

Now William Hill launches bid to break up Greek gambling monopoly

William Hill yesterday launched a fresh challenge against gambling monopolies in Europe by requesting a licence to open betting shops in Greece.

The application was lodged with the Greek Government despite the fact that gaming company OPAP has a monopoly in what is seen as a hugely attractive market by Britain's bookies.

However, if the licence is rejected – as expected – the company is prepared to go to the European courts in an attempt to challenge OPAP's monopoly.

William Hill chief executive David Harding said: „We believe the recent European cases mean that what is happening is in breach of EU law. If it is rejected we will go to the courts to argue our case and that could involve going to the European Court of Justice.“

In March gambling companies hailed an ECJ ruling that barred Italy from using criminal law to keep out foreign bookmakers in a case brought by Stanley Leisure.

Gaming companies have been encouraged by the ruling to take on other monopolies in a bid to access markets, prompting countries such as Spain and Italy to take steps to open their markets. Germany is also reviewing its gaming laws although legal action has been launched against the Austrian online betting company Bwin to stop it taking bets.

Hill believes it should be allowed access to Greece on the grounds of free movement of services and freedom of establishment, which are enshrined in EU law. Governments are

allowed a certain leeway when it comes to gambling, to control an „undesirable activity“.

However, British gambling companies have long argued that in many cases governments have prevented them from setting up to protect local monopolies. They also argue that punters on the Continent are losing out because better odds would be available if competition were allowed.

OPAP has told Greek newspapers that it fully expected William Hill's application to be rejected because of its monopoly agreement. However, Mr Harding said: „OPAP is a publicly listed company so it's clear that gambling is there for commercial benefit. It's hard to argue it's anything other than a state monopoly.“