

# Counterfeiting Goods and Digital Piracy as a Threat to Internal Security

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**Aim:** The aim is to demonstrate the impact of intellectual property (IP) crimes on the security of the European Union (EU). The relevance of the topic is ensured by the European Commission's recent initiative, 'ProtectEU', introduced in April 2025, which focuses on strengthening the EU's internal security. This strategy relies heavily on the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA), which mentions the phenomenon but does not rank it among the most significant threats.

**Methodology:** This research systematically collects, analyses and evaluates reports and studies from the relevant international literature, including comprehensive statistics and reports published by the EU or international organisations. The study applies the Copenhagen School's sectoral security theory to demonstrate the danger posed by counterfeit goods and digital piracy to the EU's internal security. Through a review of the military, political, economic, societal, environmental, and information technology sectors, the research highlights the importance of addressing this phenomenon, using available literature, reports and comprehensive studies.

**Conclusions:** The EU authorities are continuously working to combat counterfeit goods and digital piracy, and their results demonstrate the effectiveness of their joint efforts. For example, in 2024, the authorities seized or detained 112 million counterfeit products, with an estimated value of over €3.8 billion. These seizures, along with those from previous years, provide a valuable opportunity to demonstrate and prove the threat that counterfeiting poses to various security sectors, and to highlight the crucial role that EU authorities play in combating this phenomenon.

Notably, as a result of the policymakers' decision, IP crime as a sub-priority will be part of the next European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) political cycle from 2026 to 2029, which is a crucial step in the fight against counterfeit goods and digital piracy. The goal of the IP enforcement

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community should be to guarantee that measures to combat IP crime are also included in the EU's internal security strategy, ensuring that the fight against this phenomenon receives the highest priority at the highest EU level.

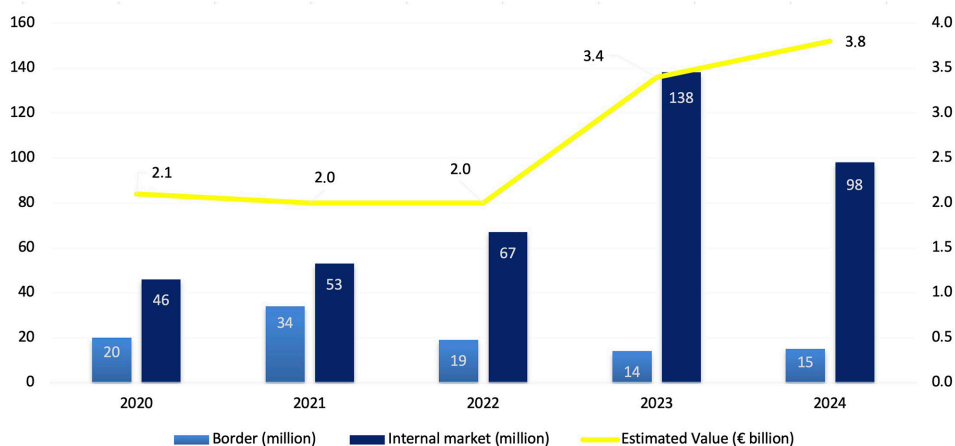
**Keywords:** polycriminality, intellectual property rights, EUIPO, security, cooperation, EMPACT

## Introduction

The European Commission (Commission) presented its new European internal security strategy, ProtectEU, in April 2025 (European Commission 2025a). The initiative aims to enhance the ability of Member States to effectively protect European societies and democracies from both online and traditional offline threats. The Commission based its strategic measures on the strategic report compiled by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol). The latest edition of this report, also known as the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA), was presented on 18 March 2025 at a press conference (Europol 2025). As a member of the intellectual property (IP) enforcement community and a PhD student researching the topic, this raised further research questions concerning internal security in my field, as the EU-SOCTA identified the following priority crimes and threats: cyberattacks, online fraud, (online) child sexual exploitation, migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, firearms trafficking and illicit trafficking of waste. Although the assessment includes a description of counterfeiting and digital piracy, this prompted the inclusion of the security–counterfeiting nexus as a dedicated subject of analysis. This article is the first step in this research process, and I hope that by the end of this journey, I will be able to prove my hypothesis, which states that intellectual property rights (IPRs) violations pose a threat to the security of the European Union (EU) in a credible and scientifically sound manner.

## A brief overview of the phenomenon

Recent reports also indicate that counterfeiting remains a globally present and dangerous phenomenon. According to the joint report of the Commission and the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), the year 2023 saw a significant increase in the number of infringing goods, with a nearly twofold increase compared to previous years, exceeding 152 million pieces (European Commission – EUIPO 2025). Even though there was a decrease in the quantity of seized goods – 112 million pieces – in 2024, their estimated value significantly increased, reaching approximately 3.8 billion euros – indicated in purple in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Quantities of counterfeit goods seized/detained in EU countries (2024)*  
 Source: European Commission – EUIPO 2025

The periodic joint study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EUIPO (OECD – EUIPO 2025) also reports a certain increase. Although in 2021, only 2.3% of global trade was estimated to be affected by counterfeiting – compared to 2.5% in 2019 – the absolute value of counterfeit goods in global trade increased from 464 billion U.S. dollars in 2019 to 467 billion U.S. dollars in 2021. A similar trend can be observed in the EU, where the volume of counterfeit products is decreasing, but their value is increasing, which is in line with the year 2024 shown in the graph above.

This study does not attempt to explore the causes of these changes, but it can be assumed that significant events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the resulting changes in the global supply and trade chains, and the inclusion of IP crimes in the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) priorities for the 2022–2025 cycle contributed to the emergence of the aforementioned situation.

## Security

Currently, there is no definition of security that enjoys consensual acceptance in terms of content and across different eras. In everyday life, security and protection are often used synonymously, as the relationship between these concepts is complex and cannot be examined separately. Security itself has a broader scope and includes protection as a part of it (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018). In my research, I would like to draw on the expanded version of security developed by the Copenhagen School, which has been known since the 1980s. According to the members and leader of the school, Barry Buzan, the new security

challenges arising from the changing international situation require a broader approach, and therefore, the security issue is projected onto five separate sectors as follows:

- Military sector
- Political sector
- Economic sector
- Societal sector
- Environmental sector

Given that nearly half a century has passed, and humanity is once again facing new types of challenges, it is necessary to introduce a sixth sector into the theory, in the form of information technology (IT).

### Economic security

“The fight against counterfeiting is particularly justified. The magnitude of the problem can be seen from the global report of the World Customs Organisation (WCO), as well as from the studies prepared by the EUIPO, regarding the various forms of potential threats to human life and health, as well as the estimated magnitude of economic damage (BAKAI–CSIKI 2025).”

To understand the estimated possible economic damage, the joint report of the European Patent Office (EPO) and the EUIPO (EUIPO–EPO 2022) can help assess the impact of counterfeiting on the economy, particularly through the EU’s IPR-intensive industries and economy. According to the report, between 2017 and 2019 these industries provided 29.7% of all jobs – 61 million – and accounted for 47.1% of the EU’s total economic activity (GDP), which is equivalent to approximately €6.4 trillion. An additional 20 million jobs are indirectly related to the sector.

Furthermore, the presence of counterfeit products on the market jeopardises the future and existing investments of legitimate market participants, as well as the positive reputation built up by reliable, high-quality products. Decreasing investments and decreasing jobs both have a negative impact on people, the member states, and the EU’s economy as a whole, as well as on innovation.

Economic security has two aspects: operational and developmental. While the former focuses on daily operations and task performance, the latter focuses on economic growth and continuous improvement of the quality of life of society (TAKSÁS 2025). Therefore, based on the above, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of counterfeiting threatens security in terms of economic stability, growth and development.

## Environmental security

“In the environmental sector, it is clear that environmental pollution, climate change, the reckless use of resources, and the resulting unfavourable changes can pose a security challenge” (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018: 23).

The issue of counterfeit plant protection products (PPPs) clearly illustrates why counterfeiting poses a threat to the environmental dimension. It is essential to note that not only the use but also the production of these counterfeit products can cause significant environmental problems, as the perpetrators often do not comply with health and safety and environmental protection regulations, and may use unknown, hazardous, unauthorised or untested substances.

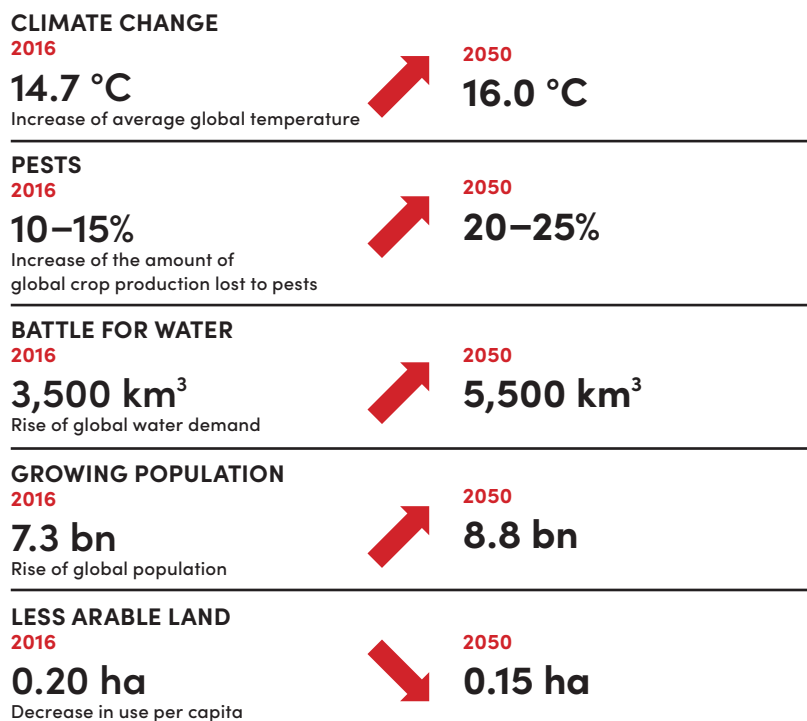
The use of these counterfeit and prohibited PPPs can threaten multiple areas at the same time. On the one hand, it threatens consumers who are at the end of the food supply chain, and on the other hand, it threatens agricultural land and both surface and ground-water resources. Furthermore, it also poses a risk to farmers who come into contact with these chemicals, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of this issue.

The severity of the problem caused by this phenomenon is well illustrated by the fact that it is specifically mentioned in the aforementioned EU-SOCTA report. Although it is not part of the EMPACT operational action plan (OAP), the authorities have recognised the magnitude of the problem. Europol has been organising international law enforcement operations under the code name Silver Axe for years to address this issue effectively.



*Figure 2: Quantity of illegal PPPs seized during the 2019 operation*  
Source: Europol 2019

The image above illustrates the results of Operation Silver Axe IV in a visual form. During the 2019 operation, thanks to the dedicated work of the participating authorities, 550 tons of illegal and counterfeit products were seized from the market. This volume would be sufficient to treat 49,000 square kilometres, which is equivalent to the entire area of Estonia.



*Figure 3: Expected outlook for 2050*  
 Source: Euroseeds 2019

Coordinated action is particularly important, as stated by Catherine De Bolle, the Executive Director of Europol: “With operation Silver Axe, Europol underlines that the public’s health and safety comes first. It is of critical importance that we team up with our partners to tackle these types of crimes together head on and bring those who are responsible to justice” (Europol 2019). The authorities continued to organise and execute operations, and as a result, after the eighth operation, a total of approximately 7,000 tons of products were seized.

To gain a broader understanding of the environmental dimension, I consider it justified to provide a brief overview of the problems related to plant variety protection. Based on current trends and the latest projections, it is estimated that by 2050, the global population will reach nearly 9 billion people, which means that we will have to feed this many people. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop agriculture, which requires investment and research, and to strive for the most efficient use of available environmental resources.

As conditions continue to evolve unfavourably, as shown in the figure below, this domain is expected to gain further importance. Plant variety right (PVR) is a form of IPR that provides protection for investors in this field. This involves long-term development and return on investment, which can take up to 15 years to achieve a suitable – adaptable to desired environmental conditions (e.g. drought-tolerant) and high-yielding – crop.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that counterfeiting poses a significant threat to our environment and food supply. Moreover, there is also a notable overlap with the societal dimension. If we fail to ensure access to basic necessities like food and drinking water, it can seriously damage social cohesion, solidarity, shared values, and self-determination.

## Social security

“The examination of this aspect deals with how to maintain language, culture, religious and national identity, as well as accepted forms of social norms, under acceptable development conditions. In the social sector, the goal is to preserve the self-identity of communities formed on the basis of different civilizational patterns” (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018: 22).

The organised crime networks involved in counterfeiting usually commit other crimes and these can often be linked to each other. This phenomenon is known as polycriminality. The connection between IP crimes and other criminal activities can be either parallel or mutually reinforcing (EUIPO 2020). In the case of parallel crimes, separate forms of crime are committed that may or may not be related and do not support each other.

In this case, mutually reinforcing crimes are more interesting. In Italy, where the authorities are particularly active in combating counterfeiting, a new concept has been created: agromafia. This term refers to mafia-related activities in the agricultural sector, which generate significant illegal revenue. According to an Italian study, an estimated 25 billion euros in revenue was generated in the agricultural sector in 2019, which is a growing trend (Eurispes 2019). The British newspaper *The Guardian* has dealt with a specific phenomenon related to this topic on several occasions in recent years. Their investigative article (JONES–AWOKOYA 2019) and video summary (TOUSSAINT-STRAUSS et al. 2023) focus on one of the Italian mafia’s illegal activities, which involves exploiting people who have entered the country illegally, almost as slaves, in the tomato fields of southern Italy. These crimes are related to IP crime here. It is possible that counterfeit, low-quality PPPs are being used, or that protected plant varieties are being used, which are the result of years of work and significant investment by legitimate market players, who have exclusive rights to use or authorise their use, as mentioned earlier.

To summarise the above, organised crime groups rely on irregularly arriving and illegally employed labourers to make illegal profits. This phenomenon, particularly in the Mediterranean region, based on recent experiences, can be a catalyst for mass illegal migration, which threatens societal security by increasing the risk of radicalisation and terrorism, as well as undermining the sustainability of national identity, which is a key component of a society’s collective identity.

## Political security

“The object of the threat is the principle that defines states, namely sovereignty, which can be jeopardised. In some cases, this can manifest in the form of ideology, such as in the case of groups with extreme political views, and the threat can even take on a supranational character” (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018: 21).

The already cited Europol–EUIPO joint report on police crime contains one finding in relation to the cases it covers. It can be seen how widely IP crime is connected to other crimes, such as document forgery, money laundering, fraud, drug production and trafficking, as well as cybercrime and terrorism. The latter is a relevant point in the list of possible factors that threaten political security. Although there is no general definition of the phenomenon, the Online Lexicon of the Ludovika University of Public Service (LUPS) can be consulted: “Behind terrorism, there is always a desire for revenge, retaliation, or intimidation, accompanied by a political, ideological, or religious idea that serves as a justification for violence” (GÖCZE 2018).

Compared to other crimes, such as the trafficking of illegal arms or drugs, counterfeiting is characterised by a lower risk of detection by law enforcement and a lower penalty, while still generating significant profits. Therefore, counterfeiting provides an excellent opportunity to finance other illegal activities with the revenue generated, as was the case with a Northern Irish paramilitary group. The authorities, who had been monitoring their activities, took action against them on several occasions. In December 2018, three individuals were arrested on suspicion of being involved with the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). During the house searches, various drugs, counterfeit clothing and illicit cigarettes were found. A month later, similar checks resulted in the seizure of cigarettes, cash, counterfeit products and football jerseys (EUIPO 2020).

In summary, the significant revenue generated by counterfeiting can be used to finance other crimes, even by extremist groups. The illegal trade and/or counterfeiting of tobacco products is not a new phenomenon. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, also known as ‘Mr. Marlboro’, financed his terrorist activities through cigarette smuggling until he was reportedly killed in a U.S. airstrike in Libya in 2015 (BBC 2015).

## Military security

“States can achieve their military security in five ways: ‘unilaterally, with their own military force; multilaterally, by joining a coalition system; unilaterally or multilaterally, by possessing weapons of mass destruction; through neutrality; and through unique solutions, international agreements, and contracts’” (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018: 21).

Counterfeiting poses multiple risks to a country’s military security, including by reducing the effectiveness of its military force. The Covid–19 pandemic had a negative impact on global supply chains, causing shortages of certain goods, such as semiconductors. Given the high demand for these goods, particularly in the automotive and electronics

industries, and considering the ability of organised crime networks to adapt quickly, counterfeit goods have also appeared in this area, responding to the growing need for semiconductors. The use of components based on these counterfeits poses a significant risk and can cause a catastrophe in the critical infrastructure and military equipment. In the latter case, for example, not only counterfeit components but also piracy can disrupt military communications, as illegal streaming devices can cause interference with military radio frequencies (EUIPO–Europol 2022).

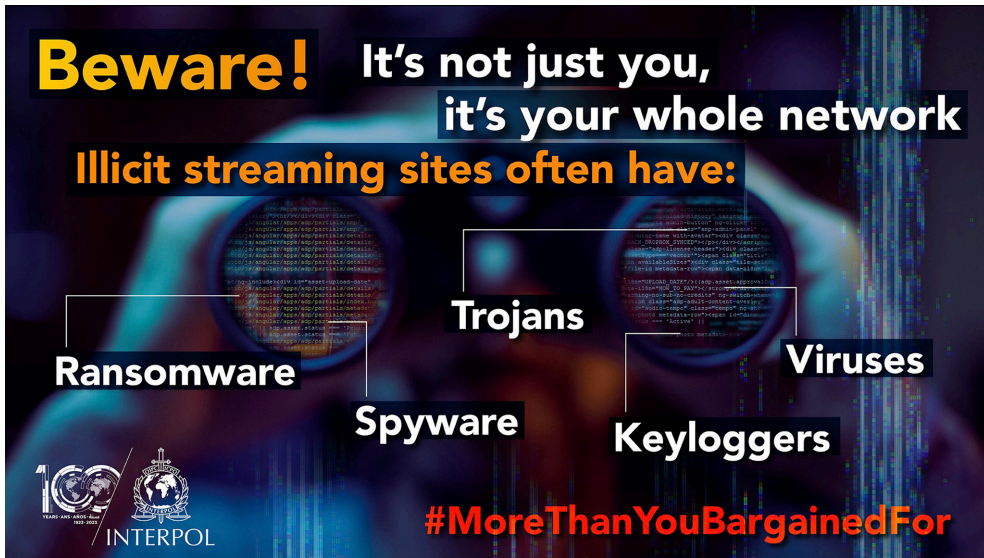
This issue predates the pandemic. Online research on the topic can yield numerous articles and official reports, some of which are nearly 10 years old or older. For example, the report of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) (U.S. GAO 2016), which was prepared at the request of the U.S. Congress to examine the Department of Defense’s (DOD) measures against counterfeit parts, highlights the risk posed by the phenomenon: “Almost anything is at risk of being counterfeited, including microelectronics used in fighter jets and missile guidance systems, fasteners used in aircraft, and materials used in engine mounts.”

The office recommended the development of uniform procedures for dealing with potentially counterfeit parts and called for greater attention and coordination in the use of government and industry reports. It can be concluded that a country’s defence capabilities can be negatively affected if counterfeit parts successfully enter the military supply chain or if the critical infrastructure suffers any damage. If this were to happen, it would significantly impact the military security of the country or alliance. According to Horváth and Csaba (2016), the key to successful action is broad cooperation between economic actors, facility owners, governments and agencies, as well as international organisations, which can span continents. Of course, these measures can be seen as an attempt to protect the economic security, as the functioning of economies in the era of global trade depends on the protection of global – including military – supply chains.

## IT security

“Information security is a new, but rapidly evolving field within the framework of security studies. Its definition requires consideration of many aspects. [...] In general, we can say that cybersecurity is the sum of tools, policies, security concepts, security guarantees, guidelines, risk management methods, actions, trainings, exercises, safeguards, and technologies that can be used to protect the information environment, the assets of organisations and users. The assets of organisations and users include connected computer equipment, personnel, infrastructure, applications, services, telecommunications systems, as well as all stored or transmitted information in cyberspace” (GAZDAG–REMEK 2018: 24).

Copyright infringement – often referred to as modern digital piracy – is sometimes perceived as harmless. However, what could be the drawbacks? Figure 5 below, taken from the awareness-raising activities of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), helps to answer this question.



*Figure 4: Awareness-raising information on potential digital threats*

*Source: Interpol – Project I-SOP/Digital Piracy*

Consumption of non-legitimate content can cause problems with viruses, trojans and spyware that can obtain our passwords, personal data, access to our finances and even make us victims of extortion. The risk not only affects our private devices but also corporate and government IT infrastructure. If these are attacked, it could undermine society's trust in security. The significance of the problem is represented by the fact that within the EMPACT framework, special attention is paid to combating crimes that threaten the sector.

## Conclusion

Threats to security sectors cannot be considered in one sector alone but can be understood as overlapping with several sectors. For example, events that threaten environmental security – such as the decrease in the size or quality of arable land, which may be related to counterfeiting – can trigger migration processes at regional or global level, which can affect the social and political security of the target country or region.

I agree with the conclusion of Bakai et al. (2024), who stated that “the professional and lawful activities of customs authorities are essential not only for maintaining the functioning of commercial supply chains, but also for ensuring their security” (BAKAI et al. 2024: 57). Customs authorities, which are the first point of contact for incoming goods, play a crucial role in combating counterfeiting. To increase the effectiveness of inspection activities, numerous options are available to decision-makers. Personal (EUIPO s. a.) and online (CEPOL 2024) training programmes – through the Virtual Training Centre

(VTC) – are available for representatives of the law enforcement and market surveillance authorities. Various useful tools are also available, with the IP Enforcement Portal (IPEP) developed and operated by the EUIPO being a prime example, which provides valuable assistance in identifying counterfeit products and facilitating real-time, multilingual communication with rights holders. The tool is also essential because – as stated on the landing page of the IPEP – it is “the EU platform for managing customs applications for action (AFAs) and dealing with matters relating to IPR enforcement”. The role of national and international law enforcement cooperation is also unquestionable, with forms ranging from cooperation agreements to joint law enforcement operations, as seen in the Silver Axe operations.

In terms of international law enforcement cooperation, a key milestone was the announcement by the European Council on 15 June 2025 of the new EMPACT priorities for the 2026–2029 cycle. IP crimes remain a joint sub-priority with forgery as part of the ‘Economic and Financial Crimes’ priority. As a result, the joint law enforcement operations, training and education that have taken place so far will continue to receive special attention and can even further develop thanks to the experiences of the past four years. However, it should not be forgotten – as mentioned in the introduction – that counterfeiting and piracy are not included in the new EU internal security strategy, as they were not identified as a key threat in the EU-SOCTA at the time of its presentation.

In view of this welcome development in the policy cycle, I trust that the IP enforcement community will recognise its importance and succeed in persuading policymakers to expand the EU’s internal security strategy to include counterfeiting and digital piracy, because in my opinion – especially when we consider the risks affecting different sectors of security – these pose a serious threat to the community as a whole in several dimensions.

The conclusions drawn from the results of this work, regardless of their source, are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the official position or opinion of the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration (NTCA) or of the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO). The publication was prepared with the support of the Scientific Council of the NTCA.

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