

Cross-border smuggling of firearms in the EU

Project SAFTE generated new insights into illicit firearms markets in Europe and terrorist access to those markets. One of the main findings of the project was the fragmented nature of illicit firearms markets. There is no such thing as a single illicit firearms market in the EU; rather there are many illicit firearms markets, each with different characteristics and dynamics. Criminal and terrorist actors source their firearms through a variety of supply mechanisms. Because of the varying local dynamics, a supply mechanism may be predominant in one member state, but not in another. This fact sheet discusses cross-border smuggling as one of the main supply mechanisms whereby firearms reach illicit markets in the EU.

Smuggling from outside the EU

Cross-border smuggling of firearms is generally considered to be the most important supply mechanism for illicit firearms markets in the EU. The freedom of movement and the lack of customs controls at national borders within the EU have significantly facilitated the activities of illegal firearms traffickers. The source countries of those firearms smuggled into the EU tend to change, with supply depending heavily on what is easily available and cheap in certain regions.

Today, the main source countries for firearms trafficking into the EU are situated in the **Western Balkans**. Following the armed conflict in the region in the 1990s, a large quantity of firearms and ammunition has remained beyond the control of national and local authorities. The smuggled firearms were often surplus weapons, firearms originating from storage facilities for plundered weapons, or weapons that in one way or another ended up in the hands of a wide range of non-state players during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

Large-scale trafficking of firearms into the EU is quite exceptional. Smuggling tends to take place **on a small scale** with weapons that are intended either for personal use or to meet specific orders. The cross-border smuggling of firearms is generally considered an **'ant trade'** in which small quantities of firearms are smuggled, often along with other lucrative goods such as drugs. However, the constant flow of these numerous small shipments over time results in the accumulation of significant numbers of illicitly held firearms.

“The Western Balkans are expected to remain a key source of heavy firearms trafficked into the EU, due to large illicit stockpiles in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Kosovo region, Montenegro and Serbia.” – Europol (2015)

In the near future, current conflict zones in regions bordering the EU, such as the Middle East and North Africa region and Ukraine, risk becoming significant new sources of assault rifles and even heavier military weapons smuggled into Europe as the conflicts in these regions stabilise. Unless measures are taken, this will lead to an increase in the availability of firearms on illicit markets in Europe.

Intra-EU trafficking

Apart from cross-border smuggling of firearms into Europe, also several forms of trafficking within the EU constitute significant supply mechanisms for illicit European firearms markets. Currently, this intra-EU trafficking mainly consists of **deactivated, acoustic, converted, blank-firing, replica and Flobert weapons**. This is often the consequence of **loopholes and differences in national legislations** that are exploited by both criminals and gun enthusiasts.

The oft-painted picture of the **Western Balkans** as the prime source of international firearms trafficking to the EU needs to be qualified. The nature of international firearms trafficking differs significantly across the EU as a result of several elements such as local demand, geography and the lack of harmonised national legislative frameworks.

In recent years a number of these have taken advantage of a lack of harmonisation in national firearms legislation in the EU by legally buying firearms and/or components in countries with less restrictive regulations and smuggling them into countries which are more restrictive. In Denmark, for example, a licence is required for the acquisition of gas pistols, alarm weapons and deactivated weapons. A significant illicit flow of firearms into the country consists of blank firers from neighbouring countries, where these weapons can easily be legally acquired. Another notorious example is poorly deactivated firearms that have been legally sold in EU member States, such as Slovakia, and then illegally imported in other EU member states.

It is important to highlight that firearms also **circulate between criminal groups** and are thus sometimes also smuggled from other EU member states.

Increasing trade via the internet

The role of the internet as a facilitator of cross-border smuggling of firearms, firearms components, and ammunition into and within the EU is increasing. Both individual criminals and organised crime groups illegally obtain firearms through various online platforms, and this is expected to expand further over the coming years.

Most policy and law enforcement attention in recent years has been focused on the dark web, but the surface web and its otherwise legal online platforms may also be exploited. Gun parts or deactivated firearms, which are legal in certain jurisdictions, are often traded via the surface web. In recent years, for example, several cases have been detected whereby firearms components were ordered online in EU member states or the United States and illegally imported. In turn, illegally assembled or reactivated guns are believed to be more frequently sold on the dark web.

For the delivery of physical goods sold on the internet, vendors generally rely on postal and courier services. Postal packages and fast parcels are increasingly being used to traffic firearms and components.