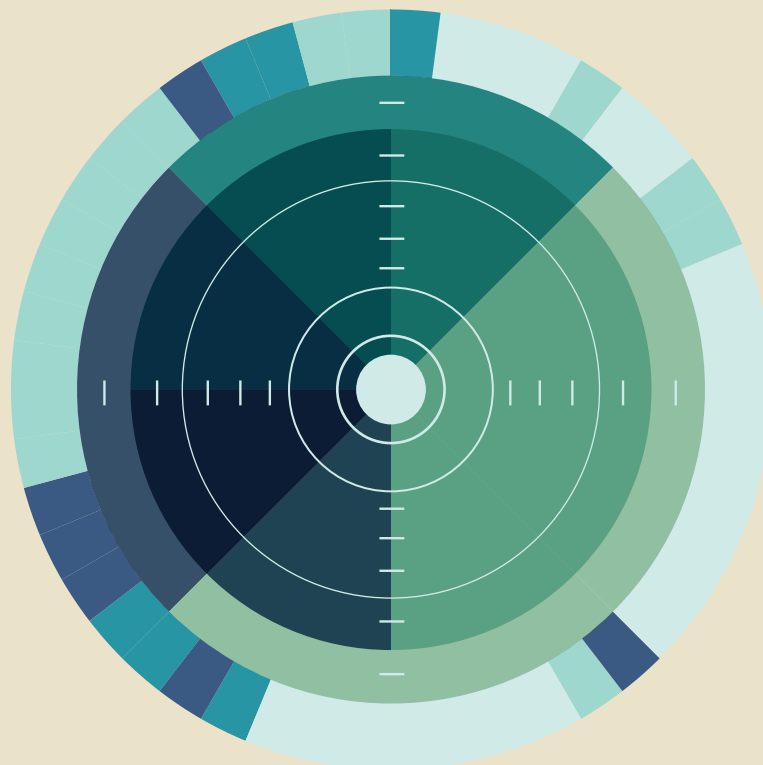




Fighting Illicit Firearms Trafficking Routes and Actors at European Level

Executive Summary of Project FIRE



 **transcrime**
Joint Research Centre on Transnational Crime



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SEESAC The logo for SEESAC, featuring the word "SEESAC" in bold black letters followed by a red circle with a diagonal slash and a rifle barrel.





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Final Report of Project FIRE – Fighting Illicit firearms trafficking Routes and actors at European level
(HOME/2013/ISEC/FP/C1/4000005009)

Edited by Ernesto U. Savona and Marina Mancuso

With the collaboration of (in alphabetical order): Monica Angelini; Ian Anthony; Anna Brener; Stefano Caneppele; Carlotta Carbone; Daniele Ciminieri; Paolo Ciuccarelli; Marco Dugato; Serena Favarin; Lina Grip; Federica Daphne Ierace; Alexander Kamprad; Marta Lai; Michele Mauri; Margaux Morganti; Carlotta Parolo; Manjana Pecht; Azzurra Pini; Samuele Poy; Anna Raspa; Elisa Superchi; Chiara Zappaterreno; Mateja Zorc.

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Executive summary

Project FIRE – Fighting Illicit firearms trafficking Routes and actors at European level (www.fireproject.eu) – was carried out with the financial support of the European Commission, DG Home Affairs, within the Prevention of and the Fight against Crime (ISEC) Programme.

The research is an exploratory study on the illicit trafficking of firearms (ITF) in the EU. Based on the results obtained, it also provides recommendations on how to improve the fight against and the prevention of ITF. For the purposes of the study, ITF has been defined as every case in which the illicit acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts or ammunition occur from, to, or within the territory of the EU.

Background

The availability of firearms is recognised as an increasingly pressing issue because of the lethal impact that firearms can have in terms of violence and terrorism. For this reason, the EU is currently revising its Firearms Directive, and the fight against organised crime and terrorism ranks high on the European security agenda. However, the role that ITF plays in feeding into violence within the EU has long been disregarded. This has been mirrored by a lack of priority given to rigorous investigation of the origins of firearms involved in the commission of crimes—and a lack of scientific research in the field. In addition, there is a lack of public official data on ITF.

Approach

Project FIRE adopts an integrated market perspective to address these difficulties and to study ITF within a wider framework of illicit markets. This approach makes it possible to combine analysis of both the various stages within the illicit supply chain of ITF and the demand for illicit firearms. It develops a methodology based on the collection and analysis of data from online news and law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and custom press releases, providing high level of detail and a large number of variables. For this purpose, firearm seizures have

been considered as a proxy for the ITF, and deadly and non-deadly shootings as proxies for the demand for illicit firearms.

This study represents a first step towards better understanding of the ITF in the EU. It is accordingly an important resource for both public and private institutions and researchers.

The results from the project have been grouped into three parts:

- ITF in the EU (Part I)
- The EU's regulatory framework to counter ITF (Part II)
- Recommendations on how to improve the prevention of and fight against ITF (Part III).

Part I. ITF in the EU¹

Supply of illicit firearms. Unlike other illicitly trafficked goods, firearms are durable. As such they may circulate in the illicit firearms market for decades and be sold and re-sold repeatedly. Most illicit firearms stem from licit production and have subsequently been diverted to the illicit market. Licit firearms can be diverted during transportation, by leakage from factories or surplus stocks, theft from stockpiles, dealers, or individual owners, or converted to illicit firearms. This last operation includes: (i) reactivation of deactivated firearms, (ii) modification of semi-automatic firearms into automatic ones, (iii) conversion of replicas, and (iv) conversion of blank-firing firearms.

1. The findings set out in this part are based on a computational analysis of cases of firearm seizures and shootings that occurred in the EU between 2010 and 2015. They have been supplemented by expert evaluations and findings from previous research in the field. With regard to the dark web, the results derive from the monitoring of some illicit websites selling firearms. For more details see the Methodological Annex.

Actors involved in the illicit supply are:

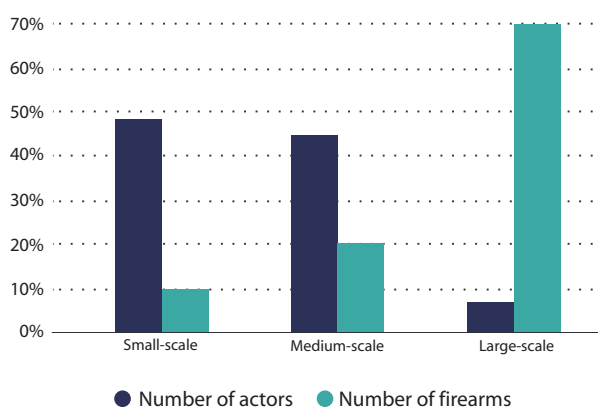
- Organised criminal groups. They usually engage in ITF in addition to other illicit activities and take advantage of their strong expertise in illicit trafficking, thus relying on well-established routes and contacts;
- Corrupted officials and professionals. They support ITF by exercising scant control on firearms and the requisite documents;
- Hobbyists and amateurs. They may participate in ITF by making use of their wide expertise in altering firearms.

Number and type of firearms trafficked in the EU.

The results on seizures are based on the analysis of 3,875 cases that occurred in the EU between 2010 and 2015 and could be identified from open sources on the internet. These seizures account for a total of 19,246 firearms.

The majority of cases regard small-scale shipments, sometimes referred to as “ant-trade”. However, large-scale seizures account for a significant portion of the number of firearms, with only few actors involved (Figure a).² This means that few actors are responsible for a large number of firearms seized.

Figure a. Number of actors and firearms per scale of seizure in the EU (2010-2015)*



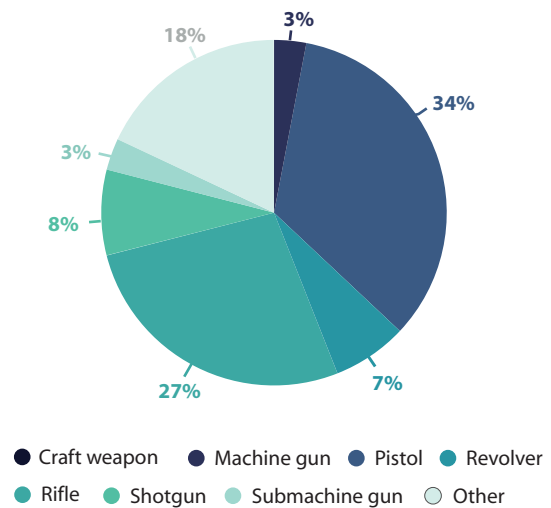
* N=2,895. For 2015, only first three months

Source: Transcrime elaboration of DFS-EU data (see Methodological Annex for details)

2. Small-scale seizures involve 1 firearm, medium-scale seizures from 2 to 9 firearms, and large-scale seizures 10 or more firearms (more details in the Methodological Annex).

Firearm seizures mostly concern pistols (34%), followed by rifles (27%) (Figure b).³ These types of firearms are easier to carry, conceal, and use than other types.

Figure b. Types of firearms seized in the EU (2010-2015)*



* N=11,671. For 2015, only first three months

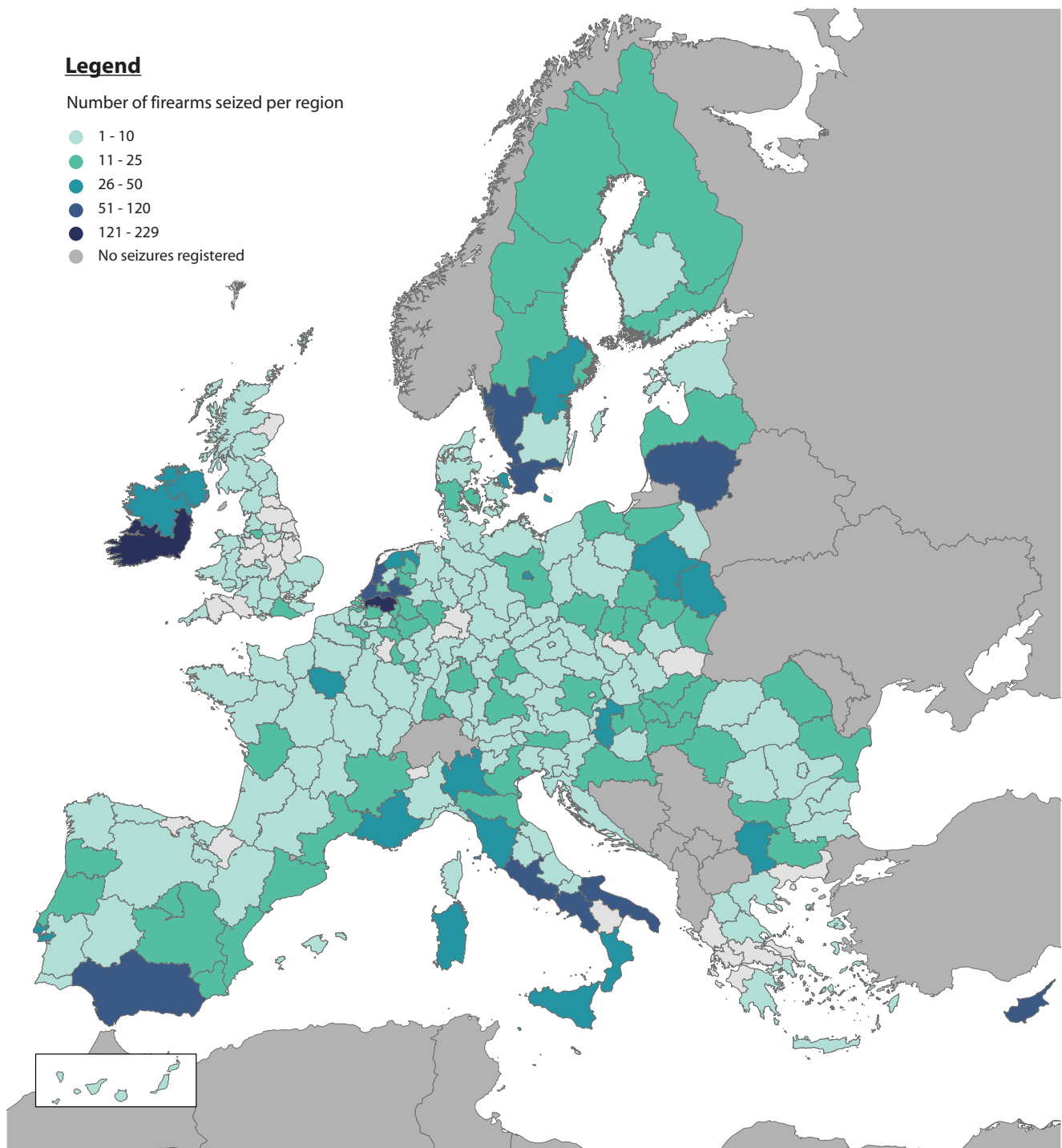
Source: Transcrime elaboration of DFS-EU data (see Methodological Annex for details)

Most seizures take place in Western Europe (35%), followed by Southern Europe (26%), Northern Europe (21%), and Eastern Europe (18%).⁴ Seizures mostly occur along borders, especially in regions close to third countries with stockpiles, in the proximity of large ports, and in regions with a strong presence of organised crime groups (OCGs) (Figure c).

3. The classification of firearm types is based on the Study on Firearms by UNODC (2015). The other category includes: replicas, air guns, gas pistols, and antique firearms (more details in the Methodological Annex).

4. Throughout Project FIRE, the aggregation of macro-regions and of geographic origins is based on the grouping scheme of European sub-regions used by the UN Statistics Division (more details in the Methodological Annex).

Figure c. Number of firearms seized in the EU per region (NUTS 2) (2010-2015)*



* For 2015, only first three months

Source: Transcrime elaboration of DFS-EU data (see Methodological Annex for details)

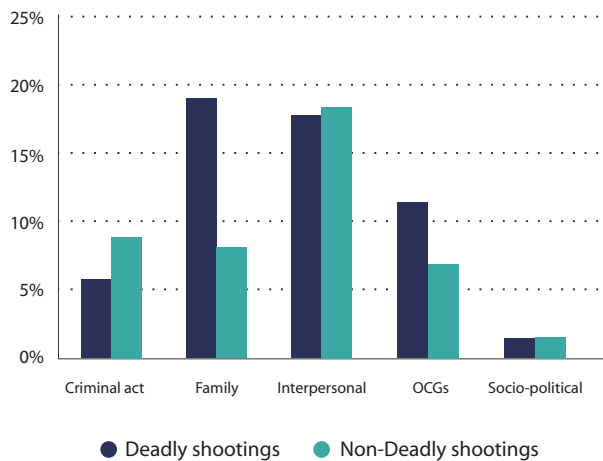
Demand for illicit firearms. The purchasers of illicit firearms are mainly:

- Criminal groups. They need illicit firearms mostly for criminal and instrumental purposes. Possessing firearms has also a symbolic value within the criminal milieu;

- Terrorist groups. Some terrorist groups have significant amounts of firearms and are often connected to criminal groups;
- Individual gun owners. They possess illicit firearms mainly for collection purposes, and self-protection.

According to online articles, the bulk of the demand can be attributed to purposes other than criminal, organised-criminal or terrorist ones (Figure d).

Figure d. Types of deadly and non-deadly shootings in the EU (2010-2015)*



* N=2,892 (only shootings with illicit firearms). For 2015, only first three months

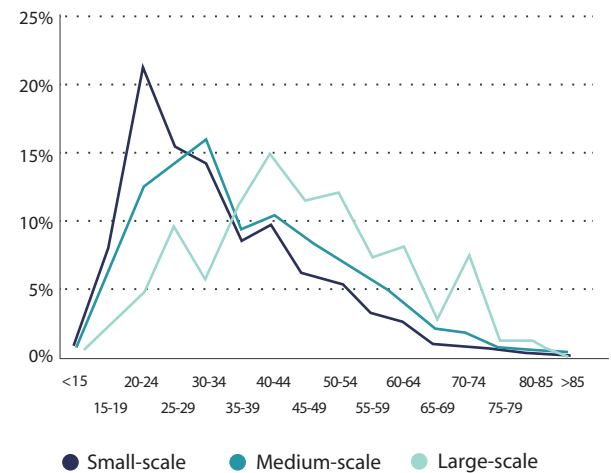
Source: Transcrime elaboration of DSh-EU data (see Methodological Annex for details)

Characteristic of actors. Data from open sources show that both the supply of and demand for illicit firearms are dominated by males. It is overwhelmingly men, not women, who buy, sell, and use illicit firearms in the EU. Men also represent the majority of victims from gun violence.

According to the analysis of firearm seizures, the age of actors typically peaks at around 20-24. The age increases with the scale of the seizure, however, indicating that large-scale ITF may require certain levels of seniority and criminal professionalization (Figure e).

ITF routes. Many illicit firearms entered the EU market after the end of the Cold War from stockpiles in neighbouring regions, especially former Soviet and Yugoslavian states. The recent eruption of conflicts close to the EU, for example the Ukraine or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has raised concerns about the emergence of new sources of ITF to the EU.

Figure e. Age of actors per scale of seizure in the EU (2010-2015)*



* N=3,513. For 2015, only first three months

Source: Transcrime elaboration of DFS-EU data (see Methodological Annex for details)

After leaving their places of origin, firearms transit along various routes. Their transit takes different forms, e.g. direct shipments or gradual ones over years and decades before eventually reaching a more permanent destination. Within the EU, the main destination countries for illicit firearms are France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Spain, and the UK.

The dark web. Project FIRE provides the first study that addresses the emerging role of darknet marketplaces with regard to ITF. The findings indicate that the size of darknet marketplaces is still limited and reflects the trends recorded in firearm seizures with respect to the types of firearms most sold. Moreover, both the (i) variety of firearms on offer and the (ii) potential emergence of new trafficking routes (e.g. from USA to Europe) raise serious concerns.

Part II. The EU's regulatory framework to counter ITF

After an overview of the EU regulatory framework, Part II of the report focuses on the 2015 EC Proposal for amending the Firearms Directive. It provides the first ex-ante crime risk assessment of all the proposed fourteen policy options in order to evaluate whether the measures envisaged may create unintended criminal opportunities.

Crime proofing analysis is the three-step scientific approach used to carry out this analysis. It is based on the assumption that legislation may have criminogenic effects. Its application yielded the following results.

Initial Screening. Thirteen of the fourteen policy options fall under one of the seven risk indicators, especially risk indicators no. 1 (fee and obligation) and no. 7 (regulatory power). The introduction of new or more burdensome obligations increases the risk of non-compliant behaviours and illicit activities, and may be an incentive to choose illegal channels for the acquisition of firearms.

Preliminary Crime Risk Assessment. The firearms market is likely to be vulnerable to crime throughout a firearm's lifecycle. All the thirteen policy options record a medium or high crime risk. Among the most risky ones, the inclusion of certain deactivated weapons under Category A or under Category C (policy option 11) is likely to establish a new obligation that may restrict the current availability of those weapons. As a consequence, there is the possibility that users may resort to illicit channels to maintain and/or obtain deactivated firearms. The same may occur if the specific ban on certain semi-automatic firearms, moving them from Category B to Category A (policy option 13), enters into force.

Extended Crime Risk Assessment. The assessment highlights that:

- The level of crime is likely to increase in most of the policy options under analysis, due to the provision of new or more burdensome obligations, the availability restrictions, and the conferral of additional regulatory powers. The sudden introduction of restrictions and prohibitions on highly demanded firearms could foster a new black market to supply the demand;

- The number of perpetrators/authors is variable. It increases or decreases depending on the specific policy options considered. As a general comment, if the provisions proposed require additional skills and qualified knowledge, the number of perpetrators/authors is likely to decrease;
- The number and characteristics of victims is closely related to the amount of crime and the number of perpetrators/authors: if the latter increase, the number of victims increases as well. Victims are here considered to be all those who suffer economic damage;
- The amount and quality of costs and harms are influenced by the level of crime: if it increases, the amount of costs increases as well.

Part III. Recommendations on how to improve the prevention of and fight against ITF

Project FIRE identifies eleven recommendations to improve the prevention of and fight against ITF in the EU. The recommendations relate to issues that have emerged from the findings of the previous parts of this report. All issues have been assessed with regard to their origin and impact at different levels, i.e. at those of policy, legislation, enforcement, and research. They are:

1. The EU and MSs should continue to prioritize ITF and acknowledge that it is an internal security threat in its own right, besides its relation to violent crime and violent extremism.
2. EU legislation on ITF should aim at reaching a high degree of harmonization; loopholes resulting from a lack of legislative harmonization and insufficiently coordinated implementation of EU law should be closed.
3. The EU and MSs should commit to a harmonised implementation of the definition of convertible and converted firearms, and establish best practices in countering firearms conversion.
4. The EU and MSs should commit to a harmonised implementation of the common deactivation guidelines.

5. On the basis of a unique marking system, the EU should develop a comprehensive tracing and record-keeping system accessible to, shared by, and properly used by MS LEAs and beyond.
6. The EU and its MSs should aim for a high level of coordination and coherence across all relevant policy areas (including the EU's neighbourhood policy, foreign policy instruments, and security-related development cooperation).
7. At both European and national levels, instruments for police and judicial cooperation should be developed further, and their more frequent use should be encouraged.
8. The EU should promote the development of common standards and continuous exchange among MSs on training policemen, forensic personnel, and prosecutors in matters relevant to ITF and other firearm-related crimes.
9. The EU should continue to address the security and safety of firearm stockpiles in third countries as part of its neighbourhood and foreign policy, and it should consider committing to common standards among its own MSs.
10. The EU should increase the control of its external borders and foster effective MSs' control over their territories.
11. Police forces should be trained and empowered to actively investigate and constantly monitor the illicit firearms trade dynamic, including local demand, and the nascent exchange of firearms on marketplaces in the dark web.