project SAFTE

FACT SHEET

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# The illicit production 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 the illicit production of firearms. This is not currently a significant supply mechanism for illicit firearms markets in Europe, but the emergence and development of 3D printing may pose a significant security risk in the future.***

## Illicit craft production

Producing and assembling firearms without the necessary authorisation is illegal in the EU. Sporadic seizures of illicitly produced firearms and the dismantlement of illicit production sites indicate that this type of sourcing of illicit firearms is not completely absent in the EU. In the Netherlands, for example, several dozen firearms are seized annually and seem to be largely the products of 'cottage industries' abroad.

In some cases there are indications of illegal industrial workshops. Among the law enforcement agencies of various EU member states **Croatia** has a reputation of being a significant illicit-firearms-producing country. This illicit production is generally believed to be a legacy of the firearms production activities during the armed conflicts that ravaged the country in the 1990s.

In the 1980s also 'brand replicas' of Belgian handguns regularly appeared on the illicit gun markets in neighbouring countries. Brand replicas are firearms that are illegally produced and imitate real existing models of firearms of various well-known brands. In this case the handguns were identical to some of the models legally produced and sold by a Belgian firearms producer, but without serial numbers or proof marks. Police investigations revealed that a number of

During the Croatian Homeland War in the 1990s, one of the major firearms factories was run by a Croatian family. This family started to produce a sub-machine gun called an '**Agram'** to fulfil the domestic need for firearms.

This gun was later improved and sold as the 'Agram 2000'. After the war the family was not given a manufacturing licence, but continued to produce weapons.

Police investigations were carried out after several murders were committed with Agram guns. The illegal firearms factory was closed. Recently several members of the family were convicted for producing illicit firearms.

employees had stolen firearms components from a factory to be assembled at home and then sold on the illicit firearms market.

## Illicit assembly of firearms components

The illicit assembly of firearms components is another form of illicit firearms production. People seeking firearms can **exploit differences in national firearms legislations on firearms components** by ordering components online from countries with fewer legal restrictions. Typically, they have these components shipped to them by regular mail or courier services. The lighter weight of these components makes them harder to detect for law enforcement services than complete firearms. Furthermore, these components are often shipped in packages containing old electronics materials to reduce the risk of detection.

*"It is possible to purchase the slide for a Glock pistol in Austria, its receiver in Luxembourg and the barrel in the United States." – French law enforcement official*

The **United States** are an important source country for these components. Several cases of the trafficking of components from the United States to EU member states have been detected in recent years. Today, US firearms dealers are no longer allowed to send firearms components to international addresses, but several ways of circumventing this restriction have also been detected.

Not all components, however, come from outside the EU. Some of them can also be legally bought in other EU member states.

## 3D printing

Europol has warned that technological progress will make 3D printing widely available in the future, offering new opportunities for illicit firearms production and trade. However, **in the short term it is considered unlikely to grow into an important source of weapons** because of the technical complexity involved in this type of printing and the availability of high-quality firearms that can be acquired for lower prices on the illicit firearms market. Not surprisingly, cases of 3D-printed firearms have not yet been observed in the eight country studies conducted for Project SAFTE.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that 3D printing offers some significant advantages:

- 3D-printed guns can be considered 'ghost guns' which are difficult to control and almost impossible to trace since the only component made of metal is the firing pin.
- Particularly for terrorists planning an attack, 3D firearms can be an interesting alternative since in general they only need to use the firearms once to carry out such an attack.
- Firearms made of plastic are difficult to detect for airport security systems for example.



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