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 ***News Release***

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**Ringleader of cigarette smuggling gang jailed**

The ringleader of a smuggling gang caught with more than nine million illegal cigarettes and £356,185 in cash has been jailed.

Oleg Cretu, 37, of Agnes Road in Northampton, was investigated by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) after the cigarettes and used bank notes were discovered during a search of an industrial unit in September 2018.

HMRC officers seized the money and 9,510,360 mixed branded cigarettes worth £3.4 million in unpaid duty from the unit in Wellingborough, which was rented by Cretu.

Cretu, along with Daniel Pascaru of London, Sebastian Hanczur of Dorset and Alan Ali of Derby, used a nearby car park as a base to meet customers and take payment, before collecting goods from the unit.

Simon Kiefer, Assistant Director, Fraud Investigation Service, HMRC, said:

“The gang, led by Cretu, was aiming to undercut legitimate retailers with this large quantity of smuggled cigarettes. Cretu thought his scam would go unnoticed and he could flood the UK streets with millions of pounds worth of illegal goods, but he was wrong.

“The money they pocketed was equivalent to the salaries of 167 trainee firefighters in the East Midlands.

“Disrupting criminal trade is at the heart of our strategy to clampdown on the illicit tobacco market. This is theft from the taxpayer, denying public services much needed money. We urge anyone with information about this, or any other tax fraud, to contact HMRC online or call our Fraud Hotline on 0800 788 887.”

The gang’s scam came undone after they were caught acting suspiciously in the car park. The gang led officers to the unit full of cigarettes and cash, hidden in cupboards and carrier bags.

They would meet customers in the cark park, take payment and leave the buyer waiting while they collected the goods. This was done in a bid to keep the location of the unit secret.

Investigators believe Cretu orchestrated the scam, Hanczur and Pascaru acted as the link between buyers and suppliers, and Ali was involved in laundering the money.

The men plead guilty during a hearing at Northampton Crown Court on 3 June 2019. Cretu was sentenced to 38 months in prison, at the same court yesterday (26 June).

The remaining gang members were also convicted for their roles in the fraud:

* Pascaru was sentenced to 32 months in prison
* Ali was sentenced to 16 months in prison
* Hanczur was sentenced to a 15-month community order, 200 hours unpaid work and ordered to pay costs of £1,200.

‎**Notes for editors**

1. Oleg Cretu. DOB: 14/04/1982 of Primrose Hill Church, Agnes Road in Northampton, was charged with acquiring possession of dutiable goods with fraudulent intent and possessing criminal property.
2. Daniel Pascaru. DOB: 19/01/1982 of Tanfield Avenue, London, was charged with acquiring possession of dutiable goods with fraudulent intent and possessing criminal property.
3. Sebastian Hanczur. DOB: 06/01/1978 of Burlington Road, Swanage in Dorset, was charged with acquiring possession of dutiable goods with fraudulent intent and possessing criminal property.
4. Alan Ali. DOB: 20/08/1982 of Warner Street in Derby, was charged with fraudulent evasion of a provision and entering into or becoming concerned in a money laundering arrangement.
5. The starting salary for a trainee firefighter in the East Midlands is £22,459.When full competence is achieved, this rises to £29,934. <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/firefighter>
6. Follow HMRC's Press Office on Twitter @HMRCpressoffice

**Issued by HM Revenue & Customs Press Office**

**Press enquiries only please contact:**

Ashleigh Prince

Tel: 03000 598834 / 07825 026303

Email: Ashleigh.prince@hmrc.gov.uk

Or

Jemma Smith

Tel: 03000 520184 / 07741 615562

Email: Jemma.smith@hmrc.gov.uk

Out of hours

Tel: 07860 359544