

Stanleybet says Greek court shuts outlet again

Athens (Reuters) – UK-based fixed-odds betting company Stanleybet said on Friday a court ordered its outlet in Athens to be shut again while a higher tribunal considered its right to compete with Greek gambling monopoly OPAP.

Stanleybet opened a store in the Greek capital and one in the northern city of Thessaloniki late last year, but Greek authorities shut them down for not having an operating licence and for violating a law that forbids online betting.

Stanleybet appealed against the move, saying that under EU law a company should be able to offer services anywhere in the bloc, and an administrative court said last month it could reopen its Athens outlet until a final ruling was reached.

OPAP in turn appealed to prevent the shop's reopening.

‘The Athens administrative court accepted OPAP’s appeal,’ Stanleybet said in a statement. ‘The court would not rule on whether Stanleybet’s activities are legal or not, and did not justify its ruling.’

Stanleybet said it would continue to defend its right to offer its sports betting services in Greece and across Europe.

In recent years, Stanleybet and William Hill have unsuccessfully challenged OPAP’s monopoly in a bid to grab a niche of Greece’s lucrative sports betting market of about 2 billion euros.

The firms have taken their case to Greece’s highest court, the Council of State, after the government did not respond to their request for a licence to operate.

The hearing took place earlier in the month, and media reports

have said the ruling could take years as the court might ask the European Court of Justice's opinion.

OPAP's chief executive told Reuters recently that an upcoming ruling of the European Court of Justice on a similar case in Portugal will set a precedent for its monopoly, which ends in 2020.

The European Commission has been trying to let foreign companies compete on an equal footing with local monopolies that bring large sums of money into national treasuries. It has launched an infringement procedure against Greece.

Stanleybet says it offers sports bets, mainly on soccer events, at more than 1,500 outlets in Cyprus, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Croatia, Romania and Poland.

OPAP, Europe's largest lottery operator, has about 5,500 outlets in Greece and Cyprus, with sales of 5 billion euros in 2007, including 2.5 billion on fixed-odds sports bets.