

Neues Deutschland, 21st October 2014

Invited by Big Tobacco

By Robert Schmidt

A meeting addressing cigarette smuggling, which was co-financed by the tobacco industry, is being criticized by anti-tobacco experts.

“Illicit cigarette trade and organized crime – prevention and combating in Germany and Europe”: the title of the two-day conference, which took place at the Europäische Akademie Berlin (European Academy Berlin), sounded ambitious. And the guest list, too, was illustrious: Among the participants were customs and police officials as well as politicians, even the federal Ministry of Finance had sent their representatives. However, much more interesting than the guest list was the list of sponsors. Among them: the world’s biggest tobacco company, Philip Morris.

Johannes Spatz, spokesman of the anti- tobacco organization Forum Rauchfrei found drastic words for this: “Philip Morris subverts the combat against illicit cigarette trade” is to be read in a statement of his organization. For years the company had been ensuring itself “opportunities to influence the combat against the illicit trade with cigarettes,” says Spatz. Berlin-based Forum Rauchfrei therefore called for a boycott of the meeting.

How deep Philip Morris dug in its pockets for this sponsoring is not known. But it is clear from a historical view on cigarette smuggling that such an exertion of influence is highly problematic. Notably Philip Morris has been actively involved in smuggling over decades. According to German authorities the company supplied large quantities of cigarettes especially produced for smuggling until at least up to the year 2002. But in the 2000s and until today, too, Philip Morris and the three other biggest tobacco companies worldwide (Japan Tobacco, British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco) have been frequently accused of participating in smuggling activities. With their massive surplus production in countries, which are difficult to control, as Ukraine or the United Arab Emirates, they have laid the foundations for the bigger part of today’s tobacco smuggling, as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the British customs authorities criticize.

Consequentially several conflicts of interest turned up in the meeting’s agenda: for example, with European Parliament member Joachim Zeller (Christian Democrats) an opponent of stricter regulations for health warnings on cigarette packs was present. In 2004 Philip Morris – and later on the other three major tobacco companies – had signed an agreement with the EU, in which the companies consented to pay the total amount of two billion Euros to EU-members, and these for their part refrained from suing the companies for participating in smuggling activities. Piquant detail: part of the money is being used for activities of OLAF, EU’s anti-fraud office, against cigarette smuggling. Since then OLAF, once an outspoken opponent of the cigarette industry, hardly ever informs about the companies’ entanglements in smuggling.

Another example is Interpol. The international police organization, which also was represented at the meeting, has for years been allowing conferences to be co-financed by

Philip Morris, as became known in 2013. In 2012 the organization even accepted a cheque from Philip Morris for 15 million Euros. Today Interpol openly speaks out for an industry-oriented control of cigarette transportation.

However, such closeness to the tobacco industry may take its toll, as Interpol experienced in the middle of this month in Moscow. At the conference of WHO countries on tobacco control Interpol was denied an observer status – a worldwide unparalleled event and a decisive warning shot.