

Reducing the firepower of criminals and terrorists

Report panel discussion 4 april 2019

“The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems – and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as ‘weapons of mass destruction’”. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2000)

The illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is a global security, humanitarian and development challenge. These weapons fuel conflicts, undermine the rule of law and sustains impunity. Therefore the fight against the illicit trafficking of these weapons and their ammunition should be high on the European political agenda.

In November 2018 the European Union (EU) has adopted a new strategy to combat the illicit proliferation of firearms, SALW and their ammunition. Through this new strategy, the EU and its member states commit themselves to coordinate their actions and initiatives on this important security challenge. On April 4 2019, the Flemish Peace Institute hosted a seminar on this new EU strategy.

Dr. Sibylle Bauer, chair of the [EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium](#) and Director of Studies for Armament and Disarmament at SIPRI introduced the topic. According to Dr. Bauer small arms and light weapons are finally getting the attention they deserve.. Partly due to the recent terrorist attacks in Europe, European institutions and members states now recognize that SALW should get a more prominent place on the EU’s policy agenda.

Frank Meeussen, policy officer Non-Proliferation, Disarmament and Arms Export Control at the European External Action Service provided more information and background on the development of the [2018 EU strategy](#). He stressed the importance of an integrated strategy. As illicit arms trade “by its very nature doesn’t respect borders”, attention is required for both internal and external security aspects connected to illicit arms trafficking. To curb the

illicit proliferation of SALW, normative frameworks and relevant instruments need to be developed, implemented and enforced. The new strategy aims at connecting the national, regional and global level by among others creating links and exchanging information. The importance of awareness raising and international cooperation on this topic is key.

Senior researcher Nils Duquet of the Flemish Peace Institute presented his [recent paper](#) on the new EU strategy, which describes the development of EU policy on firearms and SALW and analyses the actions foreseen in the new strategy. He affirmed the importance of “the integrated, collective and coordinated European action” put forward by the new strategy in a single consolidated document. An important element of the new strategy is that it deals with both ‘military-grade’ as well as ‘civilian’ firearms. Since this distinction becomes obsolete once these weapons are diverted from the legal into the illegal domain. A promising development, according to Duquet, is the attention for securing the full ‘life-cycle’ of these weapons, taking into account the different steps from production to disposal with concrete measures. However, a detailed assessment of previous EU-funded actions and efforts to identify strengths and weaknesses is lacking. It needs to be stressed that several EU member states are significant producers and exporters of SALW and that legal exports have contributed to the illicit proliferation of these weapons in conflict-affected or conflict-prone regions. The 2018 SALW Strategy explicitly aims at promoting accountability and responsibility with regard to the legal arms trade. Nevertheless, currently the focus of this strategy heavily resides on the improvement of procedures, and not on actions to promote a more restrictive arms export policy to conflict-affected regions and countries of the member states. Duquet sees an opportunity in the ongoing review process of [Common Position 2008/944/CFSP](#) on arms exports to make progress and to develop a truly comprehensive approach to tackle the illicit proliferation of these lethal weapons.

More information about small arms and light weapons and the attempts to combat the proliferation of these weapons is available in this [eLearning Unit](#) of the EU non-proliferation and disarmament consortium.