

REPORT

# PROJECT TARGET

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## Targeting gun violence & trafficking in Europe

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Nils Duquet &  
Dennis Vanden Auweele

flemish  
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# Targeting gun violence and trafficking in Europe



## Colophon

*Targeting gun violence and trafficking in Europe*

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### **Authors**

Nils Duquet

Dennis Vanden Auweele

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# List of abbreviations

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| AEW            | Acoustic Expansion Weapon   |
| ARES           | Armament Research Services  |
| AVMP           | Armed Violence Monitoring Platform  |
| Brå            | Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention   |
| CSG            | Czechoslovak Group  |
| CSES           | European Commission's Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services   |
| DIVERT         | Research project investigating the diversion of firearms from the legal to the illegal sphere                   |
| DFVM           | Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor  |
| EMPACT         | European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats  |
| ETA            | <i>Euskadi Ta Askatasun</i>   |
| FBI            | Federal Bureau of Investigation   |
| FIRE           | Fighting Illicit Firearms trafficking Routes and Actors at European Level                                       |
| ID-Belgium     | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Belgium  |
| ID-Estonia     | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Estonia  |
| ID-Netherlands | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Netherlands  |
| ID-Poland      | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Poland   |
| ID-Serbia      | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Serbia   |
| ID-Spain       | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Spain  |
| ID-Sweden      | In-depth country study for Project TARGET of Sweden   |
| IED            | improvised explosive device   |
| IRA            | Irish Republican Army   |
| ISIS           | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria   |
| MENA           | Middle East and North Africa  |
| Mol            | Serbian Police  |
| NBHW           | National Board of Health and Welfare  |
| NFI            | Nederlands Forensisch Instituut (Dutch Forensic Institute)  |
| NICC           | Nationaal Instituut voor Criminalistiek en Criminologie (National Institute for Criminalistics and Criminology) |
| NKC            | National Police's new Forensic Centre   |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| NTA    | Organised Crime National Threat Assessment   |
| OCG    | organised crime group  |
| OMG    | outlaw motorcycle gangs  |
| Opal   | l'Osservatorio permanente sulle armi leggere e le politiche di sicurezza e difesa (Permanent Observatory on Small Arms and Policies of Security and Defense) |
| PEGIDA | Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident).                                |
| RPG    | rocket-propelled grenade   |
| SAFTE  | Studying the Acquisition of illicit Firearms by Terrorists in Europe   |
| SALW   | small arms and light weapons   |
| SAS    | Small Arms Survey  |
| SEESAC | South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons   |
| SIPRI  | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute   |
| TARGET | Research project investigating the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun violence  |
| UK     | United Kingdom   |
| UN     | United Nations   |
| UNODC  | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime   |
| US     | United States  |
| WB     | Western Balkans  |
| WHO    | World Health Organization  |

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# Executive summary

Project TARGET is an international, EU-funded research project that aims to determine the impact of gun trafficking on gun violence in the European Union (EU). It did so by an explorative study of 34 countries (27 EU member states, the UK, and six countries of the Western Balkans) and an in-depth study of seven countries (Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden) of gun violence and trafficking. These findings were subsequently submitted to a comparative analysis, the results of which were published in this report. The seven in-depth country studies will be published as an edited volume in 2022.

The **main findings** of Project TARGET were that gun trafficking is a multifaceted phenomenon that predominantly impacts criminal and terrorist gun violence (rather than domestic violence or other sorts of disputes). Armed robbers and lower-level criminals generally acquire firearms to threaten or for the status they afford, and they are increasingly doing so through purchasing (converted) non-live-firing firearms. The predominant type today has become Turkish blank-firing weapons purchased in countries with lenient legislation regarding these weapons. There is also an influx of easy-to-convert Flobert guns being trafficked in(to) Europe and converted in transit or at their place of destination. Higher-level criminals have more access to firearms, including sometimes also military grade firearms, through the smuggling of conflict legacy weapons or the trafficking of reactivated firearms. While jihadi terrorists tend to acquire their firearms predominantly through criminal connections, rightwing terrorists more often tend to rely on legal purchases, firearm assembling and internet purchases. We noted that a proliferation of gun availability can lead to an arms race among criminals, increased rates of gun violence and general sentiments of insecurity among the population.

## Scope of gun violence

The scope of gun violence in the European Union is difficult to assess. When it concerns gun violence of the **lethal** kind (in particular, homicide), this is believed to have peaked in the 1990s. It has been in a downward trend in the European Union since the new millennium. According to the most recent statistics, most member states have a **homicide rate** between *0.6 and 2 homicides per 100.000 of the population*; the rate of **firearm homicide** specifically ranges between *0 and 1 firearm homicides per 100.000 of the population* – with a majority of countries around or below 0.2 firearm homicides per 100.000 of the population. Firearm usage in homicide in the EU tends to be around 20%, with huge differences among member states. This gives EU Member States among the lower rates of firearm homicides worldwide. The rate of lethal gun violence has for numerous Member States *stopped to decline* since 2012. For most, rates have remained levelled or have slowly started to remount. This report offers some explanations for this phenomenon such as the tenacity of domestic (firearm) violence and increased criminal access to firearms.

To focus the problem of gun violence merely on lethal violence, however, is myopic. At present, we lack the data to evaluate comprehensively the scope of all forms of **non-lethal firearm violence**. Non-lethal firearm violence is all illegal usage of firearms to threaten or injure another person. Data gathered for Project TARGET indicates that non-lethal firearm violence is *much greater in scope* than lethal firearm violence but operates differently in different contexts.

- **Criminal context:** Non-lethal firearm violence is extensive, and mostly threats. Comparatively more threats in armed robberies and more injuries in the drug context. The use of firearms in the EU is predominantly instrumental (protection and/or status).
- **Domestic context:** Non-lethal firearm is less extensive, but more injurious. The use of firearms in the EU is predominantly to kill or injure rather than to achieve some other aim.

Very few data were available to assess non-lethal firearm violence. The post-conflict region of the Western Balkans has developed tools to **monitor** all types of firearm violence (that is, SEESAC's Armed Violence Monitoring Platform for the Western Balkans). This ought to be extended to the EU and the information needs to be more available. This would provide opportunities to formulate informed policies and direct law enforcement attention. TARGET's follow-up project – INSIGHT – aims to develop a similar monitoring platform for the EU.

## Perpetrators and victims of gun violence

The **perpetrators** of firearm violence were systematically found to be mostly young men (below 35). This is particularly true in the *criminal context*, though in the *domestic context* we note a more even spread of the age groups (not genders).

The **victims** of firearm violence tend, also, to be young men. This is also true for the broader domestic context but in the more specific context of intimate partner firearm violence, we note a majority of female victims. Victims of *non-lethal gun violence*, especially threats, tend to be more evenly spread over age groups and genders even though young men still suffer most of the violence.

12 EU Member States show an increase in the part of female lethal firearm victims in total victims since 2000. No increase in the rate itself is observed. Main explanation seems to be a sharp decrease in male victimization and a slower decrease (or stagnation) in female victimization. This suggests that domestic violence is more persistent than criminal violence.

### Types of firearms used

The types of firearms that are used in firearm violence depend on the context and the availability of firearms (legal and illegal).

- **Criminal context:** strong preference for *handguns*, which can be acquired on the local (il)legal market or, if there is no such availability, they tend to be trafficked internationally. While high-level criminals can acquire quality handguns (such as Glock pistols) or even automatic rifles (such as Kalashnikov-type rifles) through trafficking, low-level criminals often make due with converted gas pistols or converted Flobert guns.
- **Domestic context:** firearms are used that are *available locally*, whether legally or illegally (through non-regularization or the legacy of an armed conflict). More long guns are used than in the criminal context. If available, blank-firing firearms can be used though tend not to be converted to live-firing. The role of firearm trafficking is minimal.

### Public mass shootings

In project TARGET, public mass shootings are defined as shooting incidents with at least four casualties (excluding the perpetrator) in a relatively short span of time and a focused locale. Forty-one mass shootings in the thirty-four countries investigated by Project TARGET were found, most of which occurred in the *domestic* (27%) or *terrorist* context (29%) – though also an important part associated with *mental illness* and/or *substance abuse* (20%).

Firearm-trafficking plays a role in public mass shootings predominantly in the terrorist context since terrorists prefer (semi)automatic firearms (which are not always otherwise available to them). There are relatively few cases of terrorist mass shootings but these produce a very high number of casualties. While *Jihadi terrorists* generally rely on members

with criminal connections to access the illicit market, *right-wing terrorists* more often tend to acquire firearms via legal ways, the internet or use assembled firearms.

*School mass shootings*, as a specific forms of public mass shootings, have occurred four times in the EU since 2000. They were executed with handguns held legally by the shooter or, in one case, by a family member of the shooter. They were particularly deadly with 12 lethal casualties on average.

### Changing dynamics

The **level of organization of criminal groups** was found to play a role of significance in the scope and severity of criminal firearm violence. While in the 1990s, countries like Estonia and Italy were hotbeds of lethal criminal firearm violence in organized crime, today this accounts for a very small portion of lethal firearm violence in those countries. Project TARGET found that the structure and organization of these crime groups results in control over firearm ownership and firearm usage. *Firearm violence is seen as attracting unwanted attention*. In contrast, more *loosely-structured* or entirely *disorganized criminal groups* are more prone to use firearms and often perceive firearm violence as a currency for respect. This has become evident by sudden eruptions of firearm violence in the Dutch and Swedish major metropolitan areas. Certain perceived slights among criminals can cause sudden eruptions of gun violence, which can also cause third-party victims. Gun violence can then become endemic in these contexts. These gang fights also create a general atmosphere of insecurity and can even cause an arms race between rivalling criminal groups. Some criminals even enjoy access to military-grade automatic firearms, especially in certain Nordic and Northwestern European countries.

Criminals often resort to various forms of **firearm trafficking** if there is no local availability of firearms, particularly of handguns. The most important ways this has happened from 2000 onwards are as follows.

- **Smuggling** of military-grade firearms from post-conflict areas, most importantly the Western Balkans. This happens usually through ‘ant trade’ (a steady stream of small quantities) and tend to be accompanied by (larger quantities of) drugs or other illicit goods. While several regional and national initiatives have been taken to tackle this problem, the Western Balkans remain a key source region for firearms trafficking within Europe.
- **Firearm reactivation**. Military-grade firearms can be deactivated, converted into acoustic expansion weapons (AEWs) or converted into Flobert guns, which could be sold with less restrictions. These firearms can then travel through the EU and be reactivated in transit or at their destination. While the EU Firearms Directive has been amended in 2017 to tackle this phenomenon, these types of firearms remain available on illicit gun markets across Europe.
- **Conversion from blank-firing to live-firing firearms**. Some blank-firing firearms can be converted into live-firing firearms. Currently Turkish blank-firing weapons are particularly popular. Some countries had or have lenient legislation with regard

to these weapons. They can be purchased in countries in these countries and then trafficked into or through the EU. They can be converted in transit or at their destination.

- **Conversion from Flobert to higher-caliber firearms.** Some countries had or have lenient legislation with regard to low-caliber, low-velocity Flobert guns. These can be purchased in these countries and trafficked into or through the EU. They can be converted in transit or at their destination.

The illegal trade in firearms was typically done by organized criminal groups to supply themselves with firearms to facilitate their criminal activities. Trafficking was therefore instrumental rather than profit-oriented. The trade in converted gas pistols and Flobert guns can change this dynamic. Larger quantities of these have been seized in recent years, which suggests that certain groups of individuals view the illicit firearm trade as profitable. This could result in that illicit firearms become more available on the illicit market throughout the EU.

### Present and future challenges

Certain *new technologies* and *trafficking methods* can result in increased availability of firearms. Project TARGET has identified two present and future challenges in particular. These new challenges have in common that they can facilitate access to firearms for individuals who lack criminal connections.

- **3D-printing of firearms.** In recent years several cases of small and larger 3D-printing facilities for firearms have been dismantled by national law enforcement agencies across Europe. Additive printing has facilitated the creation of 'ghost guns'. They can be used by their creator or offered on the illicit market. Some cases of 3D-printing of firearms are connected to rightwing extremism.
- **Darkweb.** Certain less accessible corners of the internet are featuring firearms. These darknets are difficult to monitor and the firearms purchased on these platforms are equally difficult to trace.

The multifaceted phenomenon of firearm trafficking thus impacts gun violence in various ways. Its impact is most clearly apparent in the criminal contexts where increased availability of firearms can rapidly and drastically alter the peaceful course of a country.

# Introduction

Firearms can be a controversial subject. Hot topics range from limitations on legal ownership to their usage in mass shootings and terrorist events. The European Union (EU) has come a long way in trying to manage firearms properly at the legislative and law-enforcement levels while at the same time balancing personal liberty and the safety and security concerns associated with firearm possession. This report aims to contribute to the prevention of violence by analysing the scope and characteristics of gun violence in 21st-century Europe, with a special focus on the ways in which firearms trafficking has an impact on gun violence.

The findings in this report are the summary analysis of the findings of Project TARGET, a large-scale comparative study on gun violence in Europe. Project TARGET was funded by the Internal Security Fund – Police of the Directorate-General Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission and coordinated by the Flemish Peace Institute. This project followed up on two other major research projects coordinated by the Flemish Peace Institute in recent years: SAFTE and DIVERT. Project SAFTE assessed the various ways in which criminals and terrorists have managed to acquire firearms and it found, first, that there is no unified illegal firearm market in Europe and, second, that different types of terrorist acquire firearms differently.<sup>1</sup> Project DIVERT assessed the variety of ways in which firearms move from the legal to the illegal sphere – such as through the legacies of armed conflicts, non-regularisation<sup>1</sup>, theft, fraud<sup>2</sup> – and further enquired how different forms of firearm diversion align with different forms of firearms trafficking.<sup>3</sup> Project TARGET built on both of these projects by linking the diversion of and trafficking in firearms to firearm-related violence. In addition, Project TARGET also benefited from other recent relevant research projects on firearms trafficking in Europe such as Project EFFECT, Project FIRE, Project ECOFIT, the CSES study on options for combatting illicit firearms trafficking, various studies by the Stockholm International Peace Research

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<sup>1</sup> Non-regularized firearms are firearms that were acquired legally but were not brought into conformity with newly enacted rules and regulations.

Institute (SIPRI), the UNODC, the Small Arms Survey (SAS) and the Flemish Peace Institute, and initiatives such as the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform developed by SEESAC.<sup>4</sup>

Gun violence became a legislative and operational priority for the EU only relatively recently. Throughout the European subcontinent, homicide levels were generally on the rise between 1960 and 1990 after steadily declining for centuries.<sup>1</sup> The role of firearms was under-researched during this evolving situation. The landmark legislative event for the EU came in 1991, when the EU enacted the firearms directive (Directive 1991/477/EC). This directive emerged at first in order to harmonise firearm legislation within the EU from a commercial perspective and the functioning of the internal market after the establishment of the Schengen area.<sup>5</sup> It would have invasive consequences for the legal status of firearms and law enforcement's attention to them. This European directive set out to harmonise different national legislation regarding the acquisition and possession of and the trade in firearms. It did so importantly by distinguishing between four categories of firearm: prohibited firearms (category A), firearms subject to authorisation (category B), firearms subject to declaration (category C) and other firearms (category D). The directive also mandated Member States to keep records of firearm manufacturing, possession and trade in their respective jurisdictions.

Later revisions of the directive, first in 2008 (Directive 2008/51/EC) and later in 2017 (Directive 2017/853/EC), were inspired by more of a security perspective and sought in particular to remedy certain legal loopholes that were exploited by criminals (and terrorists) to acquire firearms. Although the EU took several initiatives to combat illicit firearms trafficking in the early 2000s, gun violence became more central to the EU's approach to firearm policy in 2010 and, again, in 2013. In 2010, the EU formulated a plan of action directed against the access of criminals to 'heavy' weapons such as machine guns, sub-machine guns and rocket launchers; in 2013, the European Commission put out a communication titled 'Firearms and the internal security of the EU: Protecting citizens and disrupting illegal trafficking', which announced several policy initiatives to prevent gun violence.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, both initiatives were aimed at combating illicit trafficking in firearms, preventing diversion from legal possession, but also safeguarding the licit market:

*The misuse of firearms, be it legally-owned civilian weapons or civilian or military weapons which have been illicitly manufactured or obtained, is a serious threat to the EU's security from both an internal and an external perspective.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Viewed from a longer perspective, this increase becomes less impressive. Based on the work of Marcus Eisner, Pieter Spierenburg reconstructed a longer history of homicides in Europe and calculated that homicide rates were approximately 35 per 100,000 of the population around the year 1500 and declined until 1960. Between 1960 and 1990, the homicide rate increased by 50%, but given the long-term decline of homicide rates, this increase hardly shows up on statistics that take this longitudinal perspective. See P Spierenburg, (2012) 'Long-term historical trends of homicide in Europe', in MCA Liem & WA Pridemore (Eds) *Handbook of European Homicide Research. Patterns, Explanations, and Country Studies*, New York: Springer, 25–38. See also UNODC. (2019) *Global Study on Homicide 2019: Homicide Trends, Patterns and Criminal Justice Response*, 34–36.

In the subsequent years, gun violence became an even more important driver of legislative changes and policy actions at the EU level following a series of terrorist attacks on European soil in and after 2014.<sup>8</sup>

The directive of 1991 and its subsequent amendments were not always embraced immediately by all the Member States. Some Member States were slow to domesticate it by incorporating it into their national legislation. After some hedging, all the Member States did eventually adopt the directive, some as early as in the 1990s, others only in the mid 2000s. Further amendments to the directive were often forced to go through a lengthy process of litigation before they would be enacted in national legislation. Meanwhile, Europe did witness a steady decline in its homicide rates and firearm homicide rates, particularly after the new millennium. It would, of course, be naïve to attribute this trend solely to the firearm directive, but equally naïve to dismiss its role entirely.<sup>1</sup>

To describe firearm violence is difficult for a number of reasons, one of them being that there is no univocal definition of ‘firearm violence’. In 2008, the European directive did define a ‘firearm’ and repeated that definition in 2017 as ‘any portable barrelled weapon that expels, is designed to expel or may be converted to expel a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of a combustible propellant’ (Directive 2017/853/EC, art 1, 1). The original directive of 1991 did not offer such a definition of a firearm, but offered a more restrictive schema as any weapon that falls under the four abovementioned categories (A-D); it specifically excluded permanently deactivated firearms, firearms designed for alarm, signalling, life-saving, animal slaughter or harpoon fishing or for industrial or technical purposes and antique weapons or reproductions of them (Directive 1991/477/EC, Annex 1.III). While we have had more of a shared definition of firearms since 2008, that definition remains prone to interpretation.

To date, there has been no such univocal definition of what constitutes ‘firearm violence’. As a consequence, different rates of firearm violence in diverse countries can be attributed partially to varying ways of defining and policing forms of firearm violence.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of Project TARGET, we have divided firearm violence into lethal and non-lethal firearm violence. Lethal firearm violence encapsulates all illegal discharging of firearms that wilfully (that is, not accidentally) causes the death of another human being; non-lethal firearm violence is all illegal use of a firearm that results in an individual being threatened or injured. Besides the conceptual difficulties of defining ‘firearms’ and

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<sup>1</sup> A systematic study of the effects of firearm legislation on firearm violence is very difficult to achieve for Europe, given the heterogeneity of its various contexts. To single out the impact of legislation on certain trends in firearm violence is difficult, and often involves making educated guesses. In their study of firearms and violence in Belgium, Nils Duquet and Maarten Van Alstein did note that an existing downward trend in firearm deaths and homicides generally was reinforced after Belgium instituted its stricter firearm law in 2006 (Nils Duquet & Maarten Van Alstein. (2011) *Vuurwapens. Handel, Bezit en Gebruik*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 137–144). Similar results were found for Austria (see Daniel König, Patrick Swoboda, Robert J Cramer, Christoph Krall, Vita Postuvan & Nestor Kapusta. (2018) ‘Austrian firearm legislation and its effects on suicide and homicide mortality: A natural quasi-experiment amidst the global economic crisis’. *European Psychiatry* 52: 104–112).

When similar studies are undertaken in the context of the various gun legislation in the United States, the result tends to be that laws which require background checks for firearm purchase and those that require permits for gun-ownership are the most efficient tools for curbing firearm mortality. The effectiveness of other measures at decreasing firearm mortality, such as laws that address firearms trafficking, ban assault weapons or discourage the open carrying of firearms, is less evidently effective. For a recent discussion, see LK Lee, EW Fleegler, C Farrell et al. (2017) ‘Firearm laws and firearm homicides: A systematic review’. *JAMA Internal Medicine* 177(1): 106–119. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.7051.




‘firearm violence’, the findings from Project TARGET indicate that documenting the scope and characteristics of different acts of firearm violence is not a priority for many EU Member States, or has become so only recently. This means that particular data on firearm violence are not available, nor are these data fit for comparison. Therefore, we urgently need improved data-gathering if the scope and characteristics of gun violence in Europe are to be assessed properly.

In this report we turn first to describing the scope of firearm violence in Europe, both lethal and non-lethal. While lethal gun violence allows for less ambiguity than non-lethal gun violence,<sup>10</sup> we note that more hermeneutical (de)construction is needed in the case of non-lethal firearm violence in order to produce data that allow for meaningful comparison (Chapter 1). After that, we turn to the characteristics of firearm violence in Europe, which include data on perpetrators, victims, locations and firearm types (Chapter 2). From this we can gather that firearm violence in the EU occurs in various contexts, most importantly the criminal milieu and the domestic sphere – other contexts include terrorism, all sorts of disputes, and armed conflicts (Chapter 3). In order to ascertain the impact of firearms trafficking on firearm violence, we next describe the scope and characteristics of trafficking in Europe (Chapter 4). In the penultimate chapter we combine all the previous findings to describe how illicit firearms trafficking affects gun violence in seven countries: Estonia, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain (Chapter 5). This report offers a number of conclusions in Chapter 6.

# Methodology

The main research question of Project TARGET is this: What is the impact of illicit firearm-trafficking on gun violence in Europe? This can be divided into the following two sub-questions: (1) What are the connections between the various types of firearm-trafficking and the various types of gun violence in different European countries? (2) How has illicit firearm-trafficking influenced the dynamics of various types of gun violence in different European countries?

## Research objectives

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  <b>Firearm violence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. To assess the scope of lethal and non-lethal firearm violence in the EU with respect to its share in acts of violence.</li><li>b. To ascertain the characteristics of lethal and non-lethal firearm violence in the EU (typology, characteristics of perpetrator and victim, locations of firearm violence and the impact of gun violence).</li><li>c. To determine the most relevant contexts of gun violence in the EU.</li></ul> |  <b>Firearm trafficking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. To assess the scope of firearm- trafficking in and into the EU.</li><li>b. To determine the characteristics and forms of firearm- trafficking in the EU.</li><li>c. To evaluate the specific roles of different EU Member States in firearm- trafficking.</li></ul> |  <b>Impact</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. To evaluate the impact of firearm- trafficking on gun violence.</li><li>b. To formulate policy- oriented proposals to combat firearm- trafficking and reduce its role on firearm violence.</li></ul> |
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## Research design

### Phase 1: Explorative mapping of 34 countries

- Countries: 27 EU Member States, six countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>I</sup>, Macedonia, and Montenegro and Serbia) and the United Kingdom.
- Desk research of available studies and open sources.
- An analysis of existing quantitative data such as the World Health Organization European Detailed Mortality Database and the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform managed by SEESAC.
- Input of national law-enforcement agencies and firearm experts.

### Phase 2: In-depth studies of seven countries

- Countries: Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden.
- Literature review of national studies.
- Collection and analysis of detailed quantitative data on incidents of gun violence and the firearms used for these acts of violence.
- Media analysis.
- In-depth semi-structured interviews with key national actors. New data were collected through a combination of sources, including judicial court files, law-enforcement information, forensic data and detailed open sources.
- New data-collection through a combination of sources, including judicial court files, law-enforcement information, forensic data and detailed open sources.

### Phase 3: Comparative analysis

- Countries: 27 EU Member States and six countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>II</sup>, Macedonia, and Montenegro and Serbia) and the United Kingdom.
- Comparison of data gathered through phases (1) and (2).
- Literature review of global, European and national studies.
- Follow-up interviews with expert researchers.

It was decided to conduct in-depth studies of Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden because of their varying national contexts, the observed levels and characteristics of trafficking, their observed divergent levels of firearm violence, the historical evolution of each of them and their geographical distribution. The United Kingdom was included because, until very recently, it was part of the EU. The Western

I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).  
II References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Balkans were included because the region borders the European region and has been known to serve as a source region for illegal firearms into the EU. What became particularly evident is that the post-conflict area of the Western Balkans has rich and widely available resources for monitoring armed violence. These resources were not as detailed or available for most EU Member States.

The research was carried out in 2020–2021 by:

- The Flemish Peace Institute (country mappings, in-depth studies of Belgium and Spain, comparative analysis)
- Leiden University (country mappings and in-depth study of the Netherlands)
- Arquebus Solutions (in-depth studies of Estonia and Sweden)
- The University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (in-depth study of Poland)
- The Victimology Society of Serbia (in-depth study of Serbia).

For the duration of the project, the preliminary results were discussed in three research seminars and one EMPACT Firearms meeting.

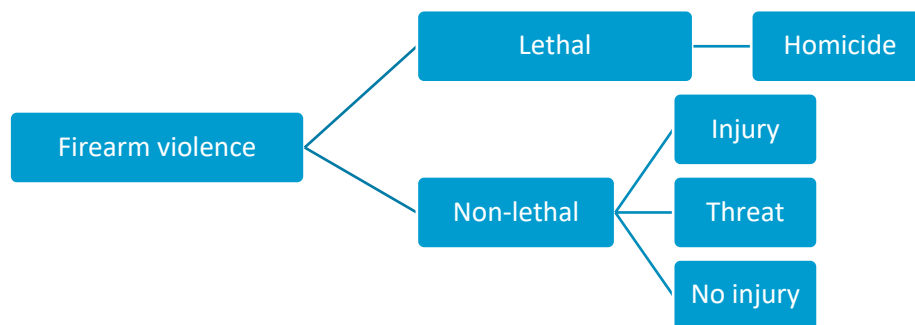
The project has been supported by Europol, the Dutch National Police, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNDP's SEESAC) and the European Centre for Drugs and Drugs Addiction (EMCDDA).

This report was launched at a webinar organised by the Flemish Peace Institute on 13 December 2021. In this webinar the main findings of the project were presented and discussed. The in-depth country studies from phase two of the project will be published in a separate report in early 2022.

# 1

## The scope of gun violence in Europe

Firearm violence can generally be divided into two groups, depending on the outcome: lethal and non-lethal. Lethal firearm incidents entail discharging a firearm that produces a lethal outcome. This can be an intentional self-harm (suicide), accidental harming of another or self-harm (accidental death), the killing of another in (self-)defence (justifiable killing) or an intentional, unjustified killing of another (murder or manslaughter). In the context of the present report, we have decided to focus lethal firearm incidents uniquely on intentional and unjustified killing of another.<sup>1</sup> Non-lethal firearm violence is all illicit use of a firearm against another human being that does not produce a lethal outcome. Instead, the outcome can be an injury, a threat or no injury (where a firearm is fired, but it does not cause physical harm).



We determine the scope of firearm violence as follows. We examine the scope of lethal firearm violence according to the incidence of homicides, firearm homicides and firearm use in homicides from 2000 onwards (section 1.1). After that we discuss the scope and trends of non-lethal firearm violence according to five major European regions, that is, North-Western Europe, Mediterranean Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and Nordic countries, and the Western Balkans (section 1.2).

<sup>1</sup> We have chosen not to deal with firearm suicides or accidents, whether lethal or non-lethal, in the present report. The main reasons for this decision are that (1) the existing literature suggests that violent firearm events will be more affected by trafficking than accidents and self-harm; (2) suicides and accidents are dealt with socio-politically in a totally different register from firearm homicides. The use of firearms in (attempted) suicides and accidents is a desideratum for future research.

## 1.1 Scope of lethal firearm violence

Since the beginning of the 21st century, after a time of turbulence in the 1990s, lethal violence in general has decreased impressively throughout Europe. Although there are noteworthy differences between different Member States, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that the annual average homicide rate per 100,000 of the population in Europe has dropped from 7.7 in 2000 to 3.0 in 2012 and to 2.8 in 2018.<sup>11</sup> The Global Peace Index ranks Europe in 2021 as the most peaceful region in the world.<sup>12</sup> That decline in homicide rates is mirrored by a decline in firearm homicide rates. In the case of homicides and firearm homicides, evidence suggests that the declining rate generally stalled from 2012 onwards or, in some cases, has reversed or fluctuates more erratically. The scope of non-lethal firearm violence can be less easily assessed: while some countries show impressive levels of decline in non-lethal firearm violence, this is not the case for other countries. While this could be due to different levels and forms of policing and reporting, in general, non-lethal firearm violence appears to show less of a clear trajectory than lethal firearm violence.

Few studies are available that review firearm violence in Europe, and data on this phenomenon are scattered, often problematic, largely incomparable and difficult to access.<sup>1</sup> Five previous, prominent studies of firearm homicides in Europe merit special mention as they laid the foundation for our current assessment of firearm violence in Europe.

First, in their study of firearm use in homicides in Europe, Martin Killias and Nora Markwalder examined the available data of firearm homicides between 1990 and 2000.<sup>13</sup> Their focus was on the way private gun ownership has an impact on firearm violence, and they concluded that gun ownership ‘is strongly correlated with female firearm homicide and firearm suicide (of both genders), but not of [sic] male firearm homicide’.<sup>14</sup> They predicted that suicide and suicide after homicide would be greatly affected by a decrease in gun availability (without displacing the methods for these forms of mortality). While lower rates of firearm availability do not prevent domestic conflicts, they argue, they tend to lower the mortality rate of such conflicts. As we discuss in this chapter and in Chapter 3, their prediction has proven to be accurate.

Second, in their study *Firearms and Violent Deaths in Europe* (2015), Nils Duquet and Maarten Van Alstein studied the data on gun ownership and firearm violence in the European Union (EU) from the new millennium until 2012. Their general conclusion was that, on average, 6,700 individuals died from firearm violence in the EU each year. Of these, about 5,000 were suicides (amounting to about 9% of all suicides), about 700 were accidents and 1,000 were homicides.<sup>15</sup> Their assessment was based mostly on data available from the World Health Organization’s (WHO) detailed mortality database. Some have considered their estimate an under-estimation, given the large numbers of ‘undetermined’ deaths in the WHO

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<sup>1</sup> The impact of these and other studies on legislative and police action was recently investigated by Nicolas Florquin. See: Florquin, N. (2021): ‘Gun violence: insights from international research’, Global Crime, DOI: 10.1080/17440572.2021.1997741

database.<sup>16</sup> WHO data of firearm mortality after 2012 usually only go up to 2014 or, at best, 2016, which tends to indicate slight decreases or rates levelling out. In the past few years, when national data are available, some countries show increasing rates of (firearm) homicides. While some of this might be due to more accurate reporting, in Chapters 4 and 5 we turn to describing the way firearms trafficking is a contributing factor to this renewed rise in firearm violence.

Third, in their study for project EFFECT, Erica Bowen and Helen Poole looked extensively at the methodological issues concerning data-collection about the nature, scope and effect of gun crime in Europe. Their recommendations focus predominantly on improving data-collection and strengthening gun legislation to combat gun violence.<sup>17</sup> Their recommendation to improve data-collection has, to an extent, been taken note of, but a lot of improvements could still be made on this front.

Fourth, the sixth edition of 'European sourcebook of crime and criminal justice statistics' (ESB) describes police reporting on criminal activities for the countries of Europe (including many non-Member States, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, and the United Kingdom) for 2011–2016. They point out that a majority of countries note a decrease in intentional homicide rates. For the countries investigated for Project TARGET, they note an increase in intentional homicides in that period in Denmark, France, Montenegro and England; homicide levels remained levelled in Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Spain and Sweden. For firearm homicides, they received data from 16 out of 46 countries only. Whereas firearm homicide rates are rising in Germany, Montenegro and Slovenia, they are level in Austria and Sweden. Following WHO and UNODC data, we note the same trends below even though the (firearm) homicide rates reported in the European sourcebook are typically slightly higher than the rates reported by the WHO.

Finally, a report published in 2021 by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) discussed how Sweden has become an outlier among EU Member States as it sees firearm homicides rising while other countries note a downward trend.<sup>18</sup> They note this is unusual in the European and Nordic context and suggest that a myriad factors account for Sweden's predicament. The situation of firearm violence in Sweden is discussed and compared with other EU member states extensively throughout this report.

All of the above studies concur, though, that the countries which have been investigated for Project TARGET (EU Member States, the United Kingdom and the countries of the Western Balkans) experience comparatively low levels of firearm violence. Based on WHO data, we can estimate that in these countries, there were between 1,627 and 2,263 firearm homicides in 2000 (636 lethal firearm incidents were 'undetermined'), which evolved to between 791 and 1,356 firearm homicides in 2014 (565 lethal firearm incidents were 'undetermined'). In the EU alone (including the UK), there were between 647 and 1,185 firearm homicides in 2014, for a rate between 0.15 and 0.27 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population (two thirds of the 'undetermined' firearm deaths in that year occur in France). It is at present very difficult to state unequivocally the number of firearm homicides after 2014.

To put these numbers into perspective, the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States of America reports for the year 2012 a total of 14,827 homicides for a rate of 4.7 per

100,000 of the population, with rates rising to 5.0 per 100,000 of the population in 2019 ( $n = 15,498$ ).<sup>I</sup> In 2012, 69% of these homicides in the United States were committed by firearm for a total of 10,230 firearm homicides. This gives a rate of 3.3 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population. In addition to these firearm homicides, the United States registered an additional 22,058 cases of other lethal incidents with firearms (accidents and suicides, with suicides largely committed by firearm – 60%). With the global average fluctuating being 40% and 50%, the United States is well above and the EU is well below the global average of firearm use in homicides. There are, however, serious differences within Europe in firearm usage in homicides: from very low in Estonia (1%) to very high in North Macedonia (75%).

### 1.1.1 Homicide rates in Europe

We begin by outlining the trend in homicide rates in Europe between 2000 and the present.<sup>19</sup> The selection of the years under comparison was made on the basis of the availability of both homicide and firearm homicide rates.<sup>II</sup> Comparing crime rates across countries is known to be problematic because of differences in criminal-justice systems, differing practices of recording crime, cultural differences in assessing behaviour, data that are missing or interpreted differently, differences in definitions, and many other difficulties.<sup>20</sup> We have tried to neutralise as many of these problems as possible in order to provide assessments of (firearm) homicide rates in Europe.<sup>III</sup> Fortunately, the area of (firearm) homicides is plagued less by these methodological difficulties because, on the one hand, the definition of a homicide is largely universal and, on the other, European law offers definitions of firearms that are mostly (though not consistently) reproduced in the national context.

When we then consider homicide rates in Europe, readily noticeable are the remarkable differences between different European countries. **Figure 1.1** below compares the homicide rates across the countries investigated in this study between 2000 and the most recent year for which data are available. The most important finding is that homicides have been in

I All numbers and rates are sourced from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program. The numbers can be consulted here: <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr>, consulted 19 July 2021. Other sources mention different rates of homicide. For instance, the FBI's 'Murder Victims by Weapon' registry mentions only a total of 12,888 homicides in the United States in 2012, of which 8,897 were committed by firearms (which is significantly lower than the other estimate). The UCR programme was conceived to generate, according to its website, 'reliable statistics for use in law enforcement. It also provides information for students of criminal justice, researchers, the media, and the public.' For this reason, this database is taken to be the more reliable. For a more comprehensive discussion of firearm violence in the first 15 years of the 21st century in the United States, see GJ Wintemute. (2015) 'The epidemiology of firearm violence in the twenty-first century United States'. *Annual Review of Public Health* 36: 5–19.

II This means that the years that are being compared per country are: Albania (2006–2016), Austria (2002–2016), Belgium (2000–2016), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010–2016), Bulgaria (2000–2014), Croatia (2000–2016), Cyprus (2004–2016), Czechia (2000–2016), Denmark (2000–2015), Estonia (2000–2019), Finland (2000–2015), France (2000–2014), Germany (2000–2015), Greece (insufficient data on firearm homicides from WHO or UNODC), Hungary (2000–2016), Ireland (2007–2014), Italy (2003–2015), Kosovo (no data on firearm homicides from WHO or UNODC), Latvia (2000–2015), Lithuania (2000–2016), Luxembourg (2000–2015), Malta (2000–2015), Montenegro (2005–2016), the Netherlands (2000–2019), North Macedonia (2006–2015), Poland (2000–2015), Portugal (2007–2014), Romania (2000–2016), Serbia (2000–2015), Slovakia (2000–2014), Slovenia (2000–2015), Spain (2000–2015), Sweden (2000–2019) and United Kingdom (2001–2015).

III We have done so primarily by checking various databases for firearm violence: police registries, reports by medical practitioners, media sources and national registries. While these sources are very different, they do shine a light on particular aspects of gun violence and, when read carefully, can then offer information that is as comparable as possible. However, standardised data on gun violence are a desideratum for the EU.

general decline across Europe. The decline is most pronounced in countries which started from a relatively high homicide rate (more than four per 100,000 of the population) such as Estonia (–80%), Latvia (–66%), Kosovo<sup>I</sup> (–63%), Bulgaria (–62%) and Lithuania (–50%). Other countries that started from more modest homicide rates in 2000 also show impressive declines, such as Czechia (–68%), Poland (–64%), Croatia and Spain (–57%), Serbia (–50%), Finland and Belgium (–48%), Portugal (–47%), Slovakia (–46%), North Macedonia (–45%), Slovenia (–44%) and Romania (–40%). More modest rates of decline are observed in the Netherlands (–36%), France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom (–33%), Cyprus and Ireland (–31%) and Greece (–22%). Most other countries show less of a decline (below 20%), with the exception of Hungary (+5%) and Montenegro (+25%), which show increases in their homicide rates.<sup>21</sup> Small fluctuations in the number of homicide cases can have larger impacts in countries with smaller populations. For instance, Malta's homicide rate can fluctuate between 0 and 2.8 on the basis of 12 homicide casualties.<sup>II</sup>

Even if most countries do not show increases since 2000, the downward trend in homicide rates since 2000 seems to have at least stalled since 2012. The 2019 UNODC study on homicide confirms that homicide rates have declined globally between 1993 and 2007, after which a period of stability followed. For Europe, the downward trend lasted longer – until 2012.<sup>22</sup> For most European countries, there has no longer been a downward trajectory since 2012 and some sources – such as the WHO detailed mortality database – suggest increases since 2015. These latter data could not be used in the above figure because no comparable firearm homicide rates were available. The homicide rate per 100,000 of the population in most countries has been holding steady, but the rate is increasing in some countries:

- Hungary's rate has been increasing steadily from 1.6 in 2013 to 2.5 in 2017 (since no information on firearm homicides is available in Hungary for 2017, that last number was not used in the figure above).<sup>III</sup>
- Denmark's homicide rate was dropping to a low of 0.5 in 2005, but then started to rise again to 1.1 in 2015.
- Austria's homicide rate dropped to 0.6 in 2009, but has since then started to mount anew up to 1.0 in 2018.
- Germany was dropping to a rate of 0.8 in 2015, while recent years have resulted in new increases (1.2 in 2016; 0.9 in 2017 and 2018).
- The United Kingdom had been dropping steadily to a low of 0.9 in 2014, but since then has started to climb again to 1.2 in 2018.
- Greece dropped to a low of 0.7 in 2017, but has started to remount to 1.0 in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

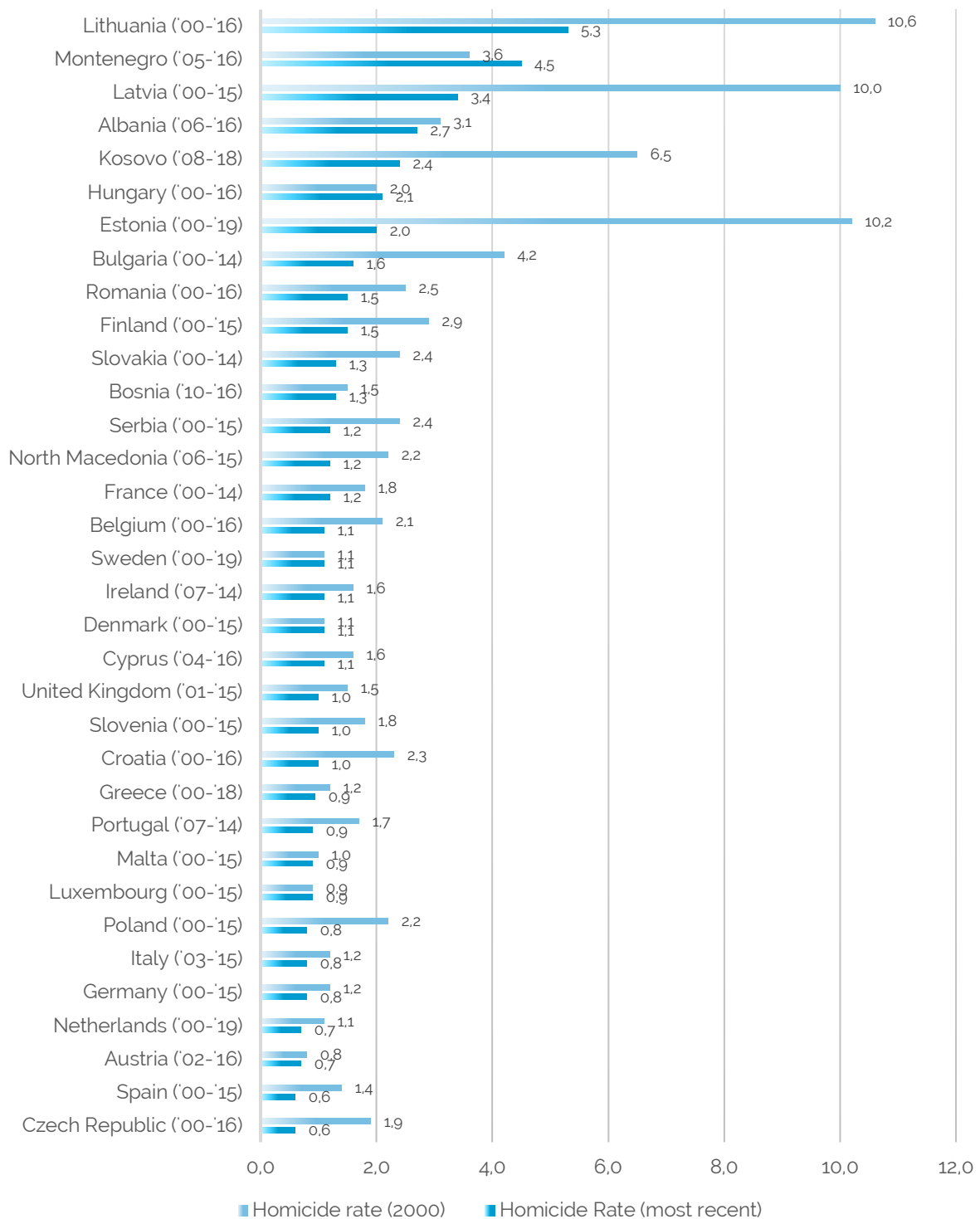
II When comparing these rates with other rates reported by law-enforcement services, it is noteworthy that these services usually have slight variations on the rates reported by the WHO and the UNODC. The variations usually remain below 10%. Interestingly, law-enforcement services tend to give slightly higher homicide rates than the WHO. See *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* (6th ed), [https://wp.unil.ch/europeansourcebook/files/2021/09/Aebi-et-al.-2021\\_European-Sourcebook\\_210904.pdf](https://wp.unil.ch/europeansourcebook/files/2021/09/Aebi-et-al.-2021_European-Sourcebook_210904.pdf).

III The homicide rate reported to the WHO by Hungary might include attempted homicides. When we take into account police reports, we note that the homicide rates fluctuate between 2.0 and 2.8 during 2011–2016. When we take into account completed cases of intentional homicides, we note the rate fluctuating between 1.0 and 1.4. This could mean that Hungary has a homicide rate significantly lower than that reported to the WHO. In all police reports, the trend in Hungary is downward rather than upward. See [https://wp.unil.ch/europeansourcebook/files/2021/09/Aebi-et-al.-2021\\_European-Sourcebook\\_210904.pdf](https://wp.unil.ch/europeansourcebook/files/2021/09/Aebi-et-al.-2021_European-Sourcebook_210904.pdf), 17–19.

None of these increases is particularly expansive and there are no clear signs that they are an indication of incremental gains.

In two European countries, the increase in homicides can be linked to an increase in firearm homicides: the Netherlands and Sweden. Sweden had a declining homicide rate until 2012 (to 0.7), but then it started to pick up again to 1.1 in 2018. A recent study by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) links this increase primarily to an increase in gun homicides, particularly in the criminal milieu.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Netherlands has also witnessed increasing levels of (firearm) violence and homicides, mostly associated with the so-called 'Mocro-mafia' (Maroccan drug mafia). Whereas the homicide rate dropped consistently from 1.1 in 2000 to 0.6 in 2016, the past few years have witnessed rates fluctuating. With regard to firearm homicides, the Netherlands dropped from 66 to 33 firearm homicides between 2000 and 2010, but after 2010 the number of firearm homicides fluctuated erratically between 61 and 27. These fluctuations are usually attributed to the fact that the Mocro-mafia started a series of violent liquidations after a drug deal went bad in Antwerp (Belgium) in 2012. The recent assassination of the journalist Peter R Vries on 15 July 2021 is the latest instalment in this series of liquidations. The most recent information suggests that lethal firearm violence in the Netherlands has, again, cooled down.

**Figure 1.1: Homicide rates from 2000 (or closest to it) to most recent**



Source: Based on data from the UNODC, <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>; data for Belgium, Estonia, Sweden and the Netherlands from local databases<sup>25</sup>

## 1.1.2 Firearm homicide rates

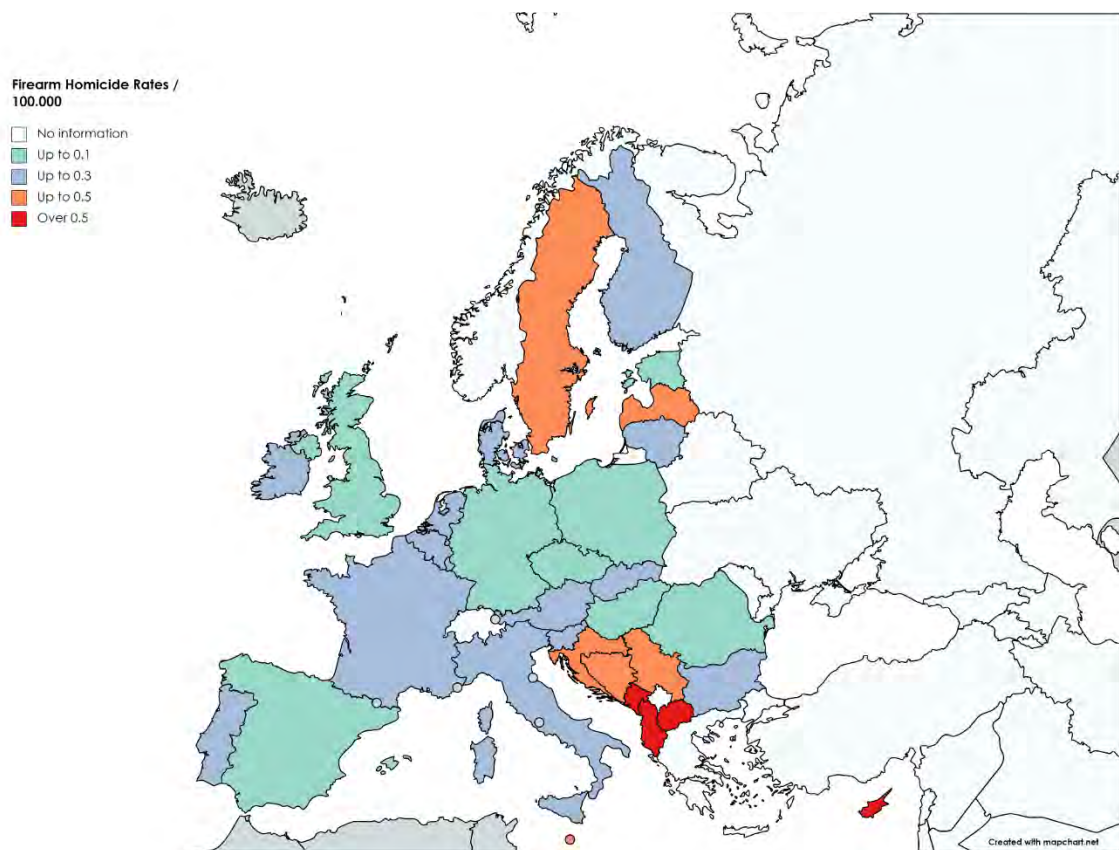
Firearm homicide rates in Europe follow a similar trend as general homicide rates. There is a general downward trend in firearm homicides between 2000 and at least 2012. Since then, firearm homicide rates appear to have been levelling, fluctuate or, in some cases, start to mount anew. In some cases, firearm homicide rates become so low that one might rightfully speculate that they have simply reached their bottom limit. **Figure 1.2** compares the firearm homicide rates between 2000 (or closest to it) and the most recent year for which the UNODC has data available (or, in the case of Belgium, Estonia, Sweden and the Netherlands, national databases that have more recent data and were accessible to the researchers).

Information with regard to firearm homicide rates was difficult to gather and several sources show contradicting rates. Most of the information was gathered from national statistics, the WHO Detailed Mortality Database and the UNODC database.<sup>26</sup> Based on WHO data for the countries that are part of this study, we can estimate that there were between 1,627 and 2,263 firearm homicides in 2000 (636 lethal firearm incidents were ‘undetermined’), which evolved to between 791 and 1,356 firearm homicides in 2014 (565 lethal firearm incidents were ‘undetermined’). The WHO database differentiates between three types of lethal gun violence: homicide, suicide and accident. Firearm suicides and accidental deaths are not part of this present research project. The category ‘undetermined’, presumably, refers to lethal firearm incidents that are undetermined whether they are homicides, suicides or accidents. In most countries, the level of undetermined lethal firearm incidents is very low or even zero. In some cases, however, a serious portion of lethal gun incidents is listed as ‘undetermined’, namely, in the case of France, Lithuania, Germany, Poland and Slovakia. Because of such a large percentage of lethal firearm incidents being undetermined, it was not possible to give a reliable rate of firearm homicides. Given that firearm suicides are usually 90% or above of lethal firearm incidents, we have chosen to treat the ‘undetermined’ lethal firearm incidents as 90% suicides and 10% homicides. We have adjusted the undetermined fatalities in accordance with that rate so as to provide an estimate of the firearm homicide rate in France, Lithuania, Germany, Poland and Slovakia. This means that the firearm homicide rates for these countries are estimations.<sup>1</sup>

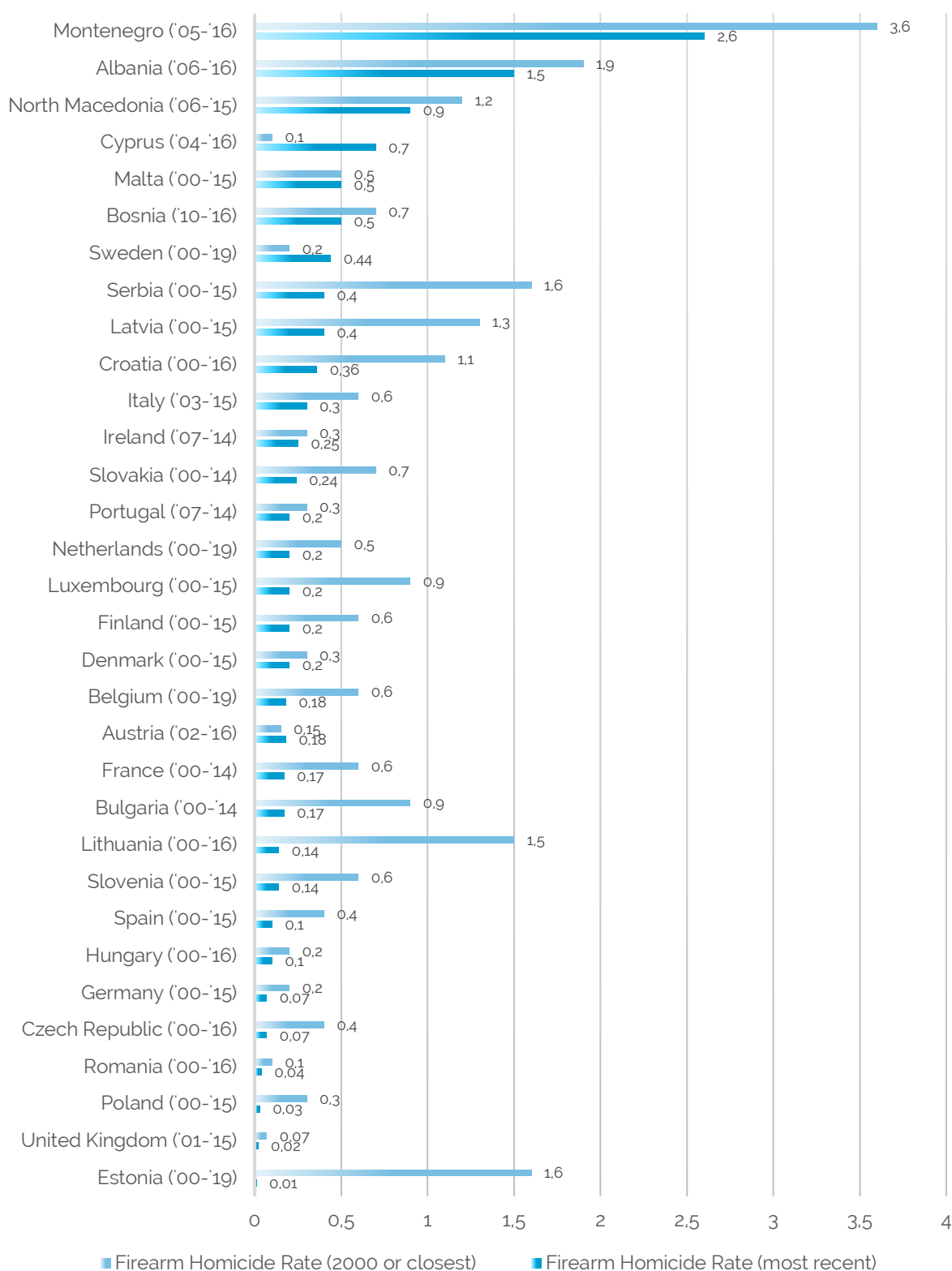
<sup>1</sup> Another difficulty concerns Serbia, where the numbers of firearm homicides differ impressively based on the source. According to the WHO database, Serbia had 52 firearm homicides (and 22 undetermined firearm deaths) in 2015 for a rate of 1 per 100,000 of the population. According to the UNODC, however, Serbia had a firearm homicide rate of 0.2 per 100,000 of the population in 2015, which translates into around 14 firearm homicides. The numbers from the UNODC return in the data we received from the Serbian police services (Mol). However, the Serbian police services register homicides in the family context separately, which amount to 17 homicides in 2015. In some cases, these domestic firearm homicides would already be included under firearm homicides generally, but in other cases – such as when the perpetrator committed suicide – it would not. Our data then suggest a range between 14 and 74 firearm homicides in Serbia in 2015. It is therefore impossible to give an accurate number of firearm homicides in Serbia. Previous studies have already complained that ‘such data incoherence hinders the analysis and comprehensive understanding of the share of homicides committed in a domestic context in the total number of homicides’ (SEESAC. (2019) *Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Survey: Republic of Serbia 2012–2016*, Belgrade: SEESAC, 44). Given the prevalence of female victims in domestic firearm homicides and the prevalence of men in firearm homicides generally, we assume that the majority of domestic firearm homicides are not included in the firearm homicide numbers. We therefore add all domestic firearm homicide victims to the general firearm victims, bringing the total of firearm homicide victims up to 31 in Serbia for 2015 for a rate of 0.4 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population. Because the WHO has a significantly higher number of firearm homicides, this could still be an under-estimation.

The firearm homicide rates listed by the WHO and the UNODC correspond roughly to the police data available (on a selected number of countries) through the *European sourcebook of crime and criminal justice statistics*. The sourcebook does list a zero rate for Lithuania and North Macedonia, whereas the WHO has these rates at respectively 0.14 and 0.9. It is unclear what causes these divergences and we have chosen to follow the WHO data as zero firearm homicides in these national contexts appear to be unlikely, given their long-term rates of firearm homicides.

**Figure 1.2: Firearm homicide rates per 100,000 of the population (most recent year with data available)**



**Figure 1.3: Firearm homicide rates per 100,000 from 2000 (or closest thereto) to present**



Source: Based on data from the UNODC, <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>; data for Belgium, Estonia, Sweden and the Netherlands from local databases<sup>27</sup>

This figure shows that the decline in homicide rates referred to above is mirrored by a decline in firearm homicide rates. Indeed, firearm homicides are becoming increasingly rare in Europe. According to the most recent available data, only two European countries – Albania and Montenegro – have a firearm homicide rate of 1.0 per 100,000 of the population or above. From 2000 onwards, most countries have starkly reduced the number of firearm homicides. In the case of countries with small populations, such as Malta and Cyprus, firearm homicide rates are not very informative and can fluctuate significantly on the basis of only a few firearm homicides. For instance, the number of firearm homicides in Malta fluctuates between 0 and 5 firearm homicides between 2000 and 2015 (with rates then fluctuating between 0 and 1.2). Increasing levels of firearm homicides between 2000 and the most recent data can be observed in Austria (+20%)<sup>I</sup> and Sweden (+100%). No disaggregated data were available for Kosovo<sup>II</sup> and Greece for homicides by mechanism, so these are not taken up in the table below.

### 1.1.3 Firearm use in homicide

When looking specifically at the proportion of firearm homicides in homicides generally, again comparing the year 2000 (or closest to it) and the most recent year with data available, we notice certain interesting trends. **Table 1.1** outlines this trend. Data are based on comparing the above homicide and firearm homicide rates, and the percentages are thus built on calculating the rates of homicides and firearm homicides. They will accordingly differ from more accurate percentages based on absolute numbers that are used elsewhere in this study. The present table serves then only to give a general overview of firearm use in homicides and to group countries according to low, low to medium, medium to high and high use of firearms in homicides.

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- I More recent information about Austria sees this rate as dropping again to 0.11 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population. See Bundesministerium Inneres. (2019) 'Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik 2019', 29. [https://bundeskriminalamt.at/501/files/Broschuere\\_PKS\\_2019.pdf](https://bundeskriminalamt.at/501/files/Broschuere_PKS_2019.pdf).
  - II References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

**Table 1.1: Firearm use in homicide between 2000 and most recent (%)**

| Country                                   | 2000 (%) | Most recent (%) | Country                                  | 2000 (%) | Now (%) |
|---|----------|-----------------|--|----------|---------|
| <i>Albania (2006–2016)</i>                | 61       | 56              | Kosovo <sup>I</sup>                      | No data  | No data |
| <i>Austria (2002–2016)</i>                | 19       | 26              | Latvia (2000–2015)                       | 13       | 12      |
| <i>Belgium (2000–2016)</i>                | 29       | 16              | Lithuania (2000–2016)                    | 14       | 3       |
| <i>Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010–2016)</i> | 47       | 38              | Luxembourg (2000–2015)                   | 100      | 22      |
| <i>Bulgaria (2000–2014)</i>               | 11       | 38              | Malta (2000–2015)                        | 50       | 56      |
| <i>Croatia (2000–2016)</i>                | 48       | 36              | Montenegro (2005–2016)                   | 100      | 58      |
| <i>Cyprus (2004–2016)</i>                 | 6        | 64              | Netherlands (2000–2019)                  | 45       | 29      |
| <i>Czechia (2000–2016)</i>                | 21       | 17              | North Macedonia (2006–2015)              | 55       | 75      |
| <i>Denmark (2000–2015)</i>                | 27       | 18              | Poland (2000–2015)                       | 14       | 4       |
| <i>Estonia (2000–2019)</i>                | 16       | 1               | Portugal (2007–2014)                     | 18       | 22      |
| <i>Finland (2000–2015)</i>                | 21       | 13              | Romania (2000–2016)                      | 4        | 3       |
| <i>France (2000–2014)</i>                 | 33       | 14              | Serbia (2000–2015)                       | 67       | 33      |
| <i>Germany (2000–2015)</i>                | 17       | 7               | Slovakia (2000–2014)                     | 29       | 19      |
| <i>Greece</i>                             | No data  | No data         | Slovenia (2000–2015)                     | 33       | 10      |
| <i>Hungary (2000–2016)</i>                | 10       | 2               | Spain (2000–2015)                        | 29       | 17      |
| <i>Ireland (2007–2014)</i>                | 23       | 18              | Sweden (2000–2019)                       | 18       | 36      |
| <i>Italy (2003–2015)</i>                  | 50       | 38              | United Kingdom (2001–2015) <sup>II</sup> | 5        | 2       |

Source: based on data from the UNODC; <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>; data for Belgium, Estonia, Sweden and the Netherlands from local databases<sup>28</sup>

- I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).
- II Discussion of firearm violence and firearms trafficking in the United Kingdom is not particularly extensive in this study. For a more in-depth review of the UK's situation, see Peter Squires, Helen Poole, Jo Chilton, Sarah Watson & Helen Williamson. (2021) 'A hidden time bomb? Policing illegal firearms in Europe', in David Pérez Esparza, Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, Eugenio Weigend Vargas (eds) *Gun Trafficking and Violence from the Global Network to the Local Security Challenge*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

In most of the above countries, the use of firearms in homicides has decreased: 19 countries show decreases, seven countries show levelled rates, six countries show increases and two countries (Greece and Kosovo<sup>1</sup>) have no data publicly available. These percentages are not based on trends over a number of years, but on specific percentages for one year. On the basis of the most recent data available, we can group countries with regard to low, low to medium, medium to high and high usage of firearms in homicides. These evaluations are based on the following division:

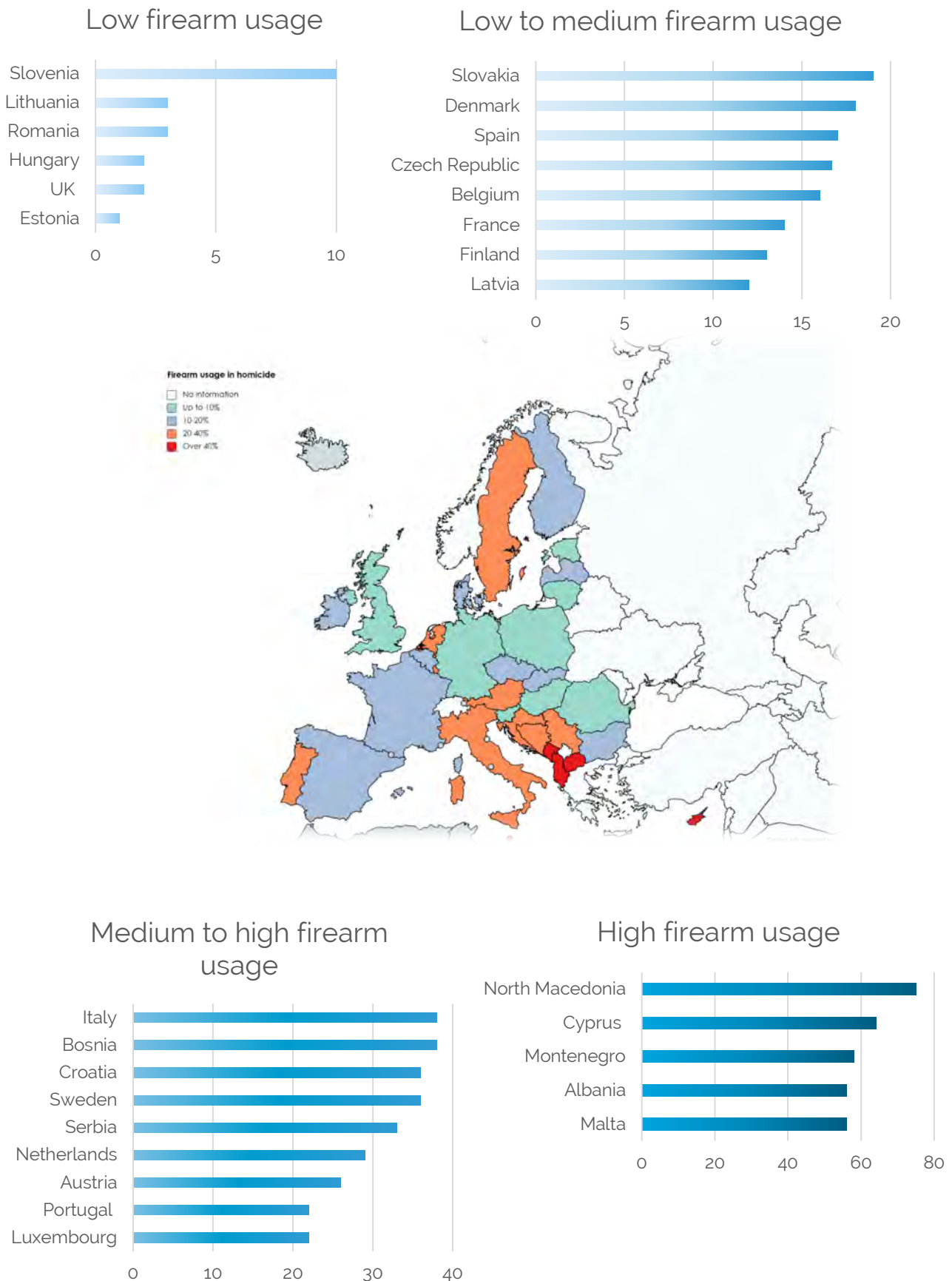
- Low = firearm usage in homicide is up to 10%
- Low to medium = firearm usage in homicide is between 10% and 20%
- Medium to high = firearm usage in homicide is between 20% and 40%
- High = firearm usage in homicide is above 40%.

We outline these groupings in **Figures 1.5.1–1.5.4**. Five countries have low firearm usage, seven have low to medium firearm usage, nine have medium to high firearm usage and five have high firearm usage. Bearing in mind that the global average of firearm use in homicides is 40%, the countries that have high firearm usage in Europe are globally only above average. With the exception of these five countries with ‘high’ usage of firearms in homicides, all 21 other European countries are below the global average. It merits mentioning that the countries with a high firearm usage are also relatively small countries. As shown in **Figure 1.4**, most countries that have a low firearm usage in homicides are part of East and Central Europe. Medium to high and high firearm usage in homicides is concentrated around the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas. Sweden and the Netherlands seem to be exceptions, which can be accounted for – as we discuss below – by a high level of criminal activity connected to firearms. Portugal and Luxembourg also have high firearm usage in homicide. For Luxembourg, this is due to a very small sampling with regard to homicides; Portugal was not studied in depth for the present project.

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

**Figure 1.5 Firearm usage in homicides (most recent year with data available)**



## 1.2 The scope of non-lethal firearm violence

There are few centralised databases from where information on non-lethal firearm violence can be sourced, which means that researchers depend mostly on the existence and availability of national registers. A cross-national comparison of the data from these national registers is problematic because, on the one hand, non-lethal firearm offences can be registered differently and, on the other, there are significant national, cultural and contextual differences where certain non-lethal firearm offences tend to be under-reported or not reported at all.<sup>1</sup>

Few academic studies of the scope and characteristics of non-lethal firearm violence exist. The most important extant study on non-lethal firearm violence was published by the Small Arms Survey (2012). This study was global in scope and covered non-lethal firearm violence mostly in non-European countries. It reached four conclusions: (1) an estimated two million people live with firearm injuries sustained in non-conflict settings; (2) the rates of surviving firearm injuries are higher in countries with lower levels of firearm violence; (3) severity of injury is causally related to firearm type, ammunition and calibre – as well as the quality and availability of medical care; (4) reliable information on non-lethal firearm violence is uncommon and not standardised.<sup>29</sup>

The Small Arms Survey's discussion on European countries was minimal. This is not uncommon, since most other studies of non-lethal firearm violence focus on the United States and usually on the economic cost of non-lethal firearm violence. The canonical study on the economic cost of non-lethal firearm violence was published by Jens Ludwig and Philip J Cook in 2000. They argued that higher levels of firearm violence in the United States make violence generally more lethal and injurious. In order to render this palpable, they create a framework for monetising the benefits of reducing gun violence beyond the mere 'cost of illness' and expanding it to include matters concerning 'risk of injury'. The cost of firearm violence is not exhausted by the actual cost of injury and illness, but it also includes certain parameters of risk and uncertainty. In this way, Ludwig and Cook both devise a manner of estimating the real costs of firearm violence and offer remedies for reducing that cost.<sup>30</sup> One more recent study of the scope and cost of non-lethal firearm violence in the United States has shown how non-lethal firearm violence has increased from a rate of 22.1 to 26.7 per 100,000 of the population during the period 2001–2013 while – during that same period – lethal firearm incidents (including assaults, suicides and accidents) rose only slightly from 10.4 to 10.6 per 100,000 of the population. The authors conclude that non-lethal firearm violence is endemic and that its already extensive societal and economic costs are rising.<sup>31</sup>

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1 Police reports on non-lethal firearm violence should be approached with caution. Donald Black's classical thesis that crime rates are produced socially seems to apply. This means that high rates of a certain type of crime result from high levels of attention to that type of crime. Crime rates are therefore predominantly a measure of police activity, not of crime (D Black, (1970) 'Production of crime rates'. *American Sociological Review* 35: 733–748).

The country mappings and in-depth studies for Project TARGET found consistently that most European countries do little to register different forms of non-lethal firearm violence systematically. More extensive data-collection should be a priority since the available official data suggest that non-lethal firearm violence is more extensive in scope than lethal firearm violence. In the present section, we discuss the available information on the scope of non-lethal violence. The major conclusions are that the rates of non-lethal firearm violence vary impressively across Europe and that trends in the rates of non-lethal firearm violence can be distinguished only at a national or a regional level, not at a European level. In order to enable for comparison, we have chosen to attend to the matter of non-lethal firearm violence on the basis of five regions and will use only those countries in each region for which sufficiently useful information is available: north-western Europe, Mediterranean Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and the Nordic countries, and the Western Balkans. While still imperfect, the Western Balkans have more extensive tools (such as the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP)) to register non-lethal firearm violence than most other countries in this study. The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) populates the AVMP with information from police websites and media, and in one case only (Kosovo<sup>I</sup>) through the police daily reports. The amount of publicly available data in the Western Balkans therefore stands out in contrast to those of other European regions and can serve as an example to EU Member States. If a country is not mentioned in the discussion below, it means that no or insufficient useful information on the scope of non-lethal gun violence was located.

### 1.2.1 North-western Europe

For the countries belonging to north-western Europe there tends to be some information available based on their respective national programmes. The Netherlands has advanced the furthest in monitoring armed violence because of two programmes: their 'Firearm Dashboard' (Dutch National Police) and the 'Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor' (University of Leiden). We can contrast this information with two other north-western European countries for which less information is available – Belgium and Germany.<sup>II</sup> On the basis of that comparison, and comparing these with data we have available on the scope of lethal firearm violence, we can say that non-lethal firearm violence is a significantly larger part of firearm violence in these countries than lethal firearm violence. Non-lethal violence is also believed to be mostly criminal in nature.

For the **Netherlands**, the first source is the Firearm Dashboard of the Dutch National Police, which gathers data on shootings in the country. Shootings were systematically registered

I References to Kosovo must be understood in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

II Only two sources could be found that document non-lethal firearm violence in France. Two surveys of l'Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme d'île-de-France showed that 0.25% in 2001 and 0.20% of participants were victimised physically or verbally in their lifetime with a firearm (excluding domestic violence and sexual aggression). These sources are not helpful in comparing data on non-lethal firearm violence. See L Mucchielli, L Miceli & S Névanen. (2010) 'Armes à feu en France: Des discours, des faits divers ... et des indices scientifiques qui démentent l'alarmisme'. *Journal du Droit des Jeunes* 1: 3. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-du-droit-des-jeunes-2010-1-page-3.htm#no2>, consulted 15 July 2020.

from 2018 onwards and the data show that the number of shootings increased annually from 527 in 2018 to more than 646 in 2019 and to 668 in 2020. This would give a rate of 3.9 shootings per 100,000 of the population in 2019. About 20% of these shootings are reported to have resulted in injuries. This increasing trend in shootings is most apparent in the greater area surrounding the Dutch major cities: in Amsterdam, a total of 37 shooting incidents in 2017 increased to 75 in the first nine months of 2019; in Rotterdam, a total of 71 shootings in 2018 increased to 108 shootings in 2020.<sup>32</sup>

The second source for non-lethal gun violence in the Netherlands is the Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor (DFVM), which was developed at Leiden University. This monitor uses a coding mechanism to quantify information from media articles on firearm violence. While usually less reliable than police data, media articles are more readily accessible and can often contain information that is not included in police reports. When we compare the findings of the Firearm Dashboard to those of the DFVM, we can make two important observations. First, this monitor caught about one-fifth of all police-registered shootings for a total of 637 non-lethal shootings between 2015 and 2019. When analysed by the DFVM, it was shown that 84% of these were aimed at individuals (or shot to threaten an individual); 13% were shot at objects (such as houses or shops); for the remaining 3%, a specific target could not be determined. Second, the DFVM registered a total of 606 firearm threats during 2015–2017. The actual number of firearm threats in the Netherlands is believed to be significantly higher because, on the one hand, the police do not register firearm threats systematically and, on the other, it is believed that a significant proportion of firearm threats (especially in the criminal and domestic sphere) fail to be reported.<sup>33</sup>

There are no similar national programmes for **Belgium**. As part of Project TARGET, the Flemish Peace Institute undertook a media analysis of all the Dutch-speaking media in Flanders and Brussels. That media analysis showed a total of 747 incidents of non-lethal firearm violence reported in the press during 2018–2020. These incidents include threats, injuries and no-injuries. According to our media analysis, 75% of these incidents targeted individuals, 10% targeted objects, 9% had no target and 2% targeted animals. Focusing on the cases that targeted human beings, a total of 560 cases of non-lethal gun violence can be divided into 369 cases of threat (497 victims) and 155 cases of injury (197 victims) in a two-year time frame.<sup>34</sup>

The data from the Netherlands and Belgium can be compared with publicly available data from the **German** federal police. Most data for Belgium and the Netherlands are sourced from media articles; we can assume that police records are more, though not entirely, comprehensive. From 2002 onwards, the German federal police have maintained statistics on criminal offences in which shots were fired or firearms were used to threaten people. The rate dropped from 13.1 threats per 100,000 of the population in 2002 ( $n = 10,800$ ) to 5.5 threats per 100,000 of the population in 2019 ( $n = 4,512$ ). Such a strong decrease is not fully mirrored by events in which shots were actually fired; these dropped from 6.7 shots fired per 100,000 of the population ( $n = 5,500$ ) in 2002 to 5.6 shots fired per 100,000 of the population ( $n = 4,600$ ) in 2019.<sup>35</sup> Whereas firearm threats seem therefore to have declined impressively in Germany, the rate of firearm shootings has decreased at a much slower pace.

Belgium and the Netherlands have not highly dissimilar amounts of lethal firearm violence, namely 0.2 per 100,000 of the population in the Netherlands (2019) and 0.18 in Belgium (2016). The Dutch rate fluctuates more erratically than the Belgian: in 2011, it was 0.35, for instance. Firearm usage in homicides is consistently higher in the Netherlands than in Belgium (29% vs 16%), which is largely due to a higher homicide rate in Belgium compared to the Netherlands. Germany in 2015 has a much lower rate of lethal firearm violence, namely 0.07 per 100,000 of the population. Their amounts and rates of non-lethal firearm violence differ impressively though. This has to be stated cautiously since our data is derived from very different sources, namely a firearm violence monitor (the Netherlands), a media-analysis (Belgium) and police records (Germany). Nevertheless, it is clear that in each of these countries, non-lethal firearm violence is much higher in scope than lethal firearm violence.

### 1.2.2 Mediterranean Europe

Reliable and detailed data on non-lethal gun violence in Mediterranean Europe is mostly lacking. For most Mediterranean countries, almost no information on non-lethal firearm violence is readily available. In **Portugal**, for example, very little information is publicly available, and that which is available is outdated. A 2016 report notes that during 2003–2009, a total of 2,047 firearm victims were registered in trauma care – 42% of these were males between 20 and 29 years of age. The report does not specify what proportion of these registrations were violent, accidental or suicidal.<sup>36</sup> No information on non-lethal firearm violence in **Italy** is available publicly.<sup>1</sup>

**Spain** is the Mediterranean country with the most information available. Between 2012 and 2015, the number of firearm homicide victims dropped from 61 to 39 (–36%) and, in that same time frame, the number of people injured by firearms declined more impressively from 605 to 239 (–60%). In the year that followed, however, the number of non-lethal firearm victims rose to 399.<sup>37</sup> This translates into rates of 1.3 (2012), 0.5 (2015) and 0.9 (2016) injuries by firearm per 100,000 of the population. These numbers do include non-lethal accidents and attempted suicides by firearm. The actual rate of firearm injuries intentionally inflicted by one person on another is therefore probably significantly lower than the rates mentioned above. We can compare this information to the database of the Spanish Ministry of Health for 2016–2019. On average, 60 individuals were admitted to the hospital annually for assault-related gunshot wounds (a rate of 0.1 per 100,000 of the population).<sup>38</sup> If we assume that all firearm injuries are treated at the hospital (which need not be the case), this would mean that one in nine firearm injuries registered by the police

<sup>1</sup> Cyprus's police statistics show a total of 4,960 cases of non-lethal serious crime registered by the police; 3% of these (156) were committed by means of firearms; 46% of these 156 firearm offences were categorised as infractions against the 'Explosive Substance Law' (offence code 10110) and 29% as infractions against the 'Firearms Law' (offence code 10111). These offences relate mostly to illegal possession of and trade in firearms. The remaining offences were for 19% ranked under burglaries and for 16% as malicious damage to property. See [https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/populationcondition\\_27main\\_en/populationcondition\\_27main\\_en?OpenForm&sub=7&sel=2](https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/populationcondition_27main_en/populationcondition_27main_en?OpenForm&sub=7&sel=2), consulted 23 July 2021.

in 2016 are assault-related gunshot wounds. This would presumably give Spain one of the lowest rates of firearm injuries in Europe, which seems consistent with their low rate of firearm homicides (0.1 and below). There are important regional difference in Spain, which will be discussed in the next chapters.

### 1.2.3 Central and Eastern Europe

Information on non-lethal violence in Central and Eastern Europe is scarce and often outdated. For **Romania**, for instance, the police report on robberies committed with a firearm and registered 29 armed robberies in 2010, 26 in 2011, ten in 2012 and 18 in 2013.<sup>39</sup> Even though Romania has very strict gun laws and generally low levels of firearm violence, these numbers appear exceptionally low for a country of its size (population about 20 million). An older study described a questionnaire made available to 443 students in 2003 in Romania which showed that 3.3% of the males had been exposed to being shot or shot at, but only 0.5% of females; 7.4% of males and 2.1% of females had witnessed a gun being pointed at someone; 4.7% of males and 2.6% of females had witnessed a shooting.<sup>40</sup>

For **Bulgaria**, as another example, the only information available is that offered by a SEESAC report of 2005 which notes that in 2003, 35 non-lethal firearm injuries were recorded (and 42 accidental injuries). The authors of the report, however, warn about serious under-reporting and, for this reason, these data are believed not to be reliable. No publicly available information about the scope of non-lethal gun violence was located for Hungary, Slovakia or Slovenia.

**Austria's** department for homeland affairs (*Bundesministerium für Inneres*) publishes annual police statistics on crime. In its 2019 report, it mentions a total of 357 cases of criminal delicts which involved a firearm (shot, used to threaten or simply carried), a number that has been decreasing from 846 in 2010. The report mentions only ten firearm homicides in that year, so the vast majority of criminal delicts involving firearms are non-lethal. Most criminal offences perpetrated with the use of weapons are committed with stabbing weapons.<sup>41</sup>

More detailed information about the scope of non-lethal firearm violence is available for **Poland**. The General Police Headquarters reports that during 2014–2019 a total of 108 homicides were committed with firearms (an annual rate of 0.05 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population). The low rate of firearm homicides is mirrored by equally low rates of non-lethal firearm violence. The Polish police report on two types of non-lethal firearm violence: 'brawl or assault' and 'armed robberies'. They report a total of 29 cases in which firearms were used in a brawl or an assault during 2014–2019 (with incidences dropping) and 455 cases of armed robberies (with incidences also dropping), which gives on average a total of 0.21 non-lethal firearm incidents per 100,000 of the population a year.

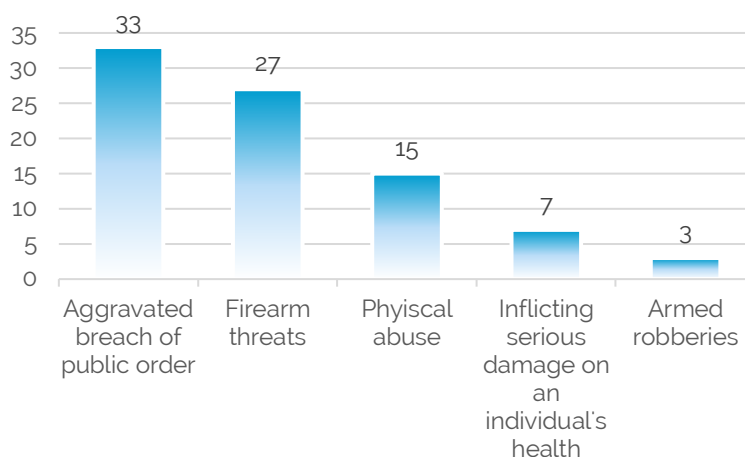
During that same period, the rate of non-lethal firearm violence almost halved, from 0.26 in 2014 to 0.14 in 2019.<sup>I</sup>

#### 1.2.4 The Baltic States and the Nordic countries

Regarding the Baltic States and the Nordic countries, some national programmes and police services provide publicly available data on non-lethal firearm violence. Very little information was located for Denmark and Finland,<sup>II</sup> but substantial amounts of data are available for Estonia and Sweden. These data suggest that Estonia suffers among the least and Sweden among the most from non-lethal gun violence in Europe.

In Estonia, detailed and recent information was collected during Project TARGET. The available data indicate that firearm crime is generally very low in the country. For the period 2010–2020 (to October 2020), there were a total of 85 cases of non-lethal firearm violence, which can be divided as shown in Figure 1.6.<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 1.6: Non-lethal firearm violence in Estonia (2010–October 2020)**



In total, this gives an annual rate of 0.6 cases of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population in Estonia.

Aggravated breach of public order is the most common form of non-lethal firearm violence, which tends to be non-criminal in nature. According to ID-Estonia, these concern mostly alcohol-related, public disputes. Such a low prevalence of firearms in criminal activity, especially in robberies, shows that criminals in Estonia prefer not to use firearms for their criminal ventures. A representative of the Internal Security Service stated that criminals

<sup>I</sup> The Polish Police pay specific attention to the use of firearms by police officers and directed at police officers. In 2014–2019, taking into account only those occasions where a police officer shot at a civilian, these led primarily to injury (65%), then to no injury (23%) and then to death (12%). All the data are compiled from police data and are fully accessible in ID-Poland.

<sup>II</sup> Little information is available for Denmark. One study published in 2007 investigated 12 years of interpersonal violence in the Odense Municipality, where only 0.4% of the people surveyed claimed to have experienced an injury due to firearms. This study is dated and hardly representative of Denmark (C Faergemann et al. (2007) 'Trends in deliberate interpersonal violence in the Odense Municipality, Denmark 1991–2002. The Odense study on deliberate interpersonal violence'. *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 14(1): 20–26).

A similarly dated study is available for Finland, which investigated the total number of victims of having a foreign object penetrate their skin ('penetrating trauma') between 1997 and 2011, and found that 12% of these were caused by gunshot (16 out of 130). The report adds that penetrating trauma had a low mortality rate in Finland (5.4%), which they attribute to a low rate of gunshot trauma (J Inkinen, K Kirjasuo, J Gunn & K Kuttilla, K. (2015) 'Penetrating trauma; experience from Southwest Finland between 1997 and 2011, a retrospective descriptive study'. *European Journal of Trauma and Emergency Surgery* 41(4): 429–433).

know that ‘blood is bad for business’.<sup>43</sup> The low rate of non-lethal firearm violence in Estonia is consonant with its very low rate of firearm homicide (0.01).<sup>44</sup>

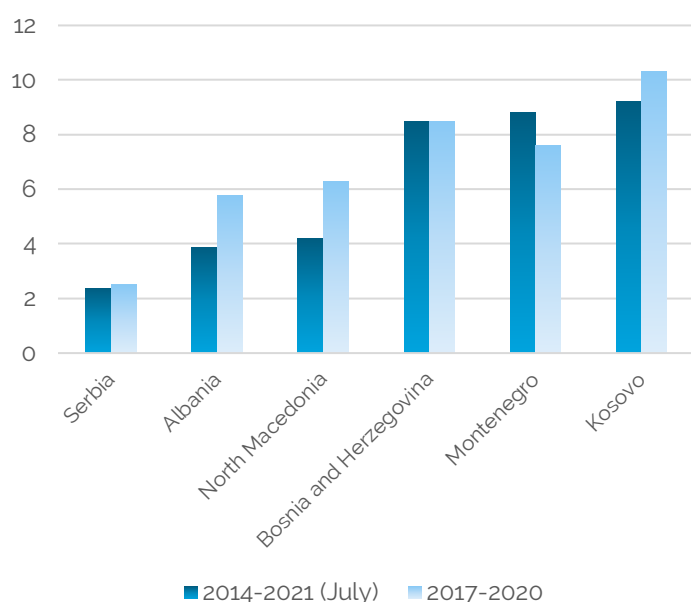
When we compare Estonia with neighbouring **Sweden**, we note that significantly more cases of non-lethal firearm violence are registered. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) reports that shootings – both fatal and non-fatal – increased by 20% between 2004 and 2014 (306 to 365). This gives a rate of 3.7 shootings per 100,000 population in 2014.<sup>45</sup> Brå reports that attempted murder by firearm increased from a rate of 2.1 in 2010 ( $n = 195$ ) to 2.8 in 2019 ( $n = 286$ ). The same database reports a relatively steady trend of robberies with a firearm from 1,068 in 2010 to 931 in 2019.<sup>46</sup> The number of robberies that take place outdoors has increased by 53% in that same time frame.<sup>47</sup> A number of academic studies by Manne Gerell, Joakim Sturup, Amir Rostami et al connects these shootings to criminal activities. First, they found certain near-repeat patterns in shootings in Sweden, which are similar criminal events that are clustered in time and space. Usually these involve the repetition of a certain criminal act because a certain victim is found to show vulnerabilities to a certain criminal offence, attracting other offenders (‘flag’); or, criminals become aware of certain efficient practices while carrying out a crime, therefore seeking out other victims (‘boost’). In examining shooting incidents during 2011–2015, they found that the risk of a shooting in two Swedish cities – Stockholm and Malmö – rose fourfold within a radius of 100 metres and a period of two weeks after a first shooting. When expanding the time and spatial parameters, this risk increased and also includes the city of Gothenburg. While the study did not have sufficient information to tie the shootings to one another, the heightened risk does suggest that shootings in Sweden are often of a retaliatory, gang-related nature rather than isolated incidents.<sup>48</sup> The same near-repeat patterns can be observed with hand-grenade use.<sup>49</sup>

### 1.2.5 The Western Balkans

Non-lethal firearm violence in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>I</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – has been recognised as a problem and is therefore researched and documented more thoroughly than in other regions. It remains difficult to characterise with a high degree of precision for three reasons. First, most Western Balkan countries – like many other countries – suffer from under-reporting, especially when non-lethal firearm violence occurs in the context of domestic or criminal violence. Second, most information is available from SEESAC<sup>50</sup> through the AVMP.<sup>51</sup> While significantly more detailed than in other countries, this information is not always sufficiently disaggregated to enable a detailed analysis. For instance, the website does not allow for connecting specific firearm types and outcomes to specific firearm incidents (eg how many armed robberies result in injury and what type of firearm is most commonly used). Upon request, SEESAC could, however, disaggregate the data further. We have requested additional data specifically on armed robberies, which has been used in section 3.1.2. Third, the AVMP has an additional hermeneutical difficulty: the platform shows

I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

markedly lower rates of firearm incidents for the period 2014–2017 than for the period 2018–2021 (up to July). During the first period (2014–2017), non-lethal firearm incidents are in a downward trajectory; in the second period (2018–2021), they also show a downward trajectory, but one that starts significantly higher in 2018. It would make sense if the downward trajectory had happened consistently from 2014 to 2021; but this anomaly suggests that firearm incidents might have been under-reported and/or inadequately or inaccurately registered during the period 2014–2017. When this question was posed to SEESAC, they responded that the rise in incidents after 2017 was due to three factors: (1) expanding the range of information to include additional sources; (2) improved training of AVMP consultants; and (3) improved quality control. The rates of non-lethal firearm violence in the Western Balkans during 2014–2017 are therefore probably higher than can be gathered from the AVMP, and it is more likely that the situation after 2017 reflects armed violence in the region more accurately. Again, however, the AVMP is not an official tool used by the Western Balkan authorities, but gathers most of its information from police websites and media.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 1.7: Rates of non-lethal firearm violence victims in the Western Balkans, 2014-July 2021.**

We start by discussing the incidence of non-lethal firearm events (excluding cases of illicit possession or trade). **Figure 1.7** shows the rates of non-lethal firearm violence from 2014 to 2021 (July) and also from 2017 to 2020. The latter shows higher rates than the previous period for all six countries except for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. These numbers are a

starting point for providing more context to non-lethal firearm violence in the Western Balkans.

For **Albania**, the SALW Survey reports a total of 6,815 cases of firearm-related criminal offences during the period 2012–2016, of which 354 were categorised as (aggravated) murder, 108 as trafficking and 5,163 as unlawful possession or manufacture of firearms. The remaining 1,190 are then non-lethal acts of firearm violence, most of which were attempted murder (852) and burglary (303). However, no data are available on violent acts categorised as ‘Serious Bodily Harm’, ‘Light Bodily Injury’, ‘Threat by Dangerous Implement in Brawl or Quarrel’ or ‘Domestic Violence’. SEESAC points out that – especially with regard to domestic violence – Albania suffers from under-reporting.<sup>53</sup> The AVMP reports that during the period from 2014 until July of 2021 there were a total of 903 victims of non-lethal firearm violence, which translates into a rate of 3.9 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year. As mentioned above, this number is

most likely unreliable: during the period 2014–2016, a total of 147 victims were reported; during 2017–2019, 537 victims were reported. Given that the numbers since 2017 show a downward trend, the actual numbers of non-lethal firearm violence victims are most likely significantly higher during the period 2014–2016.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the SALW Survey reports a total of 3,056 non-lethal firearm violent offences during 2012–2016 (omitting non-violent offences, such as the illegal trade of firearms), 51% of which were robberies and 24% of which were labelled as ‘causing of general danger’. The number of non-lethal violent firearm offences has been decreasing, in particular robberies (which decreased by 62% between 2012 and 2016).<sup>54</sup> The AVMP reports that for the period from 2014 to July of 2021 there were a total of 2,267 victims of non-lethal firearm violence, which translates into a rate of 8.5 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year.

In **Kosovo**,<sup>I</sup> the trend of firearm-related criminal offences has been in decline, from 533 in 2012 to 418 in 2016 (21.6% decrease). No information is available, however, with regard to the unlawful possession of and trade in firearms. Of all criminal firearm offences, 28.5% are categorised as causing general danger, 17.8% as threat and 14.9% as light bodily injury. The contribution of robberies to firearm-related criminal offences is very low in Kosovo:<sup>II</sup> 7.6% (well below attempted murder at 12.4%).<sup>55</sup> The AVMP reports that for the period from 2014 until July of 2021, a total of 1,318 victims of non-lethal firearm violence were recorded, which translates into a rate of 9.2 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year.

In the case of **Montenegro**, the SALW Survey reports that the most common non-lethal criminal firearm offences are burglaries and robberies (rates of 98 burglaries and 22.3 robberies per 100,000 of the population a year). Of a total of 4,322 violent non-lethal firearm incidents, 70% were burglaries ( $n = 3,045$ ) and 16% were robberies ( $n = 703$ ).<sup>56</sup> The AVMP reports that for the period from 2014 until July of 2021 a total of 438 victims of non-lethal firearm violence were recorded, which translates into a rate of 8.8 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year.

For **North Macedonia**, the SALW Survey reports a total of 1,833 firearm offences, more than half (53%) of which relate to illegal possession of and trade in firearms. The remainder consisted mostly of robberies (43%) and causing general danger (15%).<sup>57</sup> The AVMP reports that for the period from 2014 to July of 2021, a total of 705 victims of non-lethal firearm violence were recorded, which translates into a rate of 4.2 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year.

In **Serbia**, the SALW Survey reports a declining total of firearm criminal offences: from 2,373 in 2012 to 1,555 in 2016. Of these offences, 67.5% are related to illegal possession and trade, 28.4% to robberies and 1.6% to causing general danger.<sup>58</sup> The AVMP reports that for the period from 2014 to July of 2021, a total of 1,340 victims of non-lethal firearm violence

I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

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were recorded, which translates into a rate of 2.4 victims of non-lethal firearm violence per 100,000 of the population a year.

## 1.3 Conclusions

The general conclusions of the present chapter can be summarised as follows.

- A downward trend in lethal gun violence can be observed from 2000 onwards;
- this downward trend has started to level out in most cases, fluctuate or reverse in others;
- firearm usage in homicide differs markedly throughout Europe, but is generally below the global average of 40%; only in some relatively small countries (where a small number of incidents can greatly influence the percentages) is it above average;
- the scope of non-lethal firearm violence is difficult to assess, but has all the appearance in being in excess of lethal firearm violence;
- there are impressive differences between countries from low to high levels of shootings and firearm threats, to low to high usage of firearms in homicides. Within countries, these differences can also be remarkable.

The WHO data discussed above suggests a downward trend between 2000 and 2014. More recent numbers indicate a stagnation in the downward trend in lethal gun violence, which might indicate that the bottom has been reached for some EU Member States. This could possibly be the case for some exceptional success stories, such as Estonia or Poland. However, as is discussed in the subsequent chapters, it is relevant to take into account the characteristics and contexts of firearm violence, especially in contexts where the trend is reversing or has levelled out at a higher level than others. Rising rates of firearm violence can be connected to rising or fluctuating rates of criminal gun violence; rates of firearm violence that have levelled out relatively high usually indicate something about the tenacity of domestic firearm violence. The baseline numbers of firearm homicide often indicate lethal cases in the domestic sphere. Insufficient and/or inadequate policy attention to domestic violence might then be a reason why the rates of lethal gun violence stagnate. This phenomenon is discussed particularly in the context of Italy in Chapter 3.

Besides the tenacity of domestic firearm violence, criminal gun violence can erupt suddenly and erratically, as is shown in the cases of Sweden and the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent in Denmark and Belgium. It is also evidently present in certain regions of EU Member States, such as the south of Spain. Most of these countries are generally considered to be progressive and affluent, and yet they are disproportionally affected by criminal shootings. More research on the enabling conditions of this development is required, but one part of the explanation might lie – as we discuss in Chapter 3 – in a demand for high-quality drugs that translates into competition among suppliers of drugs. Drug crime does seem to be a powerful driver of gun violence, which in turn is often enabled – as discussed in Chapter 4 – by firearms trafficking.

Whereas the rising levels of criminal gun violence in Sweden and others could lead to these countries simply being regarded as outliers in Europe, these countries could also serve as a warning sign that firearm violence can suddenly re-emerge if the supply streams of illegally held firearms are not curtailed. Generally low rates of lethal gun violence risk to lull law enforcement into complacency, only to be awoken through the loud bang of high-profile events (such as extreme shooting incidents).

Non-lethal firearm violence is very difficult to characterise. From the data that are available we can ascertain that the more effort a country puts into policing and registering non-lethal firearm violence, the higher the rates of non-lethal firearm violence will be that emerge. For this reason, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and the countries in the Western Balkans appear to suffer the most from this type of violence. However, it is likely that their higher rates are due at least partly to a better registration of such incidents as a result of more attention being given to the problem by policy makers and law-enforcement authorities. This signals that non-lethal firearm violence is probably significantly more extensive in scope in countries that pay little attention to the phenomenon than is suggested in their official statistics. More, and more detailed, information and data are necessary to assess the scope of non-lethal firearm violence in Europe.

# 2



## Characteristics of gun violence in Europe

The scope of firearm violence gives an idea as to its magnitude. Equally important is to recognize the typical characteristics of firearm violence – lethal and non-lethal – in the EU. Regrettably, most countries do little to register the typical characteristics of firearm violence consistently and comprehensively. Data gathered for Project TARGET does allow us to make some general and country-specific observations about the characteristics of gun violence. We begin by discussing firearm types that are used in lethal gun violence (section 2.1). Following this, we focus on the rate at which non-lethal firearm violence leads to injury and threat (section 2.2). Finally, we describe the characteristics of the victims and perpetrators of firearm violence (section 2.3).

### 2.1 Types of firearm used in gun violence

Little information is generally available on the types of firearm that are used in gun violence. For the purposes of Project TARGET, we have gathered publicly available data from the WHO, data from police and ballistics agencies in a number of national contexts, data available through academic studies and those from the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform for South-East Europe. We begin this section by outlining the information that is available on the types of firearm used in lethal gun violence according to the WHO's Detailed Mortality Database. Despite there being very high levels of unknown firearms, we can note cautiously that handguns tend to be the preferred means for lethal gun violence in a majority of contexts. When we look specifically at non-lethal gun violence – in Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands – we note that handguns are, equally, the most common means of perpetrating it. Finally, we are able to contrast the general information from the European Union (EU) with specific information available for the Western Balkans, which confirms a predominance of handgun usage. What stands out, however, is that relatively few (converted) gas pistols are identified in the Western Balkans compared to the EU. This could suggest that that area is to date still sufficiently saturated with legacy firearms arising from conflict as not to require trafficking converted firearms (which tend to be of

lesser quality). Another explanation would be that converted firearms are being rebranded and, for this reason, are not detected as converted firearms. We discuss the nature and scope of firearm conversion more extensively in Chapter 4 section 4.3.2.

### 2.1.1 General observations

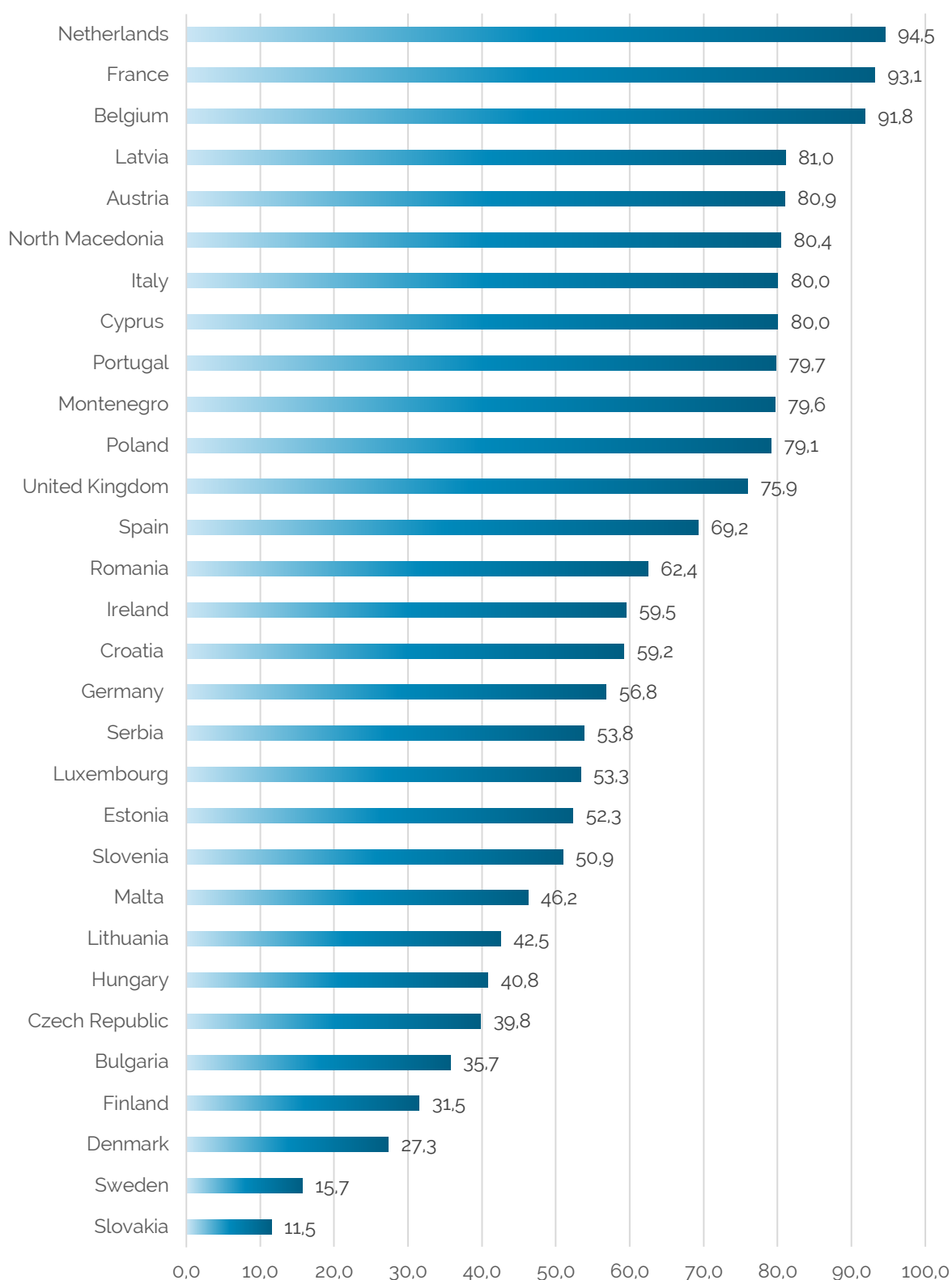
The WHO Detailed Mortality database differentiates, on the one hand, between lethal gun violence as either accident, suicide or homicide and, on the other, between mortality by handgun (short barrel) and rifle/shotgun (long barrel). Regarding both divisions, there is usually a portion that is either undetermined (ie whether accident, suicide or homicide) or unspecified/other (whether short or long gun). Whereas the proportion of ‘undetermined’ is usually relatively small, the proportion of ‘unspecified/other’ is frequently the largest. This is because WHO data are provided by autopsy reports where the type of firearm is typically determined on the basis of the gunshot wound. There are forensic guidelines – wound ballistics – on how to determine the type of firearm used in a homicide.<sup>59</sup> When there is, however, insufficient certainty about the type of firearm used, then the physician will usually list the type as unspecified/other. If the bullet is found in the body, then forensic ballistics can often determine the type of firearm based on the bullet. Given the large number of unknowns, though, it is likely that the medical records are not updated after examination of the ballistics.<sup>1</sup> This might skew firearm types in homicides in the direction of gunshot wounds that are more easily recognisable (such as shotgun wounds). New research on ways to determine the type of firearm used from an examination of wounds will hopefully reduce this category significantly in the future.<sup>60</sup>

With regard to the types of firearm used, the WHO database listed ‘unspecified’ in a majority of countries as the largest component. No disaggregated data were available for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece and Kosovo<sup>II</sup> – and so these were not included in the figures. In **Figure 2.1**, we provide the total percentage of homicide events that are labelled as ‘other/unspecified’. The percentages relate to the total usage of firearm type during the period documented by the WHO, which is usually between 2000 and 2016 (for the exact years, see Chapter 1). From this figure, we can gather that 12 countries have in excess of 75% firearm homicides ‘unspecified’; nine countries have between 50% and 75% listed as ‘unspecified’; a further nine countries have below 50% listed as ‘unspecified’. This means that the type of firearm used in firearm homicides in more than half of the firearm homicides in 21 of 30 countries is unspecified. Such a substantial lack of clear and specific information about firearm typology is a significant challenge to researchers. However, some national registries that list more accurately the types of firearm used in firearm violence (which we do below) can be consulted.

I We thank Alain E Lapon of SEESAC for bringing this point to our attention.

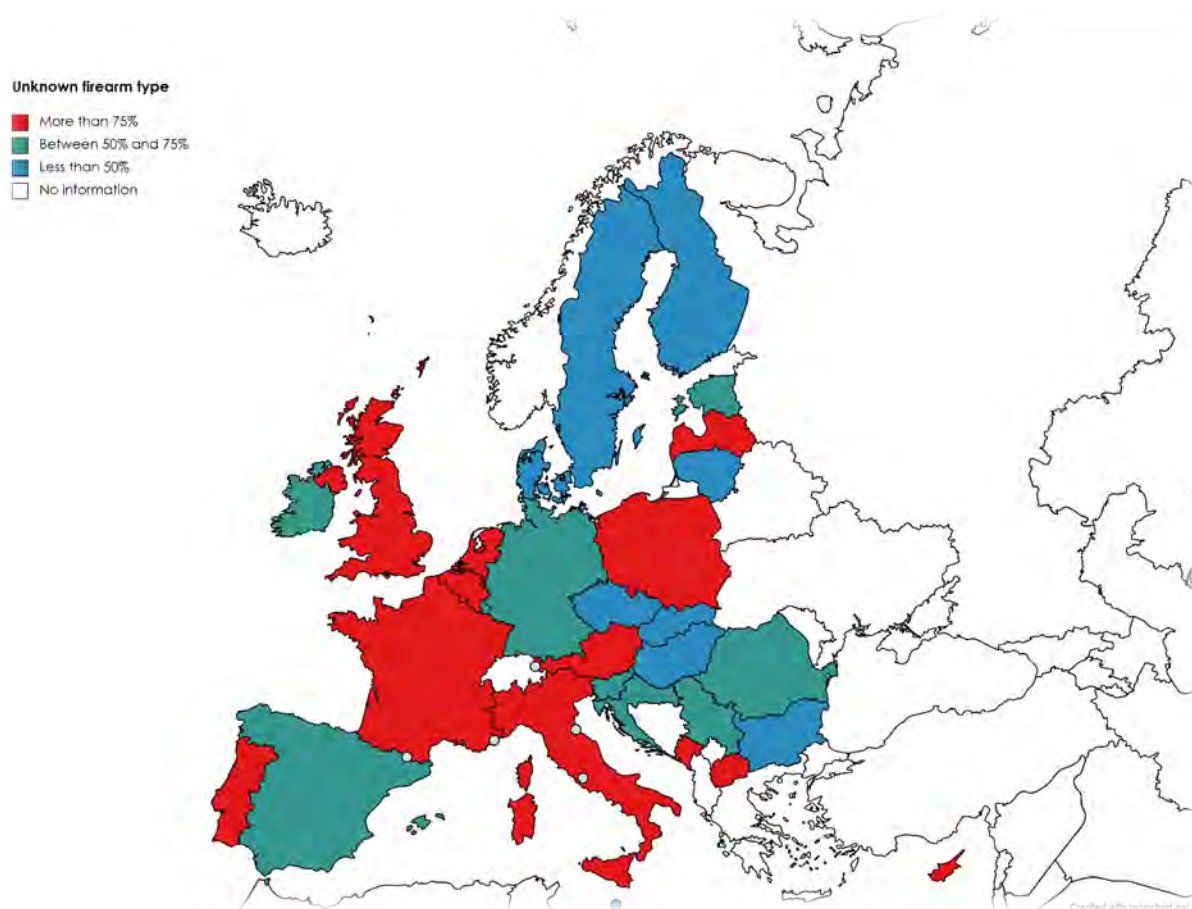
II References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

**Figure 2.1: Firearm types used in homicides (% unspecified/other)**



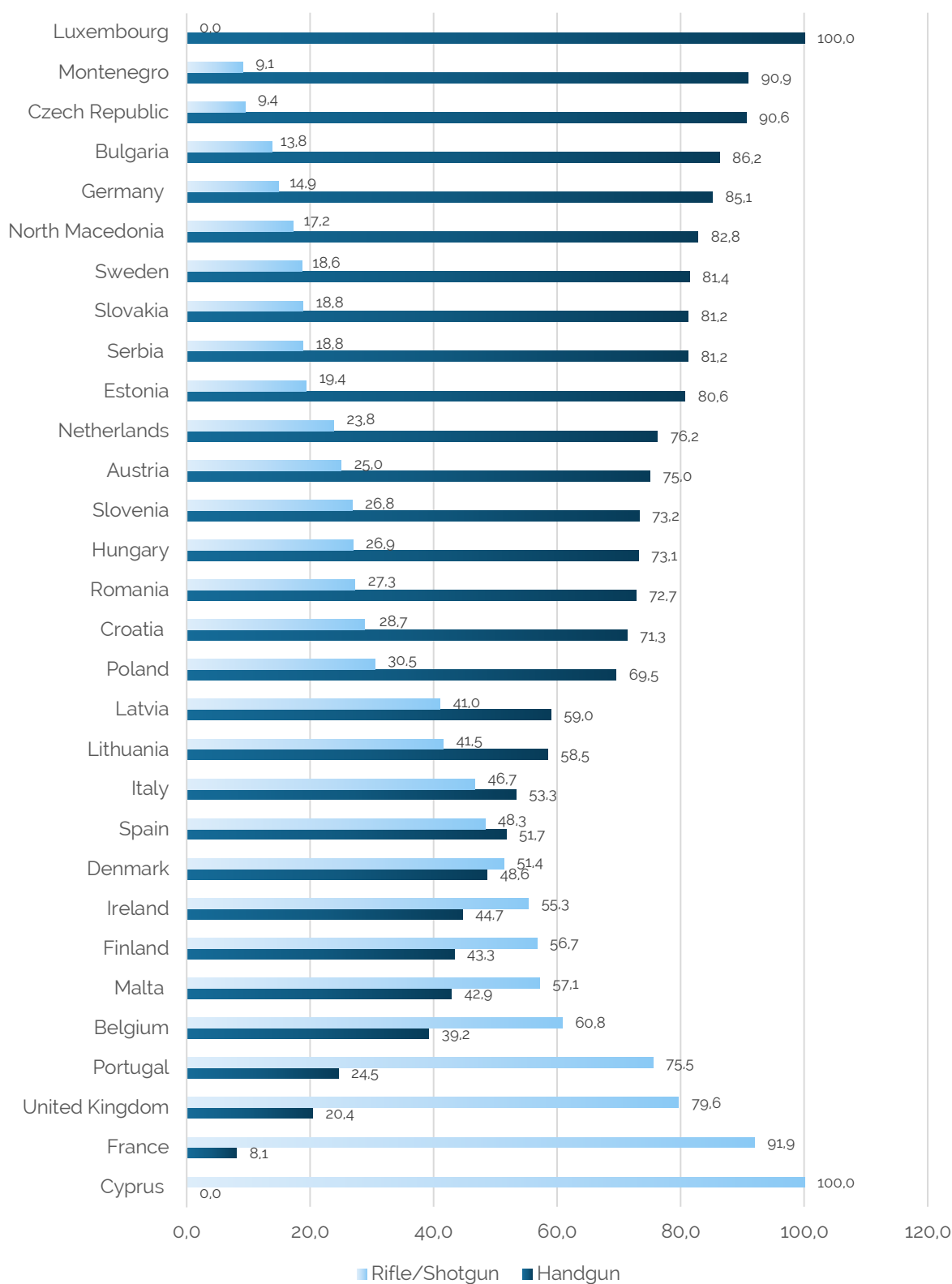
Source: based on the WHO detailed mortality database: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/who-mortality-database>. The information was collected in October 2020; the database has since been taken offline

Figure 2.2: Unknown firearm type (%)



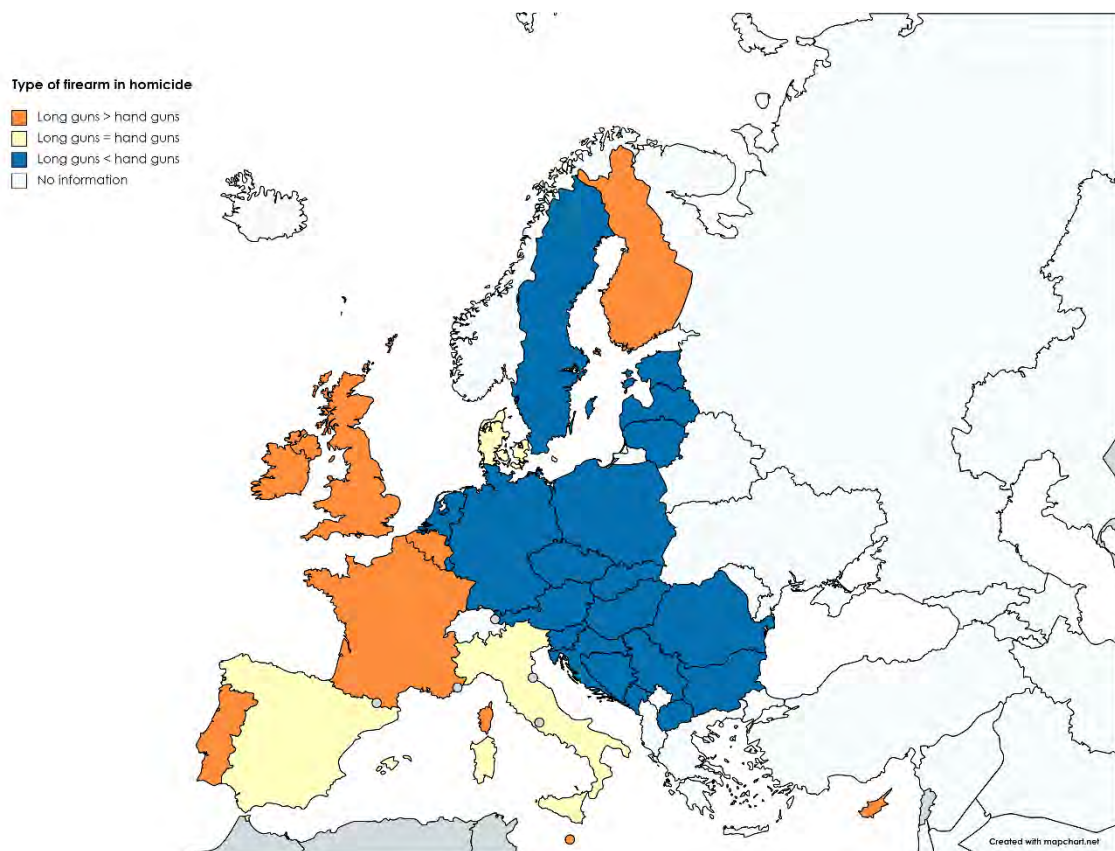
In **Figure 2.3**, we omit the category ‘unspecified/other’ and provide the percentages of handgun and rifle/shotgun as they relate to events labelled as homicides. What is noteworthy, then, is that handguns are the most used firearms in homicides in 19 countries and long guns/shotguns are more prevalent in seven countries. Three countries – Italy, Spain and Denmark – show roughly equal usage of long and short guns. Long guns appear to be particularly prevalent in France (91.9%), Portugal (75.5%) and the United Kingdom (79.6%). But all of this information is to be stated carefully: *there are a significant number of unknowns*.

**Figure 2.3: Firearm type used in homicides (omitting other/unspecified)**



Source: based on the detailed WHO mortality database: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/who-mortality-database>. The information was collected in October 2020; the database has since been taken offline

Figure 2.4: Majority type of firearm used in homicides



Any conclusions drawn from **Figures 2.3** and **2.4** ought to be nuanced with respect to the high percentage of unspecified firearm types in **Figure 2.1**. If we are to rely on the above data, we find that handguns appear to be used in homicides more commonly than long guns. Their prevalence is most apparent in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which typically have a higher legal availability of handguns. Notable exceptions to the predominance of handguns are the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Finland and France. With the exception of the United Kingdom and Ireland – for which legislative reasons might explain the prevalence of rifles – these countries tend to have a strong hunting culture, which is likely to lead to significant numbers of hunting rifles and shotguns.<sup>1</sup> We have further information available about the firearm types used in homicides in Belgium, which is discussed below; this shows that handguns are used more regularly than long guns. The wounds of some types of long gun, such as shotguns, can be detected more easily, and so would be identified more readily during an autopsy.

<sup>1</sup> Handguns are a topic of controversy with regard to firearm law and firearm violence. Hurka has traced a development that Europe has generally by 2010 shifted to a more restrictive attitude towards semi-automatic handguns, not least because of the way these are used in public mass shootings. See Steffen Hurka. (2015) 'Handguns: on target for authority?' in Christoph Knill, Christian Adam & Steffen Hurka (eds) *On the Road to Permissiveness? Change and Convergence of Moral Regulation in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## 2.1.2 Case studies

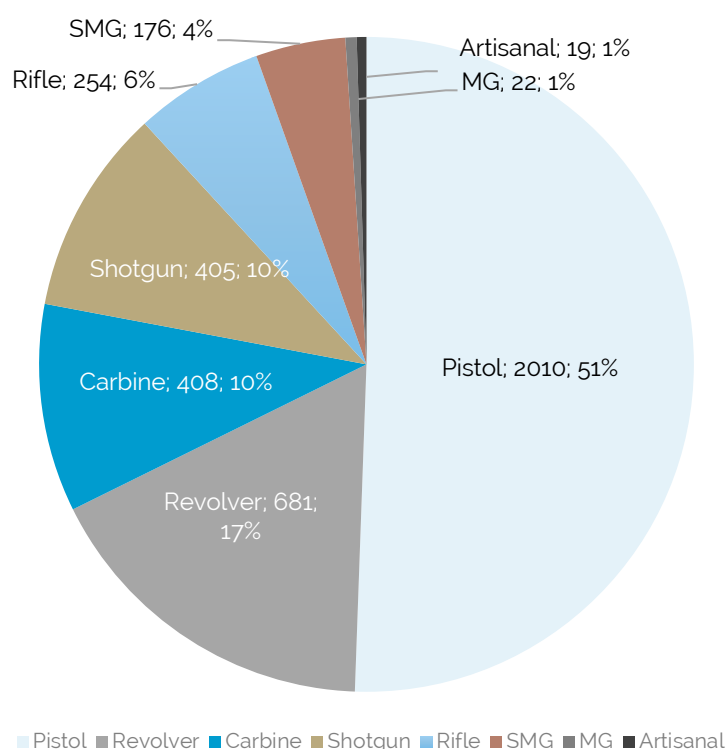
As part of Project TARGET, we researched a number of countries in depth. As a result, we can offer detailed information about the firearm typology in Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Serbia and the Netherlands in depth, and use existing studies to discuss firearm types in a series of other EU Member States.

For **Belgium**, data were gathered and analysed by the National Institute of Criminalistics and Criminology (NICC) of Belgium between 2006 and 2020. These data concern all shootings – both lethal and non-lethal – that were sent for analysis to the institute.<sup>61</sup>

**Figure 2.5: Types of firearm used in shootings in Belgium, 2006–2020**

The database holds a total of 3,975 cases of ballistics analyses where the type of firearm was determined (which includes 24 cases of suicide by firearm). **Figure 2.5** shows their distribution. Ballistics data from Belgium then suggests that handguns are used far more regularly than any other type of firearm. WHO data regarding firearm homicides did suggest, however, that

Belgium had a predominance of long-gun usage in homicides. This can be explained by a very large portion of unspecified firearms in the WHO data. Nevertheless, 26% of the shootings subjected to ballistics analysis show that a non-automatic long rifle was used (carbine, shotgun and rifle). The quantity of automatic rifles is quite small (5%). Given that during an autopsy shotguns are most easily identified as the type of firearm (as they use very distinct ammunition), it could be that these skew the WHO data to signal greater long-rifle usage.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that Belgium is more in line with other EU Member States, where the use of handguns is most prevalent in shooting incidents.



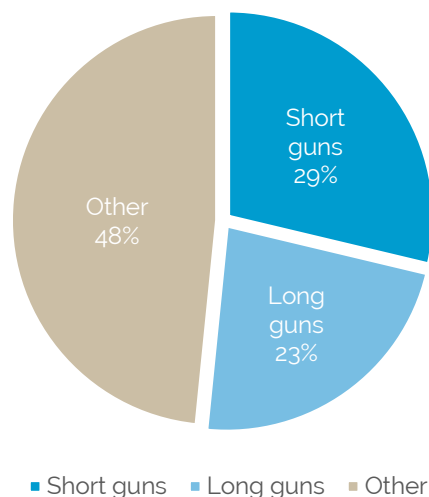
<sup>1</sup> Another difference pertains to the scope of the data. The WHO data are based on mortality statistics whereas the NICC data are based on (a fragment of) shootings (which means both lethal and non-lethal gun violence). In addition, not all shootings in Belgium lead to a ballistics analysis.

In January 2017, Spanish Senator JF Martínez Aldama requested information about injuries caused by firearms in **Spain** between 2012 and 2016.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the Spanish government released data on the matter. The statistics do not differentiate between the possible causes of injury (suicide, accidents, assault). In addition, ‘cause of death’ statistics from the National Statistics Institute provide information on the weapons used in assault-type gun violence (excluding suicide and accidents) up to 2018. This document allows us to determine which types of firearm have caused lethal and non-lethal firearm incidents during 2012–2016 in Spain.

**Figure 2.6: Firearm types used in lethal firearm violence in Spain, 2012–2016**

**Figure 2.6** shows the distribution of the types of firearm that were involved in lethal firearm incidents during 2012–2016 ( $n = 376$ ). The figure confirms the roughly equal division of long and short guns sourced from the WHO data, together with a large number of unknown firearms.<sup>63</sup>

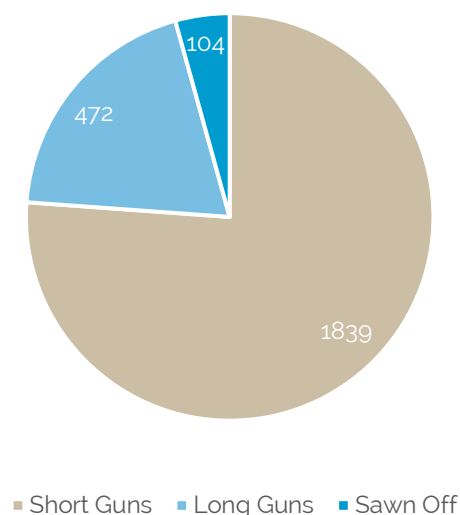
Interestingly, the firearm types that are used in non-lethal firearm violence in Spain are more specific. It is remarkable that there is no category of ‘unknown’ in the firearm types used in non-lethal firarm incidents. The government most likely omitted these from the statistics, which makes it hard to determine the rate at which firearms in non-lethal events are identified positively.



**Figure 2.7: Firearm types used in non-lethal firearm violence in Spain, 2012–2016**

**Figure 2.7** shows the distribution of the types of firearm that were involved in non-lethal firearm incidents during 2012–2016 ( $n = 2,415$ ). The figure shows a marked predominance of short-barrelled rifles over long-barrelled rifles (more than 75%).<sup>64</sup> Since short guns, like handguns, are rarely possessed legally in Spain, this suggests that most non-lethal firearm injuries are caused by illegal firearms, which occur more commonly in the criminal milieu.<sup>65</sup>

When long rifles are used in non-lethal violence, the Spanish police report that this occurs mostly in cases of domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> An interview with a representative of the Spanish National Police' unit on illicit firearms trafficking of 19 May 2021 confirms that firearm seizures after domestic violence usually involve legal firearms. See ID-Spain.

Another government answer to an interpellation raised in 2017 revealed that, in 2012, in cases of robbery with a firearm, 94% of live-firing firearms were handguns and only 6% long-barrelled rifles. Given low legal availability of handguns, it must be assumed that most of these are firearms that are acquired illegally. In cases of domestic violence with a live-firing firearm, we note less handgun usage: 54% were committed with a short-barrelled rifle and 46% with a long-barrelled rifle.<sup>66</sup> Given that a large share of these incidents are caused by handguns, this suggests one or both of two options: either a level of (illegal) availability of – most likely non-regularised – handguns or that blank-firing short guns are used in cases of domestic violence.

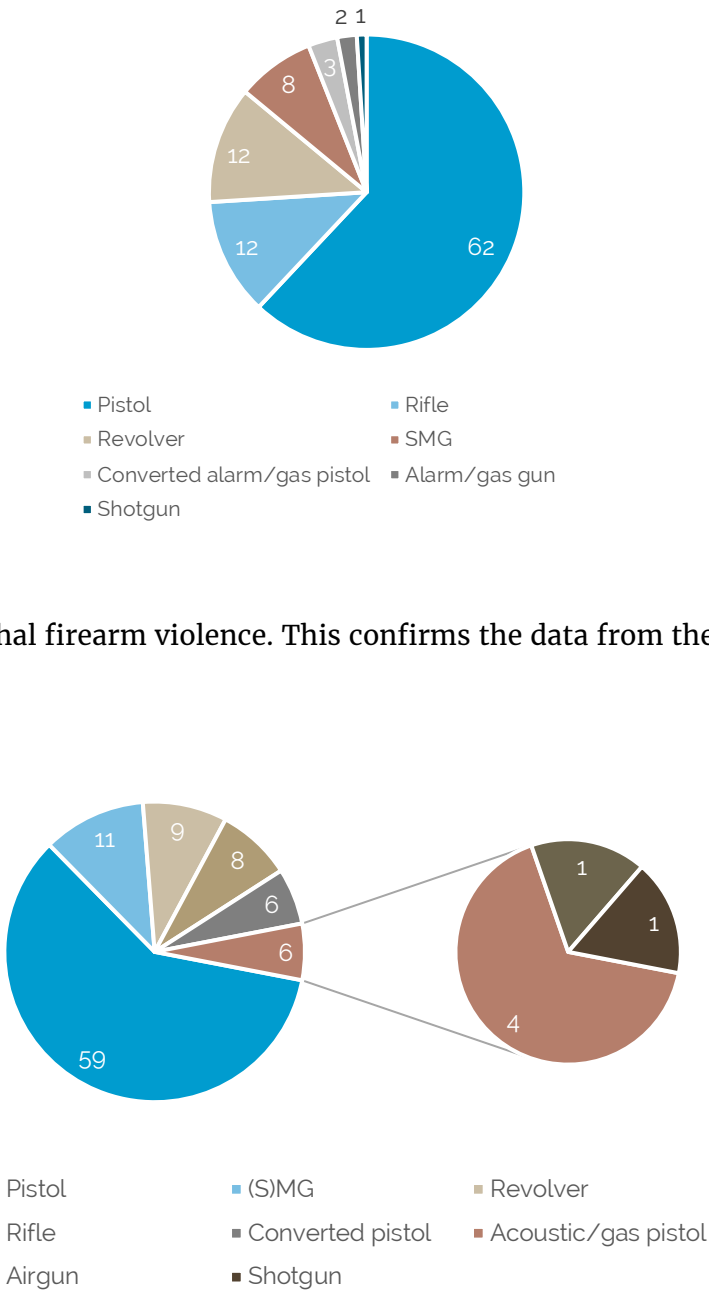
For the Netherlands, the Dutch Forensic Institute (NFI) studied 180 lethal and 670 non-lethal shootings during 2015–2019. In almost all lethal cases and about half (n = 373) of the non-lethal cases, the forensic experts were able to determine with a high degree of certainty the type of firearm used.<sup>67</sup>

Figure 2.8: Firearm types (%) used in lethal firearm violence in the Netherlands, 2015–2019

Figure 2.8 shows the firearm types used in lethal firearm violence in the Netherlands. Pistols (62%) and revolvers (12%) constitute the vast majority of firearm types used in lethal firearm violence. This confirms the data from the WHO.

Figure 2.9: Firearms types (%) used in non-lethal firearm violence in the Netherlands, 2015–2019

Figure 2.9 shows the percentages of the type of firearm used in non-lethal shootings in the Netherlands. As in the case of lethal shootings, the majority of non-lethal shootings occur by means of handguns. There do not appear to be



significant differences between lethal and non-lethal shootings in the Netherlands. For both lethal and non-lethal shootings, the most prevalent brands of handgun include the Glock (20% of all shootings), Zastava and CZ-pistols. AK-47 or Kalashnikov-type rifles are the most popular automatic rifles, amounting to 10% of shootings. Other types of automatic rifle that are detected in Dutch shootings are the Czech-made Samopal vzor 61 (commonly known as the 'Škorpion ') and the Israeli-made Uzi (probably hailing from Lithuania or Romania). Regarding revolvers, the various models from Smith&Wesson are most widespread. Converted gas and alarm pistols are increasingly detected in Dutch shootings, yet the NFI could not determine their brand. It is likely, however, that these converted pistols are by Zoraki or Ekol as these gas pistols are easily converted to live-firing firearms and have been detected all over Europe. Some of them might be Italian in origin, as large numbers of Italian gas pistols were trafficked to the Netherlands – via Portugal – during the first decade of the 2000s (see Chapter 4 section 4.3.2).

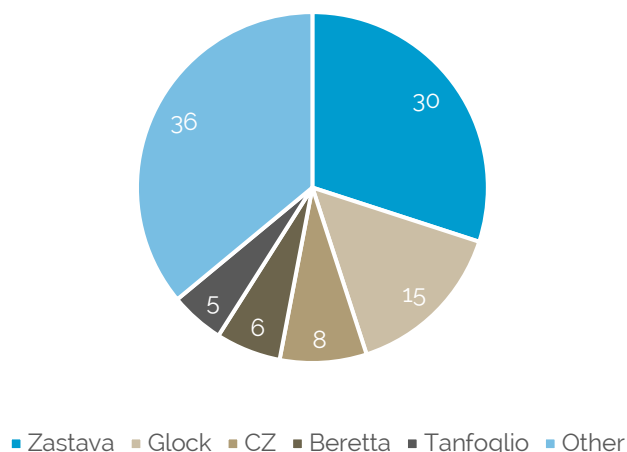
The NFI was further able to determine the loading mechanism and calibre of firearms used in lethal and non-lethal shootings, which roughly formed groupings of 60% semi-automatic, 23% automatic and 17% single shot. The calibre of the bullets in all shootings resulted in the following division: 9 mm Parabellum (34.1%), 7.65 mm Browning (21.2%), 9 mm PA Knall (8.4%), 7.62 × 39 mm (5.6%) and 6.3 mm Browning (4.8%) – the last of these is commonly used in converted gas pistols.

Police data from the Stockholm police in **Sweden** could be used to complete successfully a ballistics analysis for 449 out of 563 shootings during 2015–2019. Of the total number of shootings analysed successfully, 40% were carried out using firearms that were used more than once in a shooting, which typically suggests links to a criminal network. The police data show that automatic weapons were used more in homicide cases (25%) compared to non-lethal shooting incidents (13%). In contrast, (re)converted firearms were more prevalent in non-lethal shooting incidents.<sup>68</sup> Automatic firearms tend to be more deadly whereas converted blank-firing firearms are generally less lethal and tend also to be used more in the context of armed robberies (where there is usually no intention to kill, only to threaten). A total of 146 firearms were seized in connection with these shootings.

**Figures 2.10–2.12** show respectively the brands of semi-automatic pistols, automatic weapons and other weapons used in shootings in Stockholm during 2015–2019.

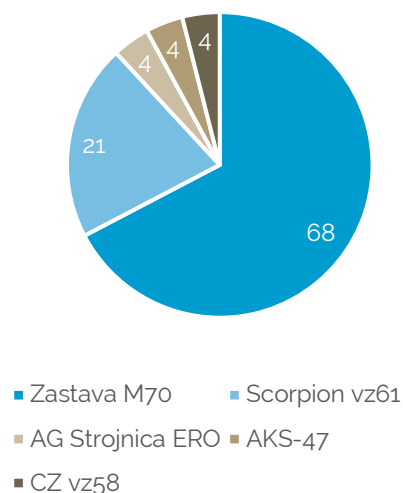
**Figure 2.10: Semi-automatic pistols used in shootings in Stockholm, 2015–2019**

Regarding handguns, it is noticeable that the Serbian Zastava and the Austrian Glock make up a large share of the firearms used in shootings.

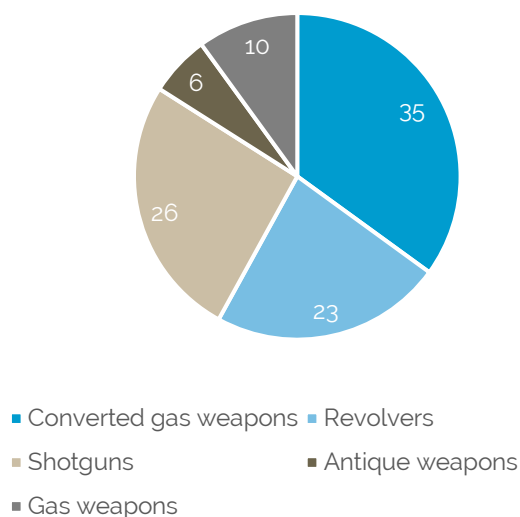


**Figure 2.11: Automatic weapons used in Stockholm, 2015–2019**

The predominance of the Serbian manufacturer is even more apparent in the automatic rifles, where the Zastava M70 is by far the most dominant type of automatic weapon. Other types of firearm used in 33% of shootings in Stockholm include the (converted) gas weapon, antique weapons and shotguns.



**Figure 2.12: Other weapons used in Stockholm, 2015–2019 (%)**



There is no information on the brands of these ‘other’ firearm types. Other reports do mention that Turkish gas pistols, often Zoraki, are frequently converted in or outside Sweden and are used by criminal groups in Sweden.<sup>69</sup>

To these in-depth studies for Project TARGET we can compare some studies for a number of other

EU Member States. These other studies tend to confirm the predominance of handguns, especially in contexts that are considered to be criminal. In the domestic context, we note that firearm usage depends more strikingly on local gun availability.

Academic studies and police data for **Germany** suggest similarly that handguns and (converted) weapons are used most frequently in lethal incidents and violent crime. A study of autopsy reports on lethal incidents of firearm use ( $n = 332$ ) found that handguns were used in 71% (53% pistols; 18% revolvers) and rifles/shotguns only in 5% of cases (the remainder are unknown).<sup>70</sup> Violent crime, reported by the German police in the border area with Belgium and the Netherlands (North Rhine-Westphalia), was also committed largely with pistols (44%) and (converted) gas guns (37%) in 2019. This area is known for the presence of significant trafficking in drugs.<sup>71</sup> Gas guns constitute the majority of firearm seizures at custom points in Germany. The extremely large numbers of seizures of gas pistols in 2013 ( $n = 16,563$ ) and 2016 ( $n = 7,933$ ) constitute more than 80% of the seizures of firearms by Customs authorities during 2013–2019.<sup>72</sup>

While there is little further disaggregated information on the subject, some reports suggest that firearm violence in the domestic sphere is less overwhelmingly achieved with handguns. In **Portugal**, an investigation into femicide in the domestic sphere showed that these were committed using a hunting firearm (26.5%), a pistol (12.2%), a revolver (10.2%), or a shotgun (4.1%); the remainder were committed without the use of firearms, such as knives (26.5%), physical strength (10.2%) and other means.<sup>73</sup> Similar firearm use in the domestic sphere is revealed for **Belgium**, where ballistics analyses (confirmed by our media reports) show that 58% of shootings in domestic violence were carried out using long guns.<sup>74</sup> The report above on firearm violence in **Spain** does, however, show that more handguns (54% of live-firing) were used in cases of domestic violence, but we also found that blank-firing guns, such as gas guns, were used very often in domestic violence in Spain.<sup>75</sup> Prior to 2015, these guns were very widely available in Spain.

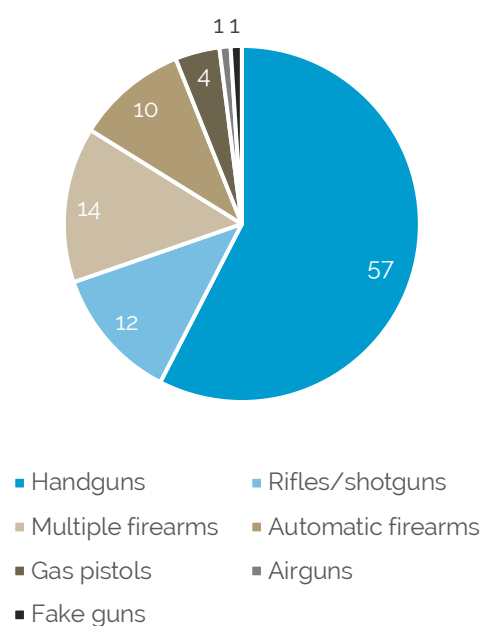
For the **Western Balkans**, information on the types of firearm that are used in lethal and non-lethal firearm violence can be sourced from the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP).<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, the ‘at a glance page’ of the AVMP does not disaggregate the information, on the one hand, with regard to lethal and non-lethal violence and, on the other hand, with regard to violent and non-violent acts (such as seizures due to illicit possession or trafficking). Upon request, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) provided this disaggregated data. For the entire region, the AVMP shows a total of 13,940 incidents where small arms and light weapons (SALW) were used between 2014 and July of 2021. When we take out the explosives and unidentified SALW, we are left with 10,421 incidents of firearm misuse (lethal, non-lethal and seizures).

**Figure 2.13: Firearm types in the Western Balkans, 2014–July 2021**

**Figure 2.13** shows the distribution of firearm types for the entire region (excluding Croatia). We note a similar distribution of firearm types used in firearm incidents as in the EU, even though gas pistols and airguns appear significantly less prominent in the Western Balkans. There are some national differences with regard to firearm types among the countries of the Western Balkans.<sup>I</sup>

In a written conversation with SEESAC, and confirmed by other regional experts, it was argued that there is an influx of blank-firing weapons into the countries of the Western Balkans. These are predominantly detected in Belgrade (Serbia) and Pristina (Kosovo<sup>II</sup>). The most popular brands are all Turkish (Blow, Voltran, Ekol and Zoraki) and tend to be purchased in Bulgaria. When criminals convert these firearms, they are selective in their choice of blank-firing weapons. They choose those that resemble live-firing firearms and rebrand them. For instance, the Zoraki 917 is often rebranded into a Glock 17 or the Zoraki 2918 into a Sig Sauer. When seized, these firearms might have been registered as live-firing firearms of those brands.<sup>77</sup> Similar strategies have been observed in Portugal and Spain, where Italian gas guns were rebranded as Astra, Star or Zastava.<sup>III</sup> This observation could also suggest that a significantly higher percentage of firearms used by criminals in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain (see above) are actually converted firearms.

All our sources therefore confirm that handguns are used the most in different kinds of shooting. In countries with high levels of criminal firearm violence – such as the Netherlands and Sweden – they stand out, in addition to the usage of automatic firearms. In other countries with lower levels of criminal firearm violence, and therefore comparatively higher levels of domestic firearm violence, we note a somewhat higher percentage of long guns, such as rifles and shotguns. Blank-firing firearms can be used in all contexts, but tend to be converted only when used in a criminal context.



<sup>I</sup> In Albania, there is a higher level of automatic or military-grade firearm usage (22%), even though handguns are still the most widespread (46%). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, handguns are particularly prominent (66%). In Kosovo, the numbers follow the regional averages, with the exception of a higher rate of gas pistols (8%) being used. In Montenegro, there is a somewhat lower rate of automatic firearms (7%). In North Macedonia, a significantly higher rate of rifles and shotguns are used (22%) and a conversely lower rate of automatic or military-grade firearms (4%). In Serbia, a noticeably higher rate of handgun usage is evident (63%) and a conversely lower rate of automatic or military-grade firearms (5%). See Armed Violence Monitoring Platform.

<sup>II</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

<sup>III</sup> Seizures of firearms with altered markings remain relatively high in Spain and Portugal, which seized respectively 2,322 and 1,275 firearms with altered markings during 2016–2017. In those contexts, this would usually involve different forms of firearm conversion. See UNODC. *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, 39.

## 2.2 Firearm locations, threats and injuries

In cases of non-lethal firearm violence, the consequence can be threat, injury or no injury. 'Injuries' are defined as occasions where a firearm is used to cause a non-lethal injury without the injury being accidental or self-inflicted; 'being threatened' refers to an occasion on which a firearm is used to intimidate someone without that firearm being shot; 'no injury' refers to an occasion on which a firearm is discharged at a person but does not cause an injury. Because of a lack of standardised information, we cannot attempt a comparative analysis of the likelihood of firearm violence resulting in injury; at best, we can offer a contextual discussion of the likelihood of firearm violence resulting in injury on the basis of whatever data are available for a specific country.

No centralised database for non-lethal firearm violence is available in Europe. Researchers and policymakers depend on national programmes and publicly available reports. As part of Project TARGET, data for Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Sweden were collected. The available data suggest that firearm threats are significantly more common than firearm injuries (in particular in the context of armed robberies), and this is especially true in those countries with relatively low levels of violent criminal activity. The Netherlands and Sweden offer the exception and show comparatively higher levels of firearm injury compared to other countries. Again, it is important to stress that the national rates below cannot be compared directly because of different registration procedures.

We do note several similarities in countries where lethal gun violence typically happens in the domestic sphere: Belgium, Austria and Germany. In response to the abovementioned interpellation in the Spanish Senate, we also have specific data on non-lethal firearm violence for the year 2012 in **Spain**.<sup>78</sup> That report notes that while the majority of firearm homicides generally in Spain are not linked to the criminal milieu, non-lethal firearm violence is intimately linked to (organised) crime. **Figure 2.14**<sup>79</sup> shows the distribution of firearm crime in Spain, ranging from less than 5% of gun crime (green) to between 5% and 10% of gun crime (yellow) to between 10% and 15% (orange) to above 30% of gun crime (red).



Figure 2.14: Gun crime in Spain (regions)

In 2012, more than 66% of all assault-type crimes committed with live-firing firearms were related to thefts and armed robberies. Of all these firearm assaults, only about 5% had a lethal outcome (130 of 2,743). The likely reason for such a low mortality rate is that the majority of these incidents are thefts or armed robberies (61%), where firearms are typically

used to intimidate.<sup>80</sup> In more organised crime groups (OCGs)– such as the drug trade – firearms are used against competitors in the criminal milieu, where the injury and death rates are higher (though comparatively still rather low in Spain). This seems concentrated mostly in the southernmost region of Spain (Andalucía), where drug-trafficking is most intense.<sup>81</sup>

When we connect gun crime to the legal possession of firearms in Spain, we can note a number of things. The rates of gun possession in Spain are shown in the map below, ranging from fewer than five guns per 100 population (green) to between five and six (yellow), then to between six and 7.5 (orange) and above 7.5 (red). This is shown in Figure 2.15.<sup>82</sup>

Figure 2.15: Gun possession in Spain, 2016 (regions)



While the south has the highest number of firearms registered legally, Andalusia has a large part of the population and therefore only an average amount of firearms registered legally per 100 population.<sup>83</sup> The highest levels of legal gun ownership are in the centre and west of Spain. Since, however, by far the largest amount of gun crime is committed in Andalucía and Valencia, which do not have the highest rates of legal ownership, it stands to reason that firearm crime in Spain is carried out using predominantly illegally held firearms. This was also shown by the fact that most firearm crime occurs with handguns, whereas domestic violence includes more often long guns. As a consequence, Spain offers a mixed bag: while for the whole of Spain lethal firearm crime occurs to a considerable extent in a domestic setting, the south of Spain seems more troubled by (drug) crime and so has a greater number of instances of criminal firearm violence.

For **Belgium**, our media analysis of the Dutch-speaking media in Flanders and Brussels for the period 2018–2020 shows a total of 497 people threatened by firearms and 197 injured. Regarding threats, an internal study of gun violence in Belgium conducted by the Federal Police on cases that occurred in 2019 reveals a total of 307 firearm threats for the year 2019 alone (which includes the southern part of Belgium). According to the media analysis, threats were issued for the most part in the context of an armed robbery (75%). With regard to injuries, police data reveal 34 cases of firearm-related injuries in 2019 (which can also be sustained by a firearm beating). The police data also offer specific detail on firearm violence during thefts and robberies: a total of 697 armed thefts in 2019, most of which are armed robberies (463). These data do not specify whether the use of a firearm resulted in a threat, an injury or no injury.<sup>84</sup>

Crime statistics in **Austria** for the year 2019 show that the distribution of non-lethal shootings includes most prominently damage to property (18.9%), endangering the physical security of a person (17.9%) and animal abuse (10%). Firearms are often used in a criminal context to threaten, mostly in the context of robberies (24.5% of firearm threats) and extortion (16.1% of firearm threats).

In **Germany**, some academic studies have investigated the registration of patients in trauma centres. This study found that 305 patients with gunshot wounds (a rate of 0.1 per 100,000 of the population a year) entered the hospitals during 2009–2011.<sup>85</sup> Of these, 121 died while in the hospital, bringing the total instances of non-lethal firearm violence to 184 (0.07 per 100,000 of the population a year). This number is significantly lower than the 700 cases of non-fatal assaults with firearm a year in Germany. While not all of these assaults might require hospital care, it is also noted that not all hospitals make use of the same registration system and therefore the actual number of firearm injuries is likely to be significantly higher.<sup>86</sup>

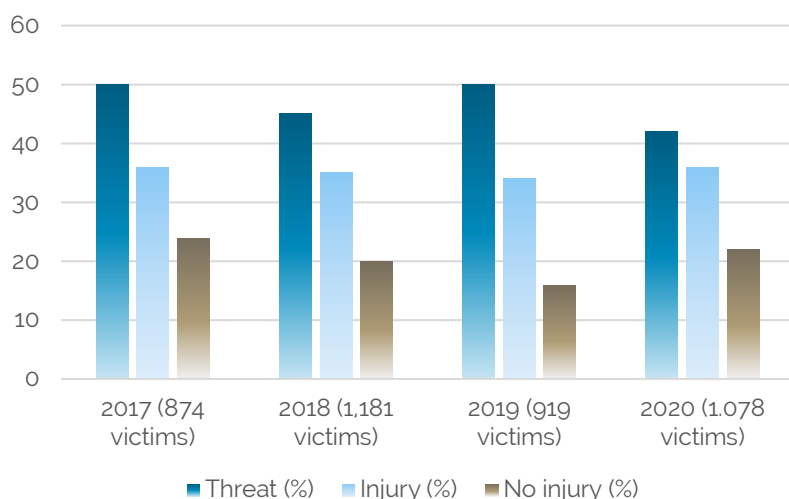
Because firearm violence in the Netherlands and Sweden occurs more frequently in the criminal milieu, these countries show slightly different characteristics of firearm violence. In the **Netherlands**, information is available on the location where most non-lethal shootings and firearm threats take place. These are concentrated mainly in the country's major cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Nijmegen and The Hague. The rates of non-lethal shootings in these cities are as follows:

- 20.4 per 100,000 of the population in Rotterdam
- 20 per 100,000 of the population in Amsterdam
- 10.4 per 100,000 of the population in Utrecht
- 9.4 per 100,000 of the population in Nijmegen
- 8.7 per 100,000 of the population in the Hague.

A number of smaller and middle-sized cities along the Belgian border also suffer higher rates of non-lethal firearm violence – most likely associated with the transnational drug trade. Firearm threats in the Netherlands occur more regularly all over the country, but the largest concentration of these is equally in the cities listed above.

For **Sweden**, Ardavan Koshnood calculated that between 2012 and 2017 the number of individuals who have to be treated for gunshot wounds increased by 50%.<sup>87</sup> Data from Brå show that the number of attempted homicides with firearms increased by 47% between 2010 and 2019 (from 195 to 286). An article in the *SVT Nyheter* reported that the costs of treating firearm injuries at Karolinska Hospital (Stockholm) in 2020 came to about €1 million (for 38 patients). As in the Netherlands, gun violence is concentrated mainly in the major cities, most importantly in Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg. During 2011–2016, 68% of firearm homicides occurred in these three cities; in 2017, they accounted for 85% of all firearm homicides in Sweden.<sup>88</sup>

The above discussion shows that information on firearm injuries for most European countries is scattered and largely incomparable. For the Western Balkans, detailed data are available in the SALW reports by SEESAC and the AVMP. For the entire region, the AVMP reports on the consequences and characteristics of non-lethal firearm violence.



**Figure 2.16: Threat, injury and no injury in Western Balkans, 2017–2020**

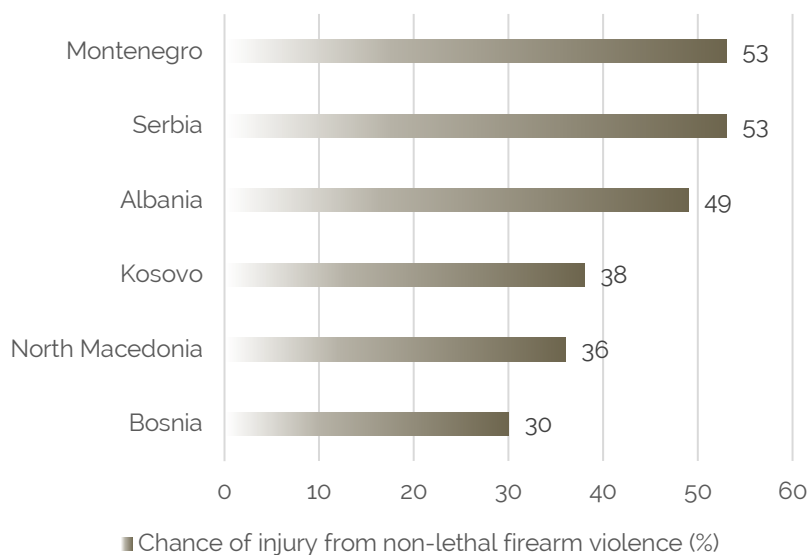
We summarise this information in **Figure 2.16**. From this figure, we can gather that firearm violence consistently has a reasonable chance of not resulting in injury. This is most likely related to the fact that a majority of the

non-lethal acts of firearm violence take place in the context of a robbery or a burglary. In the discussion of armed robberies below (Chapter 3 section 3.1.2), we find low levels of firearm injuries and deaths.

The AVMP and SALW reports from SEESAC also allow us to compare in some depth the different countries of the Western Balkans. We can make this comparison on the basis of the chances of firearm violence resulting in either death, suicide, threat or no injury.

**Figure 2.17: Risk of injury in non-lethal firearm violence in the Western Balkans, 2014–July 2021**

In **Figure 2.17** we use the AVMP to describe the risk of firearm violence resulting in injury in the Western Balkans. By combining this information with SALW reports from SEESAC,<sup>89</sup> we are also able to add a further nuance to instances of firearm violence per country.



In the case of **Albania**, SEESAC's SALW survey

reports on the outcomes of firearm-related events and their consequences according to context for the period 2012–2016. In the criminal use of firearms, 23.9% resulted in death, 33.9% resulted in the victim being threatened and 33.9% resulted in injuries. Regarding the use of firearms in the context of domestic violence, 29.4% resulted in death, 9.8% in suicide, 27.6% in the victim being threatened, 27.6% injury. In the use of firearms in public disputes, 18.7% resulted in death, 0.5% in suicide, 36.9% in the victim being threatened and 33.1% in injury.<sup>90</sup> This shows that criminal firearm violence in Albania during the period 2012–2016 had a very high probability of ending in either death or injury.

In the case of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, SEESAC's SALW survey reports that the number of firearm-related injuries has been decreasing since 2012: from 73 to 38 in 2016 (a decrease of 48%).<sup>91</sup>

In the case of **Kosovo**,<sup>1</sup> SEESAC's SALW survey reports that the number of non-lethal firearm injuries has been decreasing: from 123 in 2012 to 39 in 2016 (a decrease of 68.3%).<sup>92</sup>

In the case of **Montenegro**, SEESAC's SALW survey reports that the rate of violent firearm offences causing bodily harm – both serious and light harm – was on average 4.0 per 100,000 of the population for each year between 2012 and 2016 (with a total of 157 individuals being injured by firearms during that period).<sup>93</sup> Given that burglaries and robberies with firearms have respectively rates of 98 and 22.3 per 100,000 of the population a year, this leads us to believe that non-lethal firearm violence in the criminal milieu in Montenegro is not likely to result in bodily injury.

<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

In **North Macedonia**, SEESAC's SALW survey reports that 47 individuals were injured by gunshots between 2012 and 2016.<sup>94</sup>

In **Serbia**, SEESAC's SALW survey reports a total of 223 persons who suffered injuries inflicted by firearms during 2012–2016.<sup>95</sup> Of all the instances of firearm violence in Serbia, 77% of these took place in urban areas during the period 2015–2019.<sup>96</sup>

## 2.3 Perpetrators and victims

In this sub-section, we describe the gender division between male and female victims and perpetrators of firearm violence. We find that lethal firearm incidents tend to involve men disproportionately, both as perpetrator and as victim. Non-lethal violence tends also to involve mainly men, although there is usually a higher percentage of women and the age-subdivision seems to be spread more evenly. Some information is publicly available from the WHO Detailed Morbidity Database and the AVMP. We supplement these sources with data gathered for Project TARGET. We note particularly that the dominance of men as victims of lethal gun violence is especially apparent in countries with higher levels of criminal gun violence. In countries with higher levels of domestic gun violence, women tend to make up a larger proportion of the victims of lethal gun violence (although never the majority).

### 2.3.1 General observations

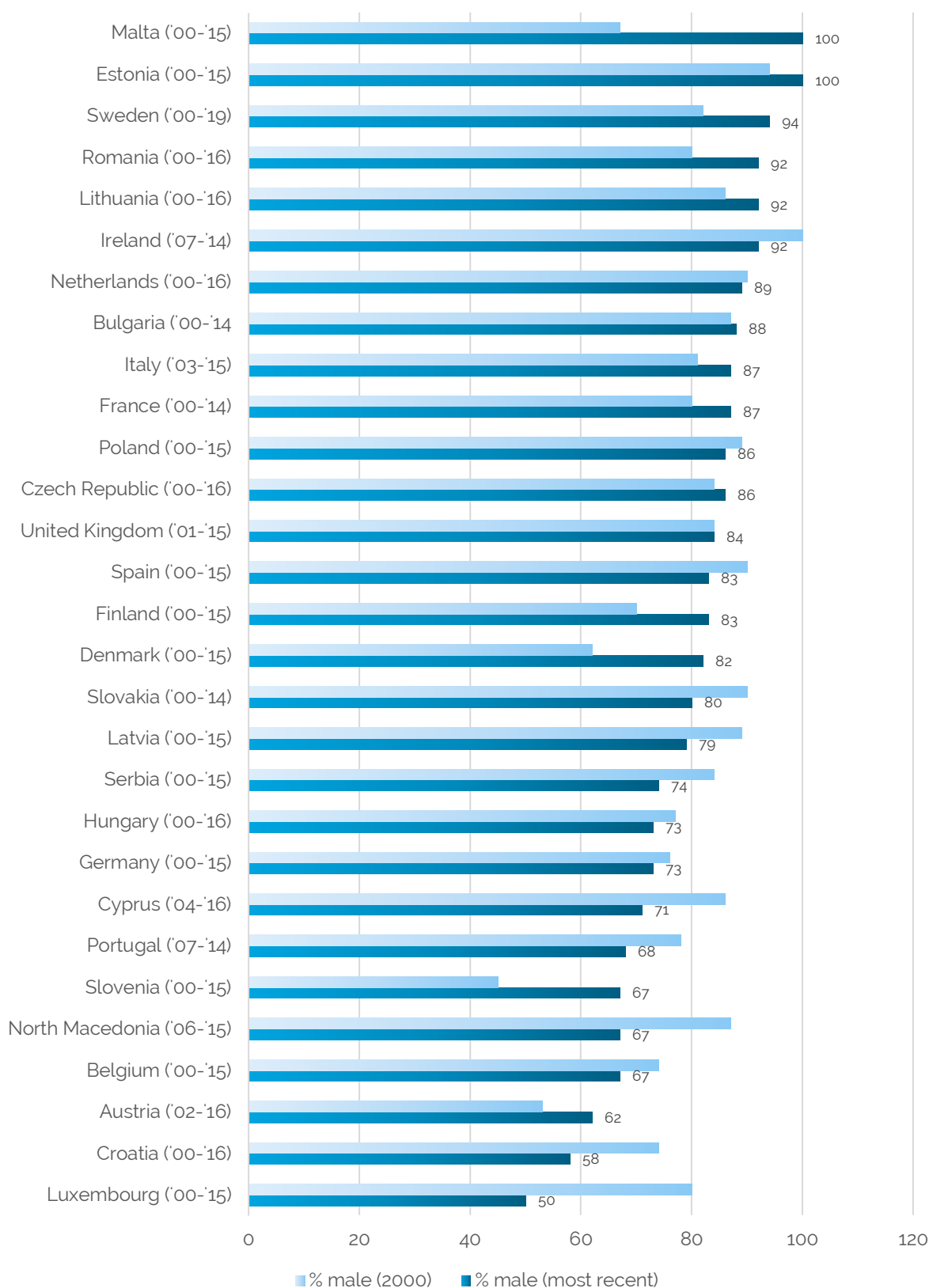
The WHO Detailed Mortality Database allows us to compare the gender division of victims of lethal firearm incidents (assault, accident and intention unknown) between 2000 (or closest to it) and the most recent year for which the WHO has data available. The percentage of male victims between those years is outlined in **Figure 2.18**. What becomes readily apparent is that males comprise the majority of victims of lethal firearm violence. This figure includes cases of accidental death and firearm death with undetermined intent. However, given that homicides are usually a larger proportion than accidental deaths and undetermined intent, the WHO data also suggest that men constitute the majority of firearm homicide victims. In 14 countries, the proportion of female victimisation is increasing slightly. We outline this trend in **Figure 2.19**. This is usually due to the fact that the total number of male victims diminishes while the number of female victims remains stable or decreases less rapidly. In many cases, this means that lethal criminal firearm violence decreases more noticeably than lethal domestic firearm violence. Changes in the rates for smaller countries, such as Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus, are not statistically relevant, given the small sampling. The changes in Estonia are omitted because Estonia has extremely low rates of firearm homicide. The rates of male and female victimisation

reappear in the countries of the Western Balkans, where the AVMP reports that men constitute on average 77% of the victims of firearm incidents since 2014.<sup>I</sup>

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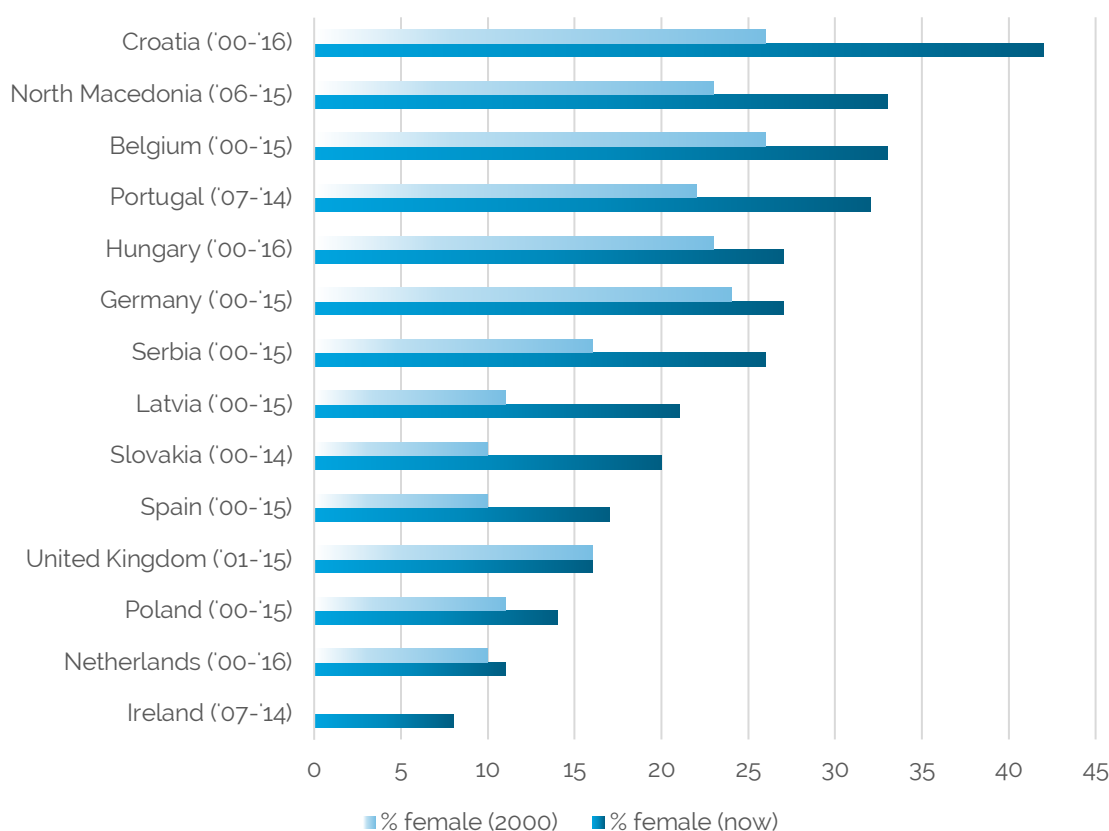
I [https://www.seesac.org/AVMP/?glance\\_year=all&glance\\_month=all&glance\\_region=#glance](https://www.seesac.org/AVMP/?glance_year=all&glance_month=all&glance_region=#glance), consulted 28 September 2021. There are obviously variations between the different countries of the Western Balkans. Compared to the regional average, women are less likely to be the victims of firearm incidents in Albania (15% of victims), in Kosovo (12% of victims) and in North Macedonia (15% of victims); whereas they are more likely to be the victims of firearm incidents in Bosnia and Herzegovina (41% of victims) and Serbia (24% of victims).

**Figure 2.18: Percentage of male victims from 2000 (or closest thereto) to most recent**



Source: based on data from the UNODC: <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>

**Figure 2.19: Female victims in countries with rising rates**



Source: based on data from the UNODC: <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>

The perpetrators of firearm violence are even more predominantly male. The AVMP reports that for the Western Balkans, for instance, 98% of the perpetrators of firearm incidents since 2014 have been men.<sup>97</sup> The WHO does not have a database of perpetrators of firearm violence and so we can offer no further general observations.

### 2.3.2 Case studies

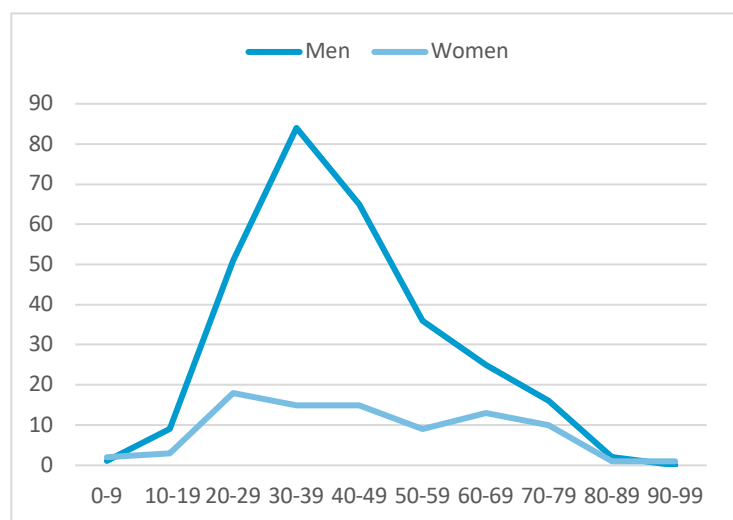
We can offer some further insights into the characteristics of victims and perpetrators in Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden based on our in-depth studies; for the countries of the Western Balkans, we are able to source information from SEESAC SALW surveys and the AVMP. These studies confirm that the victims and perpetrators of gun violence in Europe are predominantly young men (below the age of 35). In contexts with high levels of criminal activity – such as in the Netherlands and Sweden – we note an even stronger prevalence of young men as both victims and perpetrators. Young men are always the main perpetrators of firearm violence; they are also the main victims of lethal firearm violence, while in the case of non-lethal firearm violence the age distribution tends to be spread more evenly.

Belgium and Spain have roughly the same gender and age divisions for firearm victims and perpetrators. In **Belgium**, there were 226 cases of firearm homicide during 2009–2017: 73% of victims, on average, were men – slightly fewer women were victimised in Brussels (20%) and more in Flanders (30%). Half of the victims were in the 25–49 age group and 30% were between 45 and 74 years of age. In Brussels, the victims of firearm homicides were generally younger than in the rest of Belgium.<sup>98</sup>

In **Spain**, we note a strong decline in the male death by firearm rate (0.65–0.23 per 100,000 of the male population) between 2000 and 2015, whereas the female deaths by firearm remained fairly stable (0.05–0.07 firearm deaths per 100,000 of the female population). This means that the proportion of female victims increased (from 10% to 17%) without the rate of female victims of firearm violence increasing. In 2018, females made up even 29% of the victims of firearm homicides.<sup>99</sup> According to the *Guardia Civil*, men are twice as likely to use a firearm to kill than women (18% compared to 9%).<sup>100</sup> Non-Spanish residents are over-represented in crime generally in Spain, but Spanish nationals are slightly more likely to use firearms than non-Spanish residents. The *Guardia Civil* calculated that during 2010–2012, Spanish nationals used firearms in homicides 22% of the time, whereas non-Spanish residents did so 16% of the time.<sup>101</sup> In their 2019 report, the *Guardia Civil* repeats the fact that non-lethal firearm criminal violence is predominantly pursued by Spanish nationals whereas non-Spanish residents are over-represented (given their share of the population) in all non-firearm types of crime.<sup>102</sup> When we consider the ages of gun homicide victims, we note that most of them are between the ages of 20 and 40 years. This is illustrated in **Figure 2.20**.<sup>103</sup>

**Figure 2.20: Age and gender distribution of homicide victims in Spain, 2012–2018**

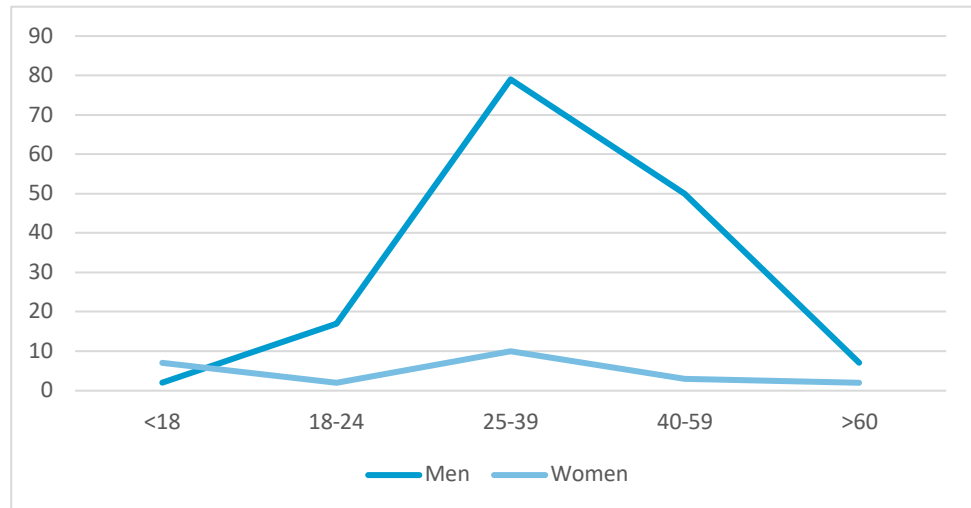
What is noticeable is that the number of male victims clearly peaks, while the number of female victims is spread roughly more evenly over the age groups. This is most likely due to the fact that a substantial number of the male victims are killed in a criminal context in which, typically, younger individuals participate. Female victims are affected more by domestic gun violence, which is distributed roughly more evenly across the age groups.



While the situation is mostly similar, we note a stronger presence of men in firearm violence in the Netherlands and Sweden. In the **Netherlands**, data from the Dutch Homicide Monitor and the Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor (DFVM) for 2015–2019 show that the victims of lethal and non-lethal shootings were predominantly men in the 25–39 age group (44.2% of lethal shootings; 35.7% of non-lethal shootings). Women constitute only 13.4%

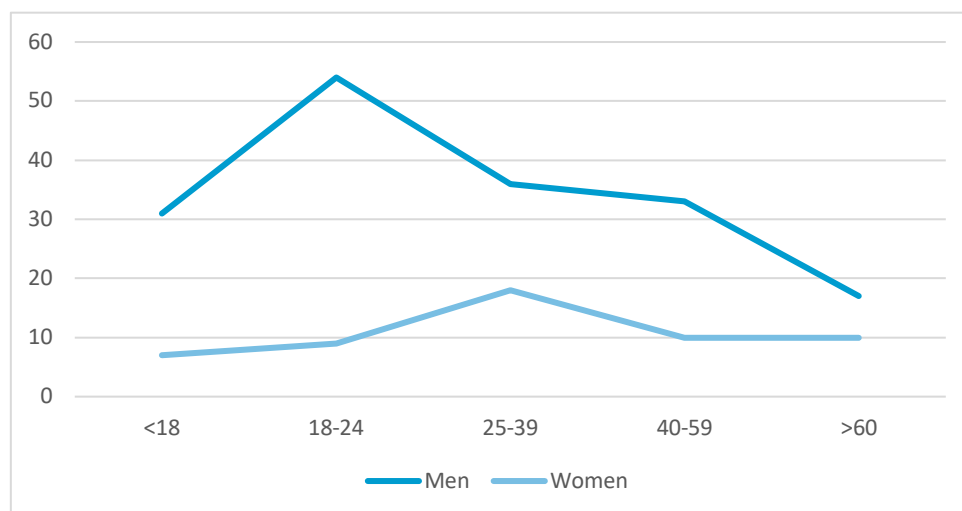
and 14% of victims of lethal and non-lethal shooting respectively (the majority of whom are in the 25–39 age group). The same age subdivision as in Spain re-emerges, where male firearm homicide victims peak and female homicide victims generally spread more evenly. This is shown in **Figure 2.21**.<sup>104</sup>

**Figure 2.21: Age and gender distribution of homicide victims in the Netherlands, 2015–2019**



Men also make up the vast majority of victims of firearm threats (76%). We note, however, that in the case of firearm

threats, the age groups are spread generally more evenly, as illustrated in **Figure 2.22**.<sup>105</sup>

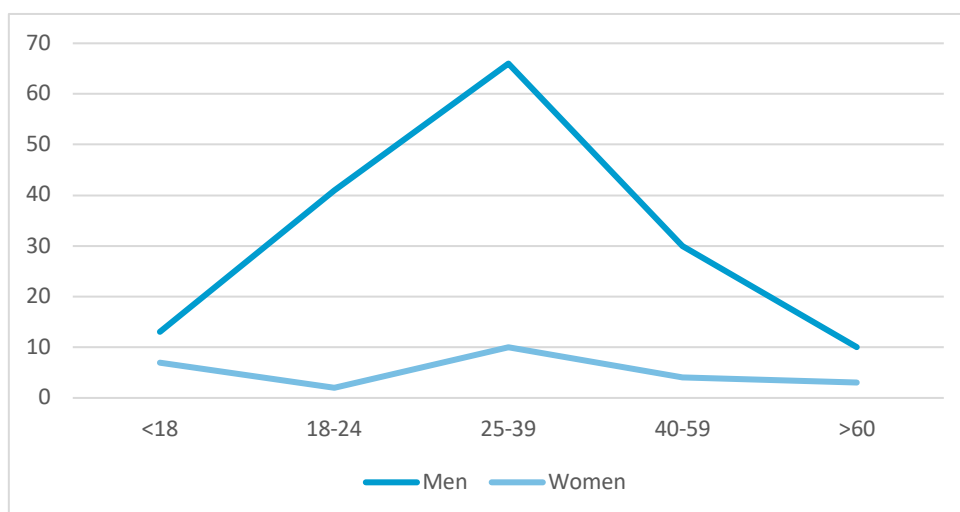


**Figure 2.22: Age and gender distribution of victims of firearm threats in the Netherlands, 2015–2017**

Firearm threats are believed to occur most frequently in the criminal milieu,

most importantly during armed robberies, where victims are distributed more evenly across the age groups.

A final, telling age and gender subdivision is that for non-lethal shootings. That distribution is shown in **Figure 2.23**.<sup>106</sup>



**Figure 2.23: Age and gender distribution of victims of non-lethal shootings in the Netherlands, 2015–2017**

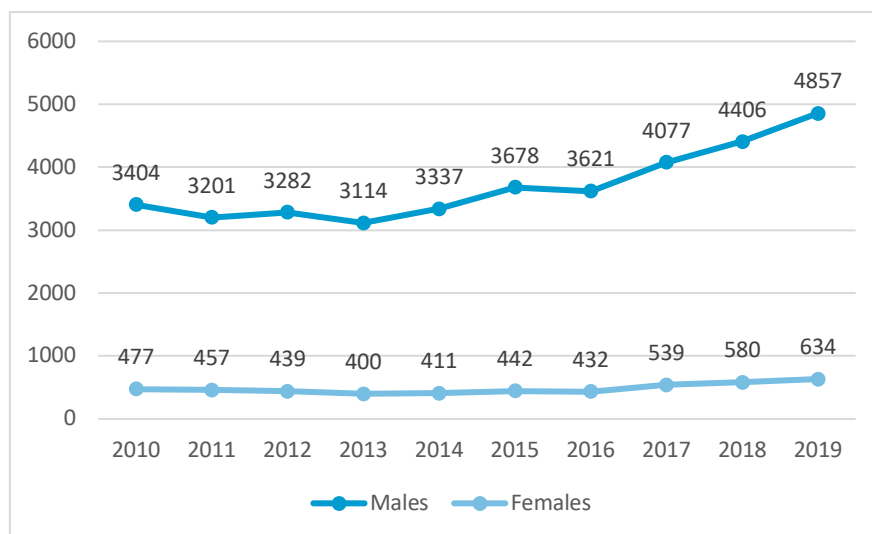
Men, especially young men, form the majority of victims of non-lethal shootings

(86%). Very few victims of non-lethal shootings are women, who are relatively more prone to being victimised by lethal violence and threats.

The main contexts in which women are victimised is intimate partner firearm homicide, where they make up 92% of victims, and other forms of domestic firearm homicide, where they make up 72% of victims.<sup>107</sup> In the case of domestic violence, there is often the intention to kill whereas this need not be the case in criminal violence, where threats are more ubiquitous (especially during armed robberies). That is why, when a woman is shot at, there is a higher chance of that shot being lethal than when a man is shot. The environment in which women are shot is generally controlled, whereas the criminal environment is less controlled – leading to a higher chance of a shooting being non-lethal.

These Dutch monitors also found that victims of Turkish and Moroccan descent are over-represented (vis-à-vis their share of the population) as victims and perpetrators of lethal and non-lethal shootings. The same picture emerges regarding the perpetrators of firearm violence in the Netherlands. Of the perpetrators of lethal shootings, 254 were identified by the DFVM: 97% were male, just over half of whom were in the 25–39 age group (48%). Four out of the six female perpetrators were in the same age group. While males are also the main perpetrators of non-lethal shootings (98%) and threats (97%), they divide more evenly between the age groups even though the vast majority are always younger than 40.<sup>108</sup> Female perpetrators of firearm violence are almost exclusively connected to firearm homicides against their current or ex-partner.

The situation in the Netherlands appears to be repeated in **Sweden**. There were a total of 233 firearm homicides and 2,403 attempted firearm homicides in Sweden between 2011 and 2019. Men constitute 91% of the victims of homicides and 87% of the victims of attempted homicides.<sup>109</sup> According to the Stockholm study on firearm violence from January 2013 to April 2018, 66% of these victims were known to be involved in street or organised crime.<sup>110</sup> With regard to perpetrators of gun crime, we note that men are predominantly the perpetrators, but that a slightly increasing number of female suspects is also noticeable. This is shown in **Figure 2.24**.<sup>111</sup>



**Figure 2.24: Suspected of gun crime in Sweden according to gender, 2010–2019**

Other media reports show that the perpetrators of firearm violence in Sweden are becoming increasingly younger, up to the point that

the age group 16–24 is the major contributor to violent firearm crime.<sup>112</sup> This is largely because street gangs recruit young boys as drug-couriers and as shooters because they face discounted penalties if caught. In return, these young boys receive status and recognition by engaging in gang activities. They generally have an immigrant background and tend to come from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>113</sup>

For the **Western Balkans**, information can be sourced through SEESAC's SALW surveys (2012–2016). Here, the data confirm that it is young men who suffer firearm-related injuries. The victims are predominantly men in all the Balkans countries, ranging from 91.1% in Montenegro<sup>114</sup> to 89.8% in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>115</sup> to 87.4% in Kosovo,<sup>116</sup> and 83.4% in Serbia<sup>117</sup> to a low of 63% in North Macedonia.<sup>118</sup> In all these countries, the age group 18–35 had the largest share of victims of gun-related violence.

All the available data confirm that firearm violence is predominantly a young male problem and tends to be executed with handguns, especially in countries with higher levels of criminal firearm violence. In countries with higher levels of domestic firearm activity, we note higher levels of female victimisation. Even in these latter countries, though, men always constitute the majority of the victims and perpetrators of firearm violence. These findings will be nuanced furthered when we divide firearm violence into different contexts – the subject of Chapter 3.

<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

## 2.4 Conclusions

The general conclusions of this chapter can be summarised as follows:

- Handguns tend to be the preferred tool for lethal and non-lethal firearm violence.
- Rates at which non-lethal firearm violence results in injury appear to vary depending on the context of firearm use (domestic or criminal) and the country, but these rates need to be interpreted carefully since often insufficient information is available.
- Criminal firearm violence is concentrated in major cities, whereas domestic firearm violence is distributed more evenly.
- Young men (below the age of 35) tend to be the main perpetrators and victims of lethal firearm violence.
- Young men are the main perpetrators of non-lethal firearm violence.
- Men are also the main victims of non-lethal firearm violence, but the age distribution is spread somewhat more evenly.
- The proportion of women involved in lethal firearm violence is increasing, but this seems largely due to declining rates of male victimisation, not to rising rates of female victimisation.

Comparable data on the characteristics of gun violence could be offered through the WHO, but, regrettably, in a majority of firearm homicide cases we are even unable to determine whether the homicide was committed by means of a long or a short gun. This would be a bare minimum requirement for comparable information, which would ideally be supplemented by other relevant information, such as firearm calibre, brand and origin, general location and context of the homicide, relationship of victim to the perpetrator, and whether the firearm was held legally or illegally. Much of this information is already being gathered by the AVMP through media sources and some police registries for the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition, comparable rates at which firearm incidents in certain countries result in threat, injury or lethality are not always available for every country. Ideally, every firearm incident should be registered in such a way that its consequence is clearly documented, together with the more specific information mentioned about lethal firearm incidents above.

Based on our case studies, we find that handguns tend to predominate in firearm violence. They are particularly prevalent in criminal violence, both in lethal and non-lethal forms. In domestic violence, there tends to be more use of long guns. Domestic firearm violence appears then to use firearms that are available while criminal firearm violence deliberately seeks out handguns. In more advanced criminal settings, we note an increase in access to and use of automatic firearms, particularly in the context of drug crime.

All the data do indicate that non-lethal firearm violence vastly outweighs lethal firearm violence. For Europe, however, no studies comprehensively map the cost of non-lethal firearm violence. This is more than simply the cost of injury (hospitalisation, work incapacity, psychological trauma); it also includes all sorts of difficult-to-measure subsidiary costs, such as a resultant general feeling of insecurity. In other contexts, such as

the Western Balkans,<sup>119</sup> it has been shown that the mere perception of high levels of firearm violence results in increased (illegal) firearm holdings and increased (firearm) violence. Then, a necessary first step is to clearly register, document and study the scope and characteristics of non-lethal firearm violence and to adopt policy measures in accordance with those findings.

Despite having evolved towards a more restrictive attitude towards the legal possession of handguns between 1960 and 2010,<sup>120</sup> our case studies show that among firearms, handguns are particularly dominant in the criminal context. This happens even in national contexts where the legal holdings of handguns are minimal (such as Spain and the Netherlands). This suggests that there exists a supply of illegally held handguns on the illicit market which (some) criminals manage to access. These handguns – especially those of a higher quality – can be very convenient to criminals (as they are lightweight, easy to conceal and reliable) and measures should be taken to restrict criminal access to them. As is shown in Chapter 4, major sources for a supply of illegal handguns include traditional smuggling, but also the conversion of blank-firing firearms.

It remains difficult to estimate what proportion of firearms used in firearm violence is acquired through (various ways of) trafficking. In addition to a lack of clear data, there is the problem, for example, that criminal gunsmiths tend to rebrand converted firearms with recognisable names. This would not always be recognised in countries where law-enforcement personnel are not (sufficiently) trained in ballistics. This could mean that the proportion of converted firearms might be significantly higher than shown in the above statistics. It is consequently most important for law-enforcement officials to be trained in recognising gun types.

The findings from our analyses of firearm locations and victims suggests that domestic firearm violence appears to be connected more to rates of legal ownership and that criminal firearm violence is connected more to illegal availability of firearms. Criminal firearm violence tends also to be highly concentrated in metropolitan and drug-heavy areas. Criminal firearm violence is mainly a male issue; lethal female firearm victims are suffered almost uniquely in the domestic context. In the criminal context, young people (mostly men) constitute a very high proportion of lethal casualties; lethal firearm victims in the domestic sphere are spread more evenly across the age groups, signalling that domestic firearm violence does not focus on a specific age group.

# 3



## Contexts of gun violence in Europe

Gun violence occurs in a variety of ways in different contexts across Europe. In this chapter, we describe the features of firearm use in the context of crime, domestic violence, terrorism and a variety of other, less well-defined contexts<sup>1</sup>:

- Criminal gun violence is the use of firearms to threaten, injure or kill another person or persons while performing criminal activities such as armed robberies, drug trade, violent crime, criminal extortion and human trafficking (section 3.1).
- Domestic gun violence is the use of firearms to threaten, injure or kill another person or persons in circumstances in which the perpetrator belongs to the victim's domestic circle. A narrower sense of domestic violence is intimate partner violence, where the violence is inflicted on a partner or an ex-partner (section 3.2).
- Terrorist firearm violence is the use of firearms to threaten, injure or kill an individual or individuals in order to destabilise a political state or a social order. It is a heavily mediated context of firearm violence, but its scope in Europe is usually limited. Its impact on society, though, can be very severe and terrorist attacks can be particularly lethal when firearms are used (section 3.3).
- There are also some less expansive contexts in which firearm violence can occur: nightlife violence, violence against police, school shootings, the use of firearms by vigilantes and firearm violence committed by the mentally ill (section 3.4).

A final context of gun violence that needs to be mentioned is the use of firearms during armed conflicts. Since there are no ongoing armed conflicts within the European Union (EU) and the use of firearms is of a wholly different nature in this context, we shall not discuss it in the present report.

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<sup>1</sup> These contexts are used nomologically: we discern certain law-related features about firearm usage in these contexts without labelling the features as necessarily or logically belonging to a particular context. What is more, we accept, on the one hand, that the use of violence in these contexts can – and most likely will – operate differently in other time frames and outside of Europe and, on the other hand, that these contexts are not mutually exclusive, but can easily be imagined as overlapping. Comparative research on firearm usage in these contexts between the EU and other regions does not fall within the scope of the current project, but it is a desideratum for further research.

A number of incidents of gun violence result in large number of victims. Such mass shootings occur in the various contexts mentioned above. As part of Project TARGET 41 cases of mass shootings have been observed and analysed. Rather than discuss cases of mass shootings individually, an attempt is made here to discern certain trends in firearm usage in these shootings according to the contexts in which they occur. Mass shootings are more commonly associated with the United States. One study found that 348 mass shootings occurred in the United States in the half-century from 1966 to 2018.<sup>121</sup> In the United States, these mass shootings tend to be planned in greater detail than more 'common' forms of firearm violence.<sup>122</sup> Most of the firearms used in mass shootings in the United States were owned legally; if they were not, they were most often stolen from family members or friends. Handguns were used the most in mass shootings.<sup>123</sup> More recent statistics show on average 22 mass shootings a year in the United States during 2010–2018, most of which begin in the family context.<sup>124</sup>

### Mass shootings

Mass shootings are not uncommon in Europe.<sup>I</sup> The most comprehensive report on public mass shootings in Europe was authored by Nils Duquet, Nino Kbiltsetskhlishvili, Isthiaq Khan and Eric Woods; it explored the guns used in public mass shootings in Europe during the period 2009–2018.<sup>125</sup> They defined a public mass shooting as “homicides in the (semi-)public space in which at least four people, excluding the perpetrator(s), were fatally shot by one or more perpetrators in a relatively short time frame and within a rather limited geographical area.”<sup>126</sup> (Duquet et al 2019, p. 8). They identified 19 public mass shootings in Europe during that time and examined the circumstances and the types of weapon used in those incidents.<sup>II</sup>

In another study of gun violence and trafficking in Europe, Peter Squires et al noted four things about mass shootings:

- Mass shootings are increasing in frequency in Europe;

I John Lott argued in a highly contested paper that the United States is below the world average in mass shootings, that mass shootings in the United States are less deadly and that the share of mass shootings in the country is declining. The United States would then have rates of mass shootings comparable to those of Europe. When Lott's research was scrutinised by the Facts About Firearm Policy Initiative, they found that Lott had skewed his results by excluding public shootings in the context of robberies and gang violence (which are more common in the United States), but including terrorist attacks (which are more common in Europe). In fact, even if Lott's database is used, then the United States is found to have a rate of 0.0078 per 100,000 of the population whereas Europe as a whole has 0.0038 and the EU has 0.0032 public shootings per 100,000 of the population. It is unclear how Lott arrived at his rates. See John R Lott. (2020) 'Comparing the global rate of mass public shootings to the US's rate and comparing their changes over time' (11 August), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3671740> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3671740>; <https://www.gvpedia.org/gun-myths/europe-and-us/>, consulted 28 July 2021.

II We follow the definition of a public mass shooting by Duquet et al as “homicides in the (semi-)public space in which at least four people, excluding the perpetrator(s), were fatally shot by one or more perpetrators in a relatively short time frame and within a rather limited geographical area.” (Duquet et al 2019, p. 8).

- most incidents – particularly until 2011 – were carried out using licensed firearms;
- the use of semi-automatic firearms increases the death toll; and
- terrorist access to military firearms is connected to a major escalation in terrorist incidents.<sup>127</sup>

Research for Project TARGET has revealed a total of 41 such shootings from the new millennium onwards and a number of relevant, high-profile public shootings that do not fit the above definition of a public mass shooting. These additional shootings were selected because either they reveal an important aspect of firearm usage in that context or they had a significant impact on public debate. Generally speaking, mass shootings tend to have more of an impact on public discussion regarding firearm legislation and the policing of firearm violence than on general rates of firearm violence.<sup>1</sup>

Of these 41 public mass shootings, one can be connected to organised crime, 11 to domestic disputes, 12 to terrorism, eight to mental problems and/or substance abuse, four are school shootings and five occur in very heterogenous contexts. The characteristics of the firearms used depend heavily on the context, but in all contexts besides the terrorist and criminal, the firearms have been typically in the possession of the perpetrator for a longer period, even often legally. The firearms used are then usually available – whether legally or illegally – in the national context. This is why these types of shooting often give cause for legal gun reform. With the exception of the terrorist context, firearms trafficking does not seem to play a major role in mass public shootings. However, trafficking does play a very significant role in firearm violence in the general criminal context.

Research on the ways in which firearms functions in these different contexts in Europe is relatively scarce and usually focused on very specific subcomponents of these types of violence. The existing studies are connected by means of the country-mappings and the in-depth studies conducted for Project TARGET. These will shed some light on the use of firearms in these contexts.

<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of mass shootings, Steffen Hurka examined the ways in which such shootings have influenced gun legislation reform. He laments the geographical focus on the United States of the impact, or failure, of mass shootings on gun reform. He found that public shootings were more likely to become politicised (and so lead to reform) on the basis of the damage caused by the event; the severity of the event as portrayed by the media; the existence of a political or regional cleavage with regard to gun legislation; and the event's timing with regard to elections (Steffen Hurka. (2017) *Rampage Shootings and Gun Control: Politicization and Policy Change in Western Europe*, London: Routledge Publishing.

### 3.1 Criminal firearm violence

Criminal firearm violence is often perceived to be the most important context of gun violence in Europe. The data collected during Project TARGET, however, serve to nuance this perception because, as already pointed out in Chapter 1, while the criminal context is the most important context for non-lethal gun violence in all European countries under investigation, it is the most important context for lethal gun violence in only a few countries. What is more, criminal gun violence tends to be focused in metropolitan areas or specific regions of a country, whereas domestic gun violence tends to be distributed more evenly across the country. Previous studies have found that the main motivation for criminals in Europe to acquire, possess and use firearms is instrumental:

*Many criminals perceive firearms as instruments that assist – and are sometimes crucial – in the carrying out of criminal activities, both as offensive tools (the threat of violence) and as defensive ones (providing protection).<sup>128</sup>*

This suggests that criminals in the relatively peaceful setting of the EU are not particularly interested in using firearms to produce lethal casualties. In high-conflict settings, criminal networks will be interested more in committing homicides as a currency of power and fear. Our analyses confirm that the overwhelming majority of firearm use in the criminal context in Europe is non-lethal (threat or injury) since criminals predominantly acquire and use firearms to pursue other criminal activities, such as robberies, burglaries, human-trafficking, firearms trafficking, drug trade and -trafficking.

A number of important studies have reported on the ways in which criminals acquire and use firearms. The 2018 *Studying the Acquisition of Illicit Firearms by Terrorists in Europe* (SAFTE) study reports that different types of criminal procure, possess and use firearms differently. Access to the illicit market is also different across countries: while some countries rely mainly on local diversion (eg those in the Western Balkans), criminals in other countries are forced to rely more on international trafficking (the Netherlands, Sweden). Whereas there is no unified criminal market for firearms, SAFTE noted that the illegal firearm markets tend to be largely closed-circuit and accessible only to criminals with sufficiently sophisticated criminal connections.<sup>129</sup>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) offers three additional studies on the criminal use of firearms. In their 2015 study, they set the stage for five now-common assumptions about the criminal use of firearms. First, it claimed that firearms are an important commodity for organised criminal groups (OGCs) because they are durable, portable, concealable, lethal and simple to use. These firearms play a central role not only in facilitating criminal exploits, but also as a status symbol and as a good traded for profit.<sup>130</sup> Second, firearms trafficking plays a pivotal role worldwide in the way criminal groups obtain firearms.<sup>131</sup> Third, handguns tend then to be the preferred tools for these purposes, although the UNODC noted, as early as in 2015, an increase in the availability of automatic rifles. Fourth, the UNODC study offers specific case studies on South Africa, Central America, Asia

and Europe.<sup>132</sup> The European case study in the global report is focused mainly on Italy, where it reports on the way Italian mafia groups are involved in trafficking firearms, often from the Western Balkans. These groups use them for their own purposes or disperse them throughout Europe or to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Finally, firearms trafficking occurs mainly in conjunction with the illicit drug trade and is considered to be mainly a supplementary source of income. In their 2020 study, the UNODC added that most criminal firearm violence in Europe occurs within the drug milieu. This more recent study focuses on firearms trafficking, which is featured more extensively in the Chapter 4.<sup>133</sup>

The regional analysis of Europe in the UNODC 2020 study added that the demand for illicit firearms in Europe is driven largely by criminals who desire firearms to pursue their own activities or to gain status. The main criminal activities that involve firearms are drug-trafficking, but firearms are also noted to be used in violent crime, mafia organisations, outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), armed robberies and various other types of criminal activity.<sup>1</sup> Whereas shotguns are in general the type of firearm most seized in Europe, handguns are the type of firearm most used and found in criminal possession; automatic firearms are not commonly seized in Europe, although in some countries (such as Sweden and Croatia) they are seized relatively more frequently. The illicit criminal market is generally a closed-circuit one, but the proliferation of firearms on this market can facilitate access to firearms by terrorists.<sup>134</sup>

The purpose of the present chapter is not to contest, but to augment and refine the findings of the above studies. Research done for Project TARGET suggests making a number of distinctions within the European contexts: we discuss these according to loosely structured (Sweden) or tightly structured (Estonia, Italy) criminal groups; and regarding various criminal activities that use firearms differently, particularly drug crime and armed robberies.

### 3.1.1 Structure of the crime groups: Estonia and Italy versus Sweden

Criminal groups are best known as tightly structured, mafia-styled groups, such as the various groups of Italian mafia (including the Camorra, 'Ndrangheta and Sicilian mafia). There are different mafia-styled groups with less of a clear frame, such as the mafia Shqiptare (Albanian mafia), the Turkish mafia or the Irish Mob (most notoriously, the Kinahan Cartel). These OGCs tend to have both a public and a private face. Other crime groups with often intricate structuring are outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), most recognisable as the Hell's Angels, Bandidos and Outlaws.<sup>135</sup> These groups, and the way they have come to use firearms, differ substantially from more loosely structured, or entirely disorganised, crime groups that have emerged powerfully in the Netherlands and Sweden. They include the Dutch 'Mocro-mafia', the various groups of Swedish gangs (such as the Husby Hyenor and the

<sup>1</sup> The 2019 UNODC study on homicide noted a correlation between male-victim homicides, firearm homicides and homicides in the criminal context. The countries with the largest share of homicides related to organised crime typically also have the largest shares of male victims and the largest shares of firearm homicides. Most of these countries are in South America. See: UNODC, *Global study on homicide. Understanding homicide*, 2019, 44–46.

Filterlösa Grabbar) or various groups commonly described as the African mafia (such as the Nigerian mafia in Italy). These groups exercise less restraint when employing firearms and tend to be more prone to escalating levels of violence over perceived slights.<sup>136</sup>

The data on decreasing levels of firearm violence and homicide (described in Chapter 1) could be explained by a variety of factors about criminal firearm violence in areas with typically high levels of criminal violence. Possible non-exclusive hypotheses include:

- (1) Criminal gangs are diminishing across Europe and so they commit less violence generally;
- (2) criminal gangs have less access to firearms and so commit less firearm violence specifically;
- (3) criminal gangs recognise that firearm violence attracts unwanted attention and so they tend to avoid it.

While not excluding the impact of (1) and (2), the impact of (3) is becoming increasingly but differently visible in at least two European countries – Italy and Estonia. We have decided to focus here on the impact of that hypothesis.

OCGs in **Italy** are usually mafia-styled. In her canonical survey of the two most prominent mafia groups in Italy (Camorra and 'Ndrangheta), Letizia Paoli has described the Italian mafia as interested predominantly in retaining and consolidating their power base locally. They will consequently adapt to changing circumstances to facilitate their survival and retain their level of control. In Paoli's view, this makes them myopic and ill-equipped to compete in an evermore globalised world.<sup>137</sup>

When we take this into consideration and consider firearm violence in Italy, we note that lethal firearm violence is increasingly more prevalent in the domestic rather than the criminal context. A 2019 study by the *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* shows that only 5.5% of homicides can be attributed in that year to the mafia (compared to 33% in the early 1990s), and that today most lethal firearm violence occurs in the domestic sphere.<sup>138</sup>

This is confirmed by a longitudinal study in 2020 of the period 1980–2014, which shows the homicide rate in Italy dropping significantly, most importantly in areas with a strong mafia presence. The most impressive drop is in the level of firearm homicides. This, the report suggests, is to be attributed partly to better medical knowledge of how to reduce the lethality of firearms.<sup>139</sup>

The decrease in mafia murders generally is very impressive. In a document made available to the research group by Letizia Paoli, the number of murder and mafia-related murders between the year 1990 and 2016 are listed in three southern Italian regions (where mafia activity is typically the most intense). While not all mafia-related murders are necessarily firearm murders, the general decline in lethal mafia violence, and its share in lethal violence generally, is telling.

**Figure 3.1: Murder and mafia-related murder in southern Italy, 1990-2016**

| Year             | Calabria    |               | Sicily      |               | Campania    |               |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
|                  | Murders     | Mafia murders | Murders     | Mafia murders | Murders     | Mafia murders |
| 1990             | 326         | 141           | 428         | 150           | 347         | 201           |
| 1991             | 277         | 165           | 481         | 253           | 378         | 232           |
| 1992             | 151         | 46            | 399         | 200           | 290         | 181           |
| 1993             | 126         | 43            | 252         | 85            | 197         | 86            |
| 1994             | 121         | 42            | 249         | 90            | 165         | 65            |
| 1995             | 95          | 24            | 223         | 88            | 228         | 113           |
| 2000             | 84          | 34            | 86          | 13            | 163         | 73            |
| 2005             | 69          | 23            | 70          | 11            | 128         | 67            |
| 2006             | 61          | 19            | 62          | 15            | 140         | 67            |
| 2007             | 59          | 16            | 72          | 12            | 152         | 85            |
| 2008             | 76          | 22            | 49          | 12            | 111         | 59            |
| 2009             | 64          | 11            | 63          | 19            | 104         | 49            |
| 2010             | 60          | 24            | 60          | 10            | 62          | 18            |
| 2011             | 59          | 11            | 59          | 8             | 61          | 27            |
| 2012             | 52          | 14            | 56          | 8             | 89          | 38            |
| 2013             | 48          | 13            | 61          | 5             | 77          | 27            |
| 2014             | 32          | 6             | 51          | 4             | 67          | 32            |
| 2015             | 37          | 3             | 52          | 4             | 107         | 31            |
| 2016             | 21          | 7             | <b>39</b>   | <b>0</b>      | 82          | 35            |
| <b>1991-2016</b> | <b>-93%</b> | <b>-96%</b>   | <b>-92%</b> | <b>-100%</b>  | <b>-78%</b> | <b>-85%</b>   |

Source: compilation by Letizia Paoli (KU Leuven).

This decline is not believed to be primarily due to a decreasing access to firearms. A 2013 study had found that Italian OGCs manage to retain impressive arsenals and continue to operate in the business of firearms trafficking; their access to firearms at the time was believed to be increasing, not decreasing.<sup>140</sup> Italian mafia groups, however, more carefully regulate firearms. The SAFTE study has emphasised that today the Italian illicit firearm market is tightly controlled, making it difficult for terrorists to acquire firearms in Italy.<sup>141</sup> Whereas the Italian mafia had occasionally operated historically as a go-between for firearms trafficking to separatist (eg Northern Irish) and other terrorist groups, more recently it would appear that the most prominent Italian mafia groups have adapted to new circumstances and exert tighter control over firearm access and higher levels of restraint

regarding firearm violence. Following Paoli's suggestion, they would probably have adapted to increased law-enforcement attention being given to firearms and now prefer to keep firearm violence and trafficking to a minimum. This can be achieved only if the OCGs are able to exert control over firearm access and use in the criminal milieu.

The situation of criminal firearm violence in **Estonia** differs from that in Italy, but it does show certain interesting overlapping structures. As in the case of Italy, Estonia was known in the 1990s as a hotbed for crime and (firearm) violence by OCGs. Today, the criminal sphere in Estonia is small and not very prone to using firearms. A global study by Naghavi et al found that Estonia had the largest annualised decrease in firearm mortality between 1990 and 2016 (an annual decrease of 6.2%).<sup>142</sup> Part of this impressive decrease ought to be attributed to very high levels of firearm mortality in the 1990s, but also to concerted action aimed at countering (firearm) violence. During 2015–2019, a total of 15 assault-related firearm homicides occurred in Estonia. When surveying the most recent data on firearm homicides in Estonia, it was found that these relate mostly to alcohol-induced disputes, often of a domestic kind.<sup>143</sup>

One factor among many explaining this trend from high levels to low levels of criminal firearm violence ought to be found in the specific structure of the criminal underworld in Estonia. Nikolai Tarankov, the long-time leader of the Estonian crime world, established what is known as the 'common fund' (*Obštšak*), which collected taxes from criminals, settled disagreements between them, establishes boundaries between groups and took care of criminals and their families, if necessary. The existence of this common fund, and the leadership of Tarankov, contributed to a decline in violence between criminal groups in Estonia. Tarankov was assassinated by his godson, Yuri Vorobei, in 2016. This event shook the Estonian criminal world and reignited sparks of conflict between different Estonian criminal groups (such as a shooting in February 2017). While firearm violence has since not spun out of control in Estonia, the Tarankov situation serves to confirm that tight control of the criminal structure in a country can deter (lethal) gun violence.<sup>144</sup>

The small scale of (lethal) criminal firearm violence in Italy and Estonia shows that tightly structured OCGs are to be preferred over disorganised crime groups. While Estonia and Italy evolved from countries with high levels of criminal firearm violence into countries with varying levels of domestic firearm violence (higher in Italy than in Estonia), **Sweden**, on the contrary, evolved from a country where firearm violence transpired mostly within the domestic sphere using legally held rifles to a country with high levels of criminal firearm violence. The Nordic Homicide Report (spanning 2007–2016) shows that whereas most Nordic countries have witnessed significant decreases in firearm homicides, Sweden has seen increases in both firearm-related homicides and firearm use in homicides.<sup>145</sup> A general increase in homicides is therefore attributed to an increase in firearm homicides.<sup>146</sup> In a paper of 2019, Ardavan Khoshnood combined statistics from various sources (the Swedish police, the National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), and the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW)) to study firearm-related violence in 2016–2017. His conclusion was that the increase in firearm violence derives from the tendency of criminal gangs to become evermore bold and to have increasing access to illegal firearms. The increase in the

availability of illegal firearms is believed to stem from a steady flow of firearms from the Western Balkans.<sup>147</sup>

We can both corroborate and nuance the above assertions about criminal violence in Sweden on the basis of the findings of Project TARGET.<sup>148</sup> **Table 3.1** shows the statistics on (firearm) homicides and attempted firearm homicides in Sweden during the period 2011–2019.

**Table 3.2: Homicide statistics in Sweden, 2011–2019**

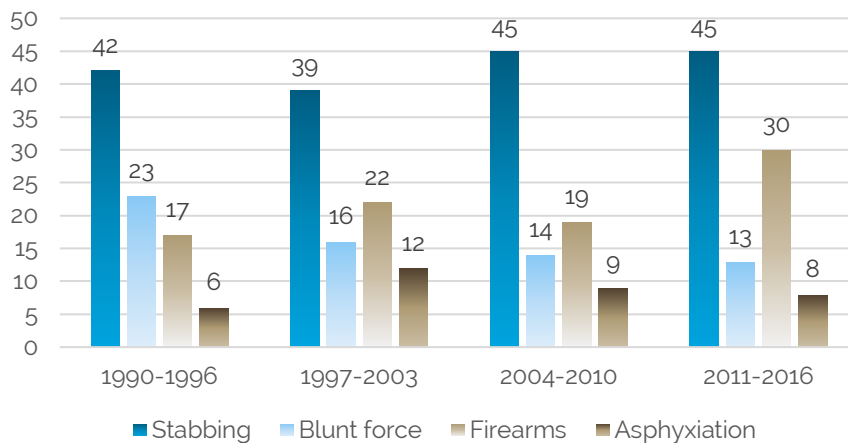
|  | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Total homicides (no)</i>                  | 81   | 68   | 87   | 87   | 112  | 106  | 113  | 108  | 111  |
| <i>Firearm homicide (no)</i>                 | 17   | 17   | 25   | 28   | 33   | 30   | 40   | 43   | 45   |
| <i>Male/female</i>                           | 16/1 | 14/3 | 21/4 | 25/3 | 31/2 | 28/2 | 39/1 | 42/1 | 40/5 |
| <i>Firearm use in homicide (%)</i>           | 21%  | 25%  | 29%  | 32%  | 29%  | 28%  | 35%  | 40%  | 41%  |
| <i>Attempted homicide (no)</i>               | 842  | 498  | 728  | 792  | 838  | 879  | 909  | 868  | 983  |
| <i>Attempted homicide with firearm (no)</i>  | 229  | 217  | 209  | 210  | 231  | 248  | 288  | 290  | 286  |
| <i>Firearm use in attempted homicide (%)</i> | 27%  | 44%  | 29%  | 27%  | 28%  | 28%  | 32%  | 33%  | 29%  |

Source: Statistics database of reported crimes – Brottsförebyggande rådet (Brå) and ID-Sweden

Arising from the data above, the following three points can be made. First, despite increases in murder and manslaughter generally, Sweden has witnessed decreases in intimate partner firearm homicide, firearm homicide-suicide and alcohol-related firearm suicides.<sup>149</sup> This means that increases in firearm homicide levels relate almost uniquely to serious increases in criminal firearm homicides. Sweden presents an exception to the general situation in Europe, where the proportion of female victims was decreasing, not increasing. Second, the increases in attempted homicides are explained mostly by increases in firearm-related attempted homicides. Third, firearm homicides of women are consistently in the lowest digits, with an unusually high number of five female firearm homicides in 2019. Attempted homicides against women with firearms usually fluctuate usually between 25 and 45, with a low of 12 attempts in 2019. It has been speculated that female firearm casualties (lethal and non-lethal) are usually a matter of collateral damage.<sup>150</sup> Manne Gerell of Malmö University claims that female firearm victimisation is usually accidental. He believes that Sweden is

‘getting used’ to firearm homicides and only particularly ‘innocent’ victims (usually, women and children) give cause for an outcry.<sup>151</sup>

On their own, these numbers suggest that firearm violence is perpetrated mostly in the criminal sphere. When we examine the trend in homicide mechanisms, we note an increase in firearm usage in homicides in Sweden.



**Figure 3.2: Murder by mechanism in Sweden, 1990–2016**

Figure 3.2 shows the percentages of use of the four most prevalent mechanisms for murder between 1990 and 2016.<sup>152</sup> From Table 3.1, we can also

add that during 2017–2019, firearm usage in homicide rose to 39%. While stabbing remained the preferred means for homicide (at least until 2016), the proportion of firearms is increasing.<sup>1</sup>

All of the above suggest a structural shift in lethal (firearm) violence in Sweden. Firearm homicides in Sweden traditionally involved domestic and other disputes which were settled with legally obtained firearms (such as hunting rifles). This is borne out by, among other factors, the fact that throughout the 1990s and 2000s men constituted about 66% of the victims of lethal violence; today, men constitute 75% of homicide victims and more than 90% of firearm homicide victims. According to a Brå report, only 5% of firearm homicides in Sweden today can be categorised as domestic violence. Legally held weapons, such as hunting rifles, are rarely used in the criminal milieu, where firearms that cannot be obtained legally in Sweden (such as handguns or automatic rifles) are preferred.<sup>153</sup>

This structural shift becomes more apparent when we consider the changing characteristics of firearm violence in Sweden. Firearm-related violence – both lethal and non-lethal – is increasingly associated with the criminal milieu, especially the drug trade.<sup>154</sup> Armed conflicts can erupt over (perceived) slights between criminal groups.<sup>155</sup> Firearms and the violence committed with them become a currency for respect and prestige,<sup>156</sup> where emergent criminal groups in particular use firearm violence to establish themselves.<sup>157</sup> Certain higher-quality firearms that are not easily obtainable (such as handguns by Glock, Luger or Smith&Wesson) confer special status on a member of a criminal group.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It falls outside the scope of the present chapter, but it merits mentioning that criminal groups in Sweden are increasingly making use of explosives to cause harm and/or kill (eg the so-called Thermos League). These are typically used to intimidate but tend to cause fewer injuries and casualties than firearms. See Joakim Sturup, Manne Gerell & Amir Rostami. (2020) 'Explosive violence: A near-repeat study of hand grenade detonations and shootings in urban Sweden'. *European Journal of Criminology* 17: 661–677.

Unlike the well-structured and organised Italian mafia, Swedish OCGs are loosely structured with little by way of a code of conduct. This makes the threshold for gun violence low and explains sudden eruptions of serious gun violence between groups.<sup>159</sup> Besides these loosely structured crime groups, Sweden also has a number of family-based crime groups and motorcycle gangs (such as the Bandidos) that are usually more thoroughly structured.

Of the total number of firearm homicides, 68% occurred in the metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg, where firearm homicides constitute 50% of all homicides in Malmö and Gothenburg and 40% in Stockholm. In 2017, the homicides committed in these three cities jointly comprised 85% of all Swedish firearm homicides.<sup>160</sup> The violence is focused in socially and economically vulnerable areas in the cities with low employment and high numbers of immigrant residents.<sup>161</sup> Shootings are five times more likely to occur in these areas than in the more affluent areas of the cities.<sup>162</sup>

Swedish police are taking more extreme measures to counter the cycle of firearm violence. For instance, Stockholm police organised the special event 'Portia'<sup>163</sup> in the summer of 2020 to counter the violence between gangs who profit mostly from the drug trade, the Husby Hyenor and the Filterlösa Grabbar.<sup>164</sup>

Swedish shootings take place predominantly in public settings, such as streets, parks and squares. A study from 2006–2017 shows that 46% of homicides that take place in a public place involve the use of a firearm, whereas only 15% of homicides in private homes are committed with a firearm.<sup>165</sup> These shootings occur in places that the victims frequently visit and are executed at close range, with perpetrators aiming for the head (as it is customary to wear protective vests).<sup>166</sup> This suggests a high level of planning, but it also results in an increased risk of collateral damage. According to Joakim Sturup, there were 46 third-party victims of firearm violence in Sweden during 2011–2020: 14 were killed and 32 injured.<sup>167</sup> In August 2020, a 12-year-old girl was shot while walking her dog. The gunman was aiming at two rival gang members.<sup>168</sup>

A police report suggests that shootings generally occur at night – between 21:00 and 03:00 – and are more frequent during mild winter months.<sup>169</sup>

Significant levels of segregation between, on the one hand, immigrants and Swedes with an immigrant background and, on the other, native Swedes, result in comparatively high numbers of the former becoming associated with crime groups.<sup>170</sup> The integration of immigrants into the labour market is generally believed to leave much to be desired, because the lack of social mobility on the part of the immigrants, which makes OCGs an attractive alternative to regular careers.<sup>171</sup> This leads also to problematic ways of racialising victimhood and crime perpetrators.<sup>172</sup>

Perpetrators and victims are remarkably young in Sweden. According to the most recent statistics on firearm homicides between June 2018 and August 2021, 81% of casualties were below the age of 34 and 54% of total casualties were even younger than 24. Young criminals therefore seem to have access to firearms. Firearm killings, according to Manne Gerell, are a

currency among gang members and a status symbol. Sweden offers reduced penalties for underage and young offenders (if underage, the maximum penalty is four years in a juvenile institute), therefore making them good candidates to perform assassinations. If caught and imprisoned, these young offenders believe they will become prominent members of the criminal group upon their release.<sup>173</sup>

The conclusion, then, is that firearm violence in Sweden has shifted from domestic violence carried out using legally obtained firearms to criminal violence committed using illegally obtained, often trafficked firearms. The lack of structure in Swedish criminal gangs is seen as a factor exacerbating the violence; another factor is the high level of firearms trafficking, which is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

### 3.1.2 Criminal contexts: armed robberies and drug crime

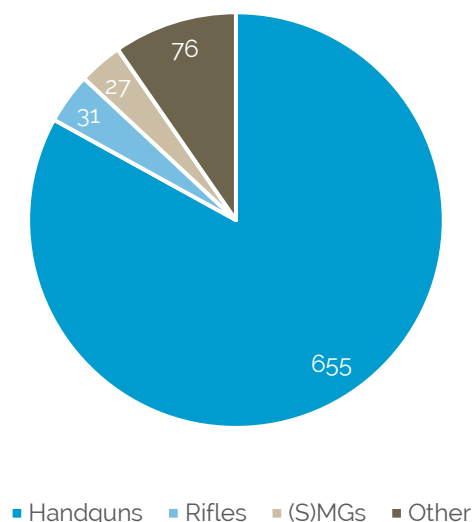
Besides the more general forms of violent crime, firearm violence in the criminal context is particularly widespread in robberies and the drug milieu. These contexts have in common the fact that firearms are used primarily to facilitate criminal exploits and that handguns are the preferred tools to that end. Some differences between these sub-contexts of crime become apparent, however. Most armed robberies are non-injurious and non-lethal, and usually involve handguns (occasionally also gas pistols or fake guns). Some armed robbers have access to higher-quality firearms, such as automatic rifles, which can be used to hit high-gain targets. Firearm violence in the drug milieu generally involves more injurious and more lethal firearm use. However, drug dealers who are lower down on the ladder of the criminal hierarchy tend to have less access to (quality) firearms, especially in contexts where firearms trafficking is uncommon. In countries that are generally more saturated with illegal firearms, lower-level criminals have easier access to firearms.

We can start by comparing the data on **armed robberies** in two countries: Belgium and the Netherlands. In these contexts, the firearms are used largely as a scare tactic, almost never lethally and rarely injuriously, where criminals can often be found to use gas pistols or even fake guns. Based on our analysis of the Dutch-speaking media in Belgium, we found that most robberies reported in the news during 2018–2020 take place in a shop, then a restaurant, then a private home and, finally, on the streets. Most of the armed robberies occurred in the evening (between 18:00 and 24:00), with a considerable proportion of them in private homes occurring during the night (between 24:00 and 06:00).<sup>174</sup>

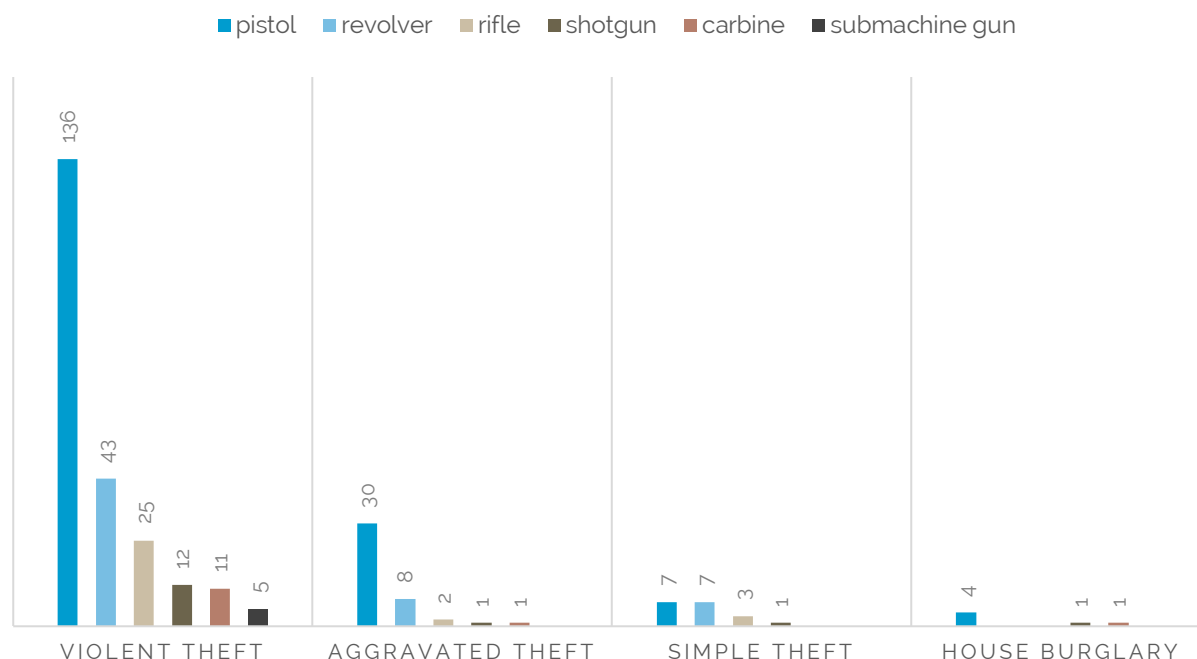
The Belgian office for combating organised crime (DJSOC) analysed the firearms used in armed robberies and found that handguns, both live-firing and unspecified, dominated in 2019 (see **Figure 3.3**).<sup>175</sup> Targets of a higher profile – such as that in a diamond heist at Brussels airport in 2013<sup>176</sup> or a robbery of a jewellery store in Oostakker in 2018<sup>177</sup> – are more likely to involve automatic rifles. The police report that young robbers (70% of robbers are below 24 years of age) have less access to live-firing firearms and therefore resort to alarm pistols or fake guns.<sup>178</sup>

**Figure 3.3: Firearm types identified in armed thefts in Belgium, 2019**

These armed robberies are almost never lethal (only one casualty reported in 346 armed robberies) and have a low likelihood of resulting in injury (only 22 persons were injured in 346 armed robberies). When reviewing ballistics data from the NICC in 2019, we note that pistols and revolvers are used the most in all forms of armed theft.<sup>179</sup> Only in a limited number of violent thefts do we note the use of automatic firearms; rifles – of whatever kind – are usually only a small proportion of the firearm types. Violent thefts are not only the most common in which firearms are used; they are also the type that feature more automatic firearms (see **Figure 3.4**<sup>180</sup>).



**Figure 3.4: Firearm type used in armed theft according to type of theft**

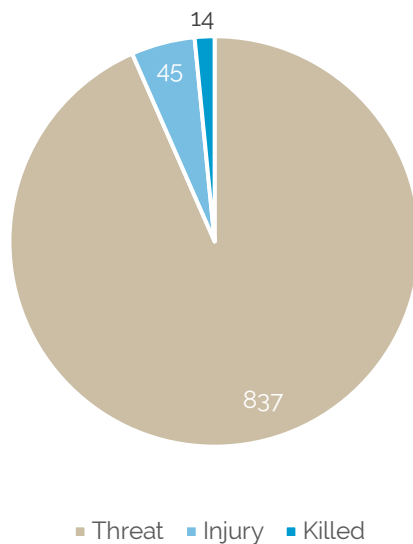


When comparing the above data on armed robberies in Belgium with the available data in the **Netherlands**, we found that the Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor reports similarly that robberies account for a very large percentage of all threats with firearms (74%) but only a

small number of firearm injuries (15%) and very few lethal shootings (2%). These robbers can be armed with live-firing or imitation firearms, but these firearms are rarely shot.<sup>181</sup>

In contrast to Belgium and the Netherlands, data provided by SEESAC through the AVMP allow us to describe in detail the firearm typology and outcomes during armed robberies in the **Western Balkans**. These data largely confirm the picture ascertained in Belgium and the

Netherlands: that firearm threats are most prominent during armed robberies, that they result in few injuries and very few casualties, and that handguns are used most frequently. The outcomes of armed robberies ( $n = 1,060$ ) in the Western Balkans are shown in **Figure 3.5**.



**Figure 3.5: Outcomes of armed robberies in the Western Balkans, 2019–October 2021**

In 789 cases (74%), the weapon could be identified; of those cases, handguns were used the most (79%). When we tie the outcomes of armed robberies to the gender of the victims, we note

that women (54%) are threatened more frequently than men (46%), but firearm injuries and deaths are inflicted more frequently on men (injuries 82% and deaths 85%).<sup>182</sup>

The use of firearms in the **drug milieu** is typically more lethal and injurious.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion could, however, be reached because firearm threats within the drug milieu (eg among different drug dealers) are not usually reported to the police. Firearm usage in this milieu then mainly becomes apparent when it leads to injury or death. Despite this caution, we do note that drug-related firearm violence is more likely to include automatic rifles and other types of military-grade firearms. One explanation for this phenomenon is offered by a study of the organisation and operations of street gangs in Denmark: it suggests that increased drug use in certain Danish neighbourhoods leads to increased capital among drug dealers and increased competition for control over the neighbourhood.<sup>183</sup> This results in a rise in violence perpetrated by increasingly more powerful firearms. One police officer interviewed for that study stated that police officers have to use their firearms more often, that they find firearms more often in the possession of drug criminals and that these firearms are used more regularly, including against the police.<sup>184</sup> These findings can probably be applied to describing firearm violence in the drug milieu in other countries.

**Belgium** has become a key player in the production of and trade in drugs, especially cannabis, amphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy.<sup>185</sup> The police often find firearms as part of a drug investigation.<sup>186</sup> According to the DJSOC Liège, drug-trafficking is not directly connected to

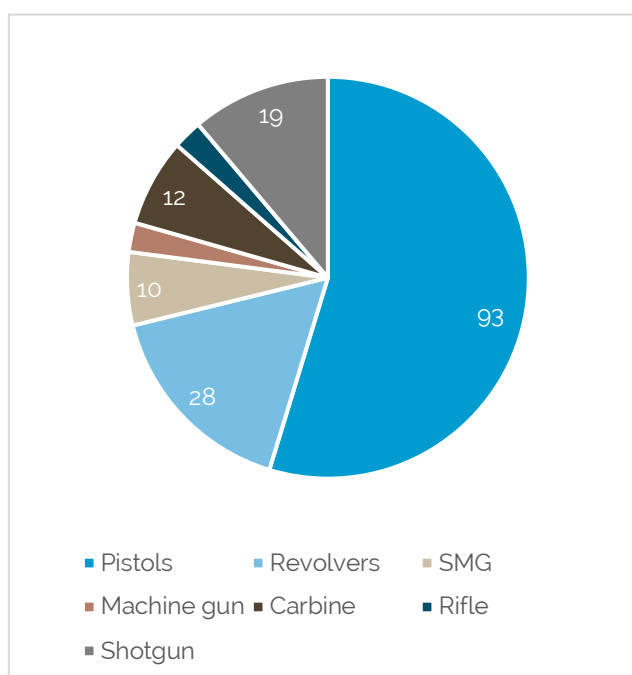
<sup>1</sup> The 2020 study by the UNODC showed that relatively many firearms are seized in the context of drug-trafficking in Portugal, Spain and Albania; relatively high levels of seizures occur in the context of violent crime in Sweden (8%) and Denmark (13%). See UNODC. *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*. 35.

firearms trafficking since firearms trafficking is not considered to be lucrative; drug-traffickers merely traffic in firearms for self-protection and as a status symbol.<sup>187</sup> The use of violence in the drug milieu seems to be intensifying because of an ostensibly increased availability of (automatic) firearms.<sup>188</sup> People involved in the drug trade – all over Belgium – are usually armed and ready to use their firearms. Criminals higher up the chain are usually better armed than more common street dealers.<sup>189</sup> If the situation described in the above Danish study applies to the Belgian context, then this could be related to increased drug consumption in (certain parts of) Belgium. Belgian police officials note that firearms and drugs are often trafficked via the same routes. The main source of income for these criminals remains in drug-trafficking because firearms trafficking into Belgium is seen as high risk–low reward.<sup>190</sup> The majority of firearm incidents in the drug milieu in Belgium are concentrated in Antwerp due to its being a port city. Where armed robberies rarely involve fatalities or injury, firearms in the drug milieu are – according to our media analysis – fired more often: in 52 cases of firearm violence identified by our media analysis in the drug milieu, 19 people were injured and five killed. This is consistent with the finding that when firearms are used in the context of drug crime, they are more likely to lead to injury (37%) or even death (10%). Handguns and alarm pistols are the preferred tools for drug criminals, with gun possession being particularly widespread among those who are involved in the production of drugs and as wholesalers.<sup>191</sup>

**Figure 3.6: Firearm types used in the drug context in Belgium**

Ballistics analysis by the NICC confirms this, as outlined in **Figure 3.6**, where in 170 analyses 71% involved handguns. In the more recent years, these analyses show an increase in automatic rifles and military-grade firearms.<sup>192</sup>

In the **Netherlands**, we obtain a similar view of the characteristics of criminal violence in the drug milieu. Ever since a drug deal went wrong in Antwerp in 2012, the Dutch drug mafia, often populated by young men of Moroccan descent, have been going back and forth in gang retaliations. These groups specialised in the drug trade and were generally loosely structured and prone to violence. Today, an estimated 60% of all firearm homicides in the Netherlands are associated with drug crime (and also about 30% of non-lethal shootings).<sup>193</sup> A trial – called the Marengo-trial – started in March 2021 against 17 members of the drug milieu.<sup>194</sup> They are charged with at least six targeted killings and many assassination attempts, all of which were carried out using firearms. There are signs of things cooling down within the Dutch drug milieu. Still, this confirms the Belgian assessment that firearm violence in the drug milieu is more lethal and injurious, as it tends



to include higher-quality firearms. However, as in the case of armed robberies, access to these higher-quality firearms is often limited to individuals higher up the criminal ladder.

Outside Europe, it has been noted that criminal gangs exchange drugs and firearms. This has been observed particularly at the United States–Mexico border. European firearms tend to be in high demand worldwide. Europol has warned about European firearms being traded for drugs from South America: the demand for drugs is high in Europe; the demand for European firearms is high in South America. To date, no actual cases of OCGs exchanging drugs and firearms have been observed.<sup>195</sup>

Drug crime can also be done by **outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs)**. Belgium has seen the rise of OMGs in recent years, especially in the border region with the Netherlands. The Belgian police report that about 80% of all Belgian members of OMGs have criminal records.<sup>196</sup> Firearms are regularly found in their possession when they are being investigated for other crimes.<sup>197</sup> OMGs are known for their use of (extreme) violence, although most of these acts of violence occur between different OMGs.<sup>198</sup> The Swedish police also report OMGs as being a growing problem, but while individuals belonging to these groups are rarely in possession of firearms, this is due to the fact that OMGs are armed only in very specific instances – for example, where firearm violence is expected.<sup>199</sup> A raid on a hideout used by the Bandidos MC in Stockholm revealed an extensive and diverse collection of firearms and explosives.<sup>200</sup> A report on street gangs, including OMGs, in Denmark mentions that OMGs in Denmark are usually better organised than more common street gangs. Despite being prone to violence, these Danish OMGs shifted away from using firearms because of the harsher penalties for carrying firearms, the OMGs wanting to protect and sustain their drug-trafficking profits.<sup>201</sup>

### 3.1.3 Mass shootings in a criminal context

Mass shootings in connection with (organised) crime are generally rare in Europe. **Figure 3.7** outlines criminal mass shootings and four high-profile criminal shootings. Even gang violence tends not to involve high counts of casualties. This can be explained by the fact that criminals prefer to remain under the radar and use gun violence only when absolutely necessary. This is not always the case worldwide. Most of cases occurred around the Mediterranean area, where organised crime is traditionally very active, or in Sweden, which has seen relatively high levels of gang-related shootings. The public mass shooting was a random mafia hit in Italy, where the mafia wanted to send a message to African drug traders who were encroaching on their territory (Castel Volturno 2008). In the cases where the firearms could be identified, the public shootings in the criminal context always involved illegal, (semi-)automatic rifles and tended also to involve the drug trade.

**Figure 3.7: Overview of public shootings and high-profile shootings in the context of (organised) crime<sup>202</sup>**



<sup>\*</sup>Size of squares represents number of fatal casualties

## 3.2 Domestic firearm violence

Domestic violence includes any act of violence that occurs where the perpetrator is in the domestic circle of the victims, including the extended family and close friends. Intimate partner violence, more narrowly, is any act of violence that occurs between partners and ex-partners. According to a systematic review of partner homicide in 2013 worldwide, 13.5% of all homicides were committed by an intimate partner: 38.6% of female homicide victims and 6.3% of male homicide victims were killed by their intimate partner. These were considered to be conservative estimates.<sup>203</sup>

Data on domestic and intimate partner violence committed by firearms is less comprehensively studied. We note, however, as is discussed in this chapter, that the component part of firearm homicide victims in the domestic sphere tends to increase for women and decrease for men. This shows that killing one's female partner by firearm (firearm uxoricide) is far more prevalent than killing one's male partner with a firearm (firearm mariticide). Moreover, women are comparatively far more likely to be victimised in the domestic sphere than in the criminal sphere. Nevertheless, the number of women who die by (firearm) homicide is still significantly less than the number of men (according to the UNODC, men constitute 79% of all homicide victims worldwide<sup>204</sup>). Only in the sphere of intimate partner violence do women tend to be victimised more by firearm violence. Compared to other methods for homicide globally, women are more likely to be victimised by any other homicide device than a firearm.<sup>205</sup> Recent reports on domestic violence in the Western Balkans show that the Covid pandemic has increased and exacerbated domestic violence generally in that region, and the presence of a firearm in the house increases the chances of a lethal outcome of domestic violence.<sup>206</sup> In the United States, the pandemic has also caused a spike in firearm purchases and firearm violence.<sup>207</sup>

As a recent review of the literature shows, firearm use in domestic violence is under-studied outside the United States. Data were too scarce and the definition of domestic and intimate partner homicide too divergent to allow for any helpful comparisons.<sup>208</sup> The use of firearms in domestic violence – especially in the European context – should be the subject of further investigation, especially since it is increasingly becoming the major cause of lethal firearm violence in most European countries. The scope of domestic and intimate partner firearm violence is more clearly researched in the United States. In 2013, the United States experienced 1,270 intimate partner homicides, half of these involving the use of a firearm. Non-fatal incidents of intimate partner violence in that year involved firearms in only 3.4% of instances. Therefore, firearms have a very high lethality rate when used in domestic violence.<sup>209</sup>

After introducing the topic of domestic firearm violence in Europe, in the following sections we discuss the scope of domestic firearm violence in Europe and then detail its characteristics (types of firearm used, victims, perpetrators, etc).

### 3.2.1 Scope of domestic firearm violence

Assessing the scope of domestic firearm violence is difficult for many reasons: under-reporting, data that are insufficiently disaggregated and problematic procedures for registering domestic violence. The following text provides an estimation of the scope of domestic violence in five different countries for which sufficient reliable information could be gathered by Project TARGET: Belgium, Spain, Serbia, Estonia and the Netherlands.

More generally, the proportion of female victimisation in firearm violence – discussed in Chapter 2 section 2.3 – has increased generally in Europe. This is attributable largely to a steep decrease in male victimisation and a lesser (or no) decrease in female firearm victimisation (see Chapter 1 section 1.1 and Chapter 3 section 2.3). There are no (serious) increases in female victimisation in absolute numbers.

There appears to be a loose correlation between increased female victimisation and a country's ranking on the gender equality index.<sup>210</sup> This seems counter-intuitive but it can be explained by a stronger drop in male victimisation rates in countries with higher gender equality because these countries tend to become less prone to firearm violence in general. In the list of countries investigated in this study, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands rank highest on the gender equality index. Finland, placed second on the index, evolved from women being 31% of firearm homicide victims during 2000–2006 to 41% during 2006–2015. Some studies suggest that due to increased gender equality in Finland – and increased alcohol consumption by women – there is an increase in female-perpetrated intimate partner homicides.<sup>211</sup> Female-perpetrated intimate partner homicides tend to be done after a history of domestic abuse, of which alcohol abuse can be a symptom.

In the Netherlands, women accounted for 14% of the victims of lethal firearm violence between 2000 and 2006, which rose to 17% during 2007–2016. This increase is actually more impressive since the Netherlands experiences relatively high levels of criminal firearm violence, where women are typically targeted less than men. This is clear from a comparison with Sweden, which is ranked highest on the gender equality index, where there is no serious increase in the female victimisation rate. This is because firearm violence almost uniquely transpires in the criminal context in Sweden.

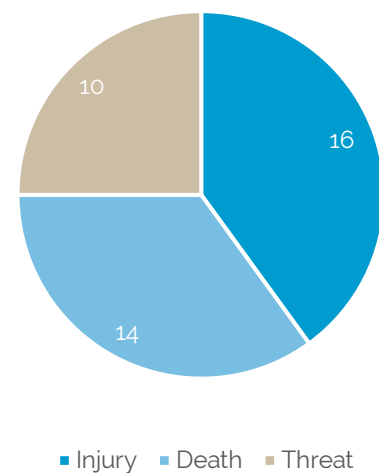
At the opposite end of the gender equality spectrum, we note that most Eastern European and Western Balkans countries have exceptionally high rates of male victimisation involving firearm violence. They also rank consistently very low on the gender equality index. Hungary is an exception: while it is ranked second lowest on the gender equality index, it has an unusually high female firearm victimisation rate of 33%.

Country studies for Project TARGET have shown that the share of domestic firearm violence in firearm violence generally differs throughout Europe. While SEESAC reports the rate of domestic firearm violence to be below that of criminal firearm violence in most south-

eastern European countries (such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia),<sup>1</sup> domestic firearm violence is considered a bigger proportion of homicides – as is discussed in the next subsection – in southern and western European countries such as Portugal, Spain, Belgium and Italy. These differences can be attributed partly to the size of the proportion of criminal firearm violence in relation to firearm violence generally. The in-depth studies for Project TARGET allow for a more nuance interpretation of the issue of domestic firearm violence.

The **Belgium** police register about 28,000 cases of physical violence in the family context each year, with 75% of these being intimate partner violence. Regrettably, the police do not record whether these cases involve firearms and so we do not know the exact number that do.

**Figure 3.8: Consequences of domestic firearm violence in Belgium, 2018–2020**

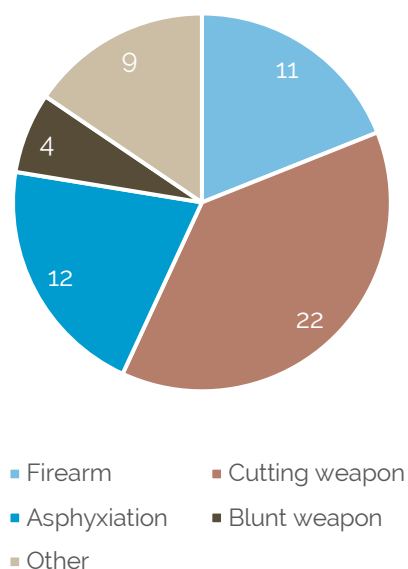


Based on our media analysis for 2018–2020,<sup>212</sup> we note 40 cases of domestic firearm violence which are broken down as shown in **Figure 3.8**. It is, however, likely that the media will be more inclined to report on cases which lead to injury or death rather than threat or no injury. The 2021 DJSOC report identified only one domestic firearm homicide in 2019, while our media analysis revealed five lethal casualties in 2019 arising from firearm violence.<sup>213</sup> There were only 12 ballistic analyses in the context of domestic firearm violence during 2006–2020 (with our media analysis showing 40 cases during 2018–2020). This can be due either to the fact that not all cases of firearm violence are subjected to a ballistics analysis or to the fact that cases are misidentified as homicides or injuries (rather than as domestic homicides or domestic injuries). Therefore, little can be said definitively about the scope of domestic firearm violence in Belgium.

Several reports from **Spain** allow us to assess the scope of domestic violence. One government study shows that lethal violence in Spain tends to take place mostly in the domestic sphere (78%).<sup>214</sup> In a 2019 report by the *Guardia Civil* for 2015–2017, a total of 58 domestic homicides were documented according to the mechanism used for the murder.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The SEESAC SALW surveys consistently put lethal firearm violence in the Western Balkans significantly ahead of criminal firearm violence. Concern is occasionally expressed that domestic violence is underreported in these countries. See <https://www.seesac.org/SALW-Surveys/>.

**Figure 3.9: Mechanism of domestic homicide in Spain, 2015–2017**



According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics' report for 2014–2018, it was shown that 82 out of 243 lethal assaults with firearms occurred in the home (34%), which is also the most common place for firearm deaths to occur in Spain. While not all firearm deaths in the home need to be domestic and domestic firearm violence can also occur outside the home, this does suggest that domestic firearm violence forms a large component of firearm deaths. Finally, Spain has a separate registry for 'gender-specific' crimes, which shows that during 2003–2019, around 1,000 women were

killed by their (ex-)partner, of whom roughly 13% are believed to have been killed by a firearm.<sup>216</sup> This translates into on average eight female firearm homicides of an intimate partner nature per year. In that same period, the Spanish National Institute of Statistics mentions a total of 1,075 firearm homicides during that same period. This means that 12.1% of all firearm homicides in Spain during that period were female firearm homicides involving intimate partners.<sup>217</sup>

Assessing the scope of domestic firearm violence is more difficult in Serbia, Estonia and the Netherlands. The **Serbian** police (Mol) register homicides generally and firearm homicides in the family context separately. It is impossible to ascertain which firearm homicides in the family context are taken up in general homicide and which are not. Data received from Mol show that 249 people were killed in the family context during 2015–2019, with 67.9% of the victims being women. The proportion of men killed in the family context has consistently increased, whereas the proportion of women killed has diminished – to 42.6% men and 57.4% women in 2019. Of these homicides in the family context, 26.5% were perpetrated using a firearm ( $n = 66$ ), with women constituting 70% of the victims of domestic firearm homicide. Of the firearm domestic homicides, 56% were intimate partner homicides ( $n = 37$ ), with women being 97% of the victims (only one man was killed with a firearm by his intimate partner).<sup>218</sup> In **Estonia**, the domestic sphere is considered to be one of the main areas, apart from alcohol-induced public quarrels, in which firearm violence occurs. Our study has shown that domestic violence tends to follow the same patterns as other forms of violence in Estonia (heavily related to alcohol intoxication), the use of firearms being rare and not showing any particular distinguishing features.<sup>219</sup> Four cases of domestic violence were reported in the media, which does not enable us to make any generalisations.<sup>220</sup> Finally, different cases of domestic firearm violence in the **Netherlands** sourced from the Dutch Homicide Monitor and the DFVM (Leiden University, 2021) show that during 2015–2019

<sup>1</sup> In Spain, the legal concept of gender-based violence is more restricted than what is understood at the international level, as it refers specifically to violence by men against women in intimate partner relationships (according to Organic Law 1/2004).

(2015–2017 for threats) domestic violence makes up 13.6% of gun homicides, 6.2% of non-lethal shootings and only 3.7% of threats.<sup>221</sup>

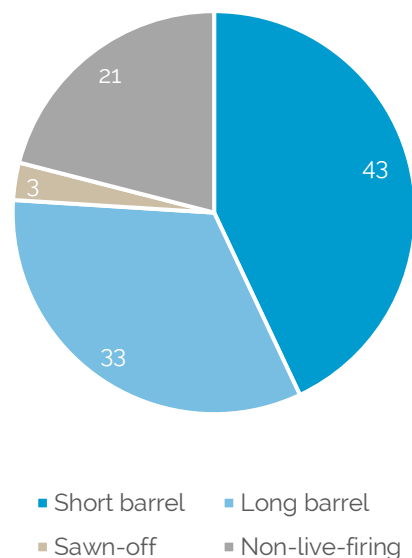
### 3.2.2 Firearm types used in domestic violence

The above discussion of the scope of domestic and criminal firearm violence shows that most of the non-lethal firearm violence is criminal whereas most lethal firearm violence can either be domestic or criminal, depending on the level of criminal activity with firearms. When firearm violence occurs in the domestic sphere, the above section shows that it is typically more injurious and lethal than criminal violence. This could be due to the nature of domestic violence or because the fact that domestic violence does not result in injury or death is under-reported. When criminal firearm violence involves innocent citizens, there seems to be a stronger tendency to report (especially in the case of armed robberies). In this section, we describe the data that are available on the types of firearm used in domestic firearm violence. Here, we can ascertain that domestic violence involves firearms that are locally available, whether legally or illegally, and are usually not trafficked into the country. Especially if handguns are available locally, they tend to be the main type of firearm used in domestic homicides, but long-barrelled firearms are used not infrequently (compared to criminal firearm violence).

In **Spain**, we note a slight majority of short-barrelled guns among live-firing firearms.

**Figure 3.10: Firearm types (%) in domestic violence in Spain, 2012**

In 2012, 21% of cases of domestic violence were committed with blank-firing firearms and, as **Figure 3.10** shows, there is a slight majority of short-barrel guns among live-firing firearms in domestic firearm violence. We can compare firearm usage in the domestic sphere in Spain in 2012 to its usage in criminal violence, respectively murder/homicides (**Figure 3.11**) and armed robberies (**Figure 3.12**).



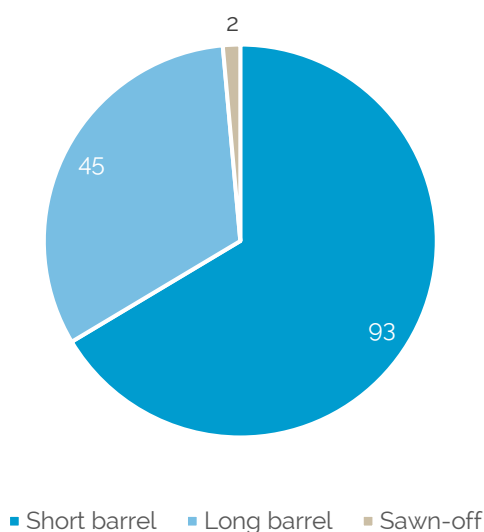


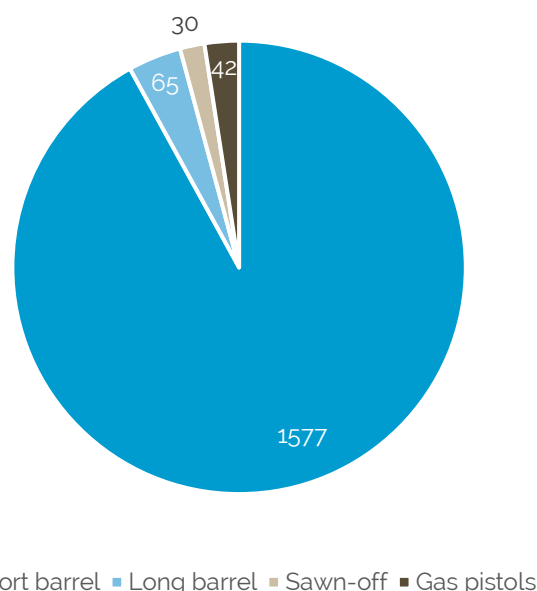
Figure 3.11: Firearm types in homicide in Spain, 2012

What stands out from comparing these figures is that short-barrel guns are always the majority firearm in the criminal sphere and that blank-firing firearms are not detected in homicides. However, armed robbers – as shown in Figure 3.11 – prefer overwhelmingly to use short-barrel guns in preference to any others. Also, a higher percentage of blank-firing firearms are used in armed robberies in Spain than in

homicide/murder. Gas guns and similar blank-firing guns can potentially be lethal, but are significantly less dangerous than live-firing firearms.

Figure 3.12: Firearm types in armed robberies in Spain, 2012

Since, in the context of armed robberies, firearms are usually used to threaten rather than shoot, this makes blank-firing guns more usable in that context.<sup>222</sup> Spain has generally low levels of legal access to handguns, which suggests that the majority of handgun usage in the domestic and criminal spheres involve illegal firearms.



In **Belgium**, the weapons of choice in domestic firearm violence, according to media analysis, are those that are available under licence (hunting or sport) or freely obtainable (such as airguns). The latter would not show up in the NICC ballistics database; this database showed only one prohibited rifle – a 7.62 mm calibre – and none that were modified or converted.<sup>223</sup>

When comparing the data from Spain and Belgium, we note that more accessible firearms – whether legal or illegal – tend to be preferred in domestic violence. Whenever handguns are available, they can be used in domestic violence but in cases where these are heavily restricted, we note more long-gun usage. Knowing that handguns are overwhelmingly used in the criminal sphere and used in the domestic sphere only when they are available, we can make some additional observations about firearm types in countries where the rate of lethal criminal firearm violence is generally considered low. In **Portugal**, a 2010 study by the Peace Studies Group at the University of Coimbra shows a roughly equal distribution between short-barrel (29%) and long-barrel (28%) guns (the remainder are unknown) in lethal

firearm incidents.<sup>224</sup> The WHO Detailed Mortality Database, however, shows – as discussed in Chapter 2 section 2.1 – that 75.5% of homicides where the type of firearm used could be determined are carried out using a long-barrel gun. Today, only 4.4% of firearm licences in Portugal permit handguns to be possessed, whereas the majority of licences (84.5%) allow the possession of hunting rifles.<sup>225</sup> This is the result of Portuguese legislation becoming increasingly strict on handguns and in particular on (converted) gas pistols after 2006.<sup>1</sup> This could suggest – although insufficient information is available to state this definitively – that handgun use in homicides is declining particularly because these weapons are less available in the sphere of domestic violence.

A similar situation emerges in **Ireland**, which – according to WHO data – shows a slightly higher use of rifles over handguns in homicides: 55.3% of firearm homicides – where the firearm could be identified – are committed using long guns. When we consider homicides in Ireland, we note that 640 homicides were committed during 1998–2008, of which 166 (or 26%) were committed by firearm. During the same period, the average percentage of homicides committed by firearm in England and Wales was 8%.<sup>226</sup> During 2005–2008, 33.3% of homicides were committed by firearm.<sup>227</sup> Ireland changed its firearm law in 2009, which severely restricted the possession of firearms, specifically handguns. At present, almost 100% of the legal possession of firearms involves hunting rifles and shotguns. According to their 2009 firearms law, the possession of handguns is restricted to grandfathering smaller-calibre rifles (such as 0.22 rimfire handguns and 0.177 air pistols). This means that the availability of handguns in Ireland is very limited, the latest estimate from Gunpolicy.Org being about 2,116 handguns as licensed legally (compared to 177,000 shotguns and 54,000 hunting rifles).<sup>228</sup> Nevertheless, a significant proportion of firearm homicides (44.7% of the firearms that could be identified) are perpetrated using handguns. According to our previous assessments, this would suggest that this aspect of lethal firearm violence in Ireland occurs within the criminal – and perhaps the paramilitary – rather than domestic sphere. This is confirmed when looking at firearm seizures in Ireland during 2013–2017: 35% are handguns (more pistols than revolvers), 42% are shotguns, 17% are rifles and 5% are different types of automatic rifle. Given that handguns make up a very small proportion of legal possession, their large share in seizures suggests the existence of a supply of handguns on the illegal market. And because the illegal market is generally closed-circuit, domestic firearm violence in Ireland will generally not be committed by handguns and only criminal violence is likely to be committed with handguns.

**Italy** provides a final example of this form of firearm usage: a slight predominance of handguns (53.3%) over rifles (46.7%) – bearing in mind that 80% of firearms used in homicides are recorded as either ‘unidentified’ or ‘other’ (see Chapter 2 section 2.1). Intuitively, this might then suggest that a substantial part of homicides are committed in the criminal rather than the domestic sphere. In 2018, though, organised crime was responsible for only 5.5% of homicides<sup>229</sup> and the *l’Osservatorio permanente sulle armi leggere e le politiche*

1 Easy-to-convert Italian gas pistols were acquired legally and converted in small workshops in Portugal, many of which were located near Valença do Minho (close to the Spanish border). The Portuguese police managed to locate and close these workshops in 2005, which resulted in a change in the law in 2006 that bans alarm and gas pistols in Portugal. In Spain, converted gas pistols are to this day referred to as ‘*Portuguesas*’. The ban will have affected the availability of converted handguns in Portugal and would then have led to a lower rate of handgun use in homicides. See <https://voxeurop.eu/en/cheap-guns-boom-in-europe/>.

*di sicurezza e difesa* (OPAL) reports that most firearm homicides occur in the domestic sphere with legally obtained firearms. A publicly available list of firearm homicides during 2017–2021 reveals that on average 2–3 firearm homicides occur per month with legally-held firearms. In 2018, OPAL reported that 49.5% of total homicides were perpetrated within the family context (163 victims) and 40% of domestic homicides happened using firearms, with 65% of these firearms having been held legally.<sup>230</sup>

These numbers are, however, estimates because Italy has no reliable registry of firearm licences and, consequently, no reliable estimate of the total number of legally held firearms or of the number of homicides committed with legally held firearms. According to a recent journal article, there could be between two and 12 million legally-held firearms in Italy.<sup>231</sup> However, we can say that while firearm violence has shifted in Italy from the criminal to the domestic sphere, firearm types have not shifted from short-barrel to long-barrel guns. When we look, for instance, at a report examining fatal firearm wounds between 1988 and 2003, including homicides (88.4%), suicides (11.4%) and accidents (0.2%), it reveals that in all groups, pistols were used the most – usually a 7.65 mm (22.5%) or a 9 mm (18.2%). This was at a time when organised crime still contributed to a serious number of firearm-related deaths. At that time, firearms were still used in organised crime without much restraint. For instance, in five of the homicides investigated, there were a total of 18 entry wounds; one case – the murder of a gang boss – even involved 30 entry wounds that were inflicted by three different guns.<sup>232</sup> Legal access to short-barrel firearms remains fairly easy in Italy, which has resulted in legal handguns being used in domestic violence. According to journalist Giorgio Beretta, the easy access to semi-automatic firearms also contributes significantly to high levels of domestic homicide.<sup>233</sup>

### 3.2.3 Homicide-suicide and firearm relinquishment

A particular form of domestic violence is domestic firearm homicide-suicide. Here, the perpetrator of a firearm homicide subsequently commits suicide. A review of the literature shows that homicide-suicides occur the most within the domestic sphere and that in these cases firearms are usually the preferred method.<sup>234</sup> There have also been some studies on firearm relinquishment and its effects on domestic firearm violence.

In a study of 17 homicide-suicide cases in Croatia between 1986 and 2009, 76% took place in the domestic sphere and 50% occurred by means of firearms.<sup>235</sup> In a study of 47 homicide-suicide cases in Belgium between 1935 and 2010, shooting was the most common method for both victim and perpetrator in couples aged below 55; in couples over 55, shooting was the most common method for the homicide, but asphyxia for the suicide.<sup>236</sup> In 58 cases of homicide-suicide in Germany during 1994–2014, 66% were in the domestic sphere and in more than half of the cases shooting was the method for both the homicide and the suicide.<sup>237</sup> In a total of 13 cases of homicide-suicide studied in Sweden during 2007–2009, 54% were in the domestic sphere and shooting was the main method for both the homicide and the suicide.<sup>238</sup> In 83 cases of homicide-suicide in Romania during 2002–2013, 69% were

classified as intimate partner homicide-suicide. There is no information on the methods for these homicides or suicides.<sup>239</sup> In Spain, academic studies of homicide-suicide cases during 2010–2012 reveal that in 35.9% of cases these involved a firearm. These data were not disaggregated according to context.<sup>240</sup>

Given that domestic violence leaves women particularly vulnerable, and it tends to become more deadly when a firearm is in the house, some countries have laws that ban known domestic abusers from possessing a firearm. In some cases, a domestic violence ruling can be grounds for the relinquishment of a legally possessed firearm. The effects of such laws have been studied in the context of the United States. A 2017 study has investigated the relationship between, on the one hand, state laws regarding the possession and relinquishment of firearms in cases of domestic violence and, on the other, the levels of intimate partner homicide (by any means). The study has shown that states with laws that ban the possession and mandate the relinquishment of firearms in the case of intimate partner violence have 9.7% lower rates of intimate partner homicide and 14% lower rates of intimate partner firearm homicide. States that did not explicitly mandate the relinquishment of firearms were associated with only a 6.6% reduction in intimate partner homicide.<sup>241</sup> More recent studies indicate that certain direct measures, particularly ‘extreme risk protection orders’ (a measure preventing individuals who are at extreme risk of (self-)harm from purchasing or holding guns), firearm bans for individuals convicted of domestic violence and mandatory background checks, can be effective measures with which to reduce gun violence. Indirect measures can also reduce gun violence, such as dealing with alcohol and drug addiction, but also community-based initiatives that target highly alienated individuals.<sup>242</sup>

### 3.2.4 Mass shootings in a domestic context

The domestic context is one of the most common in which public mass shootings have their origin. A study by Kivisto and Porter shows that cases of domestic violence “frequently [extend] to additional victims linked to the primary perpetrator or victim, either through a preexisting relationship or simply through physical proximity to the violence” and they continue that “firearm use is associated with an increased incidence of multiple homicide victimisation, particularly in domestic situations”.<sup>243</sup> A recent case in Plymouth, in the United Kingdom (12 August 2021), exemplifies this: after the perpetrator shot his mother with a legally owned shotgun, he proceeded to kill four passers-by (including a three-year old girl) and injured two more before killing himself.<sup>244</sup>

The perpetrators of domestic mass shootings tend to use a firearm that has been in their possession for a longer time. In most of the cases that we have identified, the firearm was owned legally. Public mass shootings in the family context tend to originate because of either ongoing family disputes, often regarding money, or because of sudden outbursts of jealousy that lead to excessive acts of revenge. The perpetrator is always alone. In some cases, especially when the perpetrator commits suicide or is killed, the motive remains unclear. A history of criminal behaviour and/or mental problems tends to precede the shooting.

These types of mass public shooting are more common in eastern and south-eastern Europe. The firearms that are used are always firearms that have been in the possession of the perpetrator for a longer time, whether legally or illegally. Automatic assault rifles, such as Kalashnikov-type rifles, that were in the possession of the perpetrator most likely as a conflict legacy, can prove to be particularly deadly. In the cases where handguns are used, these were often held legally through a sporting licence. While not technically a public mass shooting – because there were only three lethal casualties – the shooting in Lörrach, Germany is the only one committed by a woman. She was a trained marksman and used her legally owned 0.22 calibre Walther GSP. **Figure 3.1** provides an overview of public mass shootings in the family sphere after 2000 that involved at least four casualties (not including the perpetrator), and two other high-profile shootings.

Figure 3.13: Domestic mass<sup>245</sup> and high-profile<sup>246</sup> shootings (by gun type)

■ Legally Held Firearms ■ Illegally Held Firearm



\*Size of squares represents number of fatal casualties

(!) represents high-profile shooting

### 3.3 Terrorist firearm violence

Terrorist firearm violence is the use of a firearm in order to deliberately injure or kill innocent civilians so as to destabilise a political state or to cause general turmoil. Such terrorist events are best known as public mass shootings. Terrorist attacks tend to be heavily mediatised and closely monitored. Europol reports annually on trends in terrorist attacks in its *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*. Terrorism by means of firearms is a small portion of all terrorism events, but it tends to be the more deadly context of terrorist attacks. According to Europol's 2021 report, a total of 21 people were killed in terrorist attacks in the EU in 2020 (in addition, three died in the United Kingdom and one in Switzerland). Only two of these terrorist events involved firearms – that is, in Hanau (rightwing) and Vienna (Jihadist) – but they caused 14 out of the 21 casualties (in only 2% of all the completed, failed and foiled terrorist attacks in 2020). In previous reports, firearm prove to be the most injurious and lethal means by terrorists. This indicates that an increase in access to firearms could have potentially dramatic effects on the number of terrorism casualties. The most common forms of terrorism in 2020 were those carried out by Jihadists and rightwingers. In previous years, separatist violence was a larger component of terrorist violence, but since these mainly occurred in Northern Ireland, after Brexit they are no longer covered by the Europol report. Leftwing terrorist violence has been growing in the past few years, but it rarely produces casualties and even more rarely involves firearms.<sup>247</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Terrorism and the use of firearms

The way terrorists acquire and use firearms depends largely on the type of terrorism. We therefore outline briefly the most important types of terrorism in Europe: Jihadist (or Islamist), rightwing, separatist and leftwing, and discuss the ways in which they acquire and use firearms. The acquisition of firearms by terrorists was the subject-matter of Project SAFTE of the Flemish Peace Institute, which published its report *Firearms Acquisition by Terrorists in Europe* in 2018.<sup>248</sup> For this reason, Project TARGET did not investigate the acquisition and use of firearms by terrorists in detail. The present section offers a summary of the findings of SAFTE, enriched with additional findings from more recent studies.

As a general rule, terrorists prefer to use military-grade and automatic firearms but must often rely on what is available locally. Jihadist terrorists are particularly keen on obtaining firearms. **Jihadist terrorism** has been particularly the focus of attention worldwide since the 9/11 attack in New York and the various Jihadist attacks in Europe, especially during 2014–2016. These two attacks (or series of attacks) were largely inspired by the same ideology, that is, Jihadist Islam. Jihadist interpretations of Islam believe that 'struggle' is necessary to bring the world in conformity with the laws of God (*sharia*) and Jihadism has a long history

of connections with Islamic discussions about ‘just war’.<sup>1</sup> The 2015–2016 Sunni Jihadist attacks stand out as the major incidents of terrorism in Europe, which were claimed by Islamic State (IS). Naturally, the Europol report on terrorism of those years focused heavily on those events. They found that IS terrorist cells are usually domestically or locally based; they are recruited increasingly more rapidly and do not go through a long process of radicalisation; IS prefers to target ‘soft targets’ rather than critical infrastructure. Their strategy is conceived specifically in order to dissuade the EU from intervening in IS’s plans for establishing a new caliphate in the Middle East. IS was very successful in recruiting locally in Europe through its media campaigns, where European Muslims either immigrate to the caliphate or execute attacks in Europe (or both). Europol warned that the flow of Muslim refugees into Europe following the war in Syria could prove to be a source for Jihadist terrorism: terrorists could use the flow of refugees to find their way into Europe or refugees can be vulnerable to radicalisation while in Europe.<sup>249</sup>

Many terrorists prefer to use (automatic) firearms, these are not always available to them. Most terrorists would then rely on connections they have on the illicit criminal market. Since this market tends to be closed-circuit, especially when the supply on that market is limited, terrorists will often fail to acquire the firearms they prefer.<sup>250</sup> This mechanism creates what is known as the ‘crime–terror nexus’. According to Katharine Petrich, this means the convergence of two types of disruptive activity: crime and terror, by means of collaboration, conversion or combination.<sup>251</sup> This means that criminals and terrorists can collaborate to meet their ends; criminals can convert into terrorists; or an individual can combine criminal and terrorist activities. If criminals turn into terrorists – such as occurred in the Paris attacks of 2015 – this would mean that the terrorist enjoys access to the criminal market through their criminal connections. The 2020 UNODC study reported that criminals and terrorists primarily cooperate in the exchange of firearms: in 75% of the instances of cooperation between criminals and terrorists, the criminals provided firearms to the terrorists.<sup>252</sup>

Jihadi terrorists tend to rely on members with criminal pasts to acquire firearms. These individuals might also have acquired certain skills that would make them more deadly with a firearm. Most of the firearms used by the Jihadi terrorists in France and Belgium during 2014–2016 were originally manufactured in former Yugoslavia. These firearms could simply

1 According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, the teachings of jihad generally concern the rules of conduct and engagement for Islamist combatants (including, importantly, a ban on killing women and children). That just-war tradition divides the world into a territory of Islam (*dār al-Islām*) and a territory where Islam is not established (*dār al-ḥarb*). Some interpretations of jihad allow only war in order to defend the territory of Islam; other interpretations argue that struggle is necessary to expand the territory of Islam. In all cases, the theological tradition only allows for those means of war that are proportionate to the end of war. This means that a ‘just’ war does not allow the combatant to engage in injustice. Recent radical views of Jihadism believe, however, that all means are justified in safeguarding and expanding the territory of Islam. The terrorist group Al-Qaeda, for instance, believes that an all-out global war is justified where even innocent women and children are killed. Within these extremist Jihadist groups we have to distinguish between Sunni and Shiite extremist Muslims. While Sunni extremists usually operate under the tenets of the ‘unending war’, Shiite terrorists prefer more localised and specific targets. Sunni terrorists – such as the 9/11 bombers – are more likely to have government support and are often recruited through government agents. Shiite radicals tend to prefer high-profile targets while Sunni extremists aim for high-casualty killings. The 9/11 and 2015–2016 attacks were achieved by Sunni Jihadists. The best-known form of Shiite Jihadist terrorism is Hezbollah, who were responsible for the bombings of several Israeli embassies in the 1990s. See [Anon]. (2012) ‘J’, in Gerhard Bowering, Patricia Crone, Wadad Kadi, Devin J. Stewart, Muhammad Qasim Zaman & Mahan Mirza (eds) *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 268–291. <https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.1515/9781400838554.268>.

have been smuggled into France/Belgium, but some of them included reactivated firearms, converted blank-firers and stolen firearms (see Chapter 4).<sup>253</sup>

Whereas Jihadist terrorists are often lone actors and usually not structurally associated with any existing network, they belong roughly to a streamlined, publicly available ideology. They tend also to have criminal connections. This is not (always) the case with terrorist attacks that can be categorised as extremely rightwing. **Rightwing terrorism** has been on the rise in Europe since 2015, to some extent as a response to the Jihadist attacks. Rightwing terrorism is a umbrella term that covers a great variety of ideological backdrops or grievances, such as islamophobia, ethnic nationalism, white supremacy, incel (involuntary celibacy), misogyny and anti-globalism. Europol defines rightwing terrorism as the use of terrorist violence by rightwing extremists who aspire to change the socio-political system to a more rightwing model. However, several rightwing terrorism events were carried out by individuals in order to express their grievances rather than to bring about change.<sup>254</sup> The deadliest rightwing terrorist attack in Europe was on Utøya in 2011 after a bombing in Oslo, Norway. Rightwing terrorists can be part of a larger fascist or Nazi movement, but are more often lone wolves.<sup>255</sup>

Because of being a fairly heterogenous group, rightwing terrorist groups tend to use various methods in order to acquire firearms: some use legally owned firearms, others make use of internet purchases of firearm parts and yet others self-manufacture firearms through 3D-printing. Some connections with the military and paramilitary operations have also been observed.<sup>256</sup> Starting one year after the Halle shooting in 2019, where the perpetrator used a 3D-printed firearm, there were increasing reports and seizures of 3D-printed firearms and mini-factories. These were usually associated with fascist ideology.<sup>257</sup>

**Separatist terrorism** – occasionally called ethno-nationalism – has for the most part been pacified in the EU. The two most prominent groups of separatist terrorism were the Basque *Euskadi Ta Askatasun* (ETA) and the Northern Irish Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). This type of terrorism involves groups of individuals that vie for independence through general acts of violence. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this type of terrorism accounts for the majority of all attempted, successful and foiled terror attacks in Europe in 2018 (64%) and 2019 (48%). This category was reduced to 25% in 2020. The reason for this is Brexit: of these types of terrorist attack, 67% in 2018 and 98% in 2019 were executed in Northern Ireland.<sup>258</sup>

Separatist groups tend to be an exception to the crime terror nexus. The IRA relied initially on firearms stolen from the British and Irish armed forces. As they grew in size, these groups relied more heavily on international transfers of firearms, most importantly from Libya and the United States. These trafficked firearms were often moved, however, by professional smugglers, including the Italian mafia. In their formative years, the ETA relied also on purchasing firearms on the Belgian illegal market, but gradually started to rely more broadly on conflict legacy weapons from the Spanish Civil War and the conflicts in Yugoslavia, and on thefts from security forces stockpiles.<sup>259</sup> The ETA has also been known to manufacture large numbers of sub-machine guns (SMG) for their own purposes.<sup>260</sup>

**Leftwing terrorism** – often linked to anarchist terrorism – is the pursuit of terrorist violence in the service of an extremely leftwing or anarchist ideology. Like rightwing terrorism, leftwing terrorism is an umbrella term that comprises many different orientations, most often related to perceived government overreach. Traditionally, the dominant leftwing theme in terrorist extremism is environmentalism but, in 2020, popular themes included scientific and corona scepticism.<sup>261</sup> In 2020, 20 such (attempted) terrorist attacks were detected by Europol, all of which happened in Italy (but Greece has also been known as a hotspot for leftwing terrorism). Leftwing terrorists are not known to use firearms, but they do tend to rely on improvised explosive materials. Their attacks are usually directed at government or commercial installations and not people. The most popular target in 2020 was telecommunication infrastructure, including 5G infrastructure.<sup>262</sup>

Most leftwing terrorists tend to rely on explosive devices, as do most separatist terrorists, although some separatist terrorists – in particular the IRA<sup>1</sup> – were known to have impressive arsenals. Leftwing terrorist groups have not typically used firearms in their attacks in the past few decades. They prefer explosives, sabotage and arson. In the past, German leftwing terrorist groups (RAF) were, however, often involved in the use of firearms and today firearms are occasionally found in the possession of Italian and Greek leftwing groups. The patterns by which leftwing terrorists acquire firearms have not been investigated in depth.<sup>263</sup>

### 3.3.2 Mass shootings in a terrorist context

When we look specifically at public mass shootings in the terrorist context, we find that these also tend to operate differently in different terrorist contexts. First, all cases of mass shootings in the context of rightwing and leftwing extremism involve lone actors, whereas separatists and Islamist terrorism can involve multiple actors. Rightwing and leftwing terrorists might be inspired by certain ideological movements, but they are rarely supported explicitly by these movements. This is different for Islamist and separatist terrorism: both cases of separatist terrorist mass shootings involved large groups of militants. While the majority of cases of Islamist terrorism concern only one perpetrator and the perpetrator is not usually supported by a larger network, there is nevertheless an ideological movement to which the Islamist terrorist subscribes.

In six cases of terrorist mass shootings, the perpetrator(s) was/were found to have deliberate Islamist terrorist motivations (Vienna 2020; Brussels 2014; Paris January 2015; Paris November 2015; Strasbourg 2018; Utrecht 2019). In one case (Toulouse–Montauban 2012), the perpetrator had a terrorist motive and sought to avenge the French government’s part in the Palestinian conflict, but it is unclear whether this should be labelled Islamist terrorism. In one case, the perpetrator was motivated by leftwing extremist views (Nanterre 2002). In two cases, the perpetrator was motivated by rightwing extremist views (Munich 2016; Hanau

<sup>1</sup> According to one news report, in 2005, the IRA decommissioned approximately 90 handguns, 1,000 rifles (mainly Kalashnikov-type assault rifles) and 30 heavy machine guns. See ‘IRA guns: The list of weapons’, *BBC News*, 26 September 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/4284048.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4284048.stm).

2020). Important to note is that Norway was not among the countries investigated for Project TARGET. The attack in 2011 on Utøya by Anders Breivik, who killed a total of 77 and injured 319, would also fall within the category of rightwing extremist terrorism. In two cases, both of them occurring in North Macedonia, the perpetrators were complicit in separatist terrorism (Sharr Mountains 2001; Smilkovci 2012).

Leftwing and rightwing extremist terrorists has since 2000 always lone actors in the EU. Four cases – of which only three are public mass shootings – have been identified in this category. In three of these cases, the firearm was acquired legally and was usually in the possession of the perpetrator for a longer time (Nanterre 2002; Antwerp 2006<sup>1</sup>; Hanau 2020). In these cases, the gunman used a legally obtained firearm – handguns (twice) and hunting rifle (once) – which has sparked debates in France, Belgium and Germany about firearm legislation. In the last case (Munich 2016), the perpetrator was inspired by the terrorist attack of Anders Breivik and purchased a reactivated Glock 17 via the internet.

Separatist violence has been reduced to a minimum throughout Europe. The main hotbeds of separatism – the Basque conflict, the Northern Ireland conflict and the Western Balkans – have mostly been pacified. Most separatist movements throughout Europe are peaceful. Only two cases of mass public shootings in the separatist context could be identified after 2000, both of which have occurred in the then FYR Macedonia. Both attacks resulted from ethnic tensions and were executed with military precision.<sup>264</sup>

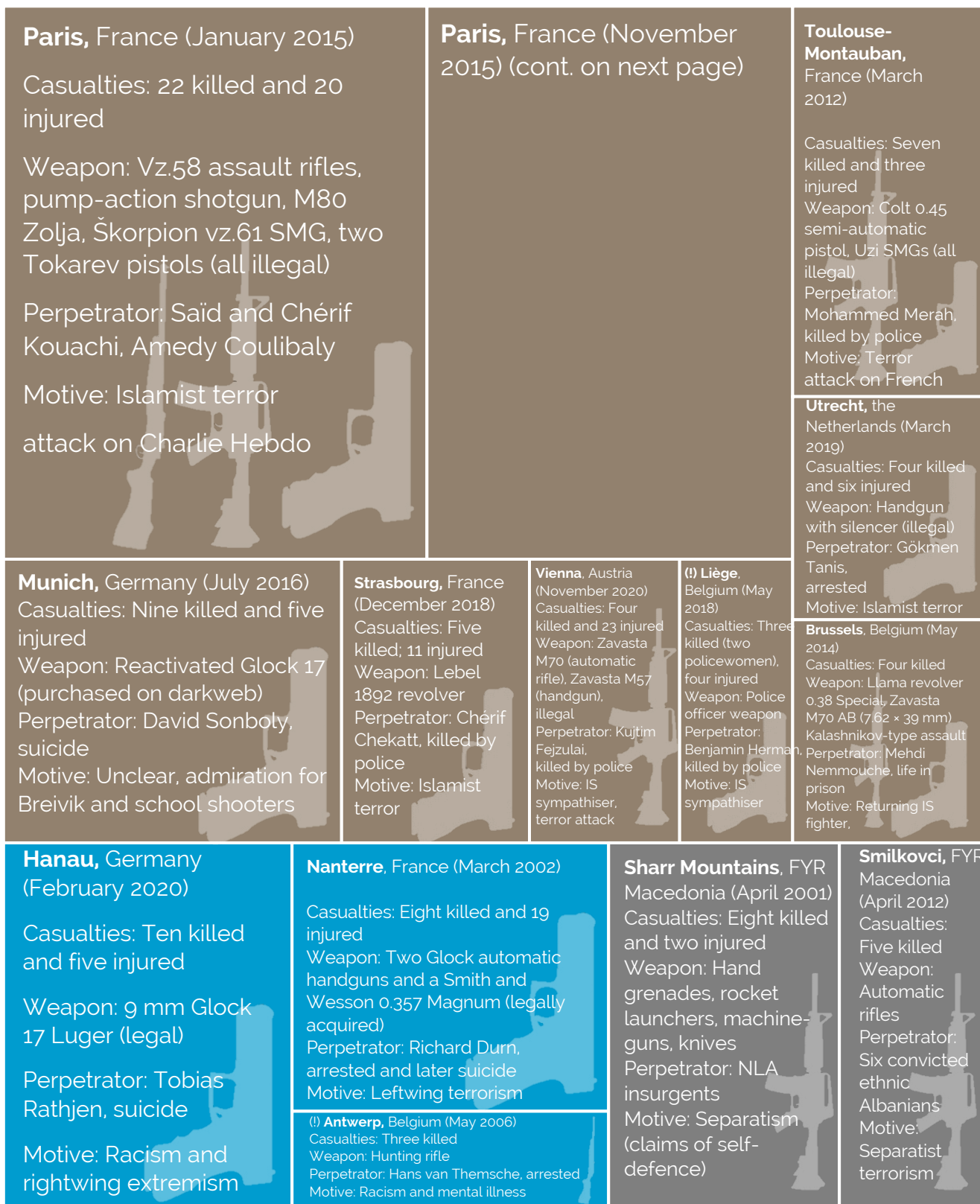
**Figure 3.14** gives an overview of terrorist mass shootings and some high-profile events.

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<sup>1</sup> The Antwerp 2006 shooter was not explicitly labelled a terrorist during his trial. He was deemed to be accountable for his actions and was found guilty of murder with racism as an aggravating circumstance. We have chosen to take up this high profile shooting because it had a significant impact on legal reform of Belgium's gun laws.

Figure 3.14: Terrorist mass<sup>265</sup> and high-profile<sup>266</sup> shootings (by gun type)

■ Legally Held Firearms ■ Illegally Held Firearm ■ Unknown



**Paris, France (November 2015)**

Cont. from previous page.

Casualties: approx.. 130 killed, more than 400 injured

Weapon: Two Zastava M70 AB2 assault rifles, two Zastava M57 pistols, two Vz.58 assault rifles, two Tokarev 33TT pistols (all Perpetrator: Multiple attackers, suicide, killed by police, arrested

Motive: IS sympathizers, terror attack



## 3.4 Firearm use in other contexts

Firearms can be used in contexts other than crime, domestic violence and terrorism, but these can be difficult to categorise. First, there is violence that occurs in non-criminal disputes, such as in nightlife violence. A pivotal factor in this type of firearm violence is alcohol or substance abuse, and seems to be mostly a factor of significance in countries that belong to the so-called 'vodka belt'. Second, violence can occur as a result of police activity. This can be the (il)legitimate use of firearms by police officers or the use of firearms against police officers. Third, individuals who are considered to be mentally ill resort to firearm violence. Occurrences of firearm violence in this context very often cause public discussion about legal access to firearms. Fourth, there are school shootings. These do not occur regularly in EU Member States and none have occurred in Member States since the 2009 school shooting in Winnenden, Germany. There are occasional reports of firearm use in the school context, but these very rarely result in injury or death. Finally, vigilantes have been known to acquire and occasionally use firearms.

### 3.4.1 Violence, alcohol and music

There is, as one would expect, a connection between alcohol intoxication and the use of (firearm) violence.<sup>267</sup> This connection is stronger in domestic violence and violence that occurs during social events. There are no indications that alcohol intoxication is a regular component of criminal firearm violence.

The literature shows that the impact of alcohol in the domestic and social context is different. In his study of lethal incidents in the United States during 1985–2004, Darryl W Roberts found that combining alcohol consumption with firearm ownership increases the incidence rates of both intimate partner homicide and intimate partner homicide by firearm.<sup>268</sup>

When we consider the connection between alcohol and nightlife violence specifically, alcohol is seen as a less straightforward exacerbating factor contributing to violence. A study of alcohol and nightlife violence in Norway found that alcohol can cause violent events to occur more easily, but such events tend not to escalate because misbehaviour is attributed to the consumption of alcohol. For this reason, alcohol can be found to increase the likelihood of violent events but reduces the damage that is caused by them.<sup>269</sup>

Three countries investigated for Project TARGET mention alcohol-induced quarrels as a major area of firearm usage: Lithuania, Finland and Estonia.<sup>270</sup> In Lithuania, alcohol intoxication is believed to be a contributing factor in 58% of firearm incidents.<sup>271</sup> According to the Finnish Homicide Monitoring System, during the period 2003–2007, 80% of the homicide perpetrators and 76% of the adult homicide victims were under the influence of alcohol.<sup>272</sup> For Estonia, Salla et al note that alcohol consumption in relation to acts of (firearm) violence has been a problem in Estonia ever since the start of the Soviet occupation. In their study of homicide victims during 2007–2010, they found that 90% of homicides in

Estonia involved alcohol.<sup>273</sup> Alcohol consumption is more likely to be connected to domestic violence and nightlife disputes in Estonia than to criminal violence. In all the shooting incidents in 2020, alcohol had been consumed in every firearm homicide case and most of, if not all, cases of firearm violence. Interviews with the Estonian government and police services revealed that infractions of section 89'10 of the Weapons Act (Carrying of weapons or ammunition in a state of intoxication) have been increasing steadily since 2010.<sup>274</sup>

While not necessarily connected to alcohol, another context of firearm violence has been recently connected to the music industry. In certain genres of music, particularly so-called 'drill rap', the use of violence is encouraged and glorified. This style of music originated in Chicago in the early 2010s<sup>275</sup> and spread to Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Belgium.<sup>276</sup> Music videos of this rap sub-genre involve knives and can feature firearms. The lyrics often refer to street violence, shootings and stabbings as a currency of status. Dutch drill rappers have often been connected to violent stabbings or shootings.<sup>277</sup> One of Sweden's most popular rappers, Einar (real name: Nils Kurt Erik Einar Gronberg), had affiliations with gang crime in Sweden and glorified violence in his songs. In October 2021, he was shot in a presumably gang-related hit because the rapper was allegedly about to testify against the Swedish Vårby gang.<sup>278</sup>

### 3.4.2 Firearm misuse by (and against) the police

Firearms are used by law-enforcement services in order to discourage violence and in self-defence. In some cases, law-enforcements agents use firearms illegitimately and/or disproportionately, where their action would technically fall under the label of firearm violence. Procedures on how to adjudicate and register such events differ greatly across Europe. There are few publicly available databases that record the misuse of firearm violence by police in Europe. When such conduct is discussed, it is usually related to racially motivated police actions.<sup>279</sup> In addition to firearm violence committed by law-enforcement officers, there is also the use of firearms directed against these officers. While this topic was not investigated in depth by Project TARGET, a number of interesting features of firearm violence perpetrated and suffered by the police in Poland came up in ID-Poland. Obviously, this specific topic could be investigated in much more detail.

Poland is today a country with generally low levels of homicide (a rate of 0.8 homicides per 100,000 of the population in 2015) and very low usage of firearms in homicides (a rate of 0.03 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population in 2015). Furthermore, the UNODC ranks Poland 142nd (out of 176) with regard to firearm possession and 98th (out of 107) with regard to firearm violence, a ranking that is confirmed by data from the Polish police services. The police services note, on the one hand, that the annual number of crimes committed by firearm decreased from 2,443 to 875 between 2002 and 2014 and, on the other, a total of 108 firearm homicides were committed during 2014–2019.<sup>280</sup>

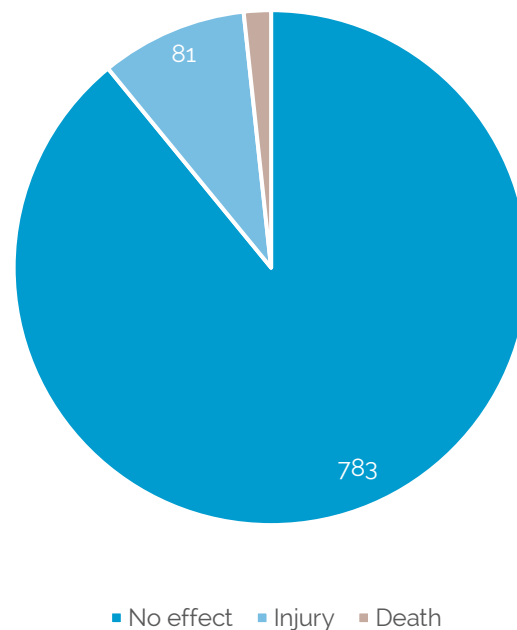
But Poland has not always been a country that has had firearm violence under control: there used to be serious issues with firearm crime in Poland. Two events where firearms were used

against police officers had a major impact. In March 2003, two police officers were killed and 17 injured in an attempt to detain two criminals in Magdalenka. These criminals were very heavily armed and used a total of 29 firearms in the shooting, including (semi-)automatic pistols (Glock 17, pw wz.33, CZ-75 Full Auto), SMGs (Sa vz.61, Uzi Mk 3, PM-98 and PM-84P), automatic rifles (AKMS and AKS-74U), a hunting rifle and a shotgun (Franchi SPAS-12). In addition, the criminals made use of explosive devices to secure the garden around their house. The criminals' arsenal gave cause for increased attention to illegal firearms throughout Poland. A second event, in February of 2010, aroused increased attention to violence directed against police officers. Police officer Andrzej Struj was assaulted and murdered while he was on leave: when he intervened to stop the destruction of public property, he was stabbed to death.<sup>281</sup>

In the aftermath of these and other events, Poland paid close attention to firearm violence in the context of policing. When we consider the rate at which police use their service weapon, we note that during the period 2014–2019 a total of 879 usages of a service weapon by a police officer were registered. **Figure 3.15**<sup>282</sup> indicates the outcomes of these events.

**Figure 3.15: Outcomes of firearm use by Polish police, 2014–2019**

This shows that not only do Polish police seldom use a firearm (147 per year on average), but these events are seldom injurious and even more rarely lethal. Firearm violence against police officers has also been rare in the past decade. During 2011–2020, there was only one case where one police officer was killed and three more injured when in December 2017 police officers attempted to halt an ATM robbery in Wisznia Mała (the perpetrator was armed with a machine gun). One case of attempted murder with a firearm was recorded in August 2014, when a criminal snatched the service weapon from a police officer.<sup>283</sup>



There is therefore low use and low lethal effects of firearms by police officers in Poland. Unlike the UK police, who are famously unarmed for the most part, the Polish police are generally armed. Police shootings have been known, however, to be poorly registered globally because of problematic overlappings between law enforcement and prosecution. This gives cause to believe that a number of police shootings can be omitted from the registries and, even worse, lethal police shootings can be mislabelled in order to shield a colleague from prosecution. A recent overview of police shootings in the United States during 1980–2019, for instance, showed that only 13,700 out of a total of 30,800 police killings were

registered as such in the US National Vital Statistics System. While there is no proof, thus far, that this might be the case in Europe, this gives cause to be wary of these data.<sup>284</sup>

While one case study of firearm violence against and by the police does not enable one to make any generalisations, the Polish situation does show that close attention to police activities can be a factor that has a positive impact on firearm violence.

### 3.4.3 Firearm violence by the mentally ill

Mental illness, possibly in connection with alcohol or substance abuse, can be a factor that has an impact on gun violence. In the United States, discussions regarding firearm violence – in particular mass shootings – tend to migrate towards mental health. Mental and/or substance problems are then believed to be a significant contributing factor to gun violence. Research on the demographics of violent crime shows that shootings by individuals with a serious mental illness amount to less than 1% of all gun-related deaths a year in the United States (about 400 firearm casualties). Most perpetrators of gun violence tend not to have a history of mental illness,<sup>285</sup> and therefore medical professionals often advocate in favor of disassociating gun violence from mental illness.<sup>286</sup> Other research found that other factors, such as environmental, organisational and social factors, affect gun violence more emphatically than mental illness.<sup>287</sup> In the United States, ten million individuals are considered to be seriously mentally ill; this population produces 400 firearm victims annually. This follows the general rate of firearm violence in the United States (a rate of four casualties per 100,000 of the mentally ill). Certain mental illnesses, however, are known to be a risk factor for gun violence (such as schizophrenia).<sup>288</sup>

The connection between mental illness and gun violence is less extensively documented in Europe. Britta Bannenberg studied the psychological profiles of mass shooters in Germany during 1993–2013 and found that most of the perpetrators were not mentally ill in the pathological sense, but they were almost always deeply emotionally troubled. Responding to the Winnenden school shooting, she suggested extensive tools for early detection of emotional trouble in youths.<sup>289</sup>

For Project TARGET, we identified eight public mass shootings since 2000 (out of 41) that were found to involve serious mental problems and/or substance abuse. In most of these cases, a more specific cause of the shooting could not be identified and so the mental illness was seen as a major contributing factor to the public shooting. What is particularly noteworthy is that in most of these cases the firearm had been in the possession of the perpetrator legally and for an extended period. This results in a discussion following such a shooting often focusing on the fact that a mentally ill person could legally possess firearms. The shooting in Alpen aan den Rijn (2011), for instance, where a person with a history of severe mental illness could possess three handguns, has been the cause of particular controversy in the Netherlands.

**Figure 3.16: Mass shootings involving mental illness and/or substance abuse (by gun)<sup>290</sup>**

■ Legally Held Firearms ■ Illegally Held Firearm

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p><b>Jabukovac</b>, Serbia (July 2007)</p> <p>Casualties: Nine killed and three injured</p> <p>Weapon: Hunting rifle</p> <p>Perpetrator: Nikola Radosavljević, injured and arrested</p> <p>Motive: Unclear – claims to have suffered ‘injustices’</p>  | <p><b>Trstj</b>, Bosnia and Herzegovina (May 2008)</p> <p>Casualties: Six killed (all relatives)</p> <p>Weapon: Handgun (legally obtained)</p> <p>Perpetrator: Tomislav Petrovic, admitted to the hospital for paranoid schizophrenia</p> <p>Motive: Unclear</p>         | <p><b>Roye</b>, France (August 2015)</p> <p>Casualties: Four killed and two wounded</p> <p>Weapon: Semi-automatic Beretta calibre 12 hunting rifle</p> <p>Perpetrator: Marcel Ruffet, arrested</p> <p>Motive: Alcohol abuse and aggression</p> |
| <p><b>Ostrava</b>, Czechia (December 2019)</p> <p>Casualties: Seven killed and two injured CZ 75 (illegally converted)</p> <p>Weapon: CZ 75 (illegally converted)</p> <p>Perpetrator: Ctirad Vitásek, suicide</p> <p>Motive: Unclear</p>  | <p><b>Tirane</b>, Albania, (November 2014)</p> <p>Casualties: Four killed</p> <p>Weapon: Type 54 pistol (Chinese copy of the Tokarev TT-33 pistol)</p> <p>Perpetrator: Konstandin Xhuvani, convicted</p> <p>Motive: Substance abuse (alcohol, cocaine and marijuana)</p> | <p><b>Uhersky Brod</b>, Czechia (February 2019)</p> <p>Casualties: Eight killed and one injured</p> <p>Weapon: CZ 75 automatic pistol and Alfa 820 revolver (legal)</p> <p>Perpetrator: Zdeněk Kovář, suicide</p> <p>Motive: Unclear</p>       |
| <p><b>Alphen aan den Rijn</b>, the Netherlands (April 2011)</p> <p>Casualties: Six killed and 17 wounded</p> <p>Weapon: Colt 0.45 pistol, a semi-automatic Smith and Wesson and an M&amp;P15-22 (all legally held on sports licence)</p> <p>Perpetrator: Tristan van der Vlis, suicide</p> <p>Motive: History of severe psychological illness</p> | <p><b>Tours</b>, France (October 2001)</p> <p>Casualties: Four killed and ten wounded</p> <p>Weapon: Pump-action 0.22 rifle</p> <p>Perpetrator: Jean-Pierre Roux-Durraffourt, injured and apprehended</p> <p>Motive: Unclear</p>   |  |

\*Size of squares represents number of fatal casualties

### 3.4.4 School shootings

School shootings are a specific type of firearm violence that is often combined with other contexts for firearm violence, such as domestic and terrorist violence, substance abuse and mental illness. School shootings are events where a (former) student brings a firearm to school and kills fellow students, teachers and/or other personnel of the school. This does not include events such as the terrorist attack in Toulouse in 2015, where a school was targeted for explicitly terrorist purposes. Public mass shootings in this context have occurred in Europe in the 2000s, but not in the 2010s. Four mass shootings since 2000 have been identified in Europe.

By way of comparison, following the same criteria, there have been 13 mass school shootings in the United States (Blacksburg, Virginia 2007; Red Lake, Minnesota 2005; Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania 2006; DeKalb, Illinois 2008; Tucson, Arizona 2002; Newtown, Connecticut 2012; Parkland, Florida 2018; Roseburg, Oregon 2015; Santa Fe, Texas 2018; Oakland, California 2012; Santa Monica, California 2013; Rancho Tehama Reserve, California 2017; Marysville, Washington 2014). One study of school shootings in the United States – which has a more extensive sample than Europe – found that school contexts play significant role in school shootings. While there can be a tendency to take into account factors at the level of the individual, this study found that school districts with higher numbers of students, greater socio-economic disadvantage and higher levels of violent crime were more likely to experience school shootings.<sup>291</sup>

Apart from mass school shootings, there have been less lethal events (less than four casualties) at schools in Europe. In Viljandi, Estonia a 15-year-old shot his German teacher with a revolver after writing several messages about planning a homicide on Facebook in 2014.<sup>292</sup> In March of 2017, a student attacked his school in Grasse, France, armed with a rifle, two handguns, a revolver and two grenades, injuring a total of four or five people (sources contradict one another). The handguns belonged to his grandfather; the rifle to his father. The youth was fascinated with school shootings generally and with self-manufacturing firearms.<sup>293</sup> In Brześć Kujawski, Poland, a former student injured two people, including an 11-year-old student, when in May 2019 he threw explosives and fired shots in his former school. The man had a history of psychological illness and had already been convicted of violent crime.<sup>294</sup>

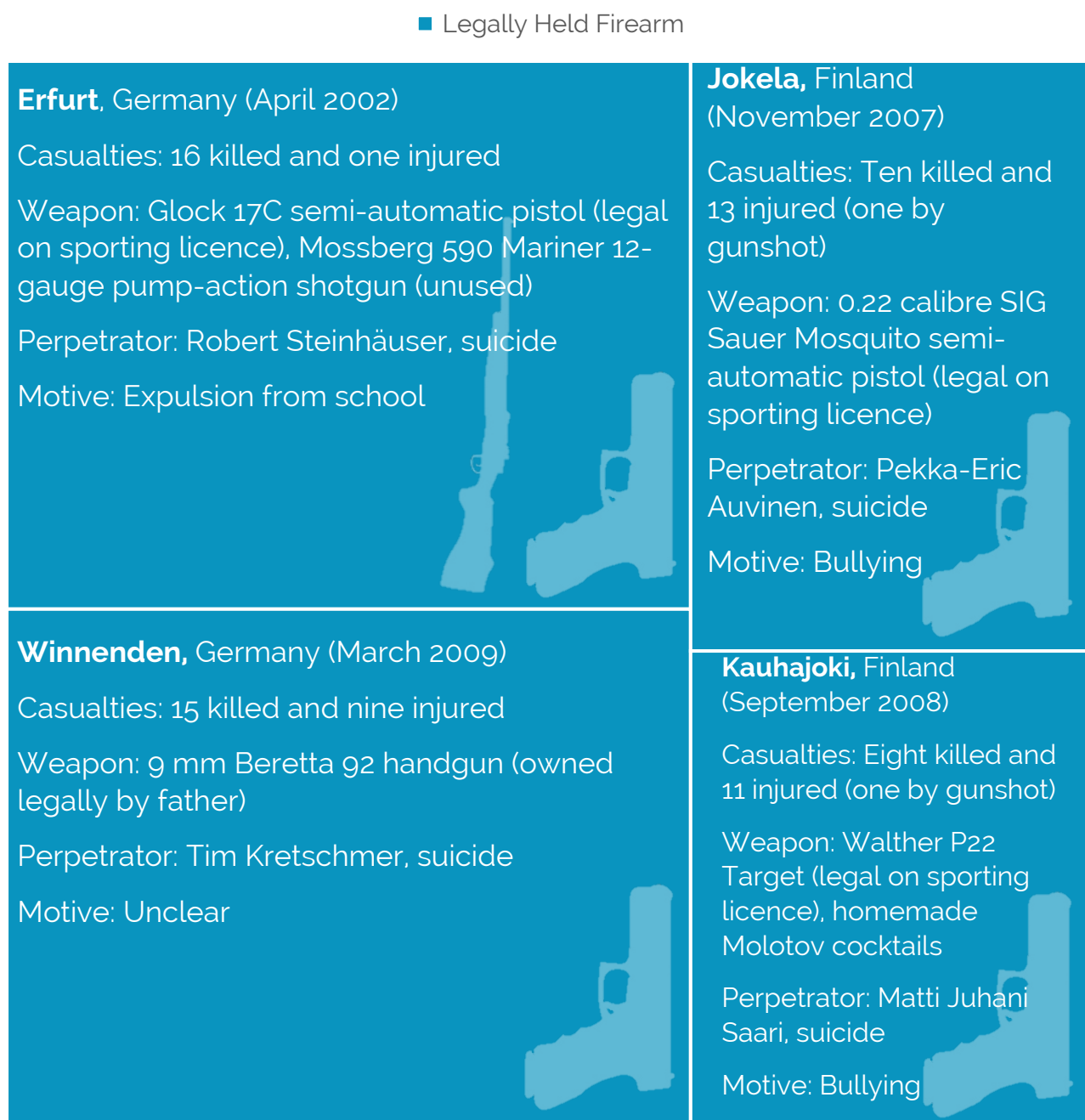
The dearth of school shootings in the EU would appear to indicate that distraught and emotionally troubled youngsters do not have access to firearms. There have been cases of school attacks that involve other weapons, such as swords (eg Trollhättan school attack in Sweden;<sup>295</sup> Kuopio college attack in Finland<sup>296</sup>) or knives (eg Stockholm school attack in Sweden<sup>297</sup>). In some cases, the perpetrator was actively attempting to acquire a firearm. Since these youngsters tend not to have criminal connections, they were not able to access the illegal market for a firearm and their attacks were not as lethal as they could have been (if they had had a firearm).

All the instances of public mass shootings in Europe since 2000 have taken place in Finland and Germany. In all of these cases, either the perpetrator possessed the firearm legally (Jokela 2007; Kauhajoki 2008; Erfurt 2002) or a family member did (Winnenden 2009), and all involved handguns that were held under a sporting licence. Practice as a marksman results in a high death toll (12 lethal victims on average). These events are particularly prone to sparking public debate and outcry, which causes them often to lead to legislative measures that have resulted in almost no school mass shootings in Europe. In two cases, the motive was identified as bullying (Jokela 2007; Kauhajoki 2008); in one case, the student wanted to avenge his expulsion (Erfurt 2002); in the last case, a motive could not be identified (Winnenden 2009).

With a few exceptions, school shootings have not occurred in the EU since 2010. Mass school shootings do continue to occur in Russia and Russia's extended territories: a shooting at the Kerch Polytechnic College in Crimea on 17 October 2018 resulted in 20 casualties (pump-action shotgun and several homemade bombs); a shooting at Kazan High School on 11 May 2021 killed nine and injured 21 at the perpetrator's former high school (Hatsan Escort PS Guard semi-automatic shotgun and a homemade bomb).

**Figure 3.17** shows the four public mass school shootings.

Figure 3.17: School mass shootings (by gun type) <sup>298</sup>



\*Size of squares represents number of fatal casualties

### 3.4.5 Firearms and vigilantes

Vigilante groups are civilian volunteers who aim to suppress and penalise criminal behaviour. A 2020 media report showed that vigilante groups have been on the rise throughout Europe.<sup>299</sup> Vigilantes can behave innocuously by reporting misdemeanours or criminal offences to the police; however, they can also take law enforcement into their own hands and even become violent. Violence-oriented vigilante groups have become more common in Europe since 2015 as a response to several Jihadi terror attacks and waves of migration. These vigilante groups tend to subscribe to a (radical) rightwing ideology and claim to be responding to misdemeanours or criminal offences committed by immigrants. Although not a vigilante group, the German grassroots movement *Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA), formed in Dresden in 2014, is often cited as an inspiration to these groups. As the studies discussed below indicate, these groups have been known to acquire firearms, usually legally, but use them in ways beyond their legal purpose (such as threatening people).

A recent study of vigilante groups in Europe by Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mares shows that there is a wide variety of vigilante groups that target immigrants and minorities in Europe; they range from vigilante terrorists and paramilitary militia movements to border and street patrols. They emerge and flourish because of a perceived threat to society (in particular to women) that is associated with certain groups, propelled by high-impact events – such as the Cologne 2015/2016 attacks<sup>1</sup> – and fostered by the belief that local law enforcement and politicians are unable or unwilling to intervene. They thrive particularly in a context where permissive legislation regarding weapons prevails, a tradition of paramilitary organisations exists and police turn a blind eye to vigilante organisations.<sup>300</sup> The most widespread vigilante group, known as the ‘Soldiers of Odin’ was formed in Finland in 2015. It was formed as a response to media reports of violent rapes by immigrants and has since spread across Europe with particularly sizeable factions in Norway and Sweden.<sup>301</sup>

Some reports indicate that vigilante groups have been known to acquire firearms and supposedly do so mostly legally by acquiring sport-shooting or self-defence licences. A media report on the German vigilante group ‘sovereign citizen Reichsbürger’ found that at least 1,000 of their 15,000 members were in possession of a full gun licence, allowing them access live-firing firearms. Many other members are believed to have *Kleiner Waffenschein*, allowing them to purchase blank-firing firearms.<sup>302</sup> The same has been observed among members of the Slovak train patrols.<sup>303</sup> In addition, certain studies of German vigilante groups point to a prevalence of members employed by private security corporations which can easily obtain gun permits and offer training in the use of firearms.<sup>304</sup>

The success of vigilante groups depends heavily on (national) context. The study above notes that much of vigilante behaviour is more ‘performance’ rather than ‘policing’.<sup>305</sup> Recent calls

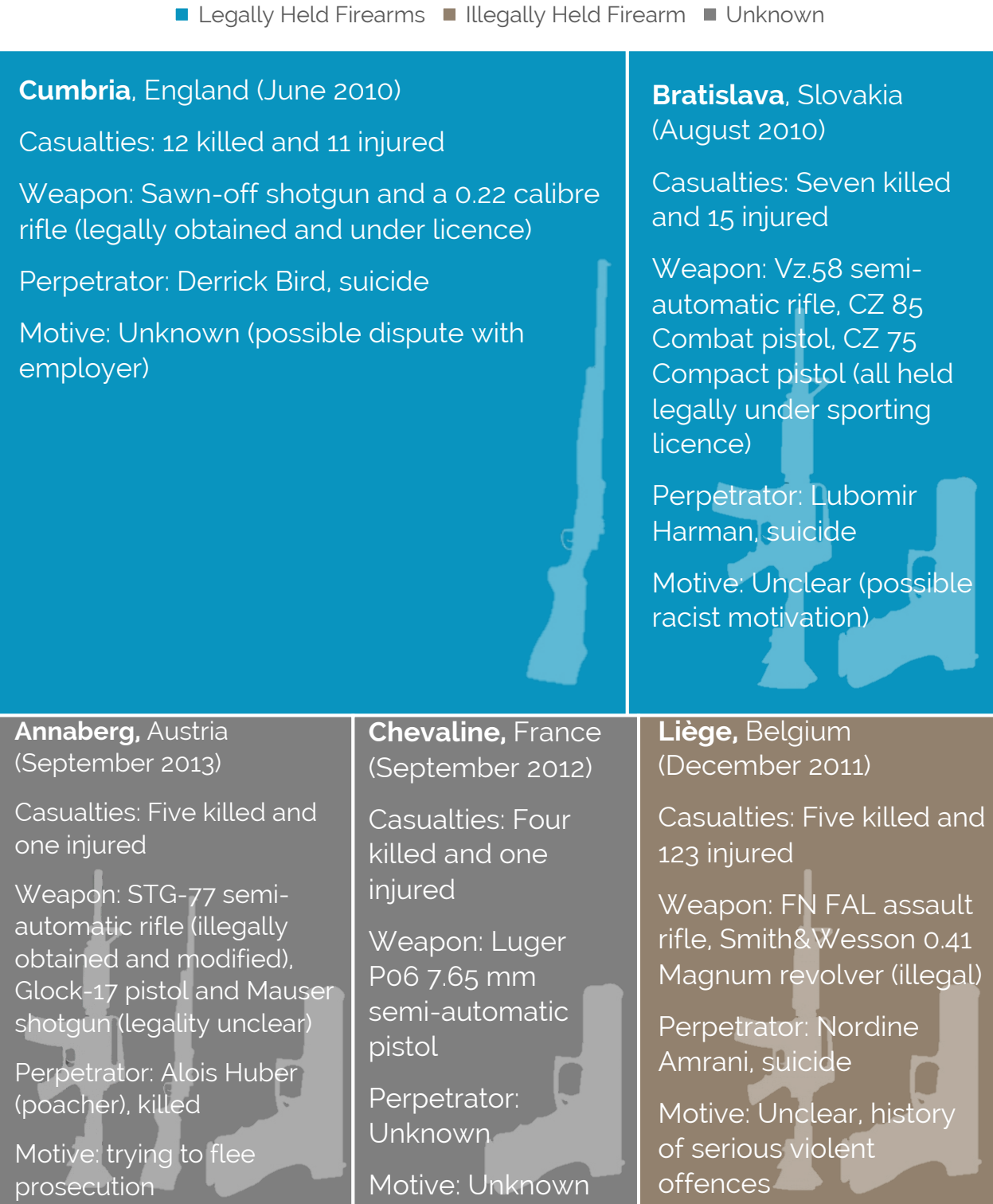
<sup>1</sup> The German group Freital (also known as Freital vigilante or FTL/360) – now outlawed as a terrorist organisation because of several attacks on immigrants – was formed originally by a bus driver in response to a Moroccan immigrant allegedly harassing young girls on the bus (Daniel Koehler. (2019) ‘Anti-immigration militias and vigilante groups in Germany: An overview’, in T Bjørgo & M Mares (eds) *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*, Abingdon: Routledge, 95).

by leaders of far-right political parties to relax self-defence guns laws could increase their activity and their access to firearms. A former UKIP leader, for example, called for the relaxation of the United Kingdom's 'ludicrous' gun laws.<sup>306</sup> A former leader of *Alternativ für Deutschland* argued equally in favour of the right of individuals to self-arm.<sup>307</sup> In Italy, the gun laws have recently been relaxed by Lega Nord.<sup>308</sup> In Spain, the far right VOX-party called for the Spanish gun laws to be relaxed.<sup>309</sup> If successful, such legal reforms could increase not only access to firearms for these vigilante groups, but also accord justification to their activities. No reports have yet been forthcoming about vigilante groups acquiring firearms illegally, although legally owned firearms under sporting or hunting licences are reported to be used in ways counter to their legal purpose (such as for intimidation or self-defence).<sup>310</sup>

### 3.4.6 Other public mass shootings

A number of public mass shootings were identified by Project TARGET where the context was either unknown or unique. These did not occur in the school or the family context, nor could any clear terrorist or criminal motive be identified. And to the extent that it can be determined, the perpetrators did not suffer from serious mental illness, nor were they under the influence of any substance. The cases in question are so heterogeneous that no common feature can be identified.

Figure 3.18: Overview of public mass shootings in other/unknown contexts<sup>311</sup>



\*Size of squares represents number of fatal casualties

## 3.5 Conclusions

The general conclusions of this chapter can be summarised as follows:

- Firearm violence in Europe occurs predominantly in the criminal or the domestic context, where there are certain dynamics and lawful features about firearm violence in these contexts.
- Criminal firearm violence involves predominantly handguns that are used to threaten so as to support certain criminal activities. This is most evident in the context of armed robberies, whereas in the drug milieu we note relatively higher levels of automatic firearms and more cases of injury and lethality.
- Criminal disorganisation can be a factor that exacerbates firearm violence, as is evidenced in the case of Sweden and the Netherlands. Highly organized crime groups exert more control over firearm possession and use and so they become more capable of avoiding escalations of firearm violence.
- Domestic firearm violence is carried out using firearms that are available in a national context, whether legally or illegally. Illegally held firearms used in domestic violence mostly involve non-regulated firearms (that is, firearms that were once acquired legally but were not brought in accordance with new rules and regulations) and not firearms that are known to be trafficked internationally. Accordingly, there is a higher level of long guns in the domestic sphere than in the criminal sphere.
- Homicide-suicides typically occur in the broader domestic sphere. They are also typically perpetrated using a firearm. These are often preceded by long-term signs of domestic abuse.
- Terrorist firearm violence is much less common in Europe than criminal and domestic firearm violence. Jihadi terrorists tend to rely on members with criminal networks to acquire (automatic) firearms; rightwing terrorists also use the criminal market to acquire firearms but tend to rely on legally held firearms or use the internet (and recently, 3D-printing) more often than Jihadi terrorists; leftwing terrorists tend to use explosive devices rather than firearms.
- A connection between alcohol, the nightlife, music and firearm violence has been observed. Alcohol can be a risk factor for violence, and the availability of a firearm – in particular in the domestic sphere – can make this violence more lethal.
- School shootings are quite rare in Europe, which indicates, among others, that troubled youngsters tend not to enjoy easy access to firearms. Online firearms trafficking and emerging technologies such as 3D-printing could increase access to firearms among youngsters who do not have criminal connections.
- Violence-oriented vigilantes, usually of a rightwing persuasion, are on the rise in some European countries. They are believed to often acquire firearms legally.

# 4

## Firearms trafficking in Europe

The Small Arms Survey estimates the total number of firearms, held legally and illegally, in civilian hands globally to be about 857 million in 2017, of which 81 million were believed to be in the European Union (EU).<sup>i</sup> At that time, this estimate translated into an average rate of 15.7 firearms per 100 of the population in the EU, which, compared to other continents, is low.<sup>ii</sup> For instance, there are an estimated 393 million firearms, or 120.5 per 100 of the population, in the United States.<sup>312</sup> Not only do the firearms possession rates differ significantly between the EU and the United States, but the rates of firearm violence also differ widely. As discussed in the previous chapter, and depending on the source, the United States has today a rate of between three and four firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population and firearm homicides constitute about two thirds of homicides in the United States.<sup>313</sup> European countries, in contrast, today rarely have firearm homicide rates in excess of 0.4 per 100,000 of the population and firearm usage in homicides averages at around 20%. Since the United States has more firearms and more firearm violence than Europe, one would be tempted to claim that increased firearm holdings translate into increased firearm violence.

The link between firearm availability and firearm violence is multifaceted and a subject prone to controversy. A recent review of the existing literature by Katharina Krüsselmann, Pauline Aarten and Marieke Liem has found that comparable data on the relationship between firearm availability and lethal gun violence are for the most part lacking in Europe. The studies available do suggest that lower levels of firearm availability translate into lower levels of lethal firearm violence, although some studies limit the latter to specific subsets of the population (female victimisation, police officers committing (homicide-)suicide, etc).<sup>314</sup> Maarten van Alstein and Nils Duquet found that the correlation between firearm holdings and firearm homicides is strongest when predicting domestic firearm homicides.<sup>315</sup> John van Kesteren found that owners of a handgun have an increased risk of being victimised by violent crime.<sup>316</sup> The 2019 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) study on

<sup>i</sup> Since Brexit, this number will probably have decreased by around three million.

<sup>ii</sup> With the exception of Thailand (15.6 firearms per 100 of the population), South-East Asia has the lowest rate of firearm holdings in the world, ranging as it does between 0.3 and 0.5 firearms per 100 of the population.

homicide found that increased firearm holdings have an incremental effect on firearm homicides and a decremental impact on the rate of homicides not committed by a firearm.<sup>317</sup> The 2020 UNODC report on firearms argues, further, that

*statistical models suggest that a 1 per cent increase in the rate of firearm civil possession can bring a 1.13 per cent increase in the homicide rate in the case of a developing country and 0.74 per cent increase in the case of a developed country.*<sup>318</sup>

Other studies point more to the impact of a ‘gun culture’, where guns are more freely accessible, as a factor that exacerbates gun violence. Especially when such a culture is compounded by social division, regional or ethnic tensions and a compromised political system, this appears to be the case.<sup>319</sup>

Estimating the (legal and illegal) availability of firearms in a country depends on a myriad factors: firearm holdings, firearm legislation, gun culture, type of illegal availability, etc. While it would be worthwhile to assess firearm availability nationally for all EU Member States, we focus the present chapter on one specific element that impacts firearm availability: firearms trafficking. Trafficking will be shown to generate an opportunity for misusing firearms. We do so first by engaging with various assessments of the scope of firearms trafficking in the EU; following this we describe the different forms under which firearms can be trafficked. From previous studies (discussed below), we note that illicit firearms trafficking is a multidimensional practice that encompasses many forms of *modi operandi*. We have decided to focus on two important forms in this rapport (smuggling and conversion) and explore some new challenges (3D-printing and the darkweb).

Finally, we assess the forms and levels of trafficking in various European regions.

## 4.1 Defining trafficking

Trafficking can most broadly be defined as the illegal movement of firearms. The firearms directive offers the following, more narrow, definition of ‘illicit trafficking’ (Directive 2021/555/EEC) in chapter 1, article 1.1 (12):

*‘Illicit trafficking’ means the acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their essential components or ammunition from or through the territory of one Member State to that of another Member State, if any of the Member States concerned does not authorise it in accordance with this Directive, or if the firearms, essential components or ammunition are not marked in accordance with Article 4.*

More or less the same definition is used in the UN Firearms Protocol (Resolution 55/255 of 31 May 2001, ‘General Provisions’, article 3(e)). We use a slightly broader definition of

trafficking, namely, as any way of moving firearms in a way that is non-complicit with legal standards for trading firearms. While that firearm might have been held legally at first, after trafficking, the firearm is always held illegally. And while the firearms directive and the Protocol both imply that trafficking means traversing borders, we also take into consideration the illegal movement of firearms within a country.

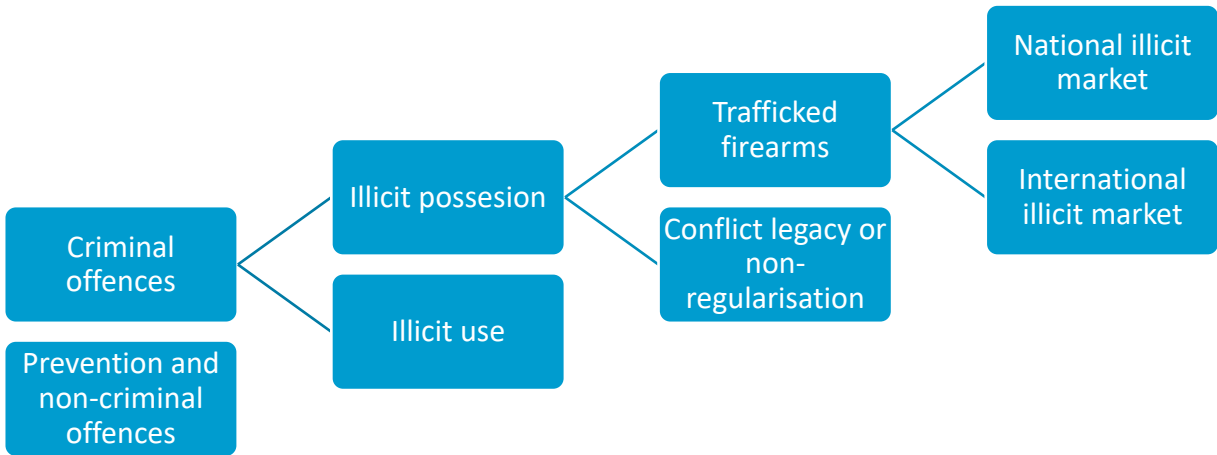
Project DIVERT of the Flemish Peace Institute found that the overwhelming majority of firearms in Europe are manufactured legally. They come to be held illegally in various ways, such as theft, fraud, embezzlement, non-regularisation or as a legacy of an armed conflict.<sup>320</sup> These firearms are then illicitly in the possession of a certain person and when this person subsequently trades those firearms, they are involved in firearms trafficking. Firearms trafficking has been and remains one of Europol's areas of focus.<sup>321</sup> The UNODC focused its 2020 study specifically on firearms trafficking,<sup>322</sup> building on its 2015 study on firearms,<sup>323</sup> including a regional analysis of firearms trafficking in Europe.<sup>324</sup> Trafficking has also previously been the topic of two major European studies: by the European Commission's Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES), entitled *Study to Support an Impact Assessment on Options for Combatting Illicit Firearms Trafficking in the European Union (2014)*<sup>325</sup> and Project FIRE of Transcrime – Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Italy. More recently, the same research institute assessed the tools in play for identifying and combatting firearm trafficking, as well as suggested potential areas of improvement in its Project ECOFIT.<sup>326</sup> Trafficking was also found to be one component of the way in which terrorists acquire firearms, and so it was investigated by Project SAFTE of the Flemish Peace Institute.<sup>327</sup>

In order to assess the scope and characteristics of firearms trafficking, these projects have used firearm seizures as a proxy for understanding trafficking itself. This is an imperfect tool for at least four reasons.<sup>328</sup>

- ⇒ *Not every illegally held firearm is trafficked.* Project DIVERT found that the two main sources of illegal firearms in Europe are non-regularisation and conflict legacies. These firearms are held illegally but were not necessarily acquired illegally.
- ⇒ *Not every firearm that is seized is held illegally.* Legally held firearms can also be seized, for instance when the owner misuses the firearm or when the owner temporarily loses their licence to own or handle a firearm. This latter element can seriously skew any assessment of trafficking. In Spain, for instance, there are high levels of firearm seizures, which is due to policies to seize firearms (temporarily) even in cases of non-firearm or even non-violent (allegations of) crime. According to the most recent UN Programme of Action of Spain, only 10% of firearms seized in the country are seized because of illegal possession or trafficking.<sup>329</sup>
- ⇒ *Seizure levels are, to some extent, connected to socio-political and policing choices.* Many different political and policing decisions can affect whether the illegal possession of and trafficking in firearms is viewed as high priority or not. Intensive efforts and resources usually result in higher rates of seizures.
- ⇒ *Seizures are regularly misidentified.* Firearms trafficking can be (mis-)identified as illegal possession by law-enforcement officers because proving illegal possession is usually significantly easier than proving illegal trade. As a result, the UNODC believes that many cases of firearms trafficking are often registered as cases of illegal

possession; firearms trafficking is recorded at a later stage of a criminal process, where illegal possession is often the initial ground for seizure.<sup>330</sup> That study found that the legal justification for seizing firearms globally is mainly illicit possession (64%), followed by trafficking (9%) and illicit use (8%) where, in Europe, the proportion of illicit possession is larger (76%), and trafficking and illicit use are roughly similar (each 8%).<sup>331</sup>

Figure 4.1: Rationale for seizures



## 4.2 Scope of firearms trafficking in Europe

The global analysis of the UNODC found the illegal flow of firearms within Europe and into Europe to be relatively small compared to the flow into and within the Americas, Africa and Asia.<sup>332</sup> The regional analysis of Europe confirmed that European firearms tend to leave Europe legally (they can, however, be diverted on destination) and that illegally held firearms in the EU tend to be European-made.<sup>333</sup> Estimating the exact scope of trafficking within and into Europe is very difficult, though. Previous assessments widely disagree. Because seizures are a problematic proxy for assessing trafficking and because of a large number of ‘dark’ trafficking cases, we will not here offer another estimate of the reach of trafficking.

A first estimate of the scope of firearms trafficking in Europe was provided by the report by the CSES mentioned above. It estimated a range of between 81,000 [sic]<sup>I</sup> and 61 million

<sup>I</sup> The bottom line of 81,000 firearms was calculated on the basis of the finding that 1% of the total number of registered and unregistered firearms in seven countries (Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal and the United Kingdom) were seized during a five-year period. The CSES recognises that this approach is problematic, but it extrapolates to 1% of all firearms held – legally and illegally – in Europe. However, 1% of 81 million is 810,000, not 81,000 (CSES. (2014) *Study to Support an Impact Assessment on Options for Combatting Illicit Firearms Trafficking in the European Union*, Brussels: CSES, 20).

firearms trafficked illegally in Europe every five years. This range was calculated on the basis of 1% of the total number of firearms and the total number of illegally held firearms. This range is too wide to be helpful. When assessing the impact of trafficking, the CSES argues that trafficked firearms have been directly responsible for about 1,000 firearm-related violent deaths in EU Member States annually over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> This estimate is not explained further but, given that – at the time – roughly 1,000 firearm homicides occur a year in the EU, this would imply that no or very few firearm homicides are committed with firearms that are not trafficked. This seems to be an overestimation.

A second estimate of the scope and type of firearms trafficking in Europe was offered by Project FIRE. Their study was largely based on a Europe-wide media analysis and concluded that a total of 18,721 firearms were seized during 2010–2015 in 3,875 cases across all EU Member States. These were mainly pistols (34%) and rifles (27%); rifles were more frequently seized in Eastern and Western Europe, pistols were seized more regularly in the north and south of Europe. More than 40% of firearms were seized in Austria (owing to one unusually large cache of 3,261 airsoft guns); however, the Netherlands and Germany generally experience the most cases of firearms trafficking. With regard to the impact of illicit firearms trafficking, they point out merely that illicit firearms are fired and injuries are suffered by young males.<sup>334</sup>

As we discuss in the next section, Project FIRE's assessment appears to be an under-estimation of the scope of firearms trafficking. This can be gathered from looking at the official rates of seizures published in the UNODC 2020 regional analysis. This report estimates that about 50,000 firearm seizures occurred in 2016 and 40,000 in 2017. This was based on comparing firearm seizures in eight countries (Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom) and then extrapolating these data to the whole of the EU. These numbers were based on official seizure data reported by EU Member States, and should therefore be considered more reliable.<sup>335</sup> As a rule, ACM Spapens argued that 10% of firearm seizures ought to be considered to have originated from firearms trafficking.<sup>336</sup>

## 4.3 Different types of firearms trafficking

The availability of different types of firearm on the illicit gun market of a country is closely connected to the various forms of illicit firearms trafficking in that country. There are many forms of trafficking and we focus here on two major modes of firearms trafficking in Europe: smuggling of conflict legacy weapons and various forms of firearm conversion. At the end of this section we will discuss two new challenges with regard to firearms trafficking in Europe: 3D printing and the darkweb.

<sup>1</sup> The CSES writes: 'Turning to the consequences of the problem, illicit firearms trafficking has been directly responsible for at least 10,000 firearms-related deaths in EU Member States over the past decade' (CSES, (2014) *Study to Support an Impact Assessment on Options for Combatting Illicit Firearms Trafficking in the European Union*, Brussels: CSES, 50).

### 4.3.1 Smuggling of conflict legacy firearms

Most military-grade firearms that are currently trafficked in Europe came into civilian possession during or after an armed conflict. While efforts are made after such conflict to recover these firearms, these efforts tend to have varying levels of success. Factors contributing to their success are political stability and a general feeling of security. These firearms can afterwards be moved, traded or stolen and in these ways they can end up in the hands of criminals. The most important source regions for conflict legacy firearms are the Western Balkans, firearms abandoned at the end of the Cold War, firearms from the battlefields of both the First and the Second World Wars, but also those left from several other, smaller conflicts.

The main source of trafficking in conflict legacy weapons is the Western Balkans. The Balkans maintained huge stockpiles of firearms during the Cold War. When conflicts emerged in the early 1990s, additional firearms flowed into the area despite an arms embargo.<sup>337</sup> One of the biggest consignments of arms was shipped to Bosnia and Herzegovina from Iran (via Croatia) as part of a secret programme to support the Bosnian and Herzegovinan army in 1994–1995. An estimated 5,000 tons of arms and ammunition were brought into the area from Iran.<sup>338</sup> Large parts of these were diverted into the population. Though never a part of Yugoslavia, high levels of firearm diversion occurred also in Albania. Under Enver Hoxha, it retained its independence from Tito's Yugoslavia and remained faithful to Stalin's idea of communism. It became an important source region for firearms trafficking within the region and beyond as a result of serious political instability in the country after the fall of the government in 1997. A large-scale failed pyramid scheme brought chaos to the country. Between January and April of that year, the Albanian government failed to maintain order and several firearm depots were looted (particularly in the southern half of the country). The Italian-led 'Operation Alba' restored order to Albania on 15 April. The Albanian Ministry of Defence estimates that 652,000 weapons, 1.5 billion rounds of ammunition, 3.5 million grenades, 3,600 tons of explosive devices and 1 million mines were taken at the time. Amnesty periods over the following years are believed to have recovered only about one third of these weapons.<sup>339</sup>

The armed conflicts and political instability in the Western Balkans in the 1990s have resulted in the diversion of large numbers of firearms, including military-grade firearms, into the hands of civilians.<sup>340</sup> Given the lack of political stability in the following years, civilians were prone to hold on to these guns. When the situation improved, many of these firearms were recovered by amnesty programmes, but a sizeable number were kept illegally or ended up on the illegal market. Jana Arsovska and Yuliya Zabyelina noted that the desire to retain a conflict legacy firearm, and the demand for firearms on the illegal market generally, does not always involve rational decision-making, but also includes a patriotic attachment to firearms, a conflict mentality and a gun culture that connects gun possession to (male) pride.<sup>341</sup> The economic crisis in the late 2000s is believed to have overridden some of these attachments and the result was that many citizens sold their firearms on the illegal market. These factors have caused a steady flow of military-grade weapons to be smuggled

across Europe. It is known that, for example, multiple firearms used by terrorists were sourced from the Western Balkans.<sup>342</sup>

These conflict legacy firearms were encountered and recovered in a variety of EU Member States, not only those involved in the conflict (such as Croatia) and those bordering the region (such as Austria and Slovenia), but also those countries with diaspora communities from the former Yugoslavia (such as Sweden and Italy) and even those with little to no direct connection to the region (such as the Netherlands and France). Project TARGET found that firearm-smuggling from the Western Balkans usually involves crime groups – often of mixed nationalities – who smuggle small quantities of firearms (‘ant trade’) together with other commodities (such as drugs). These firearms serve mainly to supply the crime groups at the point of destination with firearms which are more easily acquired in the Western Balkans.

As a result of the large number of illicitly held conflict legacy weapons in the region, the Western Balkans has become a key source of illicit firearms for trafficking into the EU. Yet, not all conflict legacy weapons in Europe have necessarily been trafficked from outside of the EU. An important, though less expansive source of conflict legacy firearms stems from both the First and the Second World Wars, with most of these originating in Germany. After the Second World War, West Germany is believed to have been unsuccessful in disarming the population and it is estimated that millions of firearms therefore ended up in civilian hands.<sup>343</sup> Collection measures in the years that followed are generally considered to have been successful, however, especially in the case of small arms and light weapons (SALW) whose only purpose is war and those that were stamped with the swastika. In East Germany, the sudden retreat of Soviet personnel resulted in illegal firearm sales or exchanges to civilians (in exchange for goods and services). In some cases, quite often in the Baltic states, citizens still find firearms from the First and the Second World Wars through a process called ‘black digging’. Organised groups have been arrested in Latvia who purposely search for legacy firearms in order to sell these on the black market.<sup>344</sup>

A number of more localised and varied armed conflicts have resulted in more modest stockpiles of conflict legacy firearms. These include the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ (1960–1998), the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Cyprus dispute (1974 onwards) and the Basque Conflict (1959–2011). The Northern Irish paramilitary group, the IRA, was armed mainly from abroad. These terrorists were armed from Libya as their cause was supported by Muammar Gaddafi. It is known that the Italian mafia, particularly the ‘Ndrangheta, acted as a liaison between Libya and Ireland in order to smuggle firearms into the country.<sup>345</sup> There are also indications that the (R)IRA purchased firearms from the Balkans, most prominently from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they exploited the corruption in the cabinet of Radovan Karadžić.<sup>346</sup> Similar government corruption and subsequent illegal transfers of weapons were detected in the Croatian army.<sup>347</sup>

Conflict legacy weapons in Spain derive from two sources: the Spanish Civil War and the Basque Conflict. Firearms from the Spanish Civil War are still being seized today and make up, according to one government official, about 15% of firearm seizures.<sup>348</sup> The Spanish Civil War was a conflict between leftist republicans (including communists and anarchists) and

rightwing nationalists led by General Franco. The nationalists, supported by the army, voiced a declaration of opposition (*pronunciamiento*) to the republican government. While the majority of the country was republican, the nationalists managed to claim control of Spain by 1939. Because of a fear of Bolshevism, the European powers either remained neutral or supported the nationalists. There was an official arms embargo, but this was ignored by Germany, Portugal and Italy (arming the nationalists) and the Soviet Union (arming the republicans). Under these circumstances, a great variety of firearms and volunteer soldiers poured into the country over a short span of time. It is estimated that in terms of SALW, Italy armed the nationalists 10,000 machine guns and 240,000 rifles.<sup>349</sup> The republicans received aid mainly from Russia. At the high point of the war, one ship arrived in Spain on a daily basis carrying with it different sorts of SALW.<sup>350</sup>

From 1959 onwards, the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) emerged in the Basque Country and was vying for independence from Spain. The ETA was armed by firearms remaining from the Spanish Civil War, but it was also engaged in firearms trafficking from other countries (such as France and Belgium). However, given that the conflict legacy firearms in Spain are generally from an older conflict, they are seized almost uniquely in Spain and are not trafficked to any great extent throughout Europe.<sup>351</sup>

The Cyprus dispute is a conflict between ethnic Greeks and ethnic Turks on Cyprus. Its current phase started in 1974, when Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus. The Turks reacted to a short coup d'état by Greek nationalists supported by the army, who deposed President Makarios III in the hope of annexing Cyprus to Greece. These short and intense moments of conflict are believed to have brought firearms into civilian hands in the region. The Small Arms Survey estimates high numbers of legal and illegal firearms in Cyprus.<sup>352</sup>

At present, there are already signs of conflict legacy firearms being trafficked from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (2014 to the present); and a report by the UNODC warned of an influx of firearms into Europe from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>353</sup> The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war started in 2014 when an insurrection removed the pro-Russian (and anti-European) President Viktor Yanukovich. Russia responded by sending anonymous, armed troops into Crimea, which was annexed to Russia after a widely criticised referendum. Although the fighting was itself relatively brief and well organised by the Russian army, some firearms did wind up in civilian hands. There is increased traffic at the Polish border, evidenced by significant increases in firearm seizures (109 firearms seized in 2015, increasing to 190 in 2016 and 607 in 2017). These seizures include a wide variety of firearms.<sup>354</sup> Romanian officials express concerns that firearms might be trafficked towards or through Romania from Ukraine. Project SAFTE found that weapon seizures in Romania increased from 2,569 in 2012 to 9,721 in 2016. These numbers were already rising significantly before the annexation of Crimea; a majority of these seizures involve non-lethal gas pistols. It is therefore difficult to estimate the scope of illicit trafficking of Ukrainian legacy firearms into Romania.<sup>355</sup>

### 4.3.2 Firearm conversion

Firearm conversion involves technical interventions that alter a firearm in such a way that it becomes subject to a licence or authorisation. This has generally involved any of the following:

- the reactivation of deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons (AEW);
- the (re)conversion of blank-firing firearms into live-firing firearms;
- the modification of semi-automatic into fully automatic firearms;
- the (re)conversion of smaller-calibre Flobert guns.

The most important study on firearm conversion was published by the Small Arms Survey and authored by Nicolas Florquin and Benjamin King (2018). They found that the two main types of convertible firearm in the EU include Slovak-origin AEW (which tend to be deactivated firearms) and Turkish-manufactured alarm handguns. The source of the problem of deactivated firearms that could easily be reactivated is believed to have been solved with the 2017 adaptation of the EU Firearms Directive (Directive 91/477/EEC), even though many of these firearms are still at large. Firearm conversion, they continue, is not only performed by OCGs, but also by self-trained individuals. Converted gas and alarm pistols are found primarily in the possession of lower-level criminals. The authors warn particularly about different national attitudes towards Flobert guns that might create streams of firearms trafficking.<sup>356</sup> The main countries known for converting firearms are Belgium, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.<sup>357</sup> In the following sections we will describe the main types of firearms conversion in Europe.

#### Reactivation of firearms and acoustic expansion weapons

Firearms that were produced as live-firing can be converted in such a way that they are no longer able to expel a projectile by means of a combustible propellant. The predominant ways of doing so are the deactivation of firearms or the conversion of live-firing firearms into a blank-firing weapon or an AEW. Annex 1.III of the original 1991 EU Firearms Directive noted that these firearms do not fall within the definition of a firearm and so they were not subject to the rules of the directive. In some European countries the procedure for deactivating such firearms, including automatic rifles, were insufficiently invasive or thorough and so these firearms could be reactivated quite easily. This has been an important way in which firearms have illicitly been trafficked throughout Europe since the 1990s.

The problem of firearm reactivation was not immediately widely recognised. An event in 2011 offers an interesting illustration, when a large stockpile of SALW (85 in total) including handguns, machine guns, high-precision sniper rifles and hand grenades was seized at Budapest airport. The firearms had been deactivated or converted to blank-firing firearms. They had been brought in from the United States via London and were supposed to be used in a Hollywood movie production (*World War Z*). The Hungarian Customs agents had seized

the firearms at the airport and would not release them to the movie crew. The international media mockingly described the Hungarian Customs officers' seizure of movie props.<sup>358</sup> But the Hungarian Customs agency had good reason to be wary since the circulation of converted or deactivated firearms in Europe has long been a cause for concern.

As mentioned above, the EU Firearms Directive had determined that any firearm rendered permanently incapable of being used or firearms designed for alarm or signalling purposes did not fall within the scope of the firearm directive, and so they were not required to be licensed or authorised (for possession or trade). Given the constraints put on trading firearms, numerous actors subsequently deactivated firearms so that they could be traded. As far back as the early 2000s, it was apparent that a significant number of these firearms could be reactivated. In order to deal with this issue, the firearm directive was amended in 2008. Two major changes included:

- (1) the definition of a firearm now includes those portable barrelled weapons that could *or could be converted to* expel a projectile by a combustible propellant;
- (2) it mandated that common guidelines on the deactivation of firearms be put forward by the European Commission (Directive 2008/51/EC).

Common deactivation guidelines were not forthcoming until 2015, though. Some European countries or non-state actors had deactivation procedures that were insufficiently invasive or permanent. Firearms that were improperly deactivated have been known to be reactivated and used in shootings throughout Europe. The perpetrator of the Hypercacher kosher supermarket siege (two days after the attack on Charlie Hebdo) was armed with Vz.58 assault rifles and Tokarev pistols that were sold by the Slovakian retailer AFG as deactivated firearms (for about €300 each).<sup>359</sup> Hans Scholzen, specialist in German firearm law, noted that these Slovakian-deactivated guns require 'neither specialist tools nor specialist knowledge' and that all you need is 'a big hammer, and you hit it and the pins fly out'.<sup>360</sup> Czechia joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1999 and found that its firearms were incompatible with NATO firearms. These firearms were often deactivated and modified into acoustic expansion rifles and then sold legally in Slovakia, where they were distributed across Europe as firearms not subject to firearm law. The Small Arms Survey reports that one Slovakian company alone is believed to have sold more than 14,000 units of converted acoustic firearms between 2013 and 2018.<sup>361</sup>

The common guidelines for deactivation were put in place shortly after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. Europol still considers firearm reactivation a major driving force behind illicit firearms trafficking.<sup>362</sup> Improperly deactivated firearms are believed to be widely available in countries such as France, Czechia and Spain, where they are purchased at low cost. There have been indications that these firearms are brought into or originate in Spain, where they are reactivated in clandestine workshops. The joint 'Operation Portu' (2017) by Europol and the Spanish National Police seized more than 10,000 firearms in Madrid, Bilbao, Valencia and Gerona believing that these deactivated firearms would be reactivated on request.<sup>363</sup>

The 2008 amendment to the firearms directive stipulated that converted firearms remain in their pre-conversion category. This means that one requires the same nationally required licence for a handgun converted into an AEW as a live-firing handgun. The 2008 amendment to the firearms directive allows for exceptions in the case of converted firearms in the possession of collectors, museums and sport shooters.

### Conversion from blank-firing to live-firing firearms

It is possible to convert a weapon originally manufactured as a blank-firing firearm into a live-firing firearm. What distinguishes this from reactivation is that here the firearm was not originally designed as a live-firing firearm, but that an original blank-firing weapon is being converted into a live-firing firearm. It is believed that these converted firearms are in general less powerful and less durable than reactivated firearms.<sup>364</sup> According to the 2020 UNODC study, firearm prices on the illicit market are usually higher for reactivated firearms than converted blank-firing firearms. In Spain, for instance, a converted pistol was six times cheaper than a reactivated pistol. This could suggest either or both a higher demand for reactivated firearms or a higher supply of converted blank-firing firearms.<sup>365</sup>

Most blank-firing firearms cannot (easily) be converted into live-firing firearms. This would involve so much work and expertise that it comes close to producing a firearm. Some types of gas gun (particularly pistols) can more easily be converted into live-firing firearms. Converting these gas pistols, according to Florquin and King, can be carried out by means of three techniques:

- (1) inserting a metal sleeve into the barrel of the alarm pistol to strengthen it (and so also reducing the calibre);
- (2) replacing the original barrel with a stronger barrel of the same calibre;
- (3) removing the obstructions and adding projectiles to the blank ammunition.<sup>366</sup>

The Firearms Directive was amended in 2017 to attend to this problem, but some Member States lag, or have lagged, behind in implementing these rules.<sup>367</sup> In its 2020 action plan on firearms trafficking Europe noted that converted firearms are the fastest growing firearm-related threat in Europe.<sup>368</sup> The 2020 UNODC study on firearms trafficking confirms that seizures of (converted) gas pistols and other blank-firing firearms are significantly on the rise.<sup>369</sup>

The first signs of alarm with regard to converted blank-firing weapons were received in the late 1990s.<sup>370</sup> The Italian manufacturer Tanfoglio produced a blank-firing variant of the semi-automatic Tanfoglio GT27 pistol, known as the Tanfoglio GT28. This blank-firing pistol had an 8 mm barrel and could be converted into a live-firing firearm with minimal effort and at relatively low cost.<sup>371</sup> Many of these gas pistols were shipped legally to Portugal, where they were converted into live-firing firearms<sup>372</sup> (Portugal has since restricted access to blank-firing firearms).<sup>373</sup> In Spain, converted gas pistols are still known as *Portuguesas*.<sup>374</sup> These handguns were used widely in the criminal milieu, which caused Europe to exert pressure – via Italy – on the arms producer, Tanfoglio. The producer has since retired this

model from the market. Other European blank-firing pistols that have been known to be converted are the Italian BBM315-auto and the Chiappa Firearms Kimar, and the German Walther P99 and Vektor CP1.<sup>375</sup>

In her 2012 study of converted firearms, Marsha S De Vries investigated converted Italian firearms in the Dutch criminal milieu. During the time frame of the study, she found that 80% of converted firearms seized in the Netherlands were produced legally by the Italian manufacture Tanfoglio. These firearms were known to have moved from Italy to Portugal assisted by Dutch and Portuguese people with a Cape Verdian background. The common *modus operandi* was to replace the name tag of the gas pistol with a different name (most often Astra, Star or Zastava).<sup>1</sup> In 2009, 9% of all shootings in the Netherlands were believed to have been carried out using these converted Italian firearms.<sup>376</sup>

De Vries had already warned about a new problem in 2012: Voltran and Zoraki Turkish firearms. An exact duplicate of the Tanfoglio GT28 – the Ekol Tuna – is being produced by the Turkish manufacturer, Ekol Voltran.<sup>377</sup> This gas pistol is widely and cheaply available and is increasingly being brought into Europe via the internet or overland through Bulgaria. These gas pistols move relatively freely throughout (eastern) Europe, are easily converted, and are sold at incredible profits in Northern and Western Europe. According to some media sources, the Turkish manufacturer is well aware that their gas pistol is an exact copy of the Italian Tanfoglio and that it can be converted easily.<sup>378</sup>

The Zoraki brand of converted blank firing weapons is known to be particularly widespread in Europe. In November of 2020, a joint Europol operation led to 1,776 Turkish gas and alarm pistols being seized in Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. All of these were trafficked from Turkey through Bulgaria.<sup>379</sup> One month later, a man was arrested in Evros, Greece with ten Zoraki pistols and 8,000 ecstasy pills, also believed to have been trafficked through Bulgaria.<sup>380</sup> Some speculation exists that these gas pistols are also trafficked across the Cypriot demarcation line into Europe (given Cyprus's geographical location and the north of the island being under Turkish-Cypriot control). No actual seizures have been made so far. This might be explained by the fact that Cyprus has some of Europe's harshest penalties for firearms trafficking.<sup>381</sup>

Before the 2017 amendment to the EU Firearms Directive blank firing weapons could be purchased legally in many European countries without the need for registration. The Baltic States have been implicated in trafficking converted alarm pistols. Latvia, in particular, has been identified as a country where gas pistols (often of the Zoraki brand) are purchased, converted and then trafficked to other countries. Lithuania is also often implicated in the conversion of firearms. Until 2011, gas and alarm pistols did not need to be registered in Lithuania. Even after the change in the law, the flow of (converted) gas pistols into, from and

<sup>1</sup> Seizures of firearms with altered markings remain relatively high in Spain and Portugal, which in 2016–2017 seized respectively 2,322 and 1,275 firearms with altered markings. In that context, this would usually involve different forms of firearm conversion. See UNODC. *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, p. 39.

through Lithuania has not decreased. It is believed that criminals purchase gas pistols in other countries and then convert them in Lithuania. In 2017, 91% of firearm seizures in Lithuania involved assembled or converted firearms.<sup>382</sup> Estonia seems to be implicated more in reactivating firearms rather than converting them.

Certain central European countries also have or had more lenient legislation with regard to gas pistols. Until 2021, gas pistols – as well as deactivated firearms, blank-firing guns and Flobert guns – did not have to be registered in Czechia.<sup>383</sup>

This uneven legal situation is slowly being remedied across the EU. Still, there remain opportunities to evade certain stricter rules. For example, alarm pistols require only a *Kleiner Waffenschein* in Germany, which means that they can be purchased by anyone above 18 years of age who is physically and mentally fit. In the Netherlands, however, alarm pistols require a licence. A gun shop located just over the border with Germany advertises their selection of alarm pistols on their web page as follows (the original text is in Dutch):

*Models of alarm pistols that can be purchased from the age of 18 in Germany. In the Netherlands, these alarm pistols require a licence. Gun shop just over the border A12.*<sup>384</sup>

A lack of systematic and streamlined policies have – for a long time – caused the proliferation of converted gas pistols. While these are typically of lesser quality than other firearms, and tend therefore to be used mostly by low-level criminals, they play a role of significance in increased levels of firearm violence. They might also change some of the existing dynamics of the illegal firearms market, which was traditionally not profit-oriented. Gas pistols can be bought for €150 or less and sold for €500 and above. Given that the technical conversion of some blank firing weapons is relatively easy, this creates a potentially profitable market for gun-traffickers.<sup>385</sup>

### Flobert guns

The Flobert gun was invented originally in 1845 when the French engineer Louis-Nicolas Flobert designed a smaller-calibre, rimfire firearm (also known as a ‘gallery’ or ‘parlour’ gun) for indoor target-shooting (a purpose now supplanted by airguns and gas pistols). Flobert guns are typically less powerful and of a smaller calibre than other firearms. Firearms can be designed originally as Flobert guns and subsequently converted into higher-calibre firearms; or higher-calibre firearms can be converted into Flobert guns, which were in some countries available without or with a more lenient licence, and reconverted in their place of destination.

After the 2015 common guidelines on deactivation were published some gun shops that sold the poorly deactivated firearms mentioned above decided to convert their deactivated firearms into Flobert guns so that they could still be sold without too many restrictions. Many European countries, including Czechia and Slovakia, did not recognise Flobert guns as being subject to the EU firearms directive due to its low calibre. Even in their low-calibre

state, these rifles can be dangerous, but they can also be reconverted into higher-calibre firearms. Until recently, Flobert guns remained a legal grey area that was exploited by those who traffic in firearms. The Munich shooter of 2016 was reported to have used a converted, Flobert-type firearm.<sup>386</sup> The Small Arms Survey and Europol express concerns that automatic firearms converted into Flobert guns could be converted and so offer a supply of trafficked fully automatic rifles throughout Europe.<sup>387</sup> Also firearms that are originally designed as Flobert guns are converted into higher-calibre, more powerful firearms.

Flobert guns (converted or not) are seized repeatedly throughout Europe. A group of traffickers were caught bringing 79 Flobert handguns into the United Kingdom which were purchased in Czechia in 2017. They admitted to bringing in more than 700 such handguns.<sup>388</sup> More recently, on 27 May 2021, the Romanian Customs agencies seized an extremely large cache (2,850 in total) of low-calibre revolvers (4 and 4.5 mm) at the Isaccea Border Crossing. These firearms were produced in Turkey by Major Berg, trafficked through Romania and intended for the Ukrainian market.<sup>389</sup> Ukraine has a history of craft production and firearm assembly, where firearms are converted into higher-calibre firearms and sold on the criminal market.<sup>390</sup> In 2016–2017, Ukraine was in the 90th percentile globally in terms of seizing notable proportions of assembled firearms.<sup>391</sup> Finally, in September–October 2021, during a Europol operation, the Dutch National Police together with the Czech National Organised Crime Agency and the Slovak National Crime Agency arrested six members of a trafficking ring in Slovakia, the Netherlands and Czechia. They were believed to have converted and trafficked more than 500 Flobert guns to criminals (including machine guns and SMGs).<sup>392</sup>

Blank-firing Flobert guns are typically thought to be harmless. However, an academic study of a case of chest trauma in Germany revealed that the trauma was inflicted by a blank cartridge-actuated rubber ball projectile. The weapon was a calibre 6 mm Flobert blank cartridge-actuated revolver which discharges a 10 mm diameter rubber ball. The case found that, given the kinetic power caused by the blank cartridge, penetrating trauma caused by the rubber ball could not be ruled out and that a contact shot could cause life-threatening injuries. The authors warn that this type of firearm – which is increasingly being seized by law enforcement – can easily be modified to alter the muzzle energy and so become more injurious.<sup>393</sup>

In spite the 2017 amendment of the Firearms Directive, Flobert guns are relatively freely available in some countries within (or outside) the Schengen area. Some countries view these firearms as mostly harmless and so are loath to restrict their access. While these firearms can cause harm in their non-converted state (though they are rarely lethal<sup>394</sup>), they can be converted into more dangerous firearms or can be used to intimate or threaten people.

### 4.3.3 New challenges

Both firearm-smuggling and firearm conversion have in common that they involve firearms that were typically produced legally. These come to be held illegally through certain illicit behaviours, such as technical conversion, theft, trafficking and others. These are

subsequently offered on the closed-circuit illicit firearms market. In recent years, new challenges have emerged that either produce firearms illegally and/or avoid the traditional illicit firearms market. We will discuss these new challenges in this section.

### 3D-printing of firearms

The overwhelming majority of trafficked firearms in Europe were legally produced and later in their lifespan diverted from their legal purpose. Yet, some firearms have also been illegally assembled, which makes it much more difficult to trace them after being seized. Such ‘ghost guns’ are manufactured either by acquiring all individual firearm components separately and subsequently assembling these into a working firearm (the essential components will, however, be marked with serial numbers) or by using a 3D-printer to manufacture a firearm and so produce one that is in no way registered.

The firearms directive (Directive 2021/555/EEC) defines ‘illicit manufacturing’ of firearms in chapter 1, article 1.1(11):

*illicit manufacturing’ means the manufacturing or assembly of firearms, their essential components and ammunition: (a) from any essential component of such firearms illicitly trafficked; (b) without an authorisation issued in accordance with Article 4 by a competent authority of the Member State where the manufacture or assembly takes place; or (c) without marking firearms at the time of manufacture in accordance with Article 4.*

In terms of this Directive, the illicit manufacturing of firearms includes not only the wholesale production of firearms, but also their assembly from firearm parts and their assembly where any essential component is trafficked illicitly. While self-assembly or the wholesale production of firearms is currently not widespread in Europe, there are worrying signs that these are becoming more popular on the illicit gun market.

In 2015 Europol already warned about the challenges related to the 3D printing of firearms:

*Innovation towards self-replicating 3D printers will make 3D printing widely available and could potentially offer new opportunities for OCGs involved in firearms trafficking.<sup>395</sup>*

The 3D-printing of firearms refers to the production of a firearm by means of a 3D-printer. The firearm that is produced can be made entirely out of plastic (but then it tends to be short-lived), entirely out of metal or of a plastic-metal hybrid. The 3D-printing of firearms first received widespread attention in 2013, when the US-based company Defence Distributed uploaded plans for ‘The Liberator’, a single-shot, fully plastic handgun. The schematics

were downloaded more than 100,000 times before the US government mandated that they be taken offline.<sup>396</sup> Since then, these plans have been the cause of continuing litigation in the United States. The same company designed the plans for a 3D-printed AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. In the years since then, anonymous individuals have regularly releases schematics for the 3D-printing of various types of firearm. These firearms are of unclear legal status in the United States.<sup>397</sup>

3D-printed firearms are illegal in Europe if they are produced by someone who does not have a licence to produce firearms.<sup>398</sup> Firearms made entirely from plastic are a particular cause for concern as they are less likely to be detected in safe zones such as airports. A reporter of the British tabloid, *The Mail on Sunday*, printed a copy of the *Liberator* and took it on board with him on the London–Paris Eurostar train, where he assembled the firearm in the bathroom (minus the firing pin). He wanted to emphasise that terrorists could do this easily.<sup>399</sup> For now, plastic firearms can usually expel one round only before they are destroyed. They tend to be as dangerous to the individual holding them as to the individual being targeted. But this does not mean that 3D-printing of firearms does not present a real threat in Europe. What has been noted are factories that 3D-print a plastic frame and then join this to a metal action and barrel. The latter can be purchased or produced relatively cheaply. The low cost and lack of traceability can make these firearms particularly attractive to criminals.<sup>400</sup>

In 2015 Europol did not expect 3D printing to become a major source for firearms trafficking:

*3D printing technology is unlikely to become a major source for the proliferation of firearms due to the technical complexity of manufacturing functioning firearms using a 3D printer, combined with the ease of access and relatively low prices of firearms traditionally available on the black market in the EU.*<sup>401</sup>

The rapid technological expansion related to 3D printing in recent years has however raised a lot of concern among law enforcement agencies across Europe. Armament Research (ARES) has recently studied how the technology has advanced remarkably since 2013 through emergent technologies such as electrochemical machining (ECM) and desktop/micro-CNC, which allows non-specialists to produce self-loading hybrid firearms such as the FGC-9. These firearms combine easily available metal components and unregulated parts.<sup>402</sup>

In the UK suspected 3D-printed gun parts were first observed in 2013 when the UK police raided a Manchester gang's hideout.<sup>403</sup> Since April of 2021, the UK police have been ordered to search for 3D-printers on raids as law-enforcement officials believe that the United Kingdom might become 'flooded' with 3D-printed firearms.<sup>404</sup> In recent years several 3D printed components and firearms have been seized and 3D printing workshops have been dismantled across Europe. In a drug bust in Finland in June 2021, for example, a joint operation found a 3D-printing factory and dozens of 3D-printed firearms. In the Netherlands dismantled a workshop in November 2021 after a firearm was found during a car search in the vicinity of Rotterdam. Following this seizure, the police conducted a house

search of the four occupants and found nine 3D printers in the process of producing parts of firearms in one of the houses. Multiple finished firearm parts were also found. This was the first time the Dutch police located 3D-printed firearms.<sup>405</sup> In a drug bust in Finland in June 2021, a joint operation found a 3D-printing factory and dozens of 3D-printed firearms.<sup>406</sup>

The 3D-printing has also been noted in the milieu of rightwing extremism. On 9 November 2019, a synagogue in Halle, Germany was attacked during Yom Kippur. The perpetrator killed two and wounded two more. He was known as a neo-Nazi and was armed with improvised firearms, including hybrid 3D-printed firearms. During the ensuing investigation, more 3D-firearms were found at his home. The perpetrator called out to likeminded individuals to explore 3D-printing and commit assaults.<sup>407</sup> The Spanish police located a factory on Tenerife in September 2020, where they also found books on white supremacy and rightwing, extremist symbols.<sup>408</sup> A former army driver in the United Kingdom, who held fascist views, was arrested in 2020 and sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment. In a raid of his home, the police found two 3D-printers and instructions on how to manufacture 3D-printed firearms.<sup>409</sup> In May 2021, two alleged rightwing terrorists were apprehended in the United Kingdom. The media and police report that they were in the possession of 3D-printed firearms.<sup>410</sup> In June 2021, a 15-year-old schoolgirl was arrested in the United Kingdom for possessing information on how to make a 3D-printed gun, together with other assorted instructions for making bombs and explosives.<sup>411</sup>

As the technology is becoming cheaper and more accessible, we can expect an incremental increase in cases of 3D-printing of firearms since 3D-printing is very difficult to trace and there is no need for criminal connections to acquire firearms.

### The darkweb

The illegal sales of firearms via the internet is becoming more widespread. These transactions can happen on legal online marketplaces, but they can also occur on the so-called 'darkweb', which is a section of the world wide web that requires special software or authorisation codes to access (so-called 'darknets').<sup>412</sup>

The world's largest darkweb marketplace ('Darkmarket') was closed by Europol in January of 2021. The server was located in Germany near the German-Danish border and was hosted by an Australian citizen. While the website mainly offered drugs, counterfeit money and credit card details, the Europol operation also mentioned that firearms were on sale on the website.<sup>413</sup> Illegal internet sales of firearms have been focused in Germany and Austria. Until February 2021, Germany did not consider operating an illegal marketplace a criminal offence in itself. While illegal sales and purchases were obviously illegal, German law did not permit action to be taken against the illegal marketplace itself. From February 2021 onwards, however, those who knowingly and willingly offer a platform for illegal activities can now be fined according to paragraph 127 of the *Strafgesetzbuch*.<sup>414</sup> The new law seems to target only those individuals who knowingly and willingly offer an illegal platform, not those who are

unaware that their marketplace is used for illegal purposes. This could raise a question as to what sort of due diligence is required on the part of the owner of an online marketplace.

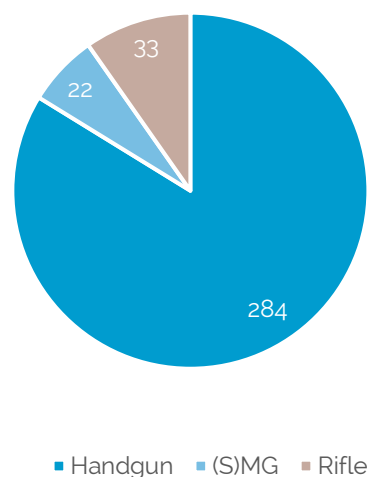
There is information regarding the prominence of firearms on the darkweb. One survey found that weapons generally are only a minor part of sales on the darkweb, among which firearms make up only 25% of all weapons listed on these internet sites.<sup>415</sup> Another survey found that – among arms generally – firearms were 42% of listings, with arms-related digital products (instructions for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), 3D-printing models) in second position (27%).<sup>416</sup> These studies surveyed different cryptomarkets with the second study looking specifically for cryptomarkets with arms and firearm listings. This might explain the disparity.

The RAND corporation undertook a wide-ranging study of the history and workings of firearm sales on cryptomarkets. The website ‘The Armory’, brought online in 2012, is considered to be the first to offer serious amounts of illegal firearms on the darkweb. A combination of high cost and the prevalence of scamming on the website made it go offline after only six months. Since then, numerous cryptomarkets have emerged (and disappeared) that offered listings of firearms.<sup>417</sup> According to the RAND corporation several types of customers search for firearms on the darkweb. First, criminals who seek to circumvent the legal and illegal market in their national contexts, especially if these are very restrictive and/or limited. Second, RAND highlights the possibility that terrorists use the dark web to acquire weapons. Our analysis suggests that especially right-wing extremists use the dark web for this. For instance, the Swiss website ‘Migrantenschrek’ was linked to rightwing extremists (most purchases involved Schreckschuss revolvers);<sup>418</sup> a Belgian citizen – aspiring to protect his family from the threat of asylum-seekers – ordered a Kalashnikov assault rifle, a Glock automatic pistol, a silencer and ammunition;<sup>419</sup> similarly, a UK citizen ordered a Glock handgun to protect himself from terrorists.<sup>420</sup> Third, individuals who are despondent, apocalyptic or otherwise frustrated have also been known to use the darkweb to obtain firearms. This can be done for reasons of self-defence, but also for suicide.<sup>421</sup>

The types of firearm that are offered on the darkweb are varied. According to the study by the RAND corporation, handguns are the most widely offered type of firearm offered on these websites, as shown in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2: Firearm types offered on the darkweb<sup>422</sup>**

The most popular brands of firearm are Glock (18% of listings), Colt (9% of listings), Ekol-Voltran (6% of listings) and Beretta, Ruger and Sig Sauer (each 5% of listings). While the brand of automatic rifles is usually unspecified, the most sizeable brand was IMI systems and probably is the UZI SMG. Franchi and Caesar Guerini were the most popular brands of rifle.<sup>423</sup>



### Assembling firearms

Online firearm purchases can also involve firearm parts. The 2017 amendment to the firearms directive (Directive 2017/853/EEC) stipulates in article 1 that:

*‘essential component’ means the barrel, the frame, the receiver, including both upper and lower receivers, where applicable, the slide, the cylinder, the bolt or the breech block, which, being separate objects, are included in the category of the firearms on which they are or are intended to be mounted.*

This implies that the purchase of certain essential components of a firearm depends on having the proper authorisation to own that firearm. Therefore, one cannot purchase an essential component of a firearm if one does not have the proper licence to own or handle that firearm. Essential firearm components can however easily be purchased online – through webshops usually located in the USA, Austria or Germany – either via the publicly-accessible internet or the darkweb.

## 4.4 Trafficking and seizures in Europe

We have outlined the difficulties involved in estimating the scope of firearms trafficking in Europe (section 4.2) and discussed the typology and dynamics of firearms trafficking (section 4.3). Now we describe how these different forms of trafficking manifest in different EU Member States and other European countries. When it concerns international trafficking, Europe could in the past be divided into source (Eastern and South-Eastern Europe), transit (Central Europe) and destination (Western and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe) countries. The situation is no longer as unequivocal. This is because most European countries perform myriad functions. In this section, we therefore discuss the findings of Project TARGET regarding these countries with the purpose of enabling meaningful comparison.

The point of departure for the analysis below is the official data on firearm seizures as a proxy for understanding trafficking. A Dutch report of 2012 claims that Belgium, Germany and Italy are the main countries of origin for firearms seized. According to that report, 50% of the pistols seized, 25% of revolvers seized and 13% of automatic firearms seized in 2010 were produced in those countries. Given that these countries have some of the largest firearm

production capacities in Europe (FN Herstal, Walther, Heckler&Koch and Beretta), this should not be surprising. This does not imply, however, that firearms which originate in these countries are also most likely to be trafficked. When trafficking is involved, we note a particular prevalence of Austrian (Glock), Serbian (Zastava) and Czech (CZ-group) firearms.<sup>424</sup> Turkish-made (converted) firearms are also seized regularly throughout Europe, yet these have become widespread only in the past decade.

#### 4.4.1 The Western Balkans: Europe's stash of firearms?

The countries of the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo<sup>I</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – are widely regarded as important source and transit countries for firearms trafficking in Europe. The quantity of conflict legacy firearms in that region is believed to be substantial (the Small Arms Survey estimates that there are about 4 million illegally held firearms in the region – though these estimates are very controversial),<sup>425</sup> many of which are military-grade firearms that were diverted into the population because of the Yugoslav war. These firearms are known to move overland (via Slovenia and Austria) or via the sea (via Greece and Italy) to other European regions. There are two important sources for assessing the form and estimating the scope of trafficking in the Western Balkans: reports by SEESAC for 2012–2016 and information from the AVMP for the period 2014 to the present. Despite having these resources, though, it remains difficult to present comparative information on firearms trafficking in this region.

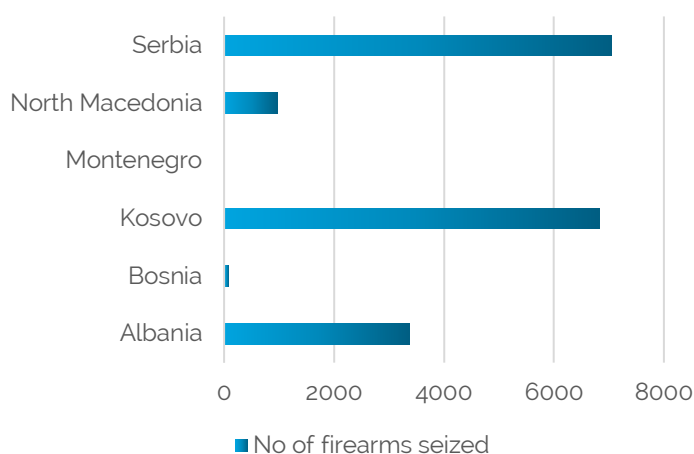


Figure 4.3: Firearm seizures in Western Balkans, 2012–2016

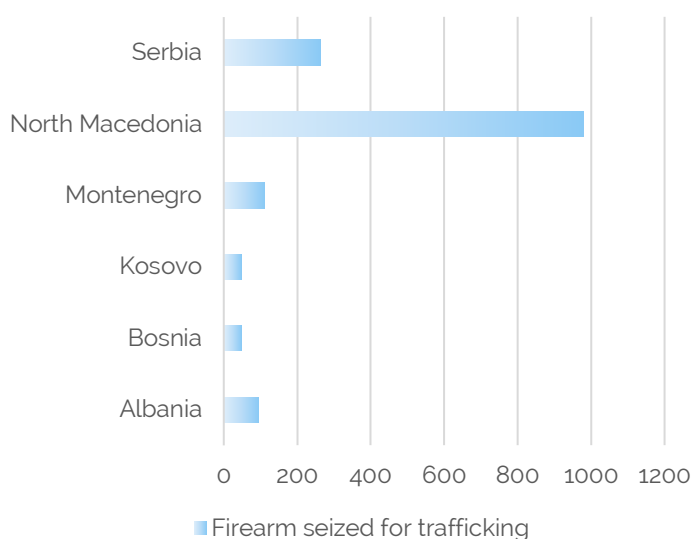
Figure 4.3 shows firearm total seizures in the Western Balkans for the period 2012–2016.<sup>426</sup> These rates of firearm seizure are relatively low, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, given high estimations of firearms held illegally in these countries.<sup>427</sup>

Rates of seizure registered specifically in the context of trafficking are similarly relatively low.

I References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

**Figure 4.4: Firearms seized for trafficking, Western Balkans, 2012–2016**

**Figure 4.4** shows the number of firearms seized for trafficking during 2012–2016. The information in both figures requires further explanation and nuance, which can be offered by examining data from the AVMP.<sup>428</sup>



Whereas SEESAC reports on low rates of trafficking seizures in **Albania** (95 in total during 2012–2016), the Albanian police mention that they have a policy of classifying a seizure as ‘illegal possession’ when they cannot fully confirm trafficking. For this reason, it is likely that a certain number of the 3,379 firearm seizures for illegal possession are actually cases of trafficking.<sup>429</sup> For the period 2016–2018, the AVMP reports an increase in the number of cases of firearm seizures in the case of trafficking by up to 170% (33 cases in 2016 to 90 in 2018). **Bosnia and Herzegovina** has registered exceptionally low cases of firearm seizures generally and also seizures in the context of trafficking. However, SEESAC is concerned about gaps in the data.<sup>430</sup> The AVMP shows a total of 692 cases during 2014–2021 (to August), with the rate rising by 200% between 2016 and 2020. In **Kosovo**,<sup>1</sup> SEESAC reports a total of 55 firearms trafficking cases involving 85 firearms during 2012–2016 (56 pistols, 13 air rifles, six SMGs, six shotguns and four rifles). The AVMP shows that the number of seizure cases has increased more than 18 times between 2016 (31) and 2020 (567). In **Montenegro**, SEESAC reports a total of 66 firearms trafficking cases involving 111 firearms during 2012–2016 (40 pistols, 41 rifles and 31 other). The AVMP shows fluctuating levels of firearm seizures from 62 cases in 2016 to a high of 171 in 2018 and then back to 88 in 2020. In **North Macedonia**, SEESAC reports a total of 1,010 firearms trafficking cases involving 962 firearms during 2012–2016 (363 pistols, 53 revolvers, 47 SMGs, 25 rifles, 207 shotguns, 135 machine guns and 148 others). A large number of these cases involve companies falsifying documents, such as false declarations of theft, in order to sell firearms illegally. The AVMP notes serious increases in firearm seizures from only seven weapon-seizure cases in 2016 to 181 in 2020. In **Serbia**, SEESAC reports an unknown total of firearms trafficking cases involving 264 firearms during 2012–2016. During that period, a total of 254 firearms were also seized at border-crossing points. The AVMP shows sharp increases in weapon-seizure cases from 37 in 2016 to 121 in 2020. **Croatia** is not covered by SEESAC or the AVMP. A study of 2018 determined that during 2010–2016 the Croatian border police seized 167 gas and signal weapons, 152 pistols, 92 rifles, 29 air weapons and three revolvers. In addition, they collected a total of 56,787 rounds of ammunition.<sup>431</sup> The UNODC has data that show the total number of seizures in Croatia: in

<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

2016, a total of 1,878 firearms were seized; in 2017, the total was 1,686, which comprised rifles (56%), pistols (34%), machine guns (5%), revolvers (4%) and SMGs (2%).

Despite being recognised as an important source and transit region for firearm-smuggling, firearm seizures in the context of trafficking in the Western Balkans are not reported as particularly widespread in the SEESAC reports for 2012–2016. But the European Commission reiterated in its 2020–2025 action plan on firearms trafficking that the ‘Western Balkans remain among the main supplying regions of trafficking to the EU’.<sup>432</sup> Data from the AVMP do show that cases of firearm seizure are generally rising, which could suggest increased law-enforcement attention being devoted to the problem of illegally held firearms.

As we discuss in the following sections, three typical routes can be taken in the Western Balkans, which often still rely on old smuggling routes that were used during the war:

- The land route via Slovenia, Austria and Hungary towards Western Europe.
- The sea route from Croatia or Montenegro towards Italy.
- The hybrid land/sea route through Albania or North Macedonia to Greece, and from Greece onwards to the rest of Europe or North Africa (one estimate believed that up to 100,000 SALW had already been smuggled to Greece by 2005<sup>433</sup>).

These routes tend to be used by different members of crime groups cooperating or even different crime groups cooperating. It is known that the Italian mafia has strong connections in the Western Balkans. Much of firearms trafficking was facilitated by corruption and bribery.<sup>434</sup>

Trafficking from the Western Balkans rarely concerns only firearms. Most of the time, large shipments of illegal drugs are accompanied by illegal firearms. Firearm seizures are then a by-product of attempts to stem the illegal trade in drugs. Trafficking into the Western Balkans is traditionally rare since the area is believed to be saturated with (illegal) firearms. In the past decade, however, an increasing number of converted gas pistols of Turkish origin (most often produced by Ekol-Voltran or Atak Arms) have been detected, especially in Kosovo.<sup>435</sup> The firearms were purchased legally in Turkey and brought into Europe through Bulgaria. They were subsequently converted into live-firing firearms and sold on the local market or trafficked throughout Europe. One case in particular stands out: on 21 April 2020, Serbian Customs intercepted 80 Grizzly 83–2 5.5 mm, Grizzly Striker 4.5 mm air rifle barrels and ten Zoraki 9 mm air pistols in a truck entering Serbia at the Gradina border crossing with Bulgaria. The truck was travelling from Turkey to Montenegro.<sup>436</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Doorways westwards: Austria and Slovenia

Some of the Alpine countries of Europe, most importantly Slovenia and Austria, are known to be chiefly transit countries for firearms trafficking. This means that firearms are not

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

prone to remaining in the country but transit through it. This is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that few seized firearms can be traced internationally. The causes of this are usually either a low demand for (illegal) firearms or a saturated illegal firearm market.

The Austrian government has consistently emphasised that Austria is not a major player in the illegal arms trade.<sup>437</sup> There are, however, no consistent reports on weapon seizures or weapon-trafficking before 2010, even though Project FIRE identified Austria as the country with – by far – the most firearm seizures in Europe (totalling more than 40% of all firearms seized).<sup>438</sup> Since 2010, the Austrian Customs has reported on firearm seizures at the border control point ‘Soko Ost’, which seized 23 firearms during 2010–2013.<sup>439</sup> Given the high levels of legally available firearms in Austria, there may not be significant interest in trafficking firearms into Austria. Despite these official reports, however, Austria is known to have played an important role in firearms trafficking either from the Western Balkans via Slovenia or in the trafficking in deactivated or converted firearms from Slovakia. Austria was a major transit point for land-trafficking firearms towards Western Europe via either the eastern route or the southern route (from Italy). Apart from this, Austria is also a source country for internet offers of illegal firearms and components (after Germany, it has the most hits for illegal firearm purchases online). Since the trafficked firearms do not remain in Austria, firearms trafficking is not considered to be a major domestic security issue the country.

Like Austria, Slovenia functions mainly as a transit country for firearms.<sup>440</sup> It declared independence from the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in June of 1991. There was only brief fighting between the Yugoslav People’s Army and the Slovenian territorial defense. The war lasted ten days only between 27 June and 7 July 1991. For this reason, no levels of conflict legacy firearm comparable to the Western Balkans are believed to exist in Slovenia. Firearms that are held illegally in Slovenia are believed to result mostly because of problematic internal control after the country gained its independence in 1991. This is evidenced by the fact that large quantities of SALW were consistently confiscated in Slovenia during the 1990s and the 2000s.<sup>441</sup> After Slovenia became a member of NATO and the EU in 2004, it functioned as the EU’s outer border until Croatia’s accession to the EU in 2013. After 2004, Slovenia made a concerted effort to regulate firearm possession and traffic in its country, which resulted in systematically lowering levels of firearm seizure. This downward trend reversed in 2010, when once again higher numbers of firearm seizure appear in Slovenia’s national statistics. According to those statistics, firearm seizures since 2005 can be divided up roughly as follows (annual numbers):

- between 90 and 120 pistols seized;
- between 25 and 50 rifles seized (with exceptionally high levels in 2008 and 2015 of 152);
- seizure of hunting rifles fluctuates between lows of about 40 (2005–2008), reaching well above 100 (2010–2014) and falling back into the 70–90 range (2015–2017);
- the number of gas pistols seized has fluctuated between 36 and 76 since 2010, with a record find of 363 gas pistols in 2016.<sup>442</sup>

The UNODC reports black market prices in Slovenia to be low, suggesting either a high level of availability or a low demand: a Zastava M70 can be bought for €450; a Zastava M59/66 for €1,000; an Uzi vz. 61 for €750.<sup>443</sup>

### 4.4.3 Central European hotspots

Many Central European countries were known as source regions for illicit firearms trafficking in the 1990s. This is due mostly to the chaos surrounding the break-up of the USSR, which saw significant quantities of firearms diverted into civilian hands. While these countries now have generally low levels of firearm violence themselves, two of them – Slovakia and Czechia – play an important role in intra-European firearms trafficking. Slovakia has played an important role as a source country of easy-to-reactivate deactivated firearms and easy-to-reconvert AEW on illicit gun markets across Europe and continues to play a role as source country for Flobert calibre firearms. Czechia – itself a long-time major producer of firearms – plays a role not dissimilar to that of Slovakia. Certain types of firearms produced and/or sold in Czechia have been noted – as we describe below – to be trafficked to countries where their registration is required.

The former Czechoslovak Republic was a major international trader in SALW.<sup>444</sup> In the 1990s, Czech arms producers, most importantly the Czechoslovak Groups (CSG), were implicated in shipping firearms to various countries illegally. One important case concerned a large sale of SALW to Israel in the 1990s, where the firearms were funnelled to Azerbaijan – at that time, at war with Armenia and therefore under an arms embargo.<sup>445</sup> More such cases have occurred since then, with the Czech government speaking out in support of its firearm producers. Czechia rates the problem of firearm violence in the country as insignificant and believes there is no significant illegal firearm market. But there are some scattered reports of internet purchases<sup>446</sup> and the UNODC considers firearm conversion and reactivation to be a problem in Czechia.<sup>447</sup>

Slovakia is still often named as an important source country, especially with regard to easy-to-reactivate and easy-to-convert weapons.<sup>448</sup> Poorly deactivated firearms and AEW were legally sold in significant quantities to persons without licences by Slovakian companies. Europol estimates that by 2014 some 10,000 of these deactivated firearms were brought onto the European illegal market.<sup>449</sup> After establishing that several of such firearms were implicated in terror attacks, the EU put forward common deactivation guidelines. This eventually stopped the flow of these easy-to-reactivate firearms.

The same Slovakian companies resorted to converting live-firing firearms Flobert firearms. Flobert guns, while technically firearms, can be acquired with a license by anyone above the age of 18 in certain countries, most importantly in Slovakia. Because of their small calibre, they are not considered by the authorities of these countries to be dangerous firearms that ought to be regulated.<sup>450</sup> Because it was found that these firearms could be converted into higher-calibre, the EU pressurised Czechia and Slovakia to amend their firearm laws. Czechia did so in January 2021, which made Flobert firearms and gas weapons (larger than 6.35 mm) subject to declaration and prohibited their sale to persons without permanent residence in Czechia (unless that person had a permit for export firearms). This does mean, however, that these firearms remain widely available to Czech residents and therefore remain a potential source for trafficking. In fact, Czech groups have repeatedly been implicated in trafficking Flobert guns to the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.<sup>451</sup>

Historically, Italian OGCs have been active in conspiring to traffic in these kinds of firearm.<sup>452</sup> Slovakian firearms are also seized regularly in Poland.<sup>453</sup>

While Slovakia has been a hotspot for firearms trafficking, this is not reflected in the levels of firearm seizures. Cases of firearm seizure have been reported in the national crime statistics as indicating a downward trend since 2009 (526 cases) up to 2018 (328 cases). The same source divides the seizures in 2016–2017 according to type as follows: rifles and shotguns (51%), handguns (47%) and unknown (2%). No automatic rifles of any kind were seized in 2016–2017. These firearms were largely (90%) not reactivated or (re)converted.<sup>454</sup> Illegal firearms seem to be trafficked out of the country rather than remaining in the country. Unlike most other European countries, Slovakia does not mention seizures of converted gas pistols of Italian or Turkish origin. Amnesty periods have been held in Slovakia, which collected 3,469 (2005–2006), 4,368 (2009–2010) and 2,875 (2014–2015) firearms, respectively. The firearms that were surrendered were 42% handguns, 40% hunting rifles and 8% assault rifles/machine guns.<sup>455</sup>

Data collected about Czechia for Project TARGET present a similar situation. While we could access no official seizure data, the Small Arms Survey reports that 75% of all seized, found or recovered firearms were gas pistols, with only very few having been converted into live-firing firearms.<sup>456</sup> The Czech Ministry of Justice has released information on the prohibited possession and acquisition of firearms between 2013 and 2018, and differentiates between Czech nationals and foreigners being convicted. While the number of foreigners convicted remains more or less constant between 11 and 18, the number of Czech nationals being convicted has decreased (by about 40%), from 203 (2013) to 120 (2018).<sup>457</sup> Amnesty periods have been held repeatedly in Czechia, leading to the surrender of 7,000 firearms in 2009 and 5,800 firearms in 2014.<sup>458</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Central European blind spots

While Slovakia and Czechia are often implicated in firearms trafficking, the same cannot be said about other central European countries such as Poland and Hungary. The reason for this is the lack of sufficient data about firearm violence and trafficking in these countries. From what we can gather from Project TARGET, Poland is an important destination country for firearms converted in Slovakia. More recently, increasing levels of seizures have been noted, among others at the border with Ukraine, which often involve Turkish blank-firing weapons. While it stands to reason that Hungary plays an important role in both supplying and transiting firearms through Europe, not much is known about the phenomenon.

Poland was a major producer of firearms. The national rifle factory (*Państwowa Fabryka Karabinów*) was very active during both World Wars, but it was destroyed during the Second World War. The factory produced large quantities of the Mauser and Karabinek wz.29 bolt-action rifles, but later became the major producer of the Browning wz.1928 (a Polish version of the Browning machine gun). Following the Second World War, Poland became a territory

within the USSR in which the Soviets kept a sizeable operational armed force.<sup>459</sup> The general disorder associated with Poland's independence in 1990–1991 created space for the diversion of firearms from the army and, since then, many firearms are still being found through 'black digging' across the battlefields of the Second World War.<sup>460</sup>

Efforts were made to reduce the number of illegal firearms in the country, which were generally believed to be successful.<sup>461</sup> Recent years, however, have seen increases in firearm seizures, which are mainly attributed to increased trafficking. The four main factors facilitating an increase in firearms trafficking into and through Poland are:

- (1) the armed conflict in Ukraine (both out of and into Ukraine);
- (2) the liberal firearm regulations, and the lack of oversight, in Slovakia, in particular with regard to deactivated and (re)converted firearms;
- (3) the long-time lack of harmonised procedures of firearm deactivation in the EU;
- (4) the ease of movement through the EU.

The number of firearms seized by different law-enforcement agencies in Poland during 2014–2019 were distributed as illustrated in **Table 4.1**:

**Table 4.1: Firearm seizures in Poland, 2014–2019**

|  | 2014  | 2015  | 2016  | 2017  | 2018  | 2019  | Total |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <i>Police</i>                          | 1,338 | 1,346 | 1,859 | 1,341 | 941   | 802   | 7,627 |
| <i>Polish border guard</i>             | 27    | 81    | 36    | 50    | 12    | 181   | 387   |
| <i>National revenue administration</i> | 123   | 0     | 30    | 3     | 63    | 31    | 250   |
| <i>Total</i>                           | 1,488 | 1,427 | 1,925 | 1,394 | 1,016 | 1,014 | 8,274 |

Source: ID-Poland<sup>462</sup>

According to interviews with forensic experts, the prevailing types of firearm that were examined have changed throughout the years. While seizures concerned predominantly homemade firearms or converted acoustic guns in the 1990s, from the late 1990s onwards most firearms examined became firearms smuggled from Czechia and Slovakia, including Škorpion SMGs and CZ 1975- and 1985-type pistols. This was at a time when OCGs from Pruszków and Wołomin were involved in retaliation strikes against each other. The subsequent years saw first increases in firearms transferred from the USSR, but since 2011 the (converted) blank-firing pistols of Turkish production have become the firearm seized most often.<sup>463</sup>

The above suggests that Poland is predominantly a destination country for firearms. Polish law-enforcement officials believe that illegal firearms are acquired mainly by foreign

criminal groups cooperating with Polish criminal groups. Customs agents look mainly to OCGs that mix Polish members with Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs and Slovaks. In the past few years, internet purchases and postal packages with firearm components have increasingly been seized. The cybercrime department of the police in Rzeszów noticed that a Czech store was selling gas pistols with 9 mm PAK cartridges (which are subject to a licence in Poland). When pursuing this lead, they uncovered 74 illegal handguns and long firearms and 3,500 rounds of ammunition. Since 2017, there has been a steep increase in the number of firearms (and other weapons) imported by mail from the United States.<sup>464</sup>

Hungary's complicity in firearms trafficking is even more of a blind spot. The Hungarian weapon industry collapsed at the end of the Cold War, which resulted in the large-scale theft and non-regularisation of firearms in Hungary. Hungarian firearms are often encountered in neighbouring Romania and far-right extremist groups are also known to be involved in trafficking firearms to their supporters across Europe. Project DIVERT discovered how Hungarian SALW found their way into the hands of IS fighters in Syria and Iraq in 2017.<sup>465</sup> Diversion from army stockpiles in Hungary might continue as a problem, as a recent counter-terrorism operation illustrates. Two Russian nationals in Hungary attempted to trade several million dollars' worth of SALW in exchange for cocaine from Mexican cartels. This turned out to be a sting operation by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) called 'Perseus'.<sup>466</sup> After apprehending the Russian nationals, the Hungarian authorities refused to extradite Vladimir Lyubishin senior and junior to the United States. They were handed over to Russia instead, which sparked a diplomatic conflict – they appeared to be shielding these firearm-traffickers from prosecution.<sup>467</sup> The fact that these Russian nationals were confident enough to promise large quantities of SALW (including machine guns, anti-tank weapons and air-to-surface missiles) from their base of operations in Budapest does suggest that firearms trafficking from Hungary is substantial (of course, father and son Lyubishin might also have been bluffing).

Firearm seizures in Hungary tell a very different story and suggest that illegally held firearms are not a major concern in Hungary. According to the UNODC, a total of 530 firearms were seized in 2016–2017 – 62% for illicit possession and 38% for illicit trafficking. They comprised pistols (25%), SMGs (25%), rifles (23%) and machine guns (20%). Almost all of these were unconverted and not reactivated. While there is a relatively high percentage of automatic firearms, there is a very low number of actual seizures. Part of this low number can be explained by the fact that gas pistols are considered legal in Hungary and can be purchased without a licence.<sup>468</sup> In October 2021, three EU-based firms – the Czech Česká Zbrojovka Group, the Hungarian De Fango and the Slovak XXEurope – flouted the arms embargo by sending firearms to Belarus and Russia.<sup>469</sup>

#### 4.4.5 Turkey's corridor: Bulgaria and Romania

Romania and Bulgaria have generally very low rates of firearm violence (see Chapter 1). However, firearms are known to be trafficked in these countries. This means that firearms

entering these countries illegally are not believed to remain in the country, but transit to the north or west. In Romania, roughly half of the firearm seizures are registered as cases of trafficking and usually involve smaller-calibre firearms (Flobert) or gas pistols. While Bulgaria has more of a history of difficulties with regulating firearms nationally, today it functions more as a transit state than a source country for illicit firearms trafficking.<sup>470</sup>

In the 1990s, Bulgaria experienced difficulties in regulating firearms as its substantial firearm-production capacities were no longer profitable. They recovered at first by exporting firearms to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but after becoming an EU Member State, it could no longer do so. There were reports of firearm diversion from the factories by workers to OCGs. This caused Bulgarian criminal gangs to be well armed. One of the conditions for joining the EU, which Bulgaria did in 2007, involved reducing criminal gang violence significantly. This is generally considered to have been successful: while the homicide rate remained constant at about four homicides per 100,000 of the population in the 1990s, it started to drop in the year 2000 and had halved by 2007. Since then, Bulgaria's homicide rate has been dropping steadily every year. The UNODC does report, however, that the rate of firearm homicides in Bulgaria has been holding steady at 0.5 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population during 2005–2011 and only started to decrease slowly after this.<sup>471</sup> While illegally held firearms are no longer as ubiquitous in Bulgaria, they remain a cause for concern. More recently, Bulgaria – as a regional expert reports<sup>472</sup> – has become a destination and transit country for Turkish gas pistols and Flobert-calibre firearms. Flobert guns, in particular, are popular in Bulgaria, mainly in the countryside, where they are purchased mainly for reasons of self-defence. Increased access to (converted) firearms can then have an impact on Bulgaria's dwindling rate of firearm homicides.

Romania suffers little from firearm violence and serves mainly as a point of transit for firearms. However, the Romanian police report that 9,721 firearms were seized in 2016.<sup>473</sup> Most of these are blank-firing weapons that were brought in from Bulgaria. Various Romanian Customs agencies report fluctuating, even incompatible, numbers of firearm seized at border points.<sup>474</sup> The majority of firearm seizures are blank-firing, such as gas pistols, and are not believed to pose a significant security risk.<sup>475</sup> Recent seizures suggest increased activity of firearms trafficking in general, usually sourced from Turkey. Recently (27 May 2021), an extremely large cache of 2,850 low-calibre revolvers (4 mm and 4.5 mm) were seized at the Isaccea Border Crossing; they were intended for the Ukrainian market. Here, presumably, they tend to be converted and either put on the local market or trafficked throughout Europe.<sup>476</sup>

We have outlined the difficulties involved in estimating the scope of firearms trafficking in Europe (section 4.2) and discussed the typology and dynamics of firearms trafficking (section 4.3). Now we describe how these different forms of trafficking manifest in different EU Member States and other European countries. When it concerns international trafficking, Europe could in the past be divided into source (Eastern and South-Eastern Europe), transit (Central Europe) and destination (Western and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe) countries. The situation is no longer as unequivocal. This is because most European countries

perform myriad functions. In this section, we therefore discuss the findings of Project TARGET regarding these countries with the purpose of enabling meaningful comparison.

The point of departure for the analysis below is the official data on firearm seizures as a proxy for understanding trafficking. A Dutch report of 2012 claims that Belgium, Germany and Italy are the main countries of origin for firearms seized. According to that report, 50% of the pistols seized, 25% of revolvers seized and 13% of automatic firearms seized in 2010 were produced in those countries. Given that these countries have some of the largest firearm production capacities in Europe (FN Herstal, Walther, Heckler&Koch and Beretta), this should not be surprising. This does not imply, however, that firearms which originate in these countries are also most likely to be trafficked. When trafficking is involved, we note a particular prevalence of Austrian (Glock), Serbian (Zastava) and Czech (CZ-group) firearms.<sup>477</sup> Turkish-made (converted) firearms are also seized regularly throughout Europe, yet these have become widespread only in the past decade.

#### 4.4.6 The Baltic States: Europe's toolbox

In the 1990s, the Baltic States were important source countries for illicit firearms trafficking because of the high levels of firearm diversion during the final days of the Soviet Union. At present, the Small Arms Survey estimates that there are about 400,000 illegally held firearms in the region, with estimates for Estonia being particularly low (about 18,000).<sup>478</sup> Despite their no longer functioning as source countries for firearms, the Baltic States are known today to be areas with skills in firearms (in particular conversion and reactivation) and so they function differently in the context of illicit firearms trafficking. Project TARGET found that illegally held firearms tend to transit through the Baltic States, where they are converted or reactivated, and subsequently move north to Scandinavia or west to north-western Europe.

Firearm reactivation has typically been the main source of illegal firearms in Estonia. Criminal gangs are regularly found in possession of reactivated firearms (eg 88 firearms recovered in two cases in 2015 and 73 firearms recovered in 2017), which are usually brought in from Czechia or Slovakia and reactivated in Estonia. Interestingly, the data show that two thirds of these reactivated firearms are transited out of the country.<sup>479</sup> This suggests that the criminal demand for firearms is low in Estonia and that the country predominantly reactivates and transits firearms onwards. This is confirmed by an extremely low level of firearm violence in the country.

Since 2017, on average, two or three firearms have been seized a year in the context of firearms trafficking, according to data from the Estonian authorities. It should be borne in mind that many firearms that are trafficked are not necessarily registered as being part of firearms trafficking: a substantial proportion of the firearms seized are registered as illicit possession. The Estonian Internal Security Service has reported that the illegal firearm market still exists, but that its size is dwindling.<sup>480</sup> However, just one year after issuing that

report, a voluminous cache of reactivated firearms was found in the possession of one criminal gang.<sup>481</sup>

Firearm conversion from blank-firing to live-firing is more prevalent in Latvia and Lithuania than in Estonia. This usually involves gas pistols that did not until 2011 have to be registered with police. Lithuania recognized that converted/assembled firearms are a significant problem. According to the 2020 UNODC study, the country ranks highest in the world with regard to assembled firearms seized, and well above average in seizures of reactivated and modified firearms.<sup>482</sup> The same is also evidenced by firearm seizures, 91% of which in 2017 involved converted or assembled firearms. Trafficking in these firearms can be potentially lucrative as some of these can be purchased at prices as low as €50 and sold for much higher amounts, yielding high profits.<sup>483</sup>

Gas pistols were often acquired in Latvia prior to 2011 and then converted in Lithuania. In 2010, 56% of all seized firearms were converted gas and alarm pistols. The change in the law created a sharp drop in gas pistol sales: from 6,850 in 2010 to 691 in 2012. Today, a significant number of previously purchased gas pistols are believed to remain in circulation.<sup>484</sup> During the 1990s, the most important source of illegal firearms in Latvia was so-called ‘black digging’, where Second World War firearms are found, restored and offered on the black market.<sup>485</sup> The Latvian police report on recent cases of significant seizures of groups (allegedly) involved in trafficking in July 2020<sup>486</sup> and January 2021.<sup>487</sup> These seizures concern relatively high quantities of automatic rifle.

More recently, Latvian officials have expressed concerns about cases of firearms trafficking between Latvia/Lithuania and Russia.<sup>488</sup> In 2015, the Russian police dismantled a smuggling ring that trafficked firearms between Latvia and Russia.<sup>489</sup> In 2018, a Ukrainian national was caught smuggling seven SMG and 97 Tokarev pistol magazines from Russia into Latvia. There are also reports that Russian-made weapons are being imported via Belarus or Ukraine into Lithuania. These firearms can remain in Lithuania or Latvia or they can be trafficked onwards to the Nordic countries (most importantly, Finland). The Russian-made firearms and cartridges are known to be significantly cheaper than their European-made equivalents.<sup>490</sup>

#### 4.4.7 Nordic countries: place to be for firearms

While most Nordic countries have traditionally been found to have significant holdings of firearms, this was related mostly to a hunting culture rather than criminal violence. This has shifted as Sweden and Denmark tend to attract attention from firearm-traffickers because criminal gangs have a high demand for quality firearms. Although Denmark experiences a high proportion of firearm seizures, at present it seems to have less of a problem with firearms trafficking and firearm violence than Sweden. Finland has a substantial national reservoir of legal firearms, far in excess of its estimated stockpile of illegal firearms. However, there is a market for illegal handguns, and diversion from military stockpiles has

also been noted as a problem in Finland. Norway was not part of the countries investigated for Project TARGET and so no information on that country is available.

The problem of firearm violence and trafficking among the Nordic countries is most serious in **Sweden**. In the past the national reservoir of illegally held firearms is considered to be limited, which is why Swedish criminals have had to look beyond national borders to acquire firearms. Experts claim that Sweden has historically under-appreciated the problem of trafficking, which resulted in a thriving illegal arms market.<sup>491</sup> The main source of illegal firearms in Sweden today remains smuggling from the Western Balkans, though recent trends have seen a steady flow of blank-firing weapons coming into Sweden and criminals acquiring higher-quality firearms and parts through parcel services. Swedish police and legislators have come to recognise the problem of firearms trafficking.

When we look, for instance, at Sweden's seizure rates, we note that it stands out as a country with not only a high proportion of seizures, but also a significant proportion of those seizures comprise automatic rifles. Between 2010 and 2019, a total of 8,245 firearms were seized (an average of 824.5 per year with higher numbers in more recent years). Seizures are made up of mostly handguns (67%), but a relatively high portion falls in the category of military weapons (7.3%); the former are heavily restricted in Sweden, the latter are forbidden. Since there is no conflict legacy stockpile in Sweden, these firearms are believed to be trafficked into the country.<sup>492</sup>

Firearms trafficking has significantly contributed to increased firearms availability in Sweden. Reports indicate that older firearms from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are readily available in Sweden,<sup>493</sup> but criminals are increasingly becoming interested in more modern, better firearms (Glock and Smith&Wesson in particular are popular brands).<sup>494</sup> Swedish crime groups therefore have the 'luxury' of being selective in the firearms they use, a feat not shared by many OCGs in Europe. The main trafficking methods remain smuggling via 'ant trade', where a steady stream of small quantities of firearms are smuggled into the country. Criminals generally perceive firearms trafficking into Sweden as 'low risk',<sup>495</sup> using general access roads into Sweden such as the Öresund Bridge or the Malmö harbour. For instance, 75% of all firearm seizures in Sweden in 2012 were carried out in those two areas.<sup>496</sup>

Apart from traditional smuggling, Sweden stands out as a country with a relatively high level of seizures of converted firearms, most of which are converted handguns. The 2020 UNODC report on trafficking in Europe ranks Sweden second highest (after the United Kingdom) for the proportion of seizures being converted firearms.<sup>497</sup> Expert interviews confirm that converted firearms are a particular problem in Sweden.<sup>498</sup> For a long time, one Norwegian firearm dealer ('Game On') was known to purchase and convert blank firing weapons and then ship these to Sweden. Since Norway has – pressured by Sweden – mandated that blank-firing weapons ought to be registered after purchase, police officers claim that this problem has been resolved.<sup>499</sup>

Converted firearms remain a problem in Sweden, however, even though these are no longer predominantly purchased abroad physically. Mail and courier services are becoming

common methods for trafficking firearms, mainly of blank-firing and gas guns. The Baltic States can also play a role in sourcing or transiting these blank-firing guns. These are purchased in countries where registration is not required and then converted elsewhere or in Sweden. One expert noted that about 80% of gas guns enter Sweden unconverted.<sup>500</sup> The hotspots are usually in Eastern Europe, and particularly Bulgaria. Bulgarian arms dealers purchase Turkish gas guns and then traffic them to Sweden.<sup>501</sup> Europol's operation Bosphorus regularly notes trafficking lines from Turkey into Bulgaria towards Sweden.<sup>502</sup> One smuggler who was caught in operation Bosphorus had paid SEK44,000 (€4,340) for 98 pistols, converted these and sold them for SEK220,000 (€21,700).<sup>503</sup> More recently, these blank-firing and gas pistols are being brought into Sweden unconverted, since the penalties for smuggling blank-firing firearms are significantly less stringent than for trafficking live-firing firearms. A recent publication by investigative journalists Mathias Ståle and Jani Pirttisalo highlights the problem of Swedish weaponsmiths and the way they are arming criminals, mainly with converted firearms.<sup>504</sup>

For some time, reactivated firearms from Slovakia were known as a problem in Sweden. A group of three men – known as the Skåne Network – managed to smuggle 236 firearms into Sweden that were purchased as deactivated firearms in Slovakia. About half of them were (czech-made) Škorpion SMGs. After the trio were apprehended by the authorities, a certain number of these firearms were recovered, but 160 are still missing.<sup>505</sup> It is believed that there is no longer a flow of deactivated firearms into Sweden since the EU decreed more stringent deactivation standards. But some of the firearms that were smuggled into Sweden prior to 2016 probably remain in the hands of criminal gangs.

The situation in **Denmark** is surprisingly different from that of Sweden. Whereas Denmark has relatively high levels of firearm seizure and surrender, these firearms are typically less available for (criminal) misuse than those in Sweden. To compare: in their most recent amnesty period (2017), a total of 10,459 weapons were surrendered to the authorities;<sup>506</sup> in Sweden, a country with twice the population of Denmark, only a slightly higher number of weapons were surrendered (12,364). This can be explained by Denmark's strict firearm law and high numbers of seizures and surrenders of hunting rifles and shotguns. The Danish police have registered decreasing levels of firearms seized between 2009 (1,119 illegal firearms registered) and 2013 (620 illegal firearms registered), but has since registered slight increases until 2016 (941 illegal firearms registered).<sup>507</sup>

This increase can be attributed to renewed attention being given to the problems of illegal holdings of firearms by police services. Firearm seizures are only slightly lower in Denmark than in Sweden (on average, 750 during 2013–2016).<sup>508</sup> Since then, however, most sources mention decreasing levels of seizures in Denmark (only 499 in 2020).<sup>509</sup> Surrender programs in Denmark during amnesties can give an indication of the illegal holdings. In their last three amnesty periods, 8,085 (2009), 17,516 (2013) and 19,026 (2017) live- and blank-firing firearms were surrendered. Increasing levels of airguns and blank-firing weapons are particularly noticeable.<sup>510</sup> There is, however, no detailed report of the types of firearm that are surrendered, although there is information about firearm seizures. Firearm seizures involve mostly pistols and revolvers. In 2015, more than 40% of seizures involved pistols and revolvers, 22% involved shotguns and 11–15% involved rifles. Machine guns (0.5%) and

SMGs (5.5%) are not particularly common. If they are seized or surrendered, they are most commonly Zastava machine guns and Škorpion SMGs.<sup>511</sup>

Shootings, whether lethal or non-lethal, are not particularly prevalent in Denmark, especially compared to Sweden. Shootings were a problem around 2008, when increasing levels of gang shootings were observed, half of these committed – according to the Danish National Police’s new Forensic Centre (NKC) – with firearms from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.<sup>512</sup> This resulted in increased efforts to stem the flow of illegal firearms, but almost no seizures were made at the Danish border in subsequent years.<sup>513</sup> Most recently, police services have been intercepting increasing levels of firearms in postal packages.<sup>514</sup> Firearms trafficking from the Western Balkans uses Denmark mainly as a transit rather than a destination country. This is usually explained by the fact that many former residents of the Western Balkans and their families have settled in Sweden since the 1990s, not in Denmark.<sup>515</sup>

Given the high number of firearms trafficked into Sweden through Denmark, law-enforcement officials are convinced that the number of seizures in Denmark is too low.<sup>516</sup> The only type of seizure that is consistently on the rise is that of (converted) gas pistols, which are purchased in other countries and converted in Denmark.<sup>517</sup> They are considered to be very available and have a low risk of being detected. Danish street gangs are often found in the possession of these firearms, which tend to be of lower quality. Despite this, the large-scale conversion of gas pistols is rare in Denmark. In January 2019, the Danish national police seized 12 gas pistols and two revolvers in Skævinge, which was considered to be a seizure of considerable magnitude.<sup>518</sup> As described in Chapter 3, Danish OCGs exercise more restraint when using firearms.<sup>519</sup>

In 2014, **Finland** reported to the CSES that up to 70% of firearms seized in Finland were produced outside of the country (10% even outside of Europe).<sup>520</sup> The report does not detail the country of origin of these firearms, but it is likely that these involve imported and/or converted gas pistols. Gas pistols are regularly found in postal packages in Finland. The decreasing availability of handguns in Finland – the country having regulated these more thoroughly since two school shootings in the 2000s – has resulted in the increasing popularity of (converted) gas pistols, which are usually purchased online.

This explains why these pistols are consistently the most seized firearm in Finland.<sup>521</sup> Firearm seizures in Finland increased between 2010 and 2016 from 2,783 to 3,527 (26.7%).<sup>522</sup> This gives Finland the highest number of firearm seizures in the Nordic countries. Expert estimates of the number of illegal firearms in Finland put it significantly lower than legal firearms – at present, the Small Arms Survey estimates there to be some 250,000 illegal firearms in Finland.<sup>523</sup> Customs agencies have seized on average 200 firearms each year during 2015–2019.<sup>524</sup> Besides lively imports of gas pistols, most of the illegal firearm market in Finland is self-serving. Despite its proximity to Russia, most illegal firearms in Finland result from inter-European smuggling instead. However, the Finnish authorities do warn about so-called ‘gun floating’ from Russia, where firearms are purchased legally in Russia and then sold in Finland and Lithuania.<sup>525</sup>

Deactivated firearms are encountered regularly in Finland, though these do not usually stem from Slovakia. Instead, one source lay within the country: the Finnish military chose to deactivate its surplus of automatic and semi-automatic military-grade firearms, which could be purchased without a license at the time. Throughout the 1980s, such firearms were even a common gift; they were not deactivated properly and therefore could be reactivated. They have been noted to have been in the possession of several OMGs and have even been used in Finland's neighboring countries and the Baltic States. On rare occasions, these firearms are also encountered in Russia. Their presence has not been reported on in other parts of Europe.<sup>526</sup>

The Nordic countries paint a mixed picture of firearms trafficking. In Finland, military diversion, theft and the import of (converted) gas pistols are the main sources of supply for the illegal market. There is, however, not a particularly high level of firearm violence in the country, and, when it does occur, it seems to be connected to domestic or public dispute (often involving alcohol). Firearm violence is generally higher in Denmark, though it is not particularly lethal. This seems attributable to lower-quality firearms in Denmark. The Swedish situation is remarkably different, where the country is a destination region for a great variety of trafficked firearms. These factors result in high levels of lethal and non-lethal gun violence.

#### 4.4.8 North-Western Europe: destination and transit point

The countries of north-western Europe – mainly Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany – were known traditionally as destination countries for firearms trafficking. They have since equally taken up the role of transit countries, especially as it involves firearm conversion. We can start by comparing Belgium and the Netherlands. The data suggest that firearm seizures in Belgium are focused on the illegal possession of firearms; the illegal trade in firearms seems to attract more attention in the Netherlands (though we cannot say for certain). Whereas trafficked firearms usually tend to pass through Belgium – after, for instance, being converted – they tend to stay within the Netherlands. France and Germany are some of the most important destination countries for firearms trafficking.

**Belgium and the Netherlands** have consistently high rates of firearm seizure. The Belgian federal police reported on average 5,500 offences of illicit firearm possession a year in Belgium during 2009–2019, with the incidence increasing.<sup>527</sup> Illicit possession is more widespread in the south (Wallonia) and the capital (Brussels) of Belgium than in the north (Flanders). Prohibited firearms – such as automatic rifles – usually make up about 8% of cases. The number of firearms that are actually seized is not as high: on average, about 2,280 seized firearms were registered a year in the Central Weapons Register (CWR) during 2010–2019. This is less than half of the cases of illicit possession. Even if only a small portion of illicit possession results in seizures, Belgium still has high levels of seizures – seventh highest among all European countries that reported to the UNODC.<sup>528</sup> The Netherlands is just one place ahead of Belgium on the UNODC list. A report published by the Dutch police shows that 23,725 firearms were seized between 2013 and August 2015, an average of 9,490 firearms

a year.<sup>529</sup> The UNODC report indicates seizures in the Netherlands in 2016–2017 at about 6,000.<sup>530</sup> These numbers were confirmed by the Dutch police, with numbers rising above 6,000 in 2020.<sup>531</sup>

A greater difference emerges between Belgium and the Netherlands when we look specifically at the illegal trade in firearms. The Belgian police registered about 320 cases of illegal trade in weapons every year during 2009–2019, of which on average the illegal trade in firearms made up about 180 cases.<sup>532</sup> Exceptionally high levels were registered in 2015 and 2016 (of about 600 cases), most likely as a response to the 2015 Paris attack and the 2016 Brussels attack. These cases occurred for the most part in the regions of Brussels, Liège, Namur, Limburg and Antwerp. In the Netherlands, there were significantly more cases of illegal trade in firearms than in Belgium. Since it began reporting on the illicit trade of firearms, the Netherlands has had fluctuating numbers of cases of illegal firearms trade: between 4,200 and 6,500 a year, with an average of 5,437 cases every year during 2012–2020. The rates have been on the increase since 2017. This is roughly 30 times higher than the 180 cases yearly in Belgium. However, the Netherlands use the same legal category to describe illicit possession and trade of firearms, which could also include other weapons. The higher number of trafficking cases thus does not necessarily mean more illegal trafficking of firearms in the Netherlands.<sup>533</sup> The lack of properly disaggregated data makes estimating the scope of characteristics of trafficking in the Netherlands very difficult.

The majority of firearm seizures in Belgium were registered not as firearms that are trafficked but mostly as non-regularised hunting rifles and shotguns.<sup>534</sup> There was, however, an increase in the prohibited firearms (mostly automatic rifles) being traded illegally from 9% to 14% between 2009 and 2015.<sup>535</sup> In the Netherlands, firearm seizures during 2013–2015 were categorised as handguns (31%), imitation firearms (18%), alarm/gas pistols (18%), rifles (16%) and machine guns (2%), the remainder being firearm parts and other (15%).<sup>536</sup> More recently, the Dutch police reported a significant increase in seizures of gas pistols (+65%) and automatic rifles (+20%) during 2016–2020.<sup>537</sup>

There is good reason to assume that significant proportions of the blank firing weapons and automatic rifles that were seized in the Netherlands and Belgium were trafficked. Belgium is known to have a thriving trafficking market for firearms. One element here is a collector's market,<sup>538</sup> though the major component driving firearms trafficking in Belgium is crime – that is, crime groups who use firearms to pursue other criminal activities (including outlaw motorcycle gangs. Access to military-grade firearms depends on criminal rank and connections, where lower-ranking criminals usually possess converted gas pistols and higher-ranking criminals can gain access to reputable handguns, even automatic firearms.<sup>539</sup>

Increases in the use of higher-quality firearms by armed robbers and drug-traffickers have been observed in recent years.<sup>540</sup> These are believed to have entered the country through firearms trafficking. The main forms of traffic that occur in Belgium are smuggling organised by OCGs, firearm conversion and firearm reactivation. Smuggled firearms usually arrive from the Western Balkans; converted firearms are usually converted in Belgium but produced in Turkey or Italy; and reactivated firearms have usually travelled from Slovakia.

Flobert-calibre rifles have also been known to be converted in Belgium, although not much more information about these was forthcoming.<sup>541</sup>

In the case of the Netherlands, a 2014 estimate of firearms trafficking claimed that between 10,000 and 15,000 firearms were trafficked into and through the country every year.<sup>542</sup> Firearm experts in the Netherlands believe that the country is predominantly a destination country for these firearms, even though limited numbers might travel to Belgium or the United Kingdom.<sup>543</sup> Besides firearms smuggled from Belgium and Germany, the Netherlands has been known to receive an influx of firearms smuggled from the former Yugoslavia. Improperly deactivated firearms from Slovakia have also been noted on the Dutch criminal market.<sup>544</sup> Converted Turkish and Italian gas pistols are also seized frequently in the Netherlands.<sup>545</sup>

As with Belgium and the Netherlands, **France** has been known as a destination country for firearms trafficking. The French law-enforcement agencies report a fairly consistent number of firearms trafficking and firearm seizures. *La section centrale armes, explosifs et matières sensibles* disaggregates the total number of firearms as accounting for 82% to illegal possession or use; the remaining 18% involved various criminal offences (including trafficking). Very few of criminal offences were actually cases of trafficking, yet a number of cases of illegal possession might actually have been cases of illegal trafficking.<sup>546</sup>

**Figure 4.5: Police (2015) and Customs (2016) seizures in France**

**Figure 4.5** shows the distribution of firearm seizures Customs authorities and police across categories A, B, C and D. Whereas category C is consistently seized the most by police and Customs, we note a higher proportion of category D having been seized by police and higher proportion of category A (forbidden firearms) by Customs. The proportion of category A seizures is proportionally high for Europe.<sup>547</sup> When we consider convictions relating to trafficking specifically, we note in 2017 a total of 7,589 convictions for breach of the regulations regarding the trade in and the transportation of firearms (a gradual increase from 5,631 convictions in 2006).<sup>548</sup>

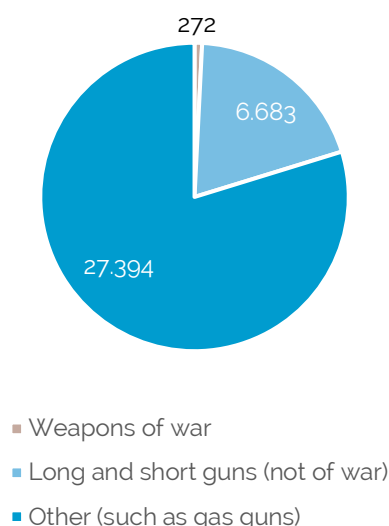


High levels of firearm seizures need not – so experts believe – necessarily mean high levels of trafficking. The majority of illegal firearms in France are believed to be purchased legally and inadequately registered, declared or authorised. This is believed to be especially true for seizures in categories C and D.<sup>549</sup> When considering illegal firearms in France that were trafficked, we note that France has been one of the primary destination countries for firearms trafficked from the Western Balkans.<sup>550</sup> Before 2015, this topic was dealt with mostly

in the context of organised crime,<sup>551</sup> but the Jihadi terrorist attacks in that year shifted attention to the ways in which terrorists acquire firearms. Firearms could arrive in France through a myriad means: directly from the Western Balkans over the eastern (Slovenia–Austria) or southern (Italy) route; deactivated firearms from Slovakia that were reactivated either in France or elsewhere (such as Belgium); converted firearms from Czechia or Slovakia that were reconverted in various workshops; Italian or Turkish gas pistols which were often converted in Portugal and then trafficked to France;<sup>552</sup> internet purchases of firearms – either in full or in parts, most often from the United States.<sup>553</sup>

Germany's role in firearms trafficking is difficult to characterise. The great majority of firearms seized in Germany are of German design.<sup>554</sup> Amnesty programmes were held regularly after 2000, but they are not considered to have been particularly successful.<sup>1</sup> Owing to its location, Germany is believed to be a major destination and transit country for gun-trafficking.<sup>555</sup>

**Figure 4.6: Customs seizures in Germany, 2013–2019**



Customs seizures during 2013–2019 ( $n = 34,349$ ) (the distribution of which is shown in **Figure 4.6**)<sup>556</sup>

reveal that the vast majority of seizures concern the category 'other' (which are blank-firing firearms). Of all firearm seizures during this period, 57% were done in 2013; they included 16,563 'other' firearms. In 2003, following the Erfurt School Massacre of 2002, Germany amended its firearm law with a *Kleiner Waffenschein* (§ 10 Abs. 4 Satz 4 WaffG), which required a special type of licence for owning and carrying blank-firing firearms. These licences could be obtained relatively easily, subject to the following requirements:

- one cannot have any prior convictions exceeding one year in prison;
- one has to abide by safe-storage rules;
- one has to be 18 years old and without a known alcohol or drug addiction; and
- one has to be mentally and physically fit.

When this licence is acquired, the (purchase of) the blank-firing firearm need not be registered. Finally, it bears mention that German-based providers have been extensively

<sup>1</sup> One reason for this is that the latest amnesty of July 2017–July 2018 did not cover transporting the firearm to the place of surrender. Many individuals were subsequently charged for transporting an illegal firearm. See Welt.de. (2010) 'Waffenamnestie bereitet reuigen Bürgern Ärger', *Welt*, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article5726792/Waffenamnestie-bereitet-reuigen-Buergern-Aerger.html>.

implicated in the (illicit) internet sales of firearms due to Germany's now rescinded criminal-law provisions regarding the operation of an illegal market place.<sup>557</sup>

#### 4.4.9 Mediterranean Europe: access to firearms by sea

Mediterranean Europe tends to function as a place of destination and transit for firearms trafficking. Despite the fact that the problem is widespread and recognised by local authorities, it was difficult to obtain reliable information about the scope and characteristics of firearms trafficking in these countries. What can be surmised from the available data is that Italy is an important destination and transit country for firearms, particularly from the Western Balkans, which tend to be trafficked through mafia-styled crime groups. Spain, however, is known particularly as a transit country for deactivated, reconverted and converted firearms. Portugal has been known to be a hub for converting blank firing weapons into live-firing firearms. Greece, finally, is believed to play a role in trafficking firearms from the Western Balkans to the rest of Europe. The country has little information publicly available about either firearm violence or firearms trafficking, though.

In Italy, mafia-styled crime groups have been known to engage in firearms trafficking both to facilitate their own activities and in order to make a profit. This latter motivation is traditionally unusual, since most European OCGs view firearms trafficking as high risk-low reward. Despite this, Italian OCGs were known to act as go-betweens in firearms trafficking to MENA and to separatist groups in Europe (such as the IRA). To furbish their own arsenal of firearms, Italian mafia groups anchored themselves in the Western Balkan countries and Albania in the 1990s to safeguard a steady flow of firearms. While that arsenal is not believed to have decreased, firearm use in the context of organised crime has diminished impressively in Italy. Expert interviews suggest that the main firearm-related difficulties in Italy are believed to be lenient legislation and problematic oversight of legally acquired handguns. These result in a high incidence of domestic firearm violence.<sup>558</sup>

There are no publicly available official data on seizures in Italy after 2000. Research Project FIRE acquired information on firearm seizures in Italy based on a media analysis and found a serious rise in instances of seizure between 2010 (32 cases) and 2014 (160). According to Project FIRE's analysis, this ranks Italy in second place regarding the most cases of firearms trafficking uncovered.<sup>559</sup> Mafia-style groups in Italy have access to a wide arsenal of high-quality firearms, such as 9 mm pistols, 7.65 mm machine guns and AK-47 rifles.<sup>560</sup> While Italy is known to have a large number of legally available firearms, it is believed that most firearms used by criminal groups are illegal and are often acquired through various forms of trafficking. Particularly prevalent are the so-called 'Chinese' Kalashnikovs, which were produced in Albania.<sup>561</sup> Older seizure reports found that most illegal firearms in Italy are of Yugoslav, Albanian or Eastern European origin.<sup>562</sup> A report on firearm seizures in Rome (2012) reveals that 90% of illegal firearms originated from the Balkans, in particular Croatia.<sup>563</sup>

While there are no official seizure data, police reports on individual seizures in Italy confirm that the scope and variety of trafficked firearms in Italy are substantial. Operation Lethal Arm (2015) confiscated more than 200 firearms in the area around Milan and Brescia, including six machine pistols, 24 automatic rifles, 74 semi-automatic rifles and 76 handguns.<sup>564</sup> A raid of an OCG's headquarters in Milan (2017) resulted in the seizure of several Kalashnikovs, a shotgun and many handguns.<sup>565</sup> In the same year, a raid in Crotona resulted in 13 shotguns, eight handguns and 1,200 pieces of ammunition being seized. While they had been produced in Italy, these latter firearms did not have serial numbers.<sup>566</sup>

In addition to being a country of destination for firearms trafficking, Italy is also known as a transit and – to a lesser extent – source country for firearms trafficking. The Italian firearm manufacturer Tanfoglio produced the GT28, a blank-firing version of the GT27, which could easily and safely be converted into a live-firing firearm. This type of firearm was acquired widely and converted in clandestine workshops, but the model has since been retired.<sup>567</sup> As a transit country, Italy is part of the southern route where firearms are trafficked from the Western Balkans into Western Europe.

In **Spain**, problems with firearms have been a long-term priority for law enforcement. While the *Guardia Civil* consequently has much information available on the topic, their reports concerning firearm seizures and trafficking ought to be contextualised. Importantly, the UN PoA report on Spain suggests that firearm seizures occur for the following legal reasons: 9% for illegal possession, 6% for illicit use and 1% for illegal trafficking. This means that 84% of firearm seizures involve firearms that are not held or used illegally. Most are seized as preventive measures.<sup>568</sup> This division between preventive measures and illicit possession or trafficking has remained more or less stable in recent years, but the share of trafficking can fluctuate impressively. The proportion of illicit trafficking fluctuated (10% in 2016, 1% in 2017, 1% in 2018), as did the percentage of illicit possession (6% in 2016, 4% in 2017, 9% in 2018). These differences are due in part to the extensive seizures made to combat illicit trafficking. Such seizures can lead to 'inflated' trafficking numbers in individual years. In other years, the number of seized firearms can seem very low. In 2018, for example, of a total of 7,194 firearm seizures, only 647 involved illicit possession and 72 were explicitly related to trafficking.<sup>569</sup>

The *Guardia Civil* has provided data regarding the firearms that were seized between 2008 and 2018, but this is not disaggregated according to the reasons for seizures. **Table 4.2** shows the type and quantity of firearms seized by the *Guardia Civil* during 2009–2018.

Table 4.2: Firearm seizures by Guardia Civil, 2009–2018<sup>570</sup>

| Types  <br>Years    | 2008  | 2009  | 2010  | 2011  | 2012  | 2013  | 2014  | 2015  | 2016  | 2017   | 2018  |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| <b>Pistols</b>      | –     | 971   | 801   | 878   | 2,249 | 1,590 | 1,480 | 1,262 | 1,549 | 4,389  | 2,235 |
| <b>Revolvers</b>    | –     | 356   | 261   | 315   | 1,022 | 692   | 561   | 507   | 1,216 | 1,185  | 653   |
| <b>Rifles</b>       | –     | 1,092 | 990   | 1,061 | 1,302 | 1,268 | 1,305 | 1,177 | 1,563 | 1,597  | 1,458 |
| <b>Shotguns</b>     | –     | 4,079 | 3,667 | 3,731 | 4,595 | 3,951 | 3,525 | 3,177 | 4,657 | 3,303  | 2,794 |
| <b>SMGs</b>         | –     | 59    | 4     | 24    | 208   | 14    | 18    | 36    | 17    | 125    | 0     |
| <b>Machine guns</b> | –     | 0     | 0     | 4     | 2     | 0     | 8     | 2     | 1     | 3      | 1     |
| <b>Other</b>        | –     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0      | 53    |
| <b>Total</b>        | 3,528 | 6,557 | 5,723 | 6,013 | 9,378 | 7,515 | 6,897 | 6,161 | 9,003 | 10,602 | 7,194 |

Sources: *Guardia Civil*;<sup>571</sup> National Report on the Implementation of the Programme of Action on SALW (PoA) and the International Tracing Instrument (ITI);<sup>572</sup> UNODC<sup>573</sup>

Since it is impossible to discern according to which legal reason firearms are seized, nothing definite can be said about illegal possession and trafficking in Spain based on this information. Some speculation can be offered, though. Spanish firearm legislation places checks on handgun possession (and SMGs and machine guns are, for the most part, prohibited). In 2018, 92% of firearm licences were for long firearms (rifles and shotguns) and 0.6% were specifically for short firearms (the remaining 7.4% could be for either type). There were 35,152 licences for sports shooting, which tend to be for short guns (2% of licences). When we then assume that only 3% of licences were granted specifically for short guns, the fact that 40.1% of seizures involved pistols and revolvers makes one believe that a large part of short-gun seizures involved firearms that were held illegally.<sup>574</sup> There is, however, no way to confirm this. When we consider the firearms seized at Spanish Customs, we note serious fluctuations in the quantity: from 114 firearms seized in 2014 to 827 in 2016 to only 24 in 2019.<sup>575</sup> All of this suggests that for the size of its country and the amount of legal holdings, Spain has recorded a fairly low number of seizures in the context of illegal possession and trafficking.

It can, however, be helpful to consider specific cases of firearms trafficking to gain a better picture of the ways in which Spain was (and possibly still is) implicated in illicit trafficking.

Of those seizures by the *Guardia Civil* in the context of trafficking 50% involved reactivated and reconverted firearms. Today, Spain has tight deactivation protocols, but these apply only to firearms intended for sale. Consequently, improperly deactivated firearms that came into or were produced in Spain prior to 2011 can still be found, because people who acquired these prior to 2011 did not have to deactivate them more effectively. They could therefore have changed hands illegally without proper deactivation. Operation Portu (2017) located and seized close to 10,000 firearms that had been deactivated and were believed to be able to be reactivated on request in Madrid, Bilbao, Valencia and Gerona.<sup>576</sup> However, the accused in this case were acquitted. To date, there are still reports of deactivated firearms being brought into Spain to be reactivated. While these firearms have been deactivated more rigorously, they can be reactivated by purchasing essential components over the internet, which was what Operation Alpes (2018) discovered in Spain: the Operation exposed 14 Glock frames.<sup>577</sup> Apart from these reactivated firearms, there was an influx of firearms that had been converted into acoustic expansion rifles. These rifles were brought from Slovakia to workshops in Spain that specialise in their reconversion.<sup>578</sup> In 2020, a total of 731 firearms were seized and 21 individuals arrested in one case of firearm reconversion.<sup>579</sup>

The conversion of blank-firing weapons pistols and Flobert guns has also been noted in Spain. These comprise 25% of the firearms seized by the *Guardia Civil* in the context of firearms trafficking. Their seizure became more prominent after 2011, when it came to be more difficult to purchase and reactivate deactivated firearms. The previously mentioned Operation Bosphorus (2017–2018) resulted in the arrest of 46 individuals in Spain and the seizure of 247 alarm pistols. In addition, a number of workshops specialising in firearm conversion were subsequently dismantled.<sup>580</sup> Not only were gas pistols converted in these workshops, but it was noted that Flobert firearms (often from Slovakia) were converted there too.<sup>581</sup> Conflict legacy firearms from the Balkans and Eastern Europe were reported in Spain, but these comprised only 5% of firearm seizures in the context of trafficking. This form of trafficking was used mostly by OCGs that were also involved in drug-trafficking.<sup>582</sup> Finally, although not yet widespread, 3D-printing of firearms has also been noted recently in Spain. Several 3D-firearm printing factories were dismantled on Tenerife in September 2020, where the authorities also found books on white supremacy and several rightwing extremist symbols.<sup>583</sup>

**Portugal's** annual homeland security report mentions 8,555 firearm seizures in 2017 and 10,536 firearm seizures in 2018.<sup>584</sup> According to the UN PoA, there were five cases of illicit trafficking in 2018 and seven cases in 2019 (the same number of cases are mentioned in the section on the illegal manufacturing of firearms).<sup>585</sup> In previous reports, a higher number of cases was declared: 15 in 2015–2016 and 112 in 2010–2011.<sup>586</sup> Firearm conversion was and remains a major problem in Portugal, where first Italian and later Turkish gas pistols were converted into live-firing firearms.

**Greece's** police services reported on average 4,866 offences against the weapons law during 2011–2019, with a high of 7,223 offences in 2013.<sup>587</sup> These concerned all types of weapon, not just firearms. Firearm seizures, particularly, averaged about 2,512 during 2010–2015, with a high of 3,618 in 2013; this is an increase on the 1,367 firearm seizures on average during 2004–2009.<sup>588</sup> There is no specific official information on firearm seizures after 2015. It is

worth mentioning that the Greek official information excludes firearms that are not seized ‘regularly’ (such as gas pistols). When major levels of firearm seizure were noted, these firearms usually traversed Greek waters and were not necessarily bound for Greece or any European country. For instance, in 2016, a large shipment of firearms (almost 5,000 shotguns) was found by the Hellenic police on a cargo ship headed for Libya from Turkey.<sup>589</sup> Because of its geographical location, Greece is considered to be predominantly a transit and destination country for SALW from the Western Balkans and Albania. One study estimated that between 350,000 and 400,000 unlicensed firearms had been imported into the country around 2000.<sup>590</sup> That a great variety of (illegal) firearms remain available in Greece is evidenced by a voluminous firearm seizure in Heraklion as part of an anti-drug operation: several long rifles, machine guns, handguns and gas pistols were seized.<sup>591</sup>

The involvement of **Malta** and **Cyprus** in firearms trafficking is difficult to assess. Given their geographical location, they are believed to play a role in trafficking firearms to and from North Africa and Turkey. The minister for national security of Malta considered firearms trafficking to be a major challenge in 2017.<sup>592</sup> No publicly available data on firearm seizures and trafficking in Malta are available. One case of trafficking concerned members of the Italian Cosa Nostra, who used Malta as a country of transit for reactivated firearms intended for Egypt.<sup>593</sup> In the case of Cyprus, Project DIVERT showed that there had been more seizures in the northern part of Cyprus than in the southern part.<sup>594</sup>

## 4.5 Conclusions

The general conclusions of this chapter can be summarised as follows:

- Firearm seizures are an imperfect proxy for understanding firearms trafficking in and into the European Union.
- While its scope seems lower than firearms trafficking in some other parts of the world, firearms trafficking has important consequences for personal and national safety.
- Firearms trafficking is not restricted to smuggling firearms from one place to another; it also takes the form of various types of firearm conversion and firearm assembling.
- Firearm conversion is a multifaceted phenomenon that can include reactivating deactivated firearms, reconverting firearms that were converted into AEWs, converting blank-firing firearms into live-firing firearms and converting Flobert-calibre firearms into higher-calibre, higher-velocity firearms.
- Firearm assembling has not been as widespread as firearm conversion, but it seems to be increasing in popularity. It includes (internet) purchases of firearm parts and subsequently assembling these, but also 3D-printing of firearms through additive manufacturing.
- The traditionally closed character of the illicit gun markets in Europe seems to be eroding, partly because of different forms of firearm conversion, partly because of internet purchases and 3D-printing.

- Different European regions can roughly be categorised as source, transit and destination regions. All of these functions emerge, in one form or another, in most regions, but often these regions tend to have a specific focus.
- Currently, one of the most important challenges to firearms trafficking is firearm conversion from blank-firing firearms to live-firing firearms. These weapons have moved relatively freely in Europe for a long time and can be expected to turn up in criminal milieus for decades to come.
- Firearm conversion is changing the long-term dynamic of firearms trafficking in Europe. Whereas firearms were usually trafficked in small numbers by OCGs to facilitate their activities, we have noted increasing levels of larger shipments of cheap gas or Flobert guns that can be converted and sold at high profits. If firearms trafficking were to become a profit-oriented occupation, this would probably increase the availability of illegal firearms throughout the EU.

# 5



## The impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun violence: seven case studies

In this report, we have outlined the scope (Chapter 1), characteristics (Chapter 2) and contexts (Chapter 3) of firearm violence in Europe. We have found that gun violence differs greatly depending on country and context. We decided to single out the impact of a single element on gun violence – firearm trafficking. We therefore described the scope, types and characteristics of gun-trafficking in Europe (Chapter 4). In this chapter, we use the seven national case studies for Project TARGET – wherefrom all information is sourced, unless noted otherwise – to indicate what exactly the impact is of firearms trafficking on gun violence in Estonia, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain. The will be published in a separate report in early 2022.

### 5.1 Estonia: from hotbed of illicit firearms trafficking violence to some of the lowest levels of gun violence

The analysis in Chapter 1 of this report indicates that Estonia, with a rate of 0.01 firearm homicides per 100,000 of the population, has one of the lowest rates of lethal gun violence in Europe. In the past two decades, the number of homicides has dropped spectacularly: from 188 in 2003 to 34 in 2019 (-77%). The number of gun homicides in the country followed the same pattern. In 1994, 121 gun homicides were recorded in Estonia, a number that started to decrease in the second half of the 1990s. By 2003, Estonia counted only 14 gun homicides and, since the mid-2000s, the number of gun homicides a year has been shown as a single digit and has remained relatively stable overall. In 2019 only one gun homicide was recorded.

The strong decline in gun homicides coincided with the declining availability of illegal firearms and illicit firearms trafficking in the country. In the first years of its return to independence in 1991, the country faced a string of upheavals, with rising levels of crime, the proliferation of weapons and (gun) violence. During this period, the country was notorious for easy access to and the illicit flows of firearms. The collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR),

weak state capacities and corruption have led to significant amounts of weaponry being diverted from state stockpiles into the hands of Estonian criminal groups. Owing to this availability of weapons, Estonia became an important source of and transit country for firearms trafficking in the region. Even politicians were accused of being involved in illicit firearms trafficking. By the end of the 1990s, the Estonian authorities were able to strengthen their efforts at combating illicit firearms trafficking by reinforcing state structures, regaining control over its borders and territory, implementing preventive measures and encouraging greater penalties for acts of gun violence. Over the years, the authorities were able to reduce the problem of illicit firearms trafficking *'to the point where firearms trafficking can largely be described as a non-issue'*.<sup>595</sup> Since the end of 2000s, only a few trafficking cases involving manufactured live-firing firearms have been observed.

While illicit firearms trafficking still takes place in the country, this phenomenon is believed to be small in scope and organised trafficking is a relatively rare occurrence. Illicit firearms trafficking is mainly ad hoc or opportunity-based, and often involves small quantities. Firearms trafficking into Estonia includes the cross-border smuggling of firearms stolen from private homes in neighbouring Latvia but also the reactivation of deactivated firearms or conversion of blank-firing weapons that were brought into the country by criminal groups, sometimes via the postal services. The blank-firing weapons (a shift from Russian Baikals to Turkish Zorakis has been noted) and deactivated firearms (mostly pistols and Kalashnikov-type firearms) are generally brought into the country before conversion and are most often not destined for the local market. Estonia serves mainly as a transit country for such weapons to other countries such as Russia, Scandinavia or the other Baltic States. Trafficking from Russia to Latvia has been noted, but not to Estonia. The weapons are occasionally reactivated or converted in Estonia before being trafficked abroad. While firearms are sometimes seized in drug-trafficking cases, these weapons are believed to be present as an instrument for self-protection of the traffickers themselves instead of as goods being trafficked.

The level of illicit firearm possession in Estonia is believed to be very low and not increasing. In 2019, fewer than 100 weapons offences were recorded in the country. The main types of illicit firearm that are illegally held nowadays are generally legacy weapons from World War Two and the collapse of the USSR that have not been regularised. These weapons have ended up in the hands of criminals and ordinary citizens in the country. Although organised criminal groups (OCGs) are believed to have larger and more capable arms caches, these weapons are not frequently used by such groups and appear to be kept in reserve in case a conflict arises. The Estonian authorities have taken the initiative to target these weapons caches. The illicit supply of firearms is believed to be connected to the increased activities of the Estonian authorities in investigating, seizing and removing firearms in addition to strengthening state capacities in general. The improvement of the security situation in the country has resulted in less demand for firearms for self-protection. The movement of non-regularised legacy weapons is generally quite stagnant: they are usually not circulating within the country but rather kept in the same place by the same persons for many years. It is believed that the observation of increased use of replicas and fake guns is an indication that the availability of firearms on illicit gun markets is decreasing.

Successive Estonian governments have not only strengthened the fight against illicit firearms trafficking, but have also introduced better-regulated legal firearm possession in the country. After independence, a first Weapons Act was introduced in 1995 and a second, more comprehensive and restrictive Act entered into effect in 2002 (it was last amended in 2020). The rate of legal gun ownership is low in Estonia, with some 26,000 persons owning in total about 74,000 firearms (mainly for self-protection and hunting).

In the second half of the 1990s the criminal landscape settled, the economy stabilised and law-enforcement agencies became more successful at combating organised crime. By the early 2000s most of the violent OCGs operating in Estonia had been dismantled and, currently, only a handful of active OCGs in the country are considered dangerous. Criminal gun violence has become rare in Estonia. The Estonian authorities explain this by stating that criminals prefer not to use firearms because this leads to greater law-enforcement attention and therefore generates additional risks ('blood is bad for business'). The criminal demand for firearms was also decreased by the establishment of the 'Common Fund', an umbrella group financed by criminals that was established to help settle disagreements within the criminal milieu peacefully instead of by resorting to violence. In recent years, a limited number of criminal gun violence incidents have taken place, but these seem to be the result of individual behaviour and not a systematic or routine use of firearms by criminal groups. The Estonian security forces, however, are currently concerned about the potential rise of outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) in their country, since they fear this will increase drug-trafficking and firearms trafficking and boost armed violence in the country.

Chapter 3 highlighted the tendency for lethal gun violence in Estonia generally to take place in private settings and involve a perpetrator and victim(s) who know each other. This type of violence is often connected to the consumption of alcohol:

*The biggest risk factor and most common contextual element in gun violence in Estonia is the consumption of alcohol .... The consumption of alcohol can lead to arguments between family, friends and acquaintances which can escalate into cases of lethal violence, though more often conducted with knives or sharp objects, firearms are also used.<sup>596</sup>*

During 2007–2010, 90% of all homicides involved a perpetrator, victim or both under the influence of alcohol and since 2010 registered cases of weapons possession combined with intoxication have increased. The connection between high levels of alcohol consumption and violence is not a new phenomenon in Estonia, but it worsened after alcohol restrictions were eased following the return to independence in the 1990s. ID-Estonia shows that the perpetrators of acts of violence between people who are in a close relationship, often prompted by alcohol intoxication, tend to use the weapons that are immediately available to them, including firearms:

*Homicides in Estonia are mainly comprised of perpetrators and suspects that know each other and/or are in close relationships, which is reflected in firearms violence. This is likely because firearms often represent one weapon among many that could be reached for during the heat of an argument when in the perpetrator or victims' house or property.<sup>597</sup>*

Interestingly, detected incidents of lethal gun violence carried out by intoxicated perpetrators indicate that these men used either trafficked firearms or legally held or stolen firearms. The link between illicit firearms trafficking and alcohol-driven acts of gun violence therefore seems less strong or direct than that between illicit firearms trafficking and the limited number of criminal acts of gun violence.

In Estonia, about half of the firearms used in acts of lethal gun violence are currently unregistered. Data from the Estonian authorities indicate that the proportion of gun homicides perpetrated with unregistered firearms decreased from 80% during 2010–2014 (20 of 25 cases) to 47% during 2015–2019 (7 of 15 cases). The Estonian Forensic Institute noted that, based only on their own experience, gun violence constituted about a 50–50 split between legally held and illegally held firearms. Although we have to be careful in interpreting this data, owing to the low number of gun homicides in the country, the observed decrease in the use of unregistered guns in gun homicide is probably linked to the observed decrease in criminal gun violence whereas domestic incidents of gun violence, more often perpetrated with legally held firearms, remained relatively stable. The Estonian police noted that the perpetrators of acts of gun violence in the country use whatever weapons are available, and this includes pistols, hunting rifles and other types of firearm. An analysis of media reports on cases of gun violence suggests that pistols are most commonly used in the various contexts of gun violence. Interestingly, the Estonian police added that the firearms used in gun violence are generally older models, for example Tokarev pistols from the 1990s that were diverted in the aftermath of the return to independence and which have been possessed illegally ever since.

Given all of these observations, we can conclude that the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun violence in Estonia is currently rather limited. Domestic gun violence and violence between acquaintances is often perpetrated with legally held firearms. When illegally held firearms are used in such acts of violence, they are not believed to have been trafficked into or within the country recently but are rather the result of diversion that occurred many years previously. Although criminal gun violence still occurs, this type of violence has decreased substantially since the 1990s. The low number of criminal acts of gun violence, which generally involve illegally held firearms, is related to the limited firearms trafficking destined for Estonia (which is mainly a transit country) and the low demand for firearms from criminals who operate in a rather stable criminal environment, preferring not to use such weapons because of the perceived increased risks associated with their use in Estonia.

## 5.2 Poland: insufficient data to link illicit firearms trafficking to observed low levels of gun violence

Poland has one of the lowest firearm homicide rates in Europe (see Chapter 1). As in Estonia, low levels of illicit firearms trafficking destined for the internal illicit gun market, the limited availability of firearms and the low criminal demand for firearms go hand in hand with low

levels of gun violence in general and criminal gun violence in particular. Law-enforcement data indicate that during 2014–2019 on average 76 robberies with the use of firearms take place per year (which is probably an over-estimate, given that the victims and/or witnesses will often not be able to make a distinction between live-firing firearms, blank-firing weapons and fake guns or replicas). The data also record less than five ‘brawls or assaults’ a year involving firearms. The available law-enforcement data are unfortunately not detailed enough to enable us to differentiate between the various contexts of gun homicide in Poland or to analyse the type, legal status and trafficking route of firearms used in gun violence in the country.

Illicit firearm possession and trafficking is currently rather limited in Poland, but this has not always been the case. Illicit firearms trafficking increased substantially after the fall of the USSR, when emerging criminal groups fought each other in an attempt to profit from and control lucrative criminal markets. This led to increasing levels of gun violence in the country and boosted the criminal demand for firearms. This increase in criminal violence and demand for firearms coincides with a shift in the types of firearm trafficked into and within the country. In the 1990s, the main types of firearm seized and forensically examined were home-made firearms, blank-firing weapons and converted blank-firing weapons (mainly for 6.35 mm Browning-type bullets). Since 1995, the number of firearm seizures and examinations has increased and reached a peak around 2000. The types of firearm seized during this period were mainly those smuggled into Poland from neighbouring countries – Czechia and Slovakia – including Škorpion sub-machine guns (SMGs) and CZ 1975 semi-automatic pistols (and its updated version CZ 1985) which were manufactured in the former Czechoslovakia. In the 2000s, an increase in the number of firearms trafficked into the country from Russia was observed. These trends suggest that an increased criminal demand for firearms, connected to increasing competition between OCGs, has boosted illicit firearms trafficking into Poland from neighbouring countries. Since 2005, the number of forensically examined firearms has started to decrease gradually.

Czechia and Slovakia are still considered key source countries for illicit firearms trafficking into the country. Such cross-border trafficking activities are generally undertaken by OCGs, often with members from Poland and the source countries, who sometimes exclusively operate in the illicit arms trade. While some of these weapons are destined for the local illicit gun market, Poland is also a transit country for, for example, firearms smuggled from Czechia through Poland and the Baltic States to Russia. Deactivated firearms trafficked from Slovakia have also been reactivated in Poland and then trafficked to other EU Member States. The conversion of firearms has been identified as a problem in Poland, with the dismantling of illegal conversion workshops in the country and also the emergence of Turkish-made blank-firing pistols on the Polish illicit gun market since 2011. The use of the internet and postal services to traffic firearms has also been detected by law-enforcement agencies.

The most recent available data on firearms seizures indicate that handguns (32%), long guns such as rifles, shotguns and carbines (28%) and various types of blank-firing weapon (29%) were seized in similar quantities during 2014–2019. Home-made firearms are also still being seized but in much lower numbers. Although a decrease in the number of seized firearms has been observed recently (from 1,338 seized firearms in 2014 to 802 seized firearms in 2019),

this subdivision of seized firearms has remained relatively stable. This suggests that, while the overall illicit availability of firearms within the country has been decreasing, spectacular divergent trends in trafficking methods have not been observed and the availability of different types of firearm has not shifted dramatically.

ID-Poland warns about the risk of increased firearms trafficking in conflict legacy weapons from Ukraine. While the overall scope of this illicit firearms trafficking and the availability of trafficked firearms on the illicit firearms market in Poland remains quite low compared to those of other European countries, the number of firearms seized by border guards has increased spectacularly recently: from a fluctuation between 12 and 81 seized firearms during 2014–2018 to 181 seized in 2019. In recent years, several seizures of firearms and other types of weapon, including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and explosives, were made on the Polish-Ukrainian border. A foiled trafficking case that received a lot of media coverage was the arrest of a 25-year-old French national in May 2016 who tried to smuggle five Kalashnikov-type assault rifles, 5,000 bullets, two anti-tank grenade launchers, detonators and 125 kg of TNT from Ukraine across the Polish border. According to the Ukrainian authorities, the arms smuggler was planning rightwing terrorist attacks on synagogues, mosques, public buildings and key infrastructure in France while the European football championship was being held in the country. He was convicted for preparing a terrorist attack, illicit possession of weapons and attempted arms trafficking and sentenced to six years in prison.<sup>598</sup>

Europol has repeatedly warned about the trafficking risks involved in the illicit proliferation of firearms and other types of weapon in Ukraine in recent years.<sup>599</sup> The UNODC recently added that ‘the situation in Ukraine is considered critical with regard to future illicit firearms trafficking to the European Union’.<sup>600</sup> The illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the country is not only connected to the recent armed conflict in the country and the continuing violence in the country, but is also the result of a historical legacy of Cold War surplus weapons, the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for firearm possession and the frequent conversion of replica firearms and blank-firing weapons into live-firing firearms.<sup>601</sup> It is currently unclear whether Ukraine will become a significant source country for illicit firearms trafficking into Poland and to what extent this will affect the rates of gun violence in Poland, which is likely to mainly become a transit country in this scenario.

### 5.3 Serbia: armed conflict legacy fuelling gun violence

Serbia is characterised by relatively high levels of gun violence compared to other European countries. It has managed, however, to decrease incidents with firearms generally. Today, firearms homicides in Serbia are almost always carried out by male perpetrators (98%), mainly take place in urban areas (77% during 2015–2019) and usually involve the use of a pistol (72%). While most of the gun homicide victims are men, an important distinction

needs to be made between the criminal and the domestic acts of lethal gun violence: in gun homicides that are explicitly characterised as domestic, 70% of the victims are women.

Firearm possession is high in Serbia as a result of cultural and historical traditions, the legacy of a large arms industry and large armed forces, the armed conflicts in the region in the 1990s and a general atmosphere of insecurity in the post-conflict situation. Legal firearm possession is motivated mainly by hunting (42%) and self-protection (40%) and increased between 2012 and 2016 due to an increased demand by young men. The armed conflicts following the break-up of former Yugoslavia and political instability in the following years fuelled the illicit possession of firearms and led to a high percentage of particularly men who had direct personal experience with firearms.<sup>I</sup> During the conflict, significant numbers of firearms, ammunition and other types of weapon ended up in the hands of civilians.

As a result of this significant quantity of conflict legacy weapons in the country, Serbia has become a source country for illicit firearms trafficking to other European countries. While the Western Balkans are primarily characterised by intra-regional firearms trafficking, a strong demand and high prices for these weapons in other regions in Europe have also led to trafficking in handguns, automatic rifles, ammunition, hand grenades and mines to these regions. This trafficking is often carried out by OCGs, who smuggle the firearms, usually together with other illicit goods, to central European countries (such as Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Austria) and from there to countries in Western Europe (such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands) and Scandinavia (such as Sweden and Norway). The firearms are generally trafficked overland and hidden in various types of vehicle. Illicit firearms trafficking is carried out mostly by citizens of Serbia and other countries from the Western Balkans, Turkey and citizens from Western European countries with their ancestral roots in the Western Balkans or Turkey. These criminal groups are often formed ad hoc.

After being trafficked to Western Europe and Scandinavia, these firearms from Serbia have been used in acts of gun violence, including in terrorist attacks. As discussed in Chapter 3, Serbian-made firearms repeatedly show up in criminal violence, especially in Sweden and the Netherlands. These are predominantly in the hands of criminals, which suggests that they were procured on the illegal criminal market.

Serbia is, however, not only a source country but also a transit country for illicit firearms trafficking. The illicit proliferation of firearms has been witnessed in the whole region and has resulted in significant trafficking in firearms mainly from east to west – for example, from Turkey and Kosovo<sup>II</sup> to Western Europe or Scandinavia. In recent years, Serbia has also become a transit country for trafficking in easy-to-convert blank-firing weapons, although some of these weapons are also destined for the domestic market.

The armed conflicts of the 1990s in the region have had an enormous impact on the illicit proliferation and trafficking in firearms from and through Serbia. Since the early 2000s,

<sup>I</sup> In 2017, 43% of surveyed men indicated that they had used a gun, had had a gun directed at them, or both, compared to 14% of the surveyed women. While men stated that this was mainly the result of the armed conflicts in the region, women more often noted that their experience was connected to intimidation, threats and celebratory shootings.

<sup>II</sup> References to Kosovo must be understood to be in the context of the Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

though, Serbia has been characterised by increased political stability, improved border controls and increased law-enforcement capacities. This is believed to have led to a significant decrease in illicit firearms trafficking. However, despite legalisation and amnesty campaigns, the level of illicit firearm possession in the country has remained high and firearms trafficking continues to pose a problem. In 2018–2019, more than 2,600 firearms, 75,000 rounds of ammunition, and 300 bombs and explosive devices were seized.

Many public shootings are connected to (organised) criminal activities with criminals as perpetrators and victims. In general, though, criminal gun violence is believed to be decreasing in the country: police statistics indicate that the number of criminal offences committed with firearms decreased drastically between 2015 and 2019. While no specific trend could be identified regarding gun homicides and the number of domestic gun violence incidents remained stable, the reported incidents of criminal gun violence decreased substantially during this period. Criminal acts of gun violence in Serbia often involve armed robberies or are connected to trafficking in drugs or migrants. The number of robberies carried out with firearms in particular has decreased substantially. Although detailed statistics are unavailable, it is believed that in Serbia acts of gun violence are mainly perpetrated with illicitly held firearms. These weapons are often not trafficked internationally, but more likely sourced domestically from the significant quantities of remaining post-conflict weapons.

While criminal gun violence seems to have decreased, the number of reported incidents of gun violence within the domestic sphere has remained quite stable. The available data on homicides in the family context are very interesting: they show that 27% of all lethal victims in such violence in Serbia between 2015 and 2019 were killed with a firearm. This renders the misuse of firearms much more lethal in domestic acts of gun violence than in criminal acts of gun violence. Data on the legal status of firearms used in gun homicides in Serbia suggest that mainly legally held firearms are used: of the 25 cases in which data on the legal status were recorded, 19 were carried out with firearms which were in legal possession. Since criminal gun violence is carried out mostly with illegally held firearms, this implies that in acts of lethal domestic gun violence legally held firearms are used quite frequently. As in the other in-depth country studies, we can conclude that the link between illicit firearms trafficking and criminal gun violence is much stronger than the connections between illicit firearms trafficking and domestic gun violence. Domestic violence sometimes also spills over into public shootings: five of the six public mass shootings that were carried out between 2000 and 2018 in Serbia started as a domestic incident or involved the shooting of an (ex-)partner or family member.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the findings of this country study is that (domestic) illicit firearms trafficking is to a certain extent connected to the high levels of gun violence within Serbia, but that this connection is much stronger for international illicit firearms trafficking from or through Serbia to other parts of Europe, where they are used in acts of gun violence.

## 5.4 Sweden: international illicit firearms trafficking fuelling a vicious cycle of gun violence

Since 2010, Sweden has been characterised by a significant increase in the number of shootings. This is largely connected to disorganised youth gangs who are prone to using firearms and seem to have easy access to them.

Legal firearms possession is traditionally high in Sweden compared to other European countries, but the number of legal gun-owners began decreasing in the 2000s. In contrast, illicit firearm possession is believed to have been increasing during the past decade. Whereas reliable estimates of illicit firearm possession in Sweden are unavailable, the illicit firearm market is known to be very active. Illicit access to firearms is very easy for those within or connected to criminal networks and the availability of firearms on the criminal market is increasing. The number of violations of the weapons law increased from 4,844 in 2010 to 7,427 in 2019, as has also the number of firearms seized by the police: from 398 firearms in 2010 to 962 in 2019. The majority of seized firearms are handguns, including converted firearms; however, revolvers, rifles and shotguns are also being seized. In Sweden, military-grade firearms such as automatic rifles and SMGs comprise a small share of the total quantity of seized firearms, but this share is much higher than in other European countries and these types of firearm are becoming increasingly available. The increased availability of firearms in Sweden is closely connected to increased illicit firearms trafficking.

The criminal demand for firearms in Sweden mainly stems from persons connected to local criminal groups in so-called ‘vulnerable areas’ in the country; this demand has increased substantially since the mid-2010s. This demand has been met by the increasing supply of firearms trafficked from other European countries into Sweden. Traditionally, these firearms are conflict legacy weapons trafficked overland or by ferry from source countries in the Western Balkans such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This type of international trafficking in firearms – generally handguns but also military-grade firearms smuggled in small quantities via Denmark – is often carried out and facilitated by Balkan criminals living in Sweden.

During 2000–2010, criminal gun violence in Sweden generally involved the use of semi-automatic pistols – often trafficked from Eastern Europe – for carrying out armed robberies and murders. Various types of firearm were smuggled, but Glock and Smith&Wesson handguns were particularly sought-after. Military-grade firearms were quite exceptional during this period, which changed during 2010–2020. A 2013 report from the Swedish police indicates that most of the firearms used in acts of gun violence at that time were illegally trafficked from the Western Balkans. Interestingly, a very different picture has emerged in neighbouring Denmark, where shootings with trafficked firearms from the Western Balkans occur much less frequently. In the mid-2010s an influx of high-grade firearms from the Western Balkans was observed in Sweden, which resulted in the changing dynamics of illicit gun markets and much easier access to firearms. The trafficking in military-grade firearms and shootings with such firearms have become much more common in Sweden. Certain firearms – for example, Glock pistols – have a good reputation and are in high demand.

Whereas older firearms from Eastern and South-East Europe – for example, old Kalashnikov-type rifles – are readily available, Swedish criminals are increasingly looking for firearms produced in Western Europe and the United States.

In recent years, illicit firearms trafficking has become more multifaceted, with the opening up of various different routes and methods of trafficking. Although they have been a source of diversion for a while, converted blank-firing weapons – mainly manufactured in Turkey – have become increasingly common in the past few years and have increasingly been used in shootings. These blank-firing weapons are generally acquired legally, first in Norway, but later in Eastern European countries; and after delivery in Sweden they are converted into live-firing firearms. A recent trend is the shift in use from smaller converted weapons to larger models. Sometimes these converted weapons have their appearance copied and are sold as top-brand handguns.

Another type of illicit firearms trafficking involves the reactivation of deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons (AEW). Since the mid-2010s reactivated firearms – including automatic assault rifles and SMGs – legally acquired in Slovakia and trafficked into Sweden have been used in shootings in Sweden. According to Customs authorities, some of these weapons have been trafficked as parcels posted to criminals. As a result of European and national initiatives to combat this source, the problem of reactivated firearms has become less prevalent. For now, Flobert firearms have not been observed in large quantities.

Criminals have easy access to manufactured ammunition and ammunition generally purchased together with a firearm. According to the interviews in the ID-Sweden study, the legal sale of ammunition without registration offers opportunities for diversion. Related to illicit firearms trafficking is also the increase in the supply and use of hand grenades and other explosive devices from the former Yugoslavia. These explosives are generally smuggled together with firearms and often come from the same supplier. Hand grenades can be acquired very cheaply and it is reported that they are sometimes included free of charge when orders for firearms are placed.

## 5.5 The Netherlands: the nexus of illicit firearm- and drug-trafficking

The number of gun homicides has decreased markedly (by 66.6%) since the early 1990s: from 93 in 1992 to 31 in 2020. Yet this does not mean that firearms have become less prevalent as a modus operandi for crime: firearms were used in 35% of homicides in the Netherlands between 1992 and 2020 and this share has remained relatively stable. The majority of recorded shootings in the Netherlands are, however, non-lethal: during 2018–2020, 1,891 shootings were registered. Gun violence is mainly an urban phenomenon. Both lethal and non-lethal shootings are highly concentrated in the largest cities of the country. In these shootings, pistols are the main weapon used but revolvers, rifles and military-grade firearms are also involved.

The illicit trafficking in military-grade firearms – in particular Kalashnikov-type rifles but also other types of military-grade firearm – is closely connected to criminal gun violence in the Netherlands. Rifles and (sub-)machine guns are used less often than pistols in shootings in the Netherlands, but almost exclusively in shootings in the criminal milieu. Remarkably, about 23% of the shootings between 2015 and 2019 were carried out using automatic firearms and about 10% of them involved the use of Kalashnikov-type rifles. Previous studies have demonstrated that Kalashnikov-type rifles circulating on illicit gun markets in Western Europe are mainly conflict legacy weapons from the Western Balkans that are smuggled by hiding them in concealed parts of various types of vehicle. These weapons are often trafficked in small shipments together with other illicit goods, especially drugs.

Illicit firearms trafficking and international drug-trafficking in the Netherlands seem to go hand in hand. For decades the Netherlands has been an important entry point for internal drug-trafficking. While in the 1990s this trafficking involved mainly cannabis, cocaine-trafficking has increased substantially in the 2000s. Many criminals in the Netherlands are directly or indirectly connected to international drug-trafficking. The very lucrative character of cocaine-trafficking has substantially altered the dynamics of the criminal landscape in the Netherlands and has increased the criminal demand for firearms. Illicit firearms trafficking in military-grade firearms has in recent years been fulfilling this criminal demand and fuelled gun violence in the Netherlands. The 2017 Organised Crime National Threat Assessment (NTA) noted the increased use of automatic rifles. Before 2012, shootings with such firearms were rather rare and were mainly connected to the cannabis trade and cash-in-transport heists. Since 2012, the use of automatic rifles for liquidations, mainly within the drug-trafficking world, has increased and spread across the country. The assessment further noted that cocaine-trafficking in particular has led to increased gun violence and it is expected that this violence will continue to increase because new criminal groups will compete with established criminal groups. The assessment further noted that synthetic drug production and trafficking has also become related to violence and the use of automatic rifles.<sup>602</sup>

Project TARGET analyses indicate that a significant number of mainly non-lethal shootings take place in middle-sized and small cities in the south of the Netherlands, close to the Belgian border, where synthetic drug production is an important criminal activity and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are particularly active. We can conclude that an arms race among OCGs and individuals connected to organised crime has resulted in the increased availability and use of automatic weapons:

*Where automatic firearms were once rare, criminals may now feel the need to acquire increasingly more dangerous firearms for personal protection against rivals, who are also arming up.*<sup>603</sup>

In recent years, several high-profile criminals but also a lawyer and a crime journalist have been lethally shot in the Netherlands.

More recently, the number of recorded cases of illicit arms trade and possession has increased from 4,252 in 2017 to 6,500 in 2020. The Netherlands is both a destination and a transit country for illicit firearms trafficking. While some of the firearms trafficked to the country are subsequently smuggled abroad, especially to Belgium and the United Kingdom, most of these firearms remain within the country. It is believed that in the past criminal groups in the Netherlands cooperated with particular firearm-traffickers but that nowadays criminals seem to rely on different sources to acquire their firearms. In addition to the trafficking in conflict legacy weapons from the Western Balkans (especially Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia), firearms have in recent years also been trafficked from Slovakia (deactivated firearms and AEW). These can involve high-quality firearms such as Glocks and automatic rifles. Other types of firearms trafficking include the smuggling of easy-to-convert blank-firing weapons and the use of parcel services to transfer firearms and firearm components ordered online, mainly from the United States.

In addition, Dutch National Police data indicate that not only the number of seized automatic firearms increased substantially between 2016 and 2020, but also the number of seized blank-firing weapons. The trafficking in blank-firing weapons can also be connected to gun violence in the country: between 2015 and 2019, these weapons were used in 5% of the lethal shootings and 10% of the non-lethal shootings that involved a human target in the Netherlands, while converted blank-firing weapons were used in 3% of the lethal shootings and 6% of the non-lethal shootings. In recent years, an interesting trend has been observed: whereas in 2008 blank-firing weapons were produced mainly in Italy and trafficked into the Netherlands after conversion in Portugal, most of the blank-firing weapons today are produced in Turkey, sold in Bulgaria and converted in the Netherlands. Dutch citizens have been noted to be working together with Czech and UK citizens in order to facilitate firearms trafficking.

We can conclude that a clear nexus of drug-trafficking and various types of illicit firearms trafficking exists in the Netherlands and that this nexus has in recent years led to the increased availability of various types of firearm, including automatic rifles, and also to comparatively high levels of gun violence. To date there have been no indications that this nexus will become less strong in the coming years.

## 5.6 Belgium: clear linkages between illicit firearms trafficking and different types of criminal gun violence

Belgium has a reputation as a hotspot for illicit firearms trafficking in Europe. While the rate of illegal firearm possession is relatively high, the majority of these illegally possessed firearms are weapons that were not regularised after successive changes of gun legislation in the country since 2006. A significant share of the illegally possessed firearms in the country, however, were acquired on the illicit gun market. This illicit gun market is driven by

criminal demand: illegally held firearms are used by various types of criminal in Belgium, ranging from international drug-traffickers via OMGs and armed robbers to crime groups involved in human-trafficking, or street gangs. While mainly handguns and (converted) blank-firing firearms are believed to be available on the illicit gun market, different types of criminal tend to possess and use different types of firearm in Belgium:

*[On the one hand], young and low-ranking criminals in Belgium often possess and use converted alarm pistols, antique firearms or even fake guns. On the other hand, more experienced, organised and higher-ranking criminals prefer to obtain weapons with a 'good' reputation via their networks, such as Glock pistols, and are prepared to pay more for them. Only specific categories of criminals – such as major drug traffickers, robbers targeting heavily secured targets and OMGs – have access to assault rifles, which have often been smuggled from the Balkans and other conflict areas.<sup>604</sup>*

This finding suggests that different types of illicit firearms trafficking are connected to various types of criminal gun violence. In addition, a significant increase in the use of firearms, including military-grade firearms, in the criminal world has been observed in recent years and this is believed also to have increased the availability of such weapons for terrorists.

In Belgium, most acts of gun violence take place in the context of armed robberies. Criminal gun violence in Belgium is mainly carried out in public spaces. Robberies in which firearms are used generally involve the use of handguns, which are easy to conceal and transport. A significant share of these robberies are carried out using 'freely obtainable weapons' and modified firearms. Armed robberies are very often carried out by young and less-experienced criminals, who do not always have access to real live-firing firearms and who do not necessarily need to shoot with these weapons since threatening usually suffices. In the 346 analysed cases of robberies with a firearm only 22 victims were injured and only one victim was killed. In some robberies, military-grade firearms can be used, but this generally involves robberies at highly secured targets.

While most firearm threats seem to occur during armed robberies in Belgium, actual shootings seem more often to be connected to violence within the drug milieu. Belgium is an important entry point for illicit drug-trafficking into Europe and also an important production country for synthetic drugs and cannabis. Criminals involved in these upstream drug activities generally have illegal access to a wide range of firearms, which they use as a tool to deter rivals and to protect themselves and their cargo. Not surprisingly, a large share of drug-related gun violence takes place in Antwerp, where the harbour is located, and its surroundings. Also, drug-related gun violence is known to take place in the border region with the Netherlands, where drug-trafficking levels tend to be high. Although these criminals tend to possess and use handguns, military-grade firearms are used relatively more often than in other criminal contexts.

The main types of illicit firearms trafficking in Belgium currently involve the cross-border smuggling of conflict legacy firearms, easy-to-convert or converted blank-firing weapons

and easy-to-reactivate or reactivated or deactivated firearms. These different types of trafficking seem to be connected to different types of criminal gun violence. The trafficking in easy-to-reactivate and reactivated firearms and easy-to-convert and converted blank-firing weapons is closely connected to criminal gun violence in Belgium. Almost 20% of the firearms used in shootings analysed by the National Ballistics Institute in Belgium between 2006 and 2020 involved modified firearms such as reactivated, converted and assembled weapons. Ballistics data suggest that modified firearms are more often used in a criminal context than in non-criminal contexts and that the number of incidents perpetrated with modified firearms analysed has increased. The conversion of blank-firing weapons increased substantially in the early 2000s. In the early days these were often of Italian origin, but this has shifted towards Turkish-manufactured blank-firing weapons.<sup>605</sup> These types of weapon are often found among drug criminals and petty offenders. The weapons are often converted by their owners themselves. The illicit reactivation and assembly of firearms is also often carried out in Belgium. As in other Western European countries, a significant share of the deactivated firearms currently trafficked inside Belgium originates from legal sales in Slovakia (see Chapter 4 section 4.4).

While the trafficking in (converted) easy-to-convert blank-firing weapons has fuelled the use of such weapons in both armed robberies and downstream drug activities such as street dealing, ballistics analyses suggest that the trafficking in military-grade firearms is closely connected to more serious criminal gun violence in Belgium. 'Prohibited' firearms account for 19% of all ballistics analyses between 2006 and 2020, but this type of firearm comprises 29% of all firearms used in the context of organised crime, 31% of firearms used in the criminal milieu and 48% of offences against state security. Military-grade firearms are very often conflict legacy weapons smuggled into Belgium from source countries in the Western Balkans. The trafficking in these firearms not only fuelled their use in armed robberies on heavily secured targets and in upstream drug activities, but also in terrorist gun violence. A similar observation can be made with regard to the trafficking in (reactivated) easy-to-reactivate firearms. These weapons have been seized from and used by criminals but have also been trafficked via Belgium to end up eventually in the hands of terrorists in neighbouring countries such as France (eg the Hypercacher supermarket hostage-taking in January 2015).

In contrast to criminal gun violence, the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun violence within the family context is quite limited. Ballistics analyses suggest that this type of gun violence, which is mainly carried out in private homes in Belgium, is to a significant extent carried out with long guns such as rifles, shotguns and carbines. According to our media analysis, these acts of gun violence tend to be triggered by feelings of jealousy or financial disputes. Our analyses further indicate that familial violence is more lethal than criminal or other types of violence and more often victimises women. The perpetrators of these acts of violence tend to use the weapons that are available to them at that time. Although detailed data on the legal status of the firearms used are not available, case studies suggest that this type of violence is more often carried out with legally held firearms than is the case with criminal violence. The types of firearm used in these acts of gun violence also reflect the types of firearm possessed legally. In addition, shotguns are not frequently trafficked in Belgium. The connection between legal access to firearms and incidents of gun violence in

the family context would also explain the higher number of gun homicides in the Walloon region in Belgium, where the rate of legal firearm possession is much higher than in the other regions. There is, furthermore, an indication that in the past legally held firearms were often used in lethal incidents of gun violence: the observed strong decrease in gun homicides and its specific timing immediately after the change in legalisation in 2006 suggest that stricter rules for firearm possession restricted legal access to firearms and therefore also contributed to fewer lethal incidents with legally held firearms. In the family context, illicitly held firearms have been used, but these weapons are not necessarily trafficked. According to the authorities, non-regularised firearms in Belgium are believed to be used frequently in incidents of gun violence in the family context or in neighbourhood conflicts.

## 5.7 Spain: firearm skill for supply and transit

Spain has one of the lowest rates of homicide (0.6) and firearm homicide (0.1) per 100,000 of the population in Europe. With some annual variation, firearms tend to be used in less than 20% of homicides; non-lethal firearm incidents – including accidents, attempted suicides and assaults – have equally low rates (0.5 injuries by firearm per 100,000 of the population in 2015). Spain's firearm law is considered to be strict as a result of dealing with conflict legacy firearms from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and having to deal with separatist violence from *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA). While Spain is regularly implicated in various forms of firearms trafficking, including reactivation and (re)conversion, the available data suggest that trafficking is relatively low into Spain as a destination and tends therefore to have a only marginal impact on firearm violence. This is so because the rate of criminal firearm violence is considered to be relatively low in Spain overall (however, it is highly concentrated in the south) and a large proportion of cases of lethal firearm violence take place in the domestic context. It is typical of that context that either legal firearms or non-trafficked illegal firearms (such as non-regularised hunting rifles) are used. However, firearms that are trafficked into Spain are known to transit to other countries and continents, and are likely to cause violence in their place of destination.

Firearm ownership in Spain decreased steadily from 3,561,487 registered firearms in 2013 to 2,730,740 registered firearms in 2019 (a portion of this impressive decrease ought to be attributed to efforts to optimise the registration database). Firearm possession is dominated by a hunting culture, particularly in the rural parts of Spain, with more than 90% of firearm licences granted for hunting purposes. While Spain does allow for self-protection licences, it interprets these restrictively. For example, only 8,501 licences allow handguns to be carried for self-defence purposes. While the extent of illegal firearm ownership is difficult to assess, Spain is believed to have relatively low levels of illegally held firearms. The latest estimate by the Small Arms Survey puts the amount of illegally held firearms well below the amount of registered firearms – 780,458. Despite high levels of seizures – among the highest in Europe: oscillating between 6,000 and 10,000 during 2009–2018 – no more than 10% of these seizures can be attributed to illegal possession of, trade in or manufacturing of firearms (the remainder are, predominantly, preventive measures). When looking

specifically at the type of firearms seized, we note two things. First, while shotguns are consistently the most seized firearms, handguns (pistols and revolvers) can be up to 50% of firearm seizures; second, 96% of firearms seized in 2018 were unaltered and legally manufactured, whereas 2.4% were converted and 0.6% were reactivated.

Given that there are few licences that allow for possessing a handgun, the high number of handgun seizures suggests that a substantial number of these types of firearm are illegally available. Most of these handguns are then likely (although this cannot be said definitely) to have been manufactured legally and remained unaltered. Because Spain declares that most firearm seizures cannot be traced internationally, this suggests that the illegally held handguns are non-regularised or that they originated from the Spanish Civil War, although the latter option is fairly unlikely. Some of these could be reactivated handguns (in particular Glocks) or converted pistols. Interestingly, the UNODC does report that black market prices in Spain are generally high for unconverted firearms – handguns (€1,500–2,000) and SMGs (€3,500–5,000) – while they are moderate for converted firearms (€300–500). This would suggest that there is a stockpile of illegally held firearms in Spain, but that these do not usually come onto the illegal market. This, in turn, suggests that these are mainly non-regularised firearms.

Firearms trafficking from outside Spain, based on Customs seizures, is not particularly high. During 2014–2018, a total of 1,207 firearms were seized by Customs agents (827 in 2016 alone). While we did not have statistics available that disaggregate the seized firearms by type, Spain changed its firearm law in 2015 to require the registration of gas pistols. The high level of Customs seizures in 2016 might be due to high seizures of gas pistols (the owners possibly not knowing that these had to be registered). Fluctuating levels of seizures are often due to individual seizure cases involving large quantities of gas pistols. Spanish officials believe that the demand for illegal firearms is driven by the criminal environment, criminals seeking firearms to facilitate other activities (such as the drug trade<sup>1</sup>). This drives the demand for high-value firearms, for example, in drug-trafficking, and for low-value firearms, for example, for criminals involved in armed robbery, who often use converted gas guns. In addition, but to a lesser extent, non-criminals who want to protect themselves try to circumvent Spain's strict laws on licensing for self-defence. Another group of illegal customers are hunters looking for additional guns. This indicates that there is a demand for illegal firearms in Spain, yet that this can be considered to be small compared to that of other European countries. If only the southern part of Spain (Andalucía) is taken into account, then the demand for illegal firearms in Spain could be considered to be high.

If firearms trafficking is found at all in Spain, this usually involves the reactivation or reconversion of firearms. Improperly deactivated firearms or firearms converted into blank-firing firearms were produced or brought into Spain before 2011/2015 and reactivated or reconverted in clandestine workshops.

<sup>1</sup> The 2020 UNODC study on firearms trafficking found that Spain was, together with Portugal, the European country in which most firearms were seized in the context of the illicit drug trade. See UNODC. *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, 35.

Given that automatic firearms are almost never seized in Spain, it is likely that these firearms do not remain in the country but transit onwards to other European countries (such as France) or to North Africa. Similarly, Slovakian AEWs are regularly encountered in clandestine workshops in Spain, where they are reconverted. One seizure uncovered 731 such reconverted firearms in the possession of an illegal arms dealer in June 2020. Operation TRETA of the *Guardia Civil* seized 36 firearms, among which were 26 handguns, in December of 2020 that were reactivated AEWs.

Finally, Spanish police report that (converted) gas pistols are becoming more common among low-level criminals, who use these mainly to threaten citizens during armed robberies. Because until 2015 Spain did not require gas pistols to be registered, there is cause to believe that a good number of easy-to-convert Italian and Turkish gas pistols are present in Spain.

Firearms are indeed used within the criminal milieu in Spain, but their usage is seldom lethal and frequently not injurious. As noted, most firearm homicides in the whole of Spain can be traced to the broader domestic sphere; in the south, it is more closely connected to drug crime. While lower-quality firearms are believed to be present in Spain and are regularly used in the commission of crime, most higher-quality firearms that are trafficked into Spain tend to leave the country. Therefore, Spain's involvement in trafficking in firearms is located mostly in the area of conversion or reactivation and in subsequent transiting beyond Spain's borders. The level of firearm skills found in Spain has led to cases of firearm assembling – in 2018, an individual was arrested for importing Glock components from Austria illegally – and cases of 3D-printing of firearms – in April 2021, a 3D-printing workshop was discovered by the Spanish police on Tenerife.

In conclusion, while Spain might not experience elevated rates of firearm violence, it plays a role in providing the firearm skills required to arm criminals with higher- and lower-quality firearms. While there is access to firearms through illicit trafficking, these firearms tend not to be used (lethally) in Spain. There is cause to remain wary, however, since most reports indicate that drug-related crime is rising steadily in Spain.<sup>606</sup> The 2019 Europol report on drugs in Europe confirms that Spain is the major point of entry for both cannabis and cocaine.<sup>607</sup> Owing to its geographical location, Spain is a receiver for drugs from North Africa and South America. We have noted in Sweden and the Netherlands that increased competition within the drug milieu in conjunction with the availability of firearms can be a deadly cocktail. The increased presence of Swedish gangs in the south of Spain (in particular, Marbella) is bringing gang violence to the area.<sup>608</sup> Members of the Dutch 'Mocro mafia' have also been detected in the area.<sup>609</sup> On a more positive note, since 2018, large-scale law-enforcement efforts have begun to deal more systematically with the problem of drug-trafficking in southern Spain and reduce the violence and corruption associated with it.

# 6

## Conclusions and implications



To assess the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun violence, we described the scope, characteristics and contexts of firearm violence, and also the scope and nature of firearms trafficking in Europe since the new millennium. This allowed us to create a framework in which we could describe in detail how illicit firearms trafficking has varied impacts on gun violence in seven countries: Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Serbia and Sweden.

### 6.1 Conclusions

We noted that lethal gun violence still produced somewhere between 791 and 1.356 firearm homicides in 2014. Despite our observing a general decrease in homicide and firearm homicide levels throughout Europe during the two decades since 2000, there are contexts in which firearm violence remains problematic, could, or is making (eg Sweden) a comeback. Furthermore, the scope of non-lethal gun violence has all the appearance of being significantly more extant than lethal gun violence. Most firearm violence within the domestic sphere is done by firearms that are available locally, whether legal or illegally; criminal firearm violence, however, involves mostly handguns, which are not always locally available. In that context, we note a thriving illicit market. The impact of firearms trafficking has become particularly apparent in the Netherlands and Sweden, and to a somewhat lesser extent in Belgium and Denmark. While these countries could, indeed, simply be outliers in Europe, they could also be heralds of a possible future for other Member States. There are, at present, no signs that firearm violence is decreasing in these countries, which is fuelled primarily by firearm- and drug-trafficking.

The general takeaway of Project TARGET is that different forms of firearms trafficking are making firearms more available to criminals in some European countries. Even countries that have done well historically in managing their legal stockpiles of firearms and combating illicit firearms now have to deal with armed criminals because of gun-

trafficking. Trafficking involves both military-grade firearms and firearms of lesser quality, which are to varying degrees available to criminals.

First, trafficking in military-grade, reputable firearms occurs either as direct smuggling (most often from the Western Balkans) or indirectly through weapon reactivation (often involving certain Central European countries). This causes these firearms to become more accessible to criminals, especially to those higher up on the ladder in the drug milieu. This problem is observed particularly in the Netherlands, where we note the usage of high-quality firearms, such as Glock pistols (accounting for 20% of shootings) and automatic rifles, especially Kalashnikov-type rifles and Škorpion sub-machine guns (more than 10% of shootings). These firearms would not be available to criminals in the Netherlands without them being trafficked from other countries. Because of the use of such high-quality firearms, shootings in the criminal milieu in the Netherlands are particularly injurious and lethal. These firearms have also been noted at increasing levels in other countries: Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and France, which could bring out a spiral of more lethal violence in these countries. In addition, the increased trafficking in (easy-to-reactivate and reactivated) deactivated firearms, in particular from Slovakia, in the mid-2010s has increased further the availability of high-quality firearms, including automatic rifles, among criminals across Europe.

Increased competition among rival criminal groups involved in drug-trafficking in the Netherlands is believed to have contributed to an arms race among criminals and consequently more, and more lethal, violence.<sup>610</sup> Where drug couriers were seldom armed in the past, it is now common for them – especially those higher up in the chain – to be armed with firearms. It would be overly simple, however, to attribute increased firearm violence in the Netherlands uniquely to increased competition in drug crime. Spain, for instance, is one of the major transitting hubs for cocaine and cannabis, but has among the lowest levels of firearm violence in Europe. While there is clearly a link between the illegal drug trade and firearm violence, this connection and its enabling elements are an important avenue for further research. Factors that should be taken into consideration are the level of (hierarchical) organisation in the criminal group, the maturity of the members of the criminal group; and the (criminal) connections these criminals have to countries with high levels of firearm availability.

Second, trafficking can also involve less powerful and durable firearms, which usually involves the illicit trade in (converted) blank-firing firearms. Throughout Europe, seizures of blank-firing weapons, such as gas pistols and alarm weapons that may or may not have been converted, have been increasing during the past decade. These are frequently used by lower-level criminals, particularly armed robbers, as a way of threatening or injuring their victims. While they have proven to be not particularly lethal in their pre-conversion form, these firearms are a more serious security risk when they are converted into live-firing firearms. Some brands and types of blank-firing firearm are more easily converted into live-firing firearms than others. While most of these, now, require some sort of licence or declaration in most European countries, the diffuseness of regulations in this respect can create trafficking streams between different countries. What is more, Turkish-made blank-firing weapons are sold in large quantities in countries such as Bulgaria and are

subsequently distributed across Europe in large numbers. The flow of these firearms is creating the opportunity for lower-level criminals to acquire deadly weaponry easily and at a low cost. Similar difficulties emerge with regard to the proliferation of Flobert-calibre firearms: most European countries by now require some sort of licence or declaration for them to be possessed, although they are noted to be trafficked into Europe from Turkey.

With regard to this second point, the trafficking in lower-quality firearms could change the dynamics of firearm trafficking in Europe. This trafficking is conventionally carried out by maintaining a steady stream of small quantities (the so-called ‘ant trade’) of firearms by criminal groups in order to facilitate their criminal activities. Here, profit-oriented trafficking in firearms was considered to be high risk and too low reward. In recent years, however, larger shipments of blank-firing and Flobert guns have been seized that are unlikely to be intended to furnish criminal gangs with firearms. These can be purchased at relatively low cost, converted with often minimal effort and offered on the criminal market for sometimes ten times their initial cost.<sup>1</sup>

The illicit trafficking in firearms and easy-to-convert blank firing weapons is therefore increasing the availability of firearms to criminals at all levels and creating a potentially profitable illegal market. Whereas lethal firearm violence might not be increasing considerably, we found that non-lethal firearm violence can itself have an enormous impact. Regrettably, there are insufficient data to assess the scope, characteristics and cost of non-lethal firearm violence. All the data point in the direction that it is much higher in scope than lethal firearm violence and mainly used in criminal violence.

The factor of firearm availability is an important contributor to firearm violence. This is particularly evident with regard to firearm typology. Handguns are always the most common tool for firearm violence, and in particular criminal gun violence in Europe, although they are not always available. We have noted a higher usage of long guns (such as rifles and shotguns) in countries that have imposed severe limitations on handgun possession (eg the United Kingdom and Ireland), that have a hunting culture (eg Portugal, Finland) or both (eg Spain). In itself, this could suggest that a significant portion of firearm violence in those countries happens in the domestic sphere where firearms trafficking is believed not to play a major role. However, this does not mean that all firearms used in domestic violence are held legally: non-regularised firearms or conflict legacy firearms are also believed to be used frequently in domestic firearm violence. This is particularly evident in post-conflict contexts, such as Serbia. While these might not have been smuggled transnationally, they can have been moved into the possession of the culprit, or remained in their possession, illegally. Furthermore, illegally held firearms are more prone to come onto the illegal criminal market and therefore create a supply line for criminals. This has been noted particularly in the case of Serbia and other countries in the Western Balkans, where vast quantities of conflict legacy firearms have armed criminals and terrorists throughout Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this, a large cache of 2,850 Flobert-calibre Turkish revolvers was seized in Romania at the border crossing with Ukraine. These firearms can be typically bought for between €50 and €100. After conversion into a higher calibre, they can be sold for upwards of €500, which could – for this cache – result in revenue of about €1,000,000.

Turning to future challenges, Project TARGET observed and reiterates two major challenges, namely 3D-printing and internet purchases of firearms. These forms of trafficking are particularly attractive to individuals who have no or fewer connections to existing criminal networks. The number of cases of seizure of 3D-printed firearms have been increasing recently. While the technology is far from perfect, this could create a new source of firearms that are almost impossible to trace.<sup>1</sup>

Our research so indicates that illicit firearms trafficking already significantly impacts both lethal and non-lethal gun violence. If these new sources and forms of trafficking render firearms more available, we can safely assume that they will increase gun violence. There is thus a need for effective policy choices and resolute measures. Project TARGET has attempted to map this issue and so, hopefully, will have contributed to the prevention of violence in the EU.

## 6.2 Implications

Policies to prevent gun violence tend to be event-driven in Europe. Most firearm violence is, as described in this final report, not a major, high-impact and/or public event, but happens mostly behind closed doors (domestic violence) or in ways that do not produce many (lethal) casualties (criminal violence). Gun violence becomes a droning in the background, not a loud bang – easily missed, until it's too late.

Project TARGET concludes that the multifaceted phenomenon of firearm trafficking impacts gun violence in various ways in Europe. Its impact is most clearly apparent in the criminal contexts where increased availability of firearms can rapidly and drastically alter the peaceful course of a country. Yet, lowering rates of lethal gun violence and generally low rates of firearm injuries can produce a false sense of security. To prevent and combat firearms trafficking a long-term structural, comprehensive and proactive approach is needed. This requires a combination of (1) encouraging legislative and policy initiatives to harmonize national legal frameworks across Europe and close existing loopholes, (2) strengthening the operational capacities of the relevant agencies within the EU and in the EU neighbourhood and improving their cooperation and information-sharing, and (3) building a better intelligence picture on firearms trafficking and gun violence.

The research findings of Project TARGET have important implications for the EU priority to build a better intelligence picture.

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<sup>1</sup> New source regions for conflict legacy firearms were also reported throughout researching Project TARGET, such as MENA and Ukraine. Large stockpiles of firearms were used in these conflicts and there is no reason to assume that these military-grade firearms were not or could not be diverted to the population. There is also no reason to believe that they could not subsequently make their way back to Europe.

## Improving the intelligence picture on gun violence

Reliable, detailed and more comparable data is needed to assess the scope, characteristics and dynamics of gun violence in Europe. To prevent such violence, it is crucial to identify the ways in which perpetrators of gun violence acquire their weapons. Yet, publicly-accessible, standardized and comparable data on the firearms that are used in gun violence is very often lacking. To improve the data collection and strategic intelligence picture on gun violence and firearms trafficking, effective and efficient national firearm focal points can play an important role.

For every shooting at least the following information should be collected and made available about the firearm(s) used: (1) type and calibre; (2) brand and origin; (3) legal or illegal ownership. Additionally, the following information with regard to the specific context of the firearm incident the following information should be made available: (4) location; (5) societal context of the shooting; (6) relationship of the perpetrator to the victim; (7) age, gender and background of the perpetrator; (8) age, gender and background of the victim; (9) type of event: (attempted) suicide, accident, (attempted) homicide; (10) outcome: no injury, threat, injury or death. These ten sets of information should ideally be registered for every shooting incident by specialized units within law enforcement agencies in every EU Member State.

Currently, the type of data that is available on gun violence differs significantly in Europe. To improve comparability across Europe, a standardized form with standardized definitions of the above mentioned elements would be useful and the data collected at national level should be integrated in a transnational, EU-wide database. This database should be so designed that it can easily produce detailed sets of data that can be disaggregated and analyzed in meaningful ways, for example by linking the types of firearms used to the specific contexts of gun violence. Ideally, such a database should be publicly-accessible and be maintained by a specialized research team, similar to the *Armed Violence Monitoring Platform* that is maintained by SEESAC.

## Improving the intelligence picture on firearm trafficking

Reliable, detailed and more comparable data is not only needed to assess the scope, characteristics and dynamics of gun violence, but also to assess the various ways in which firearms trafficking impacts violence. Project TARGET concludes that firearm trafficking is an important way for criminals to acquire firearms, particularly semi-automatic handguns. Seizure data is often used as an indicator of firearms trafficking or illicit availability in a country. Yet, our report indicates that seizure data needs to be interpreted carefully. To assess, monitor and combat firearm trafficking more effectively, more comparable detailed data on firearms seizures is required. In recent years initiatives have been taken to harmonize firearms seizure data such as the *Illicit Arms Flow Questionnaire* (IAFQ) implemented by UNODC.

To improve the data collection on firearms at least the following information needs to be collected and made available: (1) cause of seizure (preventive measure, illicit possession,

illicit trade, illicit use, etc), (2) the type and caliber of the firearm, (3) the brand and origin of the firearm, (4) whether the firearm is modified in any way, (5) whether the firearm can be traced internationally, and (6) whether the firearm is linked to criminal or other violent activities. Most of this information is included in IAFQ. To increase the possibilities for data analysis and thus improve the intelligence picture, it is crucial that these different types of information can be linked to each other for each seizure. As part of Project TARGET, we observed general linkages between various types of firearms trafficking and various types of gun violence. In most cases it could, however, not be established whether and how specifically the firearm that was used in incidents of violence was trafficked. This is a direct result of the observation that law enforcement agencies often lack the motivation, resources and expertise to send out tracing requests and to investigate the origin, lifecycle and diversion point of the firearm used.

### Research that improves knowledge of firearm violence and trafficking

Better data collection is an important step, but more is required to improve the intelligence picture on gun violence. Project TARGET is one of the few studies on gun violence in Europe. Most of the research on gun violence is either global in scope or tends to be focused on the situation in the United States. To improve the intelligence picture on gun violence, more research is required at regional and national level within Europe.

Project TARGET analysed various contexts of gun violence and observed a different impact of firearms trafficking on these various contexts. Our aim was to develop a baseline study that will inspire more research on these topics and will allow for a better evaluation of initiatives taken to combat trafficking and/or preventing gun violence. Follow-up research that investigates gun violence in different specific contexts, both nationally and internationally, is needed. Special attention should be given to, for example, the interweaving of gun violence with other forms of crime such as drug crime, violent crime, armed robberies and human trafficking. Special attention should also be given to the gender dimension of gun violence in Europe, for example by undertaking regular victim surveys to ascertain the exact measure of domestic firearm violence, which is often believed to be underreported throughout the EU.

More research is also needed on new trends and future challenges regarding firearms trafficking. New evolutions and technologies are a risk for impacting firearm violence impressively in the coming years. Illegal online firearms sales on the open internet and the darkweb are currently very difficult to monitor and trace. In addition, online trafficking can take place on global scale while traditionally firearms trafficking is a regional or even local phenomenon in Europe. Closely connected to online firearms trafficking is the observed use of postal and fast parcel services to transport firearms, components and ammunition to customers across Europe. Finally, it is important to highlight rapid technological development regarding 3D-printing of firearm components. In recent years 3D-printed of firearms are increasingly being seized and 3D printing facilities dismantled in Europe. While violence with 3D-printed firearms is currently exceptional in Europe, incremental increases in 3D-printing technology, together with increased access to 3D-printers, risks proliferating illegally-held firearms and significantly impact gun violence in the future.

While access to illicitly trafficked firearms in Europe is generally limited to persons with criminal connections, these new trends and technologies offer increased opportunities to illegally acquire firearms to persons with and without criminal objectives.

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The 2020-2025 EU Action Plan on firearms trafficking underlines the importance of limiting illicit access to firearms as a cross-thematic security priority since it facilitates criminal activities and increases the risk of domestic violence. A crucial prerequisite for developing and implementing a structural, comprehensive and proactive approach for combating illicit firearms trafficking and preventing gun violence is the development of an up-to-date intelligence picture on both multifaceted phenomena. Unsurprisingly, building a better intelligence picture is a key priority in the 2020-2025 EU Action Plan. By analysing the scope and characteristics of lethal and non-lethal gun violence in Europe and by analysing the impact of firearms trafficking on violence, we hope to inspire more research on these important topics and to contribute to various initiatives from various actors aimed at preventing gun violence in our societies.

## Endnotes

### Introduction

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### Chapter 1

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## Chapter 2

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### Chapter 3

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## Chapter 5

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