

On the black market of cigarettes in Serbia, among the most present brands are “Marble” and “Ashima”, made in the factories of Chinese companies, the research of Radio Free Europe (RFE) showed.

According to the Customs Administration, Serbia is mostly a transit country, while most cigarettes are intended for the European Union market.

Those who stay in Serbia end up mostly in the markets. A journalist from Radio Free Europe bought illegally imported Chinese “Marble” cigarettes in just a few seconds at the Belgrade flea market.

This was preceded by a telephone deal with the person selling the cigarettes. The number was obtained after inquiring about cigarettes in the market. On that occasion, it was explained to the RFE journalist that the minimum for buying is a box with ten packs. The price of a pack of Chinese cigarettes without an excise stamp is 1.7 euros, while the cheapest cigarettes in legal sale cost almost a euro more.

This is probably the reason why “Marble” and “Ashima”, another Chinese brand, are the most present brands on the gray cigarette market in Serbia.

Data sent by the Serbian Ministry of the Interior (MUP) to Radio Free Europe show that more than 712,000 boxes of smuggled cigarettes have been seized in the past five years. Among the individual brands, Chinese cigarettes dominate – “Ashima” with more than 160,000 confiscated boxes and “Marble” with over 156,000 boxes. In total, these two Chinese brands make up 44 percent of the cigarettes seized by the Interior Ministry.

In the past five years, the Serbian Customs Administration has seized more than 14 million cigarettes “Marble” and “Ashima” at the borders, worth nearly 1.2 million euros, according to data provided by Customs to Radio Free Europe.

“Brands such as ‘Ashima’ and ‘Marble’, which are the most present today, mostly come from Romania, Northern Macedonia and Montenegro,” Olivera Radovanovic from the Customs Administration told RFE / RL.

The Marble and Ashima brands are produced by the Chinese company Hongta Tobacco. Information about them is very scarce, so much so that even the company’s official website cannot be opened.

According to available data, it is a Chinese state-owned company, founded in 1995 in the city of Jusi, in the province of Yunnan, in southwest China.

Cigarettes with that label are available on the gray market of Serbia.

The Serbian Customs Administration says that Chinese cigarettes are smuggled in all means of transport on the way to the gray market.

“Larger loads are usually hidden in trucks, trains, buses, tanks, in a specially modified double bottom or vehicle bunkers, while smaller quantities that we find usually in passenger vehicles are hidden in the factory cavities of vehicles,” explains Olivera Radovanovic.

The Customs Administration often publishes recordings of the seizure of smuggled

cigarettes on its social media accounts. One of the most recent dates is from September 2021, when customs officers discovered 500 boxes of “Ashima” cigarettes hidden in one of the gasoline tanks on the ship near Kladovo, on the border with Romania.

Kladovo, a city in eastern Serbia, about 250 kilometers from Belgrade, is one of the transit points for smuggling Chinese cigarettes.

The Romanian Border Police told Radio Free Europe that from 2016 to 2020, they seized 14.3 million cigarettes on the border with Serbia, dominated by Chinese brands.

“In most cases, smuggled cigarettes were found both at the border crossings, hidden in vehicles, and in the area of jurisdiction, on communication routes near the border. They are bought without legal documents, with the intention of being placed on the domestic market. Most of the smuggled cigarettes found were without a stamp or with a Serbian stamp, with the brands ‘Marble’, ‘Fast’ and ‘Ashima’ dominating,” the Romanian Border Police said in a written response.

The Serbian Customs Administration states that illegal cigarettes mostly arrive by ship to ports in Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia.

“Cigarettes reach those ports by ship containers, mostly on the basis of falsified documentation. Allegedly, a legal entity from the United Arab Emirates sells goods to end customers, which is transported further to the countries of the European Union. There, they are reloaded on road vehicles and further transported by road to the final destination,” says Olivera Radovanović.

The smuggling route from Montenegro is especially important for Serbia, a country which, like Serbia, is part of the international Chinese initiative “Belt and Road”. The importance of that route is also indicated by the police data on cigarette seizures for 2020, which is pointed out by Sasa Djordjevic from the non-governmental Global Initiative for the Fight against Transnational Organized Crime.

“Almost a third was seized in the area of Kraljevo, and then in Novi Pazar. Both places are part of smuggling routes from Montenegro. By the way, in 2020, over 60,000 boxes were seized, which is some 34,000 less than in 2019,” says Djordjevic.

In June 2017, Serbia acceded to the United Nations Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, committing the authorities to increase efficiency in eliminating all forms of illicit trade in cigarettes and tobacco.

According to a survey by the Serbian Institute of Public Health, almost 38 percent of adults are smokers.

The average smoker in Serbia spends about 730 euros a year on cigarettes.

The total share of consumption of smuggled cigarettes is 2.4 percent of the total market of manufactured cigarettes, Danas reports.