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# Puppy scammers exposed: how deceptive dealers cash in on the illegal puppy trade across Europe

Summary version

## Introduction

Each year, millions of puppies are sold online across Europe, with online classified ad sites serving as one of the key channels for these sales. These sites provide the perfect platform for unscrupulous dealers to operate illegally, enabling them to profit from selling underage puppies. Often bred in poor conditions and transported illegally across borders from Eastern Europe, these young puppies are particularly susceptible to health and behavioural issues. Many are sold without having received veterinary care or the necessary vaccinations, and often with fraudulent documentation.

This document summarises the findings from investigations carried out in the UK, the Netherlands, Romania, and Bulgaria between 2021 and 2022 to test the legitimacy of puppies offered for sale on classified ad sites and the real origin of the offered dogs. Investigators analysed hundreds of puppy adverts and visited suspect dealers to expose the methods and extent of the illegal puppy trade.

Investigations in all four countries have shown the ease with which cross-border dealers can sell underage puppies online, highlighting not only the lax or non-existent verification of online sellers' identities, but also the lack of verification of both puppies and sellers' registration in a pet microchip registration database. This summary concludes with key recommendations for improving puppy buyer awareness and outlines the need for stricter controls on classified ad sites, and ultimately, the report calls for stricter regulations at legislative level, and for their enforcement.

**You can read the full report, including detailed methodology, expanded findings and multiple case studies at: <https://www.four-paws.org/puppy-scammers>**



## Key Findings

**Investigations revealed that an alarming number of puppies advertised on classified ad sites in the UK and the Netherlands are being illegally imported from Eastern Europe. Investigators met with puppy dealers and owners of puppy farms offering underage puppies for sale, as well as corrupt veterinarians willing to supply falsified documentation for puppies. In all countries where investigations took place, laws and animal welfare requirements were wilfully disregarded, with unscrupulous puppy dealers employing various methods of deception to trick buyers into purchasing illegally imported puppies.**

### Classified ad sites - UK and the Netherlands

The investigations revealed that a substantial number of puppies advertised on online platforms in the UK and the Netherlands had been bred in poor conditions, with many imported illegally.



In the UK, one third of surveyed adverts were suspected to be selling puppies illegally imported from other countries, reaching almost half of all adverts on one classified ad site.

Shockingly, in the Netherlands, more than 40% of surveyed puppy adverts showed tell-tale signs that the puppies had been imported illegally from other countries.

Investigators also found:

- ➔ unscrupulous sellers used multiple online accounts, a range of identities, numerous phone numbers and false locations to sell puppies without accountability.
- ➔ illicit sellers appeared legitimate and used many methods of deception, making it very difficult for puppy buyers to spot illegal dealing.
- ➔ cross-border dealers advertising puppies before they even arrived in the UK due to a near constant supply.
- ➔ puppies were regularly sold without veterinary checks and often with dubious veterinary paperwork, calling into question the validity of the puppies' rabies vaccinations.



## UK Case Study

### Seller importing puppies from Romania



Seller used multiple adverts, four different names, and several phone numbers to advertise across two classified ad sites. The adverts provided minimal information about the puppies and their ages ranged from 12 – 20 weeks old.

When the seller was visited, he made great efforts to assure buyers that the puppies were healthy and that his business was legitimate. He stated that dealing puppies was his main job and that he had been doing it for almost two years and could provide references from previous buyers. He also said that the puppies were almost 15 weeks old despite their passports stating they were over 20 weeks old. The seller made no attempt to conceal the puppies' age discrepancies, suggesting that few customers noticed or questioned it.



The seller said that transporting the puppies was expensive and that a special van was used containing 20 cages for different animals. He said he wants to buy a van so he can transport the puppies himself but said evading the authorities in Dover was difficult.



## Netherlands Case Study

### Seller advertising an underage puppy imported from Bulgaria



The seller supposedly owned the puppy for two weeks and was advertising him for sale because she said he did not get on with her cats. This was most likely a false narrative to suggest to the buyer that she was not an unscrupulous dealer herself.



The seller said the puppy had travelled for three days from Bulgaria to the Netherlands and was the only puppy on the trip. She said he was “a little bit scared” when he arrived.

The seller openly stated that the puppy was imported at two months old. The puppy was advertised as 2.5 months old, but according to the passport, the puppy was four months old. The rabies vaccination information was incomplete. When asked about these discrepancies, the seller admitted the details must be incorrect. The puppy was not seen by a vet in the Netherlands and investigators noticed he had weepy eyes. The seller intended to sell the puppy in the street, without providing an RVO or UBN registration as required by Dutch law.

## Breeding countries: Romania and Bulgaria

Investigators found that in Romania and Bulgaria, two of the source countries for puppies advertised on classified ad sites in the UK and the Netherlands, most breeders they visited were operating illegally. Many compromised the welfare of the animals, offered underage puppies for sale, and some were willing to falsify the puppy's documents, even sharing tips on how to bypass existing regulations.



In Romania, more than 80% of breeders investigated mentioned carrying out illegal activities such as providing passports with falsified information, selling puppies under the legal age, and selling unvaccinated puppies. In Bulgaria, 18 of the 19 breeders investigated appeared to be operating illegally.

Investigators also found:

- ➔ most of the 18 breeders visited in Romania worked with corrupt veterinarians to obtain passports for underage puppies with fraudulent vaccination records, creating a serious health risk.
- ➔ in Bulgaria, 18 of the 19 sellers visited showed a visible violation of the minimum age, identification, registration, or vaccination requirements for the advertised puppy.
- ➔ in Romania it was common practice for breeders to export puppies to other EU countries and the UK and sell them without EU passports, or rabies vaccinations. Some even provided false records of the puppy's date of birth and rabies vaccinations.
- ➔ in both Bulgaria and Romania breeders were found selling multiple breeds of puppies kept in poor conditions, as well as breeding bitches housed in cages or other inappropriate environments.





## Romania Case Study

### Breeder selling multiple breeds



Breeder and exporter selling multiple breeds including Bichon Frise, Yorkshire Terriers, Shih Tzu, German Shepherds, and non-pedigree cat breeds. Puppy ages ranged from a few days old to 10 weeks old and all had falsified documents. Investigators found mothers and their puppies caged inside a building and other dogs kept in groups in outside kennels. Investigators were told the mothers were bred from until they were 5-6 years old before being donated.



The breeder stated that anyone can take a puppy to other European countries without a passport or vaccinations as no one would check. They said a vet could supply passports for puppy export with false birth dates at a cost of €50 per passport, but if the rabies vaccination was included, it would cost an additional €100. It would cost more because the vet had to put his name on the passport and he would be taking a greater risk and therefore wanted more money for this service.



## Bulgaria Case Study

Seller keeping underage puppies in cardboard boxes in a run-down apartment



Seller advertised multiple breeds of underage dogs online and showed them to the potential buyers without the puppies' mother present. In one of the visits the seller stated that they could go to a veterinarian they knew to issue documents and to confirm they already had a second and a third vaccine and were ready to travel, although they had only had their first vaccine. The puppies had no documentation (passports, micro-chips, or pedigree certificates).



There were at least 20 dogs of different breeds placed in boxes including Pinschers and Cocker Spaniels. The dogs looked scared and kept crying.

More detail on these cases studies, as well as additional examples can be found in the full report at: <https://www.four-paws.org/puppy-scammers>



## Conclusion

Extensive evidence of the scale of puppy imports, breaches of regulations and the tricks sellers use to deceive buyers demonstrates the urgent need for tougher online trade regulation as well as identification and registration of dogs EU-wide and in other European countries, to allow for transparency in the sale of a dog.

With the alarming numbers of unvaccinated puppies bred in poor conditions being exported underage across Europe, we can expect to see many more puppies with medical and behavioural issues in the future. Also, as puppies continue to be imported without effective vaccination, the risk of transmission of zoonotic diseases and even the possibility of rabies transmission remains a serious public health risk.

## Recommendations

1. **Improved buyer awareness** – it is imperative that puppy buyers know how to recognise and avoid illegal dealers. They also need a better understanding of what to look out for when looking for a puppy online in order to better identify suspicious adverts.
2. **Increased traceability** – the lack of controls on classified ad sites, including the ability for sellers to create multiple online profiles and sell puppies with unverified microchip registration status, enables puppy dealers to sell without accountability. FOUR PAWS recommends increased traceability by implementing the Model Solution principle which includes:
  - a. **Mandatory Identification and Registration (I&R) of dogs EU-wide and in further European countries**
  - b. **Regulation of the online puppy trade, ensuring only registered dogs can be advertised by their registered keeper, EU-wide and in further European countries**
  - c. **Pet registration databases and pet passports need to serve as a safe source of reliable information about each dog throughout their entire lifetime.**
3. **Enforcement** – additional resources and cross-border cooperation is needed to enforce implementation of the existing regulations.

FOUR PAWS calls on decision-makers in Europe, at both the EU and country level, to urgently legislate to regulate the online trading of dogs, and to better enforce existing laws. Until further regulation is implemented, buyers must ensure they carry out sufficient research when choosing a puppy and remain alert to unscrupulous practices.

You can read the full report, including detailed methodology, expanded findings and multiple case studies at: <https://www.four-paws.org/puppy-scammers>

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The research in Bulgaria was conducted by Client X and has already been published in Bulgaria in the “FOUR PAWS study of the illegal puppy trade in Bulgaria in 2021”.

The report has been drafted by Carly Halliday on the basis of investigation reports and findings.

## Disclaimer

FOUR PAWS does not claim that the sample of classified ads used throughout this report is representative of all puppy sales online. However, it is indicative of the large number of ads that are still being published on major classified ad sites in the UK and the Netherlands and of the large number of breeding operations in exporting countries where dogs are bred in a cruel way.

This report was published a year after the last of the investigations were completed. Many of the case studies included in this report have already been reported to national and EU control bodies, including as part of the European Coordinated Control Action Plan on the illegal trade of pets, launched in July, 2022.

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## About FOUR PAWS

FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Heli Dungler, the organisation advocates for a world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding. FOUR PAWS' sustainable campaigns and projects focus on companion animals including stray dogs and cats, farm animals and wild animals – such as bears, big cats and orangutans – kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones. With offices in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Switzerland, South Africa, Thailand, Ukraine, the UK, the USA and Vietnam as well as sanctuaries for rescued animals in eleven countries, FOUR PAWS provides rapid help and long-term solutions.



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