which tested positive for E.coli bacteria. Some 3.6 tonnes of unsafe dairy products set to be processed into cheese were seized and destroyed.

Operation OPSON IX, coordinated by INTERPOL and Europol, saw more than 12,000 tonnes of illegal and potentially harmful items recovered from shops, markets and during transport checks. Police, customs, national food regulatory authorities and private sector partners in 77 countries took part in the operation which ran from December 2019 through June 2020.

During checks conducted in Jordan, authorities seized some 2,000 litres of expired energy drinks and 4,500 litres of expired soda. More than 7 tonnes of rotten milk and cheese were also seized in the country.

#### COVID-19 pandemic links

Highlighting the criminal links between different types of counterfeit items, authorities also discovered thousands of fake medical products, including disinfectants and some 17,000 false COVID-19 testing kits.

In fact, the operation demonstrated how global distribution routes, both legal and illegal, have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Seizures of expired food items or where the expiry dates had been altered were significantly higher than during previous OPSON operations – possibly a sign of criminals capitalizing on the disruption of food supply chains caused by national lockdowns.

“As countries around the world continue their efforts to contain COVID-19, the criminal networks distributing these potentially dangerous products show only their determination to make a profit,” said INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock.

“The scale and variety of food and drink seized during this operation serves as a reminder for members of the public to be vigilant about what they buy, and the need for continued vigilance and action by law enforcement,” added the INTERPOL Chief.

Other frauds connected to the pandemic were discovered, including a shipment of seafood seized in South Africa and originating from Asia which was falsely declared as personal protective equipment.

#### Adulterated alcohol and illegal meat

As in past operations, counterfeit and adulterated alcohol continued to be a global concern. More than USD 20 million worth of illicit alcoholic beverages were taken out of circulation, including 5,000 litres of vodka smuggled in a trailer in Norway.

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<sup>10</sup> Please also see the press release here: <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Food-fraud-in-times-of-COVID-19>

Catherine De Bolle, Europol's Executive Director, highlighted that: "In times of crises, criminals always look for new ways to abuse consumers and increase their illegal profit to the harm of public safety. Counterfeit and substandard food is not only deceitful to consumers but can also pose a significant threat to their health. Our annual Operation OPSON shows in its ninth year that cooperation between law enforcement, regulatory authorities and the private sector is crucial to protect both consumers and businesses from the harm criminals try to put on our plates."

At more than 5,000 tonnes, animal products were the top seizures during this year's OPSON operation. A new trend discovered in Europe was the falsification of horse 'passports': in one case, horses transported into Italy using fake documents claiming they were to take place in sports competitions were in fact sent to a slaughterhouse.

In addition to the fake food and drink, other illicit products recovered included cosmetics, footwear, clothing, handbags, car parts, electronics, tobacco and medicines, worth an estimated USD 3.1 million."

## *b. Europol press release*

22 July 2020

320 tonnes of potentially dangerous dairy products taken off the market in operation OPSON IX targeting food fraud

Animal food and alcoholic beverages are the most seized products

Europol and INTERPOL coordinated operation OPSON 2020 which targeted trafficking of counterfeit and substandard food and beverages. The ninth operation of its kind, it ran from December 2019 to June 2020 and involved law enforcement authorities from 83\* countries and was also supported by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Commission, the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), national food regulatory authorities and private sector partners.

Counterfeit and substandard food and beverages can be found on the shelves in shops around the world. The increasing online sale of such potentially dangerous products poses a significant threat to public health. Operation OPSON was created to combat organised crime involved in this area. This year's operational activities have found a new disturbing trend to address: the infiltration of low-quality products into the supply chain, a development possibly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Condiments also a highly counterfeited product

This year's operation OPSON led to the dismantling of 19 organised crime groups involved in food fraud and the arrests of 406 suspects. More than 26 000 checks were performed. As a result, about 12 000 tonnes of illegal and potentially harmful products worth about €28 million were seized. With more than 5 000 tonnes seized, animal food was the most seized product, followed by alcoholic beverages (more than 2 000 tonnes), cereals, grains and derived products, coffee and tea and condiments. Large amounts of saffron were seized: 90kg in Spain and 7kg in Belgium with an estimated value of more than €306 000. The US authorities seized 147kg of raw apricot kernel seeds sold as a cure for cancer. (...)



#### *Annex 4: Acronyms and Abbreviations*

<b>Acronyms</b>	
EU MS	European Union Member State
IPR	Intellectual Property Right
LEA	Law Enforcement Agency
NPoC	National Point of Contact
OCG	Organized Criminal Group
<b>Organizations and Institutions</b>	
EU	European Union
EU COM	European Commission
EUIPO	European Union Intellectual Property Office
DG SANTÉ	Directorate General Health & Consumers
INTERPOL IGGH	INTERPOL Illicit Goods and Global Health Programme
NCB	INTERPOL National Central Bureau