

# Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe

*Project SAFTE is an international research project, funded by the European Commission, that aims to contribute to the fight against (terrorist access to) illicit firearms markets in Europe. This research project has demonstrated the existence of various illicit firearms markets in the EU, each with their own specific features and dynamics. The traditionally closed character of these markets has partially eroded in several EU member states in recent years, which has increased the availability of firearms in general, and military-grade firearms in particular, to criminals and to terrorists with criminal connections. To combat this, a comprehensive and pro-active approach is needed that consists of improving the intelligence picture on illicit firearms trafficking, upgrading the policy and the regulatory framework on firearms, and optimising operational capacities and cooperation.*

## **Background**

Several terrorist attacks have been carried out with firearms in Europe in recent years, causing the deaths of hundreds of people and injuries to hundreds more. These events demonstrate that terrorists are able to get their hands on various types of firearms, including military-grade firearms. Although the use of firearms to commit terrorist attacks is not a new phenomenon in the EU, Europol recently noted that firearms have become the most prevalent type of weaponry used by terrorists and violent extremists across a range of ideologies. This observation led policy-makers in Europe to develop specific measures to combat terrorist access to firearms. In-depth, evidence-based insight into the firearms acquisition dynamics of terrorists in the EU is limited, however. This is part of the larger problem of the scarcity of reliable data and in-depth research with regard to Europe's illicit firearms markets.

## **Process**

The goal of Project SAFTE is to improve knowledge regarding (terrorist access to) illicit firearms markets in Europe and to provide information that can influence policy intended to enhance the fight against this security threat. The Flemish Peace Institute coordinated the project, and carried it out in partnership with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Scuola Superiore di Studi Universitari e di Perfezionamento

Sant'Anna (SSSA). In addition, research teams from Arquebus Solutions, the Small Arms Survey and Bureau Bruinsma contributed extensively to the study.

The design of the research project consisted of two phases. In a first phase, specialised research teams conducted qualitative, in-depth studies into illicit firearms markets, terrorist access to these markets and national policies to counter these phenomena in eight EU member states: Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Italy, Romania, the Netherlands and the UK. More than one hundred key national actors were interviewed during this process.

The second phase consisted of a systematic and comparative analysis, in which the studies in these countries were supplemented by an explorative mapping of the situation in the other twenty EU member states. In addition, an assessment was made of the illicit possession and proliferation of firearms in the wider EU neighbourhood (the Balkans, Northern Africa and Ukraine), to address the significant interconnections between the EU's internal and external security dimensions in terms of illicit firearms trafficking. All these findings were then linked to the EU policy context by, for example, interviews with several key international actors.

The research conducted for Project SAFTE resulted in two separate publications. The findings of the systematic and comparative analysis are presented in a policy-oriented synthesis report, *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE*. A separately edited volume, *Triggering Terror: Illicit Gun Markets and Firearms Acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe*, publishes the individual country studies, together with the studies on the illicit possession and proliferation of firearms in Northern Africa and Ukraine.

### *Findings on illicit firearms markets*

There is no unified illicit firearms market in the EU. Various regional variants of illicit firearms markets can be identified, however, each with distinct characteristics and dynamics. These differences can be attributed to a variety of local elements that shape local demand and supply of illicit firearms and influence the involvement of different actors. Although it is currently impossible to quantitatively estimate the scope of illicit firearms markets in the EU in a credible way, it is clear that most of the firearms that are available on illicit firearms markets are handguns. The presence of military-grade firearms is generally more limited.

The easy and cheap access to certain firearms in some countries strongly contributes to illicit firearms trafficking across the EU. Most illicit firearms markets in Europe are driven by criminal demand. Different types of criminals tend to procure, possess and use different types of firearms, and contemporary terrorist networks usually rely on established criminal connections to acquire firearms from these markets. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the illicitly possessed firearms are in the hands of private citizens in several EU member states who have no criminal or terrorist motives. These are individuals who simply possess firearms without holding the necessary permits.

Firearms end up in illicit markets in the EU through cross-border smuggling from both outside the EU (mainly from the Western Balkans) and intra-EU trafficking (mainly as a result of differences in national legislation). The most important illicit supply mechanisms for firearms in the EU are cross-border smuggling, change of ownership through theft, the conversion of blank-firing guns, and the reactivation of deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons. Each EU member state has a different illicit firearms market with its distinct supply mechanisms, however. These different supply mechanisms are characterised by their own dynamics, and present specific policy and law enforcement challenges. Our analyses indicate that supplying firearms to European illicit firearms markets is not very lucrative, and is generally not a primary source of income for those actors involved in trafficking firearms. Another observation is the cyclical nature of supply and demand in these markets. The actors involved in firearms trafficking in the EU have constantly adapted their operating methods in reaction to regional, national and European policy initiatives and law enforcement operations.

Traditionally, illicit firearms markets in Europe are closed markets with restricted access for people outside criminal networks, and having the right criminal connections and reputation are crucial factors in this, even in countries with rather high levels of illicit firearms possession. Differences can be observed in the access to illicit firearms, and especially military-grade firearms, and these differences are linked to the criminal hierarchy and the criminal milieu to which the potential buyer belongs. They are also reflected by a price hierarchy for illicit firearms markets that is similar across the EU: the most expensive firearms on the illicit firearms market are generally military-grade firearms such as assault rifles, while the cheapest firearms are generally (converted) blank-firing firearms.

The closed character of these markets has been under pressure in recent years, which is linked to the observed growing availability of certain types of firearms. The underlying factors of this erosion are the emergence of the Internet, the cross-border smuggling of military-grade assault rifles into the EU, the conversion of blank-firing guns and the reactivation of deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons. The increased availability of firearms has contributed to arms races between criminal groups across the EU. This has facilitated the gradual trickling-down of the possession and use of firearms to lower segments of the criminal hierarchy in several EU member states, especially in Western Europe.

#### *Findings on terrorist access to illicit firearms markets*

Significant amounts of firearms have been seized from different types of terrorist networks in recent years. These firearms include various models and brands of pistols and revolvers, but also various types of military-grade firearms, such as assault rifles and sub-machine guns. Terrorists who procure firearms generally do so exclusively for carrying out terrorist acts and to defend themselves against law enforcement agencies.

Most terrorists seem to have a preference for military-grade firearms, although the observed possession of less-suitable firearms among terrorist networks suggests that not all terrorists have access to a wide range of firearms. Our comparative analysis identified clear distinctions between different types of terrorist networks in the EU in the acquisition,

possession and use of firearms. While the traditional separatist groups have developed their own distinct (and context-specific) firearms acquisition patterns, religiously-inspired terrorist networks across the EU generally rely on criminal connections to obtain firearms from local illicit markets. There are no indications of significant firearms flows between the various types of terrorist networks in Europe today and also no indications of recent state-sponsored arms transfers to terrorist groups in the EU. For most of the contemporary terrorist networks operating in Europe, access to local criminal firearms markets is a key element in their firearms acquisition patterns.

Through their criminal pasts, contemporary terrorists with criminal antecedents have acquired various skills that can be used in the planning and execution of successful terrorist attacks, including the skills and network needed to acquire weapons more easily. Given the generally closed character of these markets, only terrorists with the right criminal connections can acquire firearms, and in particular military-grade firearms, on illicit firearms markets in the EU. The observed terrorist firearms arsenals therefore generally reflect the specific dynamics of the local criminal firearms market. Individuals without a developed criminal network generally experience more difficulties in their attempts to acquire firearms, and are more likely to use an alternative acquisition method, for example the Internet, or to use a different type of weapon.

No illicit firearms dealers have been observed who exclusively supply firearms to terrorist networks. There seem to be a number of barriers that inhibit criminals from actively and knowingly supplying weapons for terrorist attacks. Illicit firearms dealers are generally not eager to engage in activities that are not very lucrative, but at the same time involve an increased risk of detection and higher penalties. Terrorists will generally rely on already established criminal connections, often pre-dating their radicalisation, in order to obtain firearms on illicit markets, and sellers often do not know they are selling to terrorists. This can be observed among the significant number of terrorists with a criminal history. Prisons have also been identified as places that offer new opportunities for terrorists who do not yet have the necessary criminal connections to acquire firearms.

The overwhelming majority of those perpetrators of recent jihadi terrorist attacks who had a criminal history were involved in low-level criminality. There have been some exceptions of perpetrators who attained a mid-level position in the criminal underworld, but none of the perpetrators or people arrested for plotting terrorist attacks in the EU in recent years was a member of a high-level organised crime group. In countries where illicit firearms supply channels are tightly controlled by a limited number of highly-organised crime groups, it is quite difficult for terrorists to acquire firearms. In particular, countries with more chaotic criminal landscapes present potential terrorists with increased opportunities for illicit firearms acquisition. Individuals who acquire firearms for a terrorist network are generally not recruited for this specific purpose, but are already part of the network, and become responsible for this task later because of their skills and networks.

Contemporary terrorist networks seeking (specific types of) firearms, but who lack the necessary criminal connections or are operating in a context of limited firearms availability in the local illicit market, can engage in the direct diversion of legally owned firearms, for

example by targeted thefts of firearms from state stockpiles or legal gun owners. From a historical perspective, targeted thefts have been a vital element in the firearms acquisition patterns of separatist terror groups in Europe, but such thefts have decreased in recent years. Firearms that were deliberately stolen have only been encountered among jihadi networks in exceptional cases. The diversion of legal ownership for terrorist aims through various forms of embezzlement is also quite exceptional in the EU, as well as the legal possession of firearms by perpetrators of terrorist attacks. Yet, in some EU member states significant numbers of legally-owned firearms have been observed among members of extremist networks, and especially right-wing networks.

### *Policy recommendations*

The development of European and national policy to combat both illicit firearms markets and terrorist access to these markets has been strongly event-driven. A proactive and comprehensive approach is needed to effectively combat illicit firearms trafficking. The multifaceted and transnational nature of illicit firearms trafficking requires a comprehensive strategy that simultaneously pressures various supply and demand dynamics, while the crime-enabling capacity and closed nature of illicit firearms markets require a proactive policy and operational response. For such an approach to be successful, efforts need to be made in at least three closely-interdependent areas: the intelligence picture, the policy and regulatory framework, and operational capacities and cooperation.

A good intelligence picture is the starting point for a solid regulatory framework and effective operational initiatives. Increased knowledge about which kinds of firearms are being used in crimes gives law enforcement a vital tool in mapping the actors and networks that are linked to the illicit arms trade. In order to improve the intelligence picture on illicit firearms trafficking, the following actions should be taken:

- improve data collection on the various aspects of firearms trafficking and gun crime;
- facilitate and enhance data-sharing at the national, EU and international level;
- establish and monitor national focal points on firearms in all EU member states, and
- invest in strategic data analysis and research.

The current policy and regulatory framework on firearms needs to be upgraded. Flaws in this framework continue to be exploited for illicit firearms trafficking from both within and outside the EU. Remedying these flaws would enable pressure to be applied to illicit firearms markets. The following actions should be taken to upgrade the policy and regulatory framework on firearms:

- close the loopholes in EU and national firearms legislation, for example, by taking measures to stop the relative easy circulation of easy-to-convert blank-firing guns and Flobert guns;
- monitor the implementation of EU firearms legislation;
- adopt firearms and ammunition surrender programmes tailored to the specific context of national illicit firearms markets;
- effectively penalise illicit firearms possession and trafficking, and
- increase security cooperation with third countries to prevent firearms from illicitly flowing into the EU.

Operational capacities and cooperation need to be optimised. Actions to improve the intelligence picture and regulatory and policy framework must be supported by sustained, appropriate and sufficient operational capacities and cooperation in order to successfully contribute to the fight against (terrorist access to) illicit firearms markets. Priority should be given to uncovering the actors and networks involved in gun-related crime and illicit (terrorist) firearms acquisition. This can be done by using a proactive ‘investigate the gun’ approach. For this approach to be effective, the following actions should be taken:

- increase operational capacities by installing specialised national police teams equipped with sufficient staff, expertise and equipment;
- enhance inter-agency operational coordination within EU member states;
- enhance international cooperation aimed at effectively tackling the transnational dimensions of illicit firearms trafficking, and
- closely monitor specific risks, such as the apparent increased availability of military-grade assault rifles on European illicit firearms markets and illicit firearms transactions on the Internet.

It is impossible to fully prevent terrorist access to illicit firearms markets in the EU, but by putting constant pressure on these markets the risk of detection can be increased. This way we can limit the use of firearms in terrorist attacks in particular, while at the same time contribute to the prevention of gun crime in general.



Duquet, N. and Goris K., (2018) *Firearms acquisition by Terrorists in Europe. Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute

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