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ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF *THE GUARDIA DI FINANZA* IN EFFORTS TO COMBAT COUNTERFEITING

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ABSTRACT

The Guardia di Finanza is an Italian police force specialized in combating economic and financial crime. This contribution outlines the role, functions and strategic objectives of the Guardia di Finanza, with a focus on preventing and combating crimes related to intellectual property (IP) and counterfeiting. *The Guardia di Finanza* takes a cross-cutting approach in its efforts to combat counterfeiting, combining enforcement, technology, monitoring and stakeholder engagement. Two key instruments in those efforts are (i) the Anti-Counterfeiting Information System (*Sistema Informativo Anti-Contraffazione*, SIAC), which enables IP rights holders and officers to work together in gathering evidence of counterfeiting, and (ii) the European Union (EU) Safety Gate system, which helps European law enforcement agencies to cooperate in order to remove unsafe products, usually counterfeits, from the market.

* The views expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Secretariat or of the Member States of WIPO.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. *The Guardia di Finanza* is a military, economic and financial police force that acts under the supervision of the Italian Ministry of the Economy and Finance. It employs nearly 64,000 personnel in local and specialized units across the country. Its mission is threefold:

- to combat tax evasion and excise duties fraud, with a focus on the smuggling of tobacco, through tax audits and judicial police investigations;
- to fight against public expenditure offences, by conducting judicial police investigations and other actions to prevent and prosecute cases of misappropriation and embezzlement of public monies; and
- to combat economic and financial crime, through inspections and investigations of suspicious transactions designed to prevent and combat money laundering and terrorist financing; controls on cross-border currency movements; recovery of organized crime assets; investigations into bankruptcy, financial offences and international drug trafficking; and, most notably, action directed against counterfeiting and the sale of unsafe and dangerous products.

II. METHODOLOGY

2. Counterfeiting is a pervasive threat. It undercuts competition and the efforts of those who invest in research, innovation and creativity; it thwarts trade by undermining brand reputation, client trust and consumer safety; and, more broadly, it has an adverse impact on the labor market and the environment.

3. Efforts to combat counterfeiting, therefore, require a cross-cutting approach, combining enforcement, technology, monitoring and stakeholder engagement. Counterfeiters constantly change their tactics, so the problem cannot be solved by working in silos. Rather, there is a need, among other things, to adopt a “follow the money” approach to seize illicit gains. In counterfeiting cases, *the Guardia di Finanza* traces financial flows and economic processes to the source by analyzing invoices, bank accounts, and online marketplaces and digital platforms, where counterfeit products are often sold.

III. FIGURES

4. Between January 2024 and May 2025, *the Guardia di Finanza* seized assets of more than US\$1.6 billion and confiscated a further US\$1.7 billion worth (seizure is a provisional precautionary measure, while confiscation is definitive and results in the return of the asset to the State’s patrimony). Those figures refer only to organized crime assets and do not take into account specific illicit actions.

5. In the same period, with regard to intellectual property rights (IPRs) and consumer safety, more than US\$15 million in counterfeit or unsafe items were seized and more than 77,000 websites used to trade counterfeit products were blocked or shut down. In addition, more than 2,200 tonnes of tobacco and cigarettes and more than 40 tonnes of drugs were seized either at the border in conjunction with Customs or elsewhere throughout the country.

IV. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

6. Counterfeiting affects world trade and efforts to combat it are not confined to Italy but necessarily global. International cooperation with a network of officials operating in countries considered to be strategic partners is therefore key to the force's cross-cutting approach. It also works closely with international and European cooperation bodies, such as INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization (WCO), Europol, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). *The Guardia di Finanza* also leverages the capabilities of its Financial Intelligence Units and Asset Recovery Office when dealing with money laundering and other financial crimes.

7. *The Guardia di Finanza* also participates in operations organized under the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), for which economic and financial crimes (VAT fraud, excise and customs fraud, IP crime, and counterfeiting of goods and currencies) are priorities for the 2026-2029 cycle. In that context, *the Guardia di Finanza* is driving the operational action plan on "IP crime, and counterfeiting of goods and currencies", setting the operational framework for tackling such crime at the international level.

V. BEST PRACTICES

8. For *the Guardia di Finanza*, two best practices are highly pertinent to discussions at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Advisory Committee on Enforcement (ACE):

- (i) Stakeholder engagement, in particular cooperation between the Guardia di Finanza and IP rights holders, is facilitated by the Anti-Counterfeiting Information System (*Sistema Informativo Anti-Contraffazione*, SIAC). Private sector stakeholders can register themselves on this free online platform as the owners of any type of IP asset and upload any information they deem useful to address the counterfeiting of their products, including reports on specific violations. After careful analysis, those reports are forwarded to territorial units for on-the-ground investigations, which can lead to administrative fines or criminal proceedings, depending on the specific counterfeiting offense. The results of those investigations are eventually uploaded to the platform and can be downloaded by each concerned stakeholder as part of a quarterly report. To date, more than 880 brands have been registered with SIAC, which is widely recognized as an effective anti-counterfeiting tool by national and international stakeholders. Foreign brands also rely on the platform, which is maintained in five languages (Italian, English, French, German and Spanish).
- (ii) The European Union (EU) Safety Gate system enables the rapid exchange of information among EU Member States, disseminating key details identifying unsafe products, most of them counterfeit and posing a serious risk to consumers' health. The aim of the system is to facilitate the withdrawal of dangerous products from the EU internal market. In the period 2023–2024, the Guardia di Finanza uploaded to the system more than 2,000 notifications relating to the seizure of some 540,000 products (mostly cosmetics and toys) all over Italy that were deemed a serious threat to human health, as they contained prohibited substances.

VI. CONCLUSION

9. According to the latest report by the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the trade in counterfeit goods in the EU market alone is worth US\$117 billion. Given the deeply rooted interests involved and the complexity of enforcement, *the Guardia di Finanza's* multi-faceted approach is designed to encourage the broadest possible collaboration with private sector stakeholders and European and other international partners. The force believes that both forms of collaboration bring real added value to any dynamic anti-counterfeiting strategy.

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