



Illegal Firearms in Europe and the UK - Stemming the Tide?

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Abstract

Even before the handgun ban introduced in 1998 following the school shooting at Dunblane, Scotland, the UK had one of the world's stricter firearms control regimes. Partly as a consequence, rates of firearm ownership in England, Wales and Scotland were low, even by European standards. More recently, however, with increasing concerns about gang involved violence, mass shootings, organised crime and terrorism; questions of firearms control have taken on a new significance. In Europe generally, firearm ownership has been creeping upwards and, even as police and security agencies have developed new methods to disrupt firearm trafficking, criminal entrepreneurs find new ways to transport illegal firearms. The trafficking of weapons has been addressed at the European level but issues arising from distinct and separate national 'gun cultures' and legal systems, wavering political will, varying ballistic analysis capabilities and differing levels of enthusiasm for intelligence sharing have meant that firearms control across Europe resembles a patchwork with numerous loopholes. Although the introduction of NABIS (the National Ballistics Intelligence Service) in Britain represents an important step forward in ballistics analysis, weapons tracing and intelligence sharing, its ability to withstand the rising global tide of firearms remains to be seen.

Keywords: Firearms Control; Gun Crime; Weapon Trafficking; Ballistic Analysis; Intelligence Sharing

Abbreviations: NABIS: National Ballistics Intelligence Service; NCA: National Crime Agency; ICVS: International Crime Victims Survey; SAS: Small Arms Survey; NCA: National Crime Agency; UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; ICVS: Crime Victims Survey; NBIS: National Ballistics Intelligence Service.

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the risks and threats

associated with illegal gun possession, trafficking and use in the region of Europe and how these might, most effectively be combated, minimised and prevented. A particular and specific concern also includes the trafficking of firearms for illegal purposes into the UK. In order to do this, two separate, but related, aspects of the issue will be considered. As Savona and Mancuso [1] note, 'relatively little is known about the structure of the threat that firearms pose to European security' so, in the first place, our question concerns the scale and nature of firearm ownership or possession across

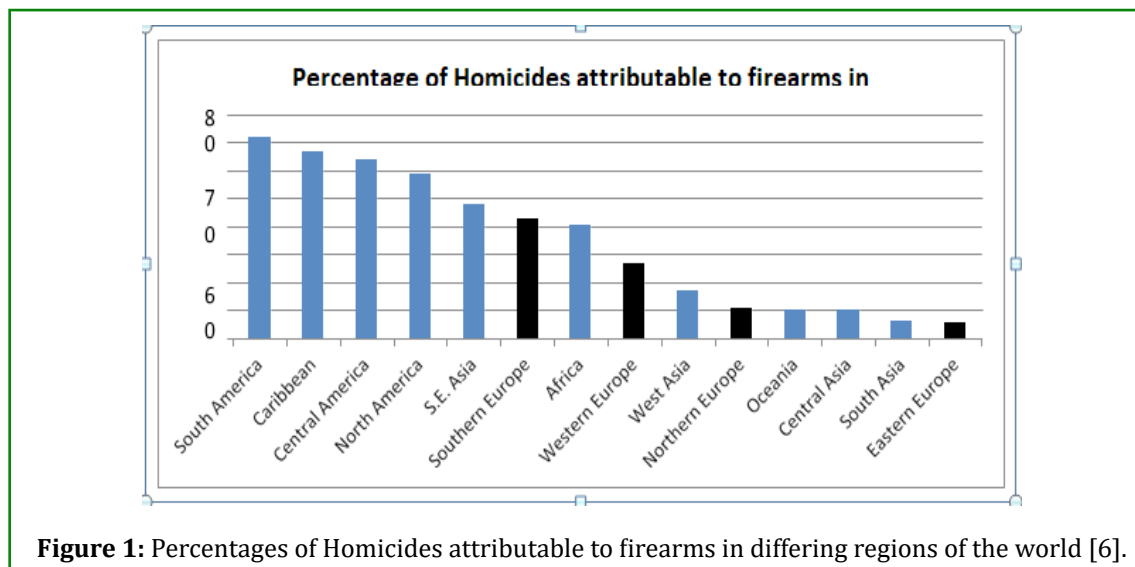
the range of European societies; the balance between legal and illegal (licensed or unlicensed) firearms comprising the various societies' firearm inventories; the chief uses to which these firearms are put, and the risks and social harms to which these rates of possession routinely give rise, including background levels of homicide, suicide and firearm related violence. In this regard we might also include environmental harms such as the mass slaughter of migrating birds, including many already endangered species, as practiced in several southern European cultures [2], but we will not be discussing this further here.

From this perspective, firearm regulation, crime prevention and incident investigation typically falls within the brief of 'routine' policing and crime management activities. In the second place we will address a number of the more contingent, institutional features of firearm production, exchange and distribution, including particular configurations of political, cultural and geographic incidents and relationships including wars and patterns of conflict, especially crimogenic 'gun cultures' which generate a demand for illegal firearms and structural or institutional features of gun control regimes [3] giving rise to large scale or organised criminal or terrorist opportunities [1]. This latter area of concern corresponds to what is often referred to as the 'high policing' agenda [4,5],

and includes issues of intelligence development, surveillance, security management and risk assessment, and in this case the quality of firearm tracking and tracing, and the retrieval, interpretation and sharing of ballistic and intelligence data. It is important to recognise, of course, that while these two aspects of perspective are addressed separately here, they are in many ways, connected, as we shall see.

Rates of Firearm Possession and Firearm Fatalities

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [6], comparatively speaking, as a region, Europe has some of the lowest international rates for intentional homicide. The UNODC data on intentional homicides excludes what are referred to as 'conflict deaths', 'killings in self defence' and deaths resulting from legal interventions. Were these killings included in the comparison, the comparative European 'safety margin' would be even greater. Furthermore, as UNODC data on homicides attributable to firearms reveals (Figure 1) Eastern Europe and Northern Europe, in particular, have the lowest rates of firearm homicide. Nevertheless, as Duquet and Van Alstein [7] have noted, on average there are around one thousand gun homicides (as compared to around 4,000 firearm suicides), each year, in Europe.



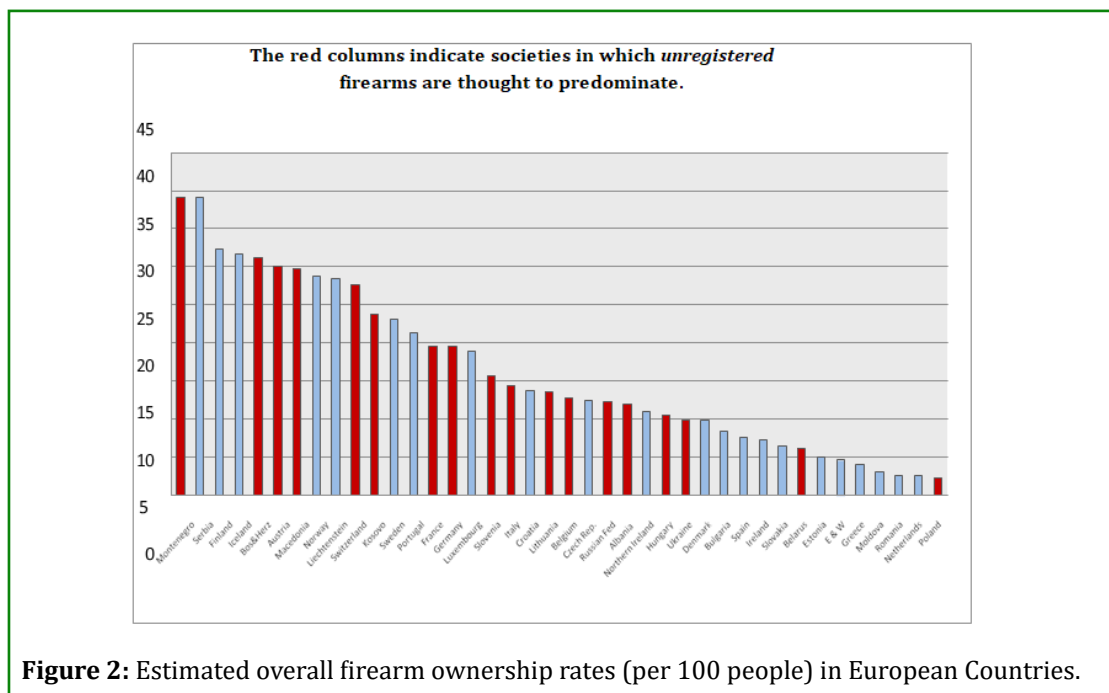
As the graph above shows, Western Europe and Southern Europe indicate significant steps up in rates of firearm-related killings, a finding that, for our present analysis, begins to suggest its own story, just as it cautions against over generalisation by region-Europe. In any event, the UNODC analysis [6] acknowledges a greater uncertainty regarding the upper ranges of homicide estimates in Eastern Europe, by contrast the data for the rest of Europe is regarded as more reliable. This is confirmed to some extent by Lysova and Shchitov [8] who demonstrate systematic under recording

of homicides in Russia, for example. The apparent 'relative safety' of Europe, as demonstrated in the above figures, and especially the – by international comparisons-relatively limited exposure of European societies to firearm violence can be attributed to a wide range of historical, social and cultural factors.

Even so, as a report for the European Commission [9] has noted, although accepting some of the vagaries in the ways by which even legal ownership of firearms is recorded, there are

estimated to be some eighty million legally held and civilian owned firearms in the countries of the European Union. And although, by its very nature, illegal firearm possession does not lend itself to clear and precise estimation, there have been a number of attempts, prompted especially by concerns about gangs, organised crime and weapon trafficking, and, in the wake of terrorist attacks in France and Belgium, terrorist access to more powerful military specification and 'mass casualty' weapons [10]. Noting that official data on the scale of illegal firearm possession in European societies is sketchy at best, one official European publication estimated the number of illegally-held firearms in Europe as lying somewhere between a low of 81,000 and a high of 67 million [11].

Although the high Figure 2 of 67 million illegal firearms in Europe is derived from data collated by the Gun Policy News website, hosted by the University of Sydney, the merits of this data set resides in the breadth and variety of data available and the ability to compare ownership rates with firearm mortality data. Furthermore, the Gun Policy News data also suggests that for eighteen of the forty countries identified in figure 2, the estimated number of unregistered ('illegal') firearms exceeds the number recorded. The Small Arms Survey has confirmed this apparent disproportion, with the number of unlicensed or unregistered firearms in Europe as a whole exceeding registered firearms by a ratio of around 4 to 3 [12].



In Albania, Hungary and the Ukraine there were thought to be four times as many unregistered firearms as registered ones; in Italy, Belarus and Macedonia approximately three times as many, and roughly twice as many in France, Switzerland, Russia, Lithuania, Belgium, Austria, Bosnia and Latvia. In Kosovo, no doubt reflecting its recent civil war, the number of legal weapons, is thought to be exceeded by illegal firearms at a ratio of around nine to one. The wars and regional conflicts following the break-up of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Soviet bloc have been, in large part, responsible for the high level weaponisation of the region [13]. As Green and Marsh [14] have noted there is nothing as effective as war for ensuring the indiscriminate dissemination of firearms and this helps account for the continued significance of the region in assessments of organised crime, trafficking, and illegal firearm supply [15]. As Savona and Mancuso noted in Paoli GP, et al. [16], while firearm seizures mostly occur in

border areas, this is especially so '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' [17]. Prominent amongst the countries, or regions, supplying the majority of firearms into Europe have been the Balkans (former Yugoslavia), former Soviet states and other Eastern European countries and the Middle East and North Africa. Key transit states for weapons entering Europe are Belgium, the Netherlands, Croatia, Greece and Italy [1], the first two of which, as well as France, appear significant for the transshipment of weapons to the UK. That said, recent firearm tracing by NABIS (UK) indicates that the USA remains the single most frequent source of manufacture for illegal firearms recovered in the UK [18]. Until relatively recently National Crime Agency (NCA) annual 'Threat Assessments' had identified the USA as the source of over fifty percent of criminal firearms traced in the UK, although the most recent

NCA assessment now emphasises the European origins of illegal firearms in the UK [19].

Schwander-Sivers and Cattaneo [20] have rightly criticised the assumption that the prevalence of (even non-registered or illegal) firearms in a society, necessarily equates to the existence of a monolithic or homogenous 'gun culture' which inevitably spells violence and disorder. After all, many of the forty countries in figure two might claim some form of 'gun culture' – so, by itself the concept may explain relatively little. However, compounded by regional and ethnic conflict, inequality and social division, weak governance, widespread social tensions and flourishing criminal opportunities, then freely available firearms can undoubtedly exacerbate social tensions resulting in especially crimogenic gun cultures in parts of Europe reflected in organised criminal enterprises and violent gang cultures.

For a long while research on the correlation between firearm ownership rates and gun violence was dominated by US based research where both the unique culture of firearm research and, on occasion, some remarkably partisan research projects undermined the extent to which research results might be generalised. More recently, however, international research evidence has pointed to a clear correlation internationally between rates of firearm ownership and firearm deaths. In 2013, Bangalore and Messerli reported, in respect of 27 'developed' countries (20 of which being European) a 'significant positive correlation between guns per capita per country and the rate of firearm-related deaths', the majority of such deaths being suicides. They concluded that, 'the number of guns per capita per country was a strong and independent predictor of firearm-related death in a given

country', whereas there appeared no significant effect of firearms on crime rates [21].

The following year, Van Kesteren's analysis of a series of international data sets found clear evidence to 'support the notion that gun ownership acts as a risk-enhancing rather than as a protective factor', in particular, evidence from 26 developed countries (including most major European countries) found that 'owners of a handgun [also] show increased risk for victimization by violent crime' [22]. Taken together, both surveys reinforced a clearly emerging global picture that, all things being equal, higher rates of gun ownership and possession corresponded to higher rates of firearm misuse – suicide and homicide. Handgun possession, in particular, for reasons of convenience and concealability – the firearm of choice of the criminally inclined – was best understood as a risk factor for society at large. Figure 3 details the total number of firearm deaths (and the subset of firearm suicides) in twenty-eight different European countries. As we have seen, firearm deaths are more frequent in societies with the highest rates of firearm ownership and, while suicides generally comprise the overwhelming majority of firearm deaths, the proportion of firearm deaths recorded as homicide often appears greater in a number of Southern European and or former Eastern bloc societies, especially where rates of unlicensed firearm possession were highest. Correspondingly, such findings accord with Duquet and Van Alstein's evidence from the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS), comprising longitudinal data from 1989 to 2005, and the Eurobarometer poll of 2013, that in countries which were EU member states before 2004, firearms were more typically owned by older white males, living in rural areas.

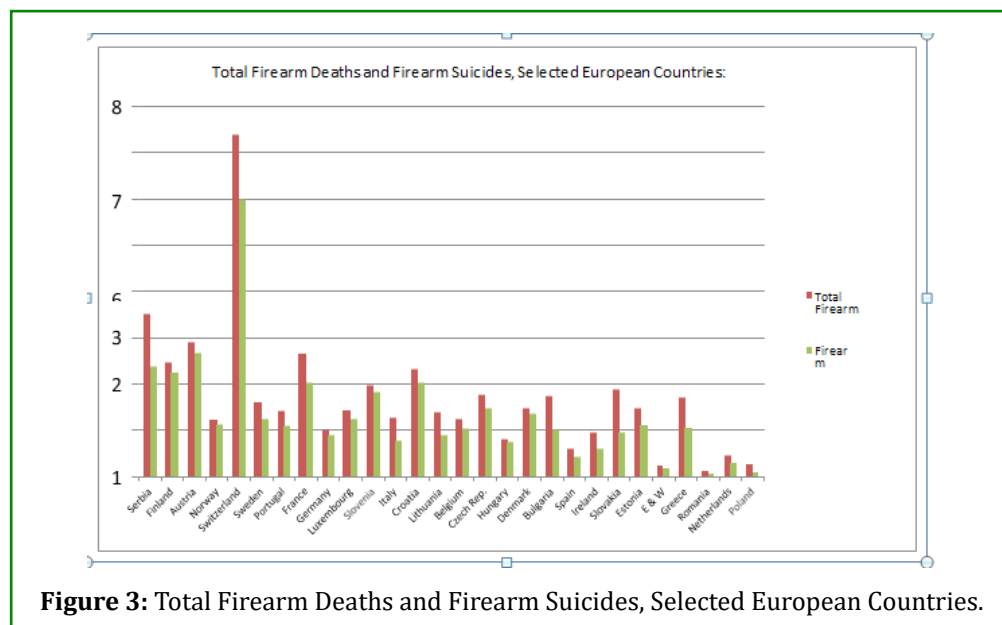


Figure 3: Total Firearm Deaths and Firearm Suicides, Selected European Countries.

Shotguns and rifles predominated, hunting and sports shooting tended to be the most common reasons given for firearm ownership. The data they examined confirms the range and variation in rates of gun ownership across different European countries, and the diversity of firearms control regimes, as well as cultural and ideological differences in popular attitudes to guns. Between 1989 and 2005 they identified rates of firearm ownership that were, by international standards, relatively high (Belgium, France, Norway, Switzerland) and in which gun ownership appeared to be falling, but also societies in which ownership appeared to be rising (especially Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK, the ICVS data did not include data from the former Yugoslavian societies) to societies with unusually low rates of firearm ownership.

While the phenomenon of mass shootings is often associated with the USA, Europe too has had its share of such tragedies [23]. In Europe, reflecting the enormous symbolic impact of such incidents, mass shootings have often been associated with 'step changes' in firearms control legislation in European societies, for example the banning of civilian ownership of handguns in England, Wales and Scotland after Dunblane. However, legislative change does not always follow a mass shooting, for a number of European 'rampage shootings' Hurka [24] has explored which factors make legal changes more or less likely, including for instance, the strength and leverage of national gun lobbies. Figure 4, below, presents a timeline of European 'mass shootings' in Europe, beginning with the 1987 incident in Hungerford, England (using the FBI standard definition of continuous shooting incidents involving 4 or more victims).

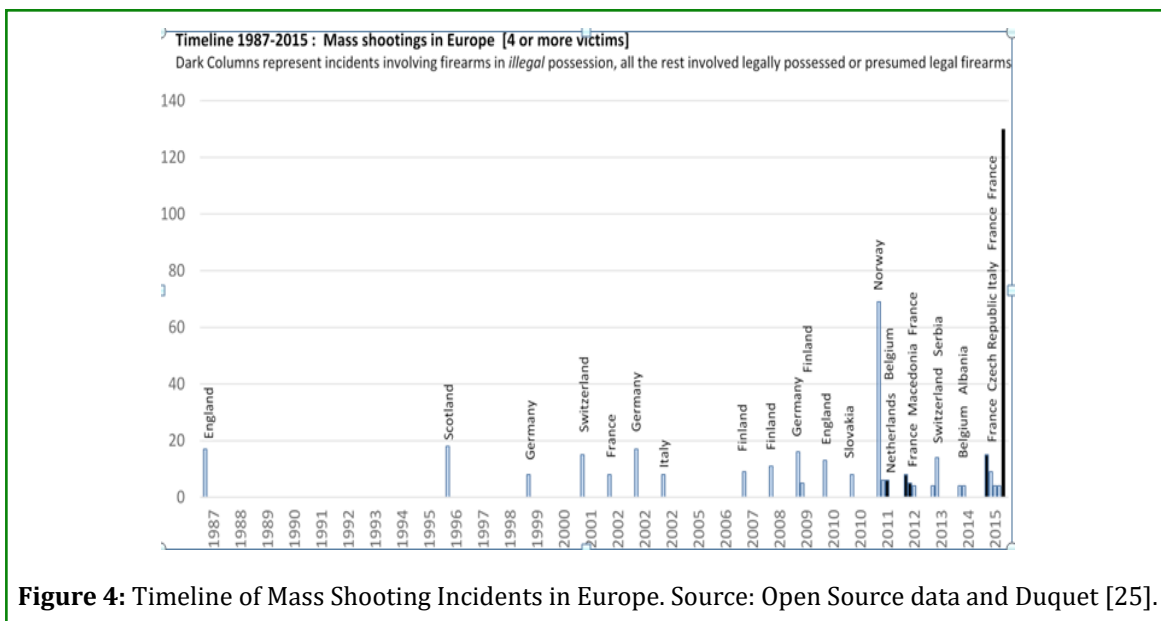


Figure 4: Timeline of Mass Shooting Incidents in Europe. Source: Open Source data and Duquet [25].

The timeline illustrates a number of points: first the apparently increasing frequency of these incidents; second, the fact that most incidents, especially until 2011, were carried out with legally owned or licensed firearms (pale columns indicate legal firearms, dark columns illegal weapons); third, the firepower – military specification firearms – available to private citizens can dramatically exacerbate the potential death toll during mass shootings; and, finally, terrorist access to illegal supplies of mass casualty military firearms represents a major escalation of the threat posed by such incidents [25]. We will address this latter issue later in the chapter. Recently, the Small Arms Survey [12] has reported a thirty-two percent increase in the global civilian ownership of personal firearms in the decade to 2017, and while only ten per cent of this increase is attributed to a growth in civilian firearm ownership in Europe, politicians, lobbyists and commentators have sought to interpret the significance

of these trends and where and why they may be occurring. Globally, the NRA has never been slow to promote the 'right to bear arms' as a quintessentially American 'freedom' [27] and now a number of right-wing parties and populist movements have come to advocate for a nationalist right to bear arms. Firearms have become a means to embolden followers through a call to arms against perceived crime, terror or especially supposed migrant 'threats'.

The Czech Republic recently passed legislation advocating a 'right to bear arms', and while Putin had initially blocked laws permitting armed self-defence in Russia, he subsequently announced support for the new measures [28]. Politicians in Hungary, and Italy's interior minister Matteo Salvini, have also advocated extending gun laws to allow private citizens to defend themselves. This stance has also been echoed by the Alternative for Germany's leader, Frauke Petry, whilst

sales of less lethal weapons (known as 'basic weapons', alarm guns, flares, irritant sprays and stun guns) have reportedly been increasing in Germany [29]. A combination of issues – terrorism, crime and the 'migration crisis' – are typically deployed to explain these developments. Correspondingly, Finland, Austria, Norway, Germany, Belgium and France have also seen increasing rates of firearm ownership.

Mention of less lethal self-defence weapons which are available in many countries also necessitates reference to the apparently widespread practice of weapon conversion whereby blank-firing pistols or weapons designed to discharge irritant powder towards would-be attackers are converted to fire live ammunition. Florquin and King [30] have undertaken an overview of the scale and nature of firearm conversion and reactivation in Europe, to which we should also add the 'recycling', servicing and repurposing of antique firearms, and they point to firearm manufacturers in Germany, Italy, Turkey and the Russian Federation producing substantial numbers of these weapons (2018: 20). Concern has also focused upon the manufacture of bespoke ammunition, in a variety of calibres, to fit the newly converted or recycled firearms. DeVries [31] presented a useful case study of the modus operandi of the production, trafficking, conversion, trade and end-use of a number of makes of alarm pistols originally manufactured in Turkey and Italy, converted in Portugal and subsequently intercepted.

Around a thousand were recovered between 2002 and 2006, in the Netherlands [31]. In like fashion, over twenty percent of illegal firearms submitted to the National Firearms Forensic Intelligence Service of England and Wales, between 2003 and 2008, were recorded as 'converted'. The converted firearms appeared in waves, initially entering the market in smaller numbers, gaining acceptance and buyers but then facing interceptions, leading to analysis and, in the UK, prohibition on grounds of 'ready convertibility' [32]. Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, concluded that 'converted firearms [were] both more widely available and cheaper than purpose built firearms' in their 2006 analysis of the illegal market in firearms in England and Wales (2006: 52), whereas a NABIS study in 2015 noted that, 'a third of the firearms that UK police examined were converted blank-firing, modified, or reactivated firearms', indicating that these weapon types contributed significantly to the pool of illegal firearms [33]. Converted handguns were involved in two of the most controversial British police shootings of recent times, the deaths of Azelle Rodney, in 2005, and Mark Duggan, in 2011, the immediate precursor of the British Riots of that year [3].

The case of converted firearms demonstrates further connection between the legal production, possession and use of types of firearms and their illegal misuse. Data analysed by Duquet and Van Alstein found evidence from respondents in

11 countries, primarily post-2004 EU states, which indicated that more than 50% of gun owners reported owning handguns (either only handguns or in addition to rifles and shotguns). Perhaps reflecting this, almost thirty percent of respondents cited 'professional reasons' (security or military employment) especially in Romania, Estonia and Bulgaria, while 'personal self-defence' was mentioned by 14% overall, but most frequently in Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia [7]. Such findings correspond closely with a more detailed and qualitative local study of the society identified in figure 2 as having the highest firearm ownership rates, Montenegro. Florquin and Stoneman [34] unearthed some rather conflicted attitudes to firearms amongst Montenegrin people.

Firearms, especially handguns, were most often misused by young men participating in 'late evening bar or gang fights, but also in celebratory shootings and suicides' and, while survey respondents would readily agree that there were 'too many guns' in Montenegrin society, they also tended to see gun ownership itself as traditionally endorsed and legitimate in the context of concerns about the high rate of crime. Although there was support for the police, 'protection of one's self and family' was the primary reason given by Montenegrins for owning a firearm, and for that reason, men were reluctant to give them up [34]. Comparable patterns of gun ownership and similarly gendered, symbolic, cultural and practical attachments to firearms [35] have been found in other Balkan societies – Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo, all of which, as figure two reveals, evidence some of the highest rates of gun ownership in Europe, with (figure 1) Southern Europe recording the highest rates of gun homicide [36-39].

Of course, one of the ironies of the relatively peaceful and safe conception of the 'European homeland' [3], despite some European societies having, again by international standards, quite high rates of firearm ownership is the fact that the 18th and 19th century European empires were primarily responsible for distributing the firearms, generating the conflict and ethno- geographic divisions, imposing exploitation, genocide and slavery upon many of the underdeveloped regions of the Southern world [22]. Priya Satia's recent book, *Empire of Guns: The violent making of the industrial revolution* (2018), a rigorous, detailed and sophisticated analysis, describes the foundational role of gun-making to the European industrial revolution. More critically, she demonstrates how the production and procurement of firearms, the stockpiling and dissemination of weapons and the deployment of military firearms around the world, underpinned the pursuit of empire and the achievement of military conquest. Other commentators have likewise drawn attention to this cultural 'legacy' aspect of firearm production, for the 'countries where a significant proportion

of gun-possessing households own a handgun, are also the European countries with the largest firearms production' [7].

These countries include Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, and the authors speculate that countries with a significant recent history of firearms production may also have a less restrictive legal framework for civilian firearm ownership. Such countries may also be less willing to enthusiastically embrace European wide firearms control measures such as the Schengen Two alert and data-sharing arrangements regarding lost or stolen firearms, ballistics intelligence sharing (which we will discuss later) and implementation of the 2017 amendments to the European Firearms Directive, which sought to tighten up European-wide firearms laws and classifications in the wake of the 2015 terrorist outrages. It is argued that the partial 'right to bear arms' in the Czech Republic is, in part, explained as 'resistance' to the new Directive, Finland also expressed reservations about the impact of the new regulations and sought exemptions.

Satia also remarks upon another of the more pragmatic side-effects of a thriving national gun trade, revealing an important disconnection between the production of arms and the assumption of moral responsibility for their use and misuse. For frequently, in the aftermath of wars, conquests and conflicts, the state and the gun trade conspired to dump, sell and otherwise off-load old, obsolete and surplus military firearms, both openly and covertly, to a range of legitimate and illegitimate purchasers, often in pursuit of political or economic alliances or in furtherance of particular influence [40]. Such developments undoubtedly continue to have their more recent parallels, for as a European Commission report from 2013 noted, 'large amounts of powerful military grade weapons have since the mid-1990s reached the EU from the Western Balkans and former Soviet Bloc countries, often trafficked in small quantities and hidden in vehicles like long distance coaches to avoid detection' [9]. The EC went on to reflect that recent conflicts in North Africa and the Middle-East pose a similar risk that surplus and stolen military firearms might reach criminal firearm markets in Europe along similar routes, drawn by the price dividend that illegal commodities can often command in high regulation regimes.

Security Risks and Social Harms

Having established these broad underlying relations between patterns of firearm ownership and possession across European societies, the varying types of orientations towards firearms and the uses to which these are chiefly put and the resulting rates of homicides and suicide, it is important to turn to the more contextual, institutional and strategic connections between firearm supply and demand, regimes and enforcement issues and specific security risks and social

harms. Having noted how surplus military weapons are often off-loaded into civilian markets, a particular case in point arose in 2015. This was the year in which a number of Kalashnikov variant assault rifles, originally manufactured in Serbia, purchased deactivated² from a firearm dealership in Slovakia (where they were ostensibly destined for a supposed European firearm souvenir markets), were subsequently reactivated and then employed by terrorists to kill 12 people in the Charlie Hebdo offices attack in January 2015.

Prior to this time, although there had been reports of similar 'mass casualty' weapons being trafficked from the Balkans and falling into the hands of terror cells or organised crime groups in mainland Europe [41,1], there appeared little evidence of such firearms reaching the UK. Then, in the Summer of 2015, twenty- two further AKM assault rifles and nine Skorpion machine pistols (potential 'mass casualty attack' weapons) along with around a thousand rounds of ammunition, purchased from the same Slovakian dealer, were intercepted by police and the National Crime Agency as a criminal gang attempted to smuggle them by boat into Kent - the largest haul of illegal weapons ever seized in the UK [42]. This led to a number of police and security efforts to reassess the vulnerability of national firearm inventories, especially illegal firearm holdings, to terrorist acquisition, and to reflect upon the robustness of the police and security measures to prevent, detect and secure intelligence regarding illegal firearm trafficking.

The Project SAFTE report [10] provided nine fairly detailed national and regional analyses of the scale and nature of illegal firearm supplies in a diverse range of European societies as well as a study of North Africa, chiefly taking in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Mali and Tunisia [27]. While Libya, following the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, gained an unfortunate label as the 'Tesco of the world's illegal arms trade' [43], other countries in the region reflected a familiar range of weak firearms control regimes, with characteristics including state failure, corruption, conflict and civil war, frequently a virtual magnet for illegal weapon supplies, weapon surpluses and highly porous borders with often equally poorly regulated neighbouring states. The European countries were selected to reflect the diversity of their geo- political histories, regime characteristics, their proximity to former conflict regions, established organised crime cultures, their law enforcement traditions and firearm regulatory practices and, importantly, what was already known about the scale of illegal weaponry in the country. Finally, and not to be overlooked, their recent experiences of terrorist activity were also considered.

The overall aims of Project SAFTE had been, first, to produce a better informed intelligence picture concerning illicit firearms markets in Europe in general and potential terrorist

access to these markets so that more effective, evidence-based, policies and preventive strategies might be developed. Secondly, the project aimed to explore the differing regulatory regimes and operational strategies adopted to prevent illegal and unregulated firearm dissemination in order to more effectively combat firearms trafficking and weapons acquisition by terrorists. Finally, recognising that, even in the most restrictive firearms management regimes with the most extensive data and intelligence, law enforcement institutions typically collect far more information than they ever analyse, let alone share, so the third aim of the project was to contribute to the further development of an independent (academy and civil society) research community focusing on firearms-related topics in the European context [10]. To the extent that this research community has already begun to emerge, a number of significant areas of interest and concern have arisen regarding weapons trafficking, illegal supply chains (and their sources), the scale of unregistered firearms in a given culture and deficiencies in surveillance, regulatory and enforcement regimes.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but many of the particular security deficits identified relate to the scale and nature, patterns of use, culture and traditions of firearm possession that we have already considered in the first part of this chapter. In recent years, in particular, two relatively, perhaps 'mundane' and seemingly low-key misuses of firearms have surfaced as causes of concern. The first has involved avid collectors amassing large firearm stocks, collected over many years, and comprising guns both legal and illegal. Often these are stored in private homes, with limited security. Such collections would prove highly dangerous in the wrong hands. In a related sense, a thriving antique firearm trade has also contributed to the illegal supply chain. Weapons are often considered antique, in obsolete calibres, when there is no longer thought to be any suitable ammunition available for them to fire.

The absence of any clear and precise legal definition of an antique firearm has also hampered regulation and enforcement efforts, providing a loophole through which ingenious illegal entrepreneurs have seized criminal opportunities. By re-engineering antique weapons, re-chambering firearms or simply inserting metal tubes into existing barrels, firearm calibres might be re-sized to suit available ammunition. Other criminal armourers have simply resorted to manufacturing their own bespoke calibre ammunition [3]. During 2018, the UK National Ballistics Intelligence Service profiled a number of operations which had successfully disrupted a series of antique firearm and illegal ammunition distribution networks. One particular 'security' deficit, however, points to a more strategic issue and concerns the potential role of both new technologies, global free trade, the internet (and perhaps especially the

'dark web'), crypto currencies and the logistical difficulties of effectively scrutinising 'fast-parcel' services and deliveries. A study for the Rand Corporation in 2017 [16] explored the role of the 'dark web' in facilitating the trafficking of firearms and explosives.

A related pair of developments, the advent of remote 3D printing [44] and the rising significance of composite firearms [45] and (legal and illegal) markets in gun components, have resulted in the phenomenon of untraceable 'ghost guns' in the USA [6]. Taken together these developments point to the possibility for would be gun purchasers accessing hidden and encrypted websites, paying in crypto currencies, for unmarked or untraceable guns, components and ammunition, contained and delivered in parcels designed to defeat scanning and surveillance technologies. As the Rand survey put it, contraband is 'shipped by post using special shipping techniques to minimise the risk of detection. In the context of firearms, these techniques often involve disassembling the weapon and shipping different parts in multiple packages' [16]. Of eighteen crypto-markets accessed by the study, 'firearms represented the most common category of product sold. Within the firearms category, pistols are by far the most common firearm type'. Ammunition was often sold with the firearm and, while a large number of the origins and destinations of the shipped items could not be discerned, the USA appeared to be the dominating source country of most of the firearms sold, while 'Europe appears to be a key recipient of firearms sold on the dark web' (2017: xiii-xiv, 29-32). Reflecting existing concerns regarding the effect of loose firearm regulation regimes upon regions and countries with tighter gun control, in this case the USA as 'global bad neighbour', the Rand study concluded that the 'Dark Web' and related developments, while constituting a relatively limited 'present danger' represent a likely growing source of black market firearms and a potential vehicle for illegal diversion of privately owned weapons. They recommended continuous monitoring and trend analysis and rigorous assessment of the validity and effectiveness of existing national and international weapon trafficking regimes, policies, laws and regulations, actors, resources and emerging technologies such as 3D printing of firearm components. In addition to attempts to tighten EU-wide laws and the regulations pertaining to different firearm classifications (EU Amending Directive (EU) 2017/853) attention has also been drawn to efforts to ensure concerted and collaborative enforcement of European and national firearms laws, and appropriate security intelligence sharing to tackle weapon trafficking.

Far be it for criminologists to think that new laws alone are sufficient to combat crime. For some time, forensic and ballistic scientists have been examining computer platforms for analysing and sharing ballistics intelligence data across Europe [46,47] with a view to tackling cross border crime

and weapon trafficking throughout Europe. In 2015, the European Commission published an action plan for developing more effective security collaboration in respect of firearms and explosives trafficking, this was followed a year later by the publication of a research report, the EFFECT project [48] which comprised a series of research operations exploring the adoption and use of ballistics technologies, data sharing, systems inter-operability and the extent to which existing intelligence sharing arrangements facilitate proactive policing operations to detect and disrupt firearm trafficking.

The research was, in part, motivated by the observation that, in Europe, while criminals, terrorists, guns, ammunition and evidence frequently move across borders, intelligence data held by police and security agencies in member states did not with anything like the same facility, despite being collected and collated [48]. Police agencies in differing member states, according to their different national priorities and commitments, tended to submit more or less ballistics data to their intelligence systems. Four or five different and incompatible ballistic intelligence systems were in use across the EU, and the researchers noted that 'there is currently no single shared European database at present, the potential for linking databases on an EU basis is restricted due to the use of reportedly incompatible systems' [19] resulting in a significant loss of intelligence capacity. Europol is currently helping co-ordinate European-wide efforts to foster improved operational collaboration and more effective sharing of firearms intelligence and ballistic evidence.

In all, the EFFECT project made thirty recommendations for improving data gathering, intelligence sharing and police and security operation across Europe as well as harnessing best practices from existing available systems for tracing and tracking illegal weapons. The EU funded, Project Fire, [1] likewise made eleven rather more generic recommendations prioritizing regulative harmonisation, comprehensive tracing and tracking of weapons, more effective police and security collaboration and intelligence sharing, tighter weapon stockpile management, more consistent training of police, judicial and security personnel and more effective monitoring of illicit weapons markets, especial those hosted on the 'Dark Web'.

Conclusion

Taken together a series of tragic events, including both mass shootings and terrorist outrages, have sharpened the focus of European policy makers regarding the several vulnerabilities associated with cross European firearm regulations. At the same time, when regulators turned to address these vulnerabilities it has often been some of the less prominent (or less publicly acknowledged) aspects of European firearms

controls that have garnered their attention. Nonetheless, as has been argued already [3], it is frequently the case that some of the more mundane regulatory breaches are precisely the means by which legal firearms cross over into illegality [49] and into the hands of those who would use them for criminal purposes. As we have seen, such issues and vulnerabilities have included: the gradually increasing stockpile of civilian-held firearms in Europe; compared with crime, the largely unrecognised extent of firearm suicide across the continent (a public health issue in its own right, now being joined by concerns about the involvement of domestic firearms in cases of fatal domestic violence) [7].

Related concerns have included the many vagaries of local firearm licensing arrangements – even when laws are themselves strict, police enforcement practice might be highly variable. As the EU expanded eastwards and even as the conflict in the Balkans subsided, researchers have claimed that insufficient attention has been paid to the stockpiles of redundant military firearms [50,15], furthermore the conflict in the Ukraine has reawakened many similar concerns, the disruption weakening the country's already limited control over firearm distribution, incentivising criminal entrepreneurs and accelerating illicit weapons flows in the region [51]. Similarly, across Europe as a whole, firearms laws still resemble something of a patchwork quilt with more or less strict regulations concerning who can own what weapons and for what reasons.

Differing regulatory thresholds as regarding (souvenir) firearm deactivation (the subject of an EU Firearms Directive in 2017)³, and regarding the 'convertability' of a range of firearm types (blank firers, athletics starting pistols and alarm guns) never intended to fire potentially lethal ammunition, has supported a cottage industry of criminal armourers and traffickers supplying firearms to criminals and gang members across western Europe. As the various research initiatives we have considered earlier have shown, regulatory weaknesses of this order are compounded by varying levels of priority afforded to firearm tracking and tracing in different countries, the willingness of police in different cultural contexts to share intelligence and the compatibility of the ballistic analysis and information systems adopted by different states. Finally, of course, writing from the perspective of a state that has recently opted to leave the European Union and cut ties with a wide range of European regulatory systems, the consequences of 'Brexit' for police co-operation and intelligence sharing through Europol still remain to be seen. Gun crime is rising once more in the UK; a demand exists for illegal weapons, incentivising illegal supply.

The UK continues to be a destination for many of Europe's trafficked firearms. These will remain continuing concerns.

Taken together the various directives, research projects and analyses we have considered in this paper do take us several important steps forward in recognising and addressing many of the security deficits providing opportunities for the criminally motivated or the terrorist. However, as we have noted throughout, even strategic national security provisions are shaped and structured by traditions, histories and cultures, including variations in national data-protection laws which affect the types of information that might be shared. What the pattern and scale of firearm ownership, weapon use and misuse, reveals about the governance of guns in particular societies is also reflected in how those societies legislate for and police their gun cultures, as well as how effectively they collaborate regionally and internationally (or choose not to do so). Ultimately, whether the gun control regimes currently in place - or even those envisaged or proposed in recent reports - will succeed in stemming the tide of illegal firearms in a weaponising world, remains to be seen.

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