

# Improving the intelligence picture to tackle illicit firearms trafficking

*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 improving the intelligence picture of illicit firearms trafficking.*

## Strengthening intelligence gathering

A detailed 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 across member states offers law enforcement a vital tool in mapping the actors and networks linked to the illicit arms trade. Currently, official statistics on seized firearms and gun-related crime are incomplete and thus unreliable. Greater focus must be placed on the kinds of weapons being used in various kinds of shootings and how they are being used. Strategic investment in law enforcement must be directed at overcoming deficiencies in the completeness and quality of information on illicit firearms in Europe.

Ballistics information on firearms, bullets and ammunition casings recovered after a seizure or shooting incident is also potentially extremely useful in improving the understanding and combating of illicit firearms trafficking. **EU member states should strive to undertake as much ballistics analysis as possible**, especially in the most relevant cases. The results of these analyses should be **systematised and centralised**.

Attention must be focused on **expanding the base of law enforcement officials with specialized knowledge in firearms** to increase the quality of seizure registrations. These officials do not always have the necessary expertise to ensure the correctness of the information they are required to register. Firearms legislation and technicalities should therefore play a more important role in national law enforcement training programs. In addition, EU member states need to adopt an **electronic data-registration** program which is easy to interpret and use, and allows for the registration of contextualised data on firearms seizures.

Law enforcement agencies should also increase awareness of the importance of **correct and complete registrations of firearms seizures**. The registration process is often not meticulously carried out because of an already high workload and the low priority given to registering firearms, especially when they are seized in relation to another criminal act deemed to be more important (e.g. a drug-trafficking case). As a result, not all seized firearms are ultimately included in the official seizure statistics. This has a significant negative impact on the intelligence picture of illicit firearms trafficking.

## Enhancing intelligence sharing

Given the multifaceted, inter-regional and cross-border nature of illicit firearms trafficking, **information sharing is key** in a comprehensive and proactive approach: within and between member states, and between those states and specialised international agencies such as Europol and Interpol.

National law enforcement agencies are not always able to share information with national and international partners. This may result from the absence of reliable data, but procedural and technical difficulties can also hinder effective information-sharing. The **interoperability of databases** both within and between member states must be increased. A **standardised collecting and reporting system** on firearms seizures needs to be introduced at national level, and integrated in an EU-wide database of seized firearms. There is also an urgent need for much greater sharing of **ballistics data** internationally.

However, the willingness to share information also presents a challenge. Intelligence-sharing between member states and with agencies such as Europol and Interpol has improved, but national sovereignty issues continue to hinder effective and efficient cooperation. Europol can only fully play its role as a central information hub and increase the return of relevant information to EU member states if those states increase the amount of relevant information they share with this agency. There is therefore a continued **need to convince all member states of the added value of information exchange**.

An important answer to several of the problems relating to the current intelligence picture of illicit firearms trafficking is the **establishment of national focal points on firearms across Europe**. Their function would be to collect, analyse, and share information and intelligence on firearms-related crime at both national and international levels.

Besides developing a template in which their core tasks are clarified, the **European Commission needs to encourage and monitor the effective implementation** of these national focal points across the EU.

## Making use of the intelligence

Investment in analytical law enforcement personnel and tools making use of collected data at national level is also key. Increased focus on analysis in conjunction with better data will lead to more effective regulations, policies and operational actions across the EU. At EU level, Europol already devotes significant effort to delivering strategic intelligence products on illicit firearms trafficking. To assess the broader international picture and assist member states to take action that is properly attuned to the evolving threat, **the sharing of relevant national data and analyses with Europol by member states is crucial**.

A **structural collaboration between specialised research institutes and law enforcement agencies and policymakers** in the area of illicit firearms trafficking should also be set up. In cooperation with national law enforcement agencies and Europol, policy-oriented researchers can significantly add value to the intelligence picture of illicit firearms trafficking. The combination of their methodological skills with the operational information and expertise of law enforcement agencies is potentially very enriching.