

Optimising operational capacities and cooperation to combat illicit firearms markets

Project SAFTE generated new insights into illicit firearms markets in Europe and terrorist access to those markets. EU policy agendas on firearms and terrorism converged significantly after the terrorist shootings in Europe in recent years. To more effectively counter illicit firearms markets and terrorist access to these markets, it is important to move away from an event-driven approach towards a long-term, structural strategy. To be successful, such a strategy needs to be both comprehensive and proactive. This implies combined efforts in at least three closely interdependent areas: improving the intelligence picture, upgrading the policy and regulatory framework, and strengthening operational capacities and cooperation. This fact sheet gives an overview of Project SAFTE's main recommendations for strengthening operational capacities and cooperation.

Increase operational capacities

Illicit firearms trafficking facilitates different types of criminal activities as well as some of the deadliest terrorist attacks. This crime-enabling capacity in combination with the closed nature of illicit firearms markets calls for a **proactive approach** in law enforcement practice to illicit firearms and their acquisition. By proactively combating illicit firearms trafficking, a contribution can be made to the prevention of (gun-related) crime and terrorism as a whole.

Law enforcement agencies should therefore prioritize illicit firearms trafficking and adopt an **'investigate the gun'** approach designed to pinpoint the actors and networks involved in this type of trafficking. Despite progress made in the last decade, firearms are still too often considered to be 'collateral finds'. When illicit firearms are retrieved in the context of other crimes, such as drug trafficking or murder, law enforcement agencies often tend to primarily focus on investigating or solving these crimes.

It is crucial that national criminal policymakers and law enforcement agencies change their current approach. The **UK and Belgium** SAFTE country studies – showing a decline of gun-related violence and illicit firearms trafficking in Merseyside (Liverpool) and Brussels – suggest that an 'investigate the gun' approach can have a positive effect on (gun-related) crime as a whole.

An 'investigate the gun' approach requires **structural investment in specialised police teams** with a specific focus on illicit firearms trafficking. These teams need to be equipped with sufficient staff, expertise and tools.

Such specialised police teams do not exist in many EU member states, while in other member states budget cuts threaten their continued existence and capacities.

Due to a general lack of specialised teams and investigators, the problem of illicit firearms trafficking is in danger of being overlooked. This risk currently seems to be especially high. The heightened terrorist threat may result in a displacement of attention towards counter-terrorism investigations and away from other (but closely related) criminal phenomena.

Enhance cooperation: at both national and international levels

Intensifying national and international cooperation has been identified as a crucial means of improving the fight against illicit firearms markets and terrorist access to those markets. At **national** level the ‘investigate the gun’ approach **needs to be operationally coordinated**, as this can involve many actors: regional police, national police, judicial services, intelligence services, counter-terrorism agencies, export control services, customs and border control services, justice and interior departments, etc. Cooperation and coordination between agencies dealing with illicit firearms trade and counter-terrorism are especially vital, while Project SAFTE has shown that potential terrorists often rely on their prior criminal connections to acquire firearms.

IMPACT Firearms, established by the Council of the EU as part of the EU Policy Cycle 2014-2017 to tackle organised and serious international crime, is a well-suited platform for setting up joint international operations.

Through its activities, it stimulates awareness of the relevance and importance of European cooperation among national law enforcement and EU agencies.

Because illicit firearms trafficking often has a transnational dimension, with supply lines operating through both intra-EU trafficking and the cross-border smuggling of firearms from outside Europe, an ‘investigate the gun’ approach also requires **international operational cooperation**. National agencies are encouraged to set up joint investigation teams, and maintain close ties with Europol, Eurojust and Frontex in particular. Cooperation with these EU agencies can be hugely beneficial due to the increased availability of information, along with forensic, technical and judicial expertise.

To prevent firearms from illicitly flowing into the EU, stronger operational cooperation with third countries and international organisations such as Interpol and the UN is also encouraged.

Closely monitor specific risks

Project SAFTE also identified several specific security risks requiring close monitoring and operational attention from national and EU law enforcement agencies. Urgent groundwork is required to keep in check threats such as:

- the apparent increased availability of **military-grade assault rifles** on European illicit firearms markets;
- the **diversion of firearms** from licit to illicit markets which mainly occurs in the form of theft, embezzlement and non-regularisation;
- the potential role of certain **gun enthusiasts, handymen and arms fairs** in supporting illicit firearms markets throughout Europe;
- illicit firearms transactions on the **internet** and the delivery of weapons through **postal packages and courier services**.