

REPORT 

PROJECT TARGET

Firearm-related violence and trafficking in Estonia

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Colophon

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Introduction

Estonia has experienced a drastic reduction in firearm-trafficking and gun violence since the country regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Estonian society faced upheaval during the early years of the transition to democracy, with a rise in crime and organised criminal groups (OCGs), the proliferation of weapons and a significant increase in violence, including gun violence. The country has since developed socio-economically but has also developed stringent firearm regulations and strong legal institutions. Firearm-trafficking and violence have decreased to minimal levels, although gun violence in Estonia, where it does occur, is often marked by specific characteristics.

This chapter will develop an understanding of the scope and characteristics of firearm-trafficking and violence, and the interplay between them, as well as describe the evolution of these phenomena. First, a brief overview of the firearm regulatory framework in Estonia provides an understanding of the dynamics of the legal market and possession. The next section explores the scope and characteristics of illicit firearms in Estonia and of firearm-trafficking, and their evolution. The section that follows explores gun violence in Estonia, examining the scope and nature of such incidents. The specific contexts of gun violence and its perpetrators and victims are detailed, along with the dynamics of firearms used in violence. Finally, this article investigates national policy and initiatives used in combatting firearm-trafficking and violence, as well as shortcomings such as the challenges with data-collection and analysis.

Box 1: Research Methodology

This study used a research methodology based on various methods. First, desk research was conducted through a literature review and an analysis of existing relevant open-source documents in English and Estonian from studies conducted previously, international reports, legislative materials and media documents. Little research has previously been conducted on firearms in Estonia. This open-source information was supplemented by an analysis of internal data helpfully provided by the competent authorities.

Second, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with experts from key authorities in Estonia involved in tackling firearm-trafficking and violence. These included individuals from the Police and Border Guard Board, the Internal Security Service (KAPO), the Tax and Customs Board and the Ministry of Interior. Further written communication with representatives of the Ministry of Interior, the Estonian Forensic Science Institute and the Ministry of Justice also followed and assisted the research process.

1

Regulatory framework and legal firearm possession and market

The first weapons Act which codified firearm regulations in Estonia after the country regained independence was introduced in 1995. A second Act, which was more comprehensive and stricter, entered into force in 2002. This replaced the first Act and continues to be the basis for the regulation of weapons in Estonia. It was last amended in 2020 (Weapons Act/ Relvaseadus). The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board is the competent authority responsible for the enforcement of the law and the administration of permits for natural persons and legal persons, such as shooting ranges, arms dealers and security companies.

Firearms in Estonia may be obtained by Estonian citizens, foreign citizens with a residency permit or those who reside in Estonia based on a right of residence. As a minimum requirement, applicants applying for ownership of a firearm must be above the age of 18, although for some firearms the legal threshold is 21 years of age. A civilian firearm may be held by a natural person for the corresponding activities of hunting, sports, self-protection and the protection of property, the pursuing of a profession and collection. A legal person, or entity, can acquire or own a firearm similarly for protection, hunting, sports, studying subjects related to weapons and collection but also for providing security services and the sale, manufacture, storage, conversion or repair of weapons permitted by such a licence.¹

Weapon permits and acquisition permits are issued solely in a digital format in Estonia. A weapon acquisition permit is valid for three months, although extensions can be obtained. A firearm permit is valid for a maximum of five years, but no longer than the validity of the owner's medical certificate, and it allows an individual to handle a weapon that has been acquired. After the five years, the permit must be renewed; however, firearm permits which are specified solely for self-defence require a re-examination of firearm handling and usage. An individual applying for the first time must pass a weapons examination, a medical examination by a general practitioner and first aid training. Health certificates must be no older than three months at the time of applying. Moreover, supporting documents are required such as a hunting certificate if

the weapon is for hunting, a certified sports membership if the weapon is for sports or a weapons collection permit for collecting.¹ The Estonian Police will check the individual against grounds for denial, which include:

- mental/behavioural disorder caused by narcotic drugs;
- severe mental disorders;
- a physical disability which precludes the adequate handling of the weapon;
- evasion of service in the Defence Forces;
- a restricted legal capacity; and
- a criminal record.²

Moreover, the police may still deny and/or revoke a permit if a background check provides the grounds for assuming an individual intends to commit a crime against the state or an act of terrorism.³ Re-taking the weapons examination is required when extending a weapons permit for the purposes of self-protection to ensure safe handling and to reduce risk.

Some 74,000 firearms in Estonia are registered to approximately 26,000 firearm-owners or about 2.1% of the population as at spring 2019.^{4 5} The number of new firearm permits has remained largely stable over the past few years, with 950 new permits issued in 2015, 1,400 in 2016, 948 in 2017, 849 in 2018 and 841 in 2019. The most commonly held firearms are shotguns and handguns, followed by rifles; of the handguns, the most common are Makarov pistols, Glock-19s and Glock-17s.⁶ Self-protection is the most popular purpose for registering a firearm at 45%, closely followed by hunting at 44% with sports and other reasons comprising 10% and 1% respectively.⁷ Harju county, which includes the capital Tallinn, has the most registered firearm-owners, with more than 10,000, followed by Tartu, Pärnu and Ida-Viru counties, all with around 2,000 firearm-owners.⁸

Estonia has a small firearms industry: only seven companies in Estonia are licensed to manufacture weapons, essential components of firearms or ammunition. However, none of these companies is actively involved in manufacturing. In addition, two companies are involved in assembling firearms but also have no industrial factory activity. Similarly, Estonia also has very few firearm dealers, with 35 licensed to engage in commercial activity, less than the other Baltic states.⁹ While successive governments have encouraged growth in the Estonian defence industry,¹⁰ the firearms industry has remained marginal.¹¹

¹ Owners engaged in hunting and sports shooting are required to certify their skills regularly.

¹¹ For an in-depth study of firearms regulations in Estonia see Baltic Briefings: firearms regulation and diversion in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, in the DIVERT study.

2



Illicit firearm trafficking and possession

2.1 Scope and characteristics of illegal possession

The illicit firearm-trafficking scene in Estonia is very quiet and inactive; the number of illegally possessed firearms in the country is understood to be low, while this number is estimated not have grown.¹ Owing to the low level of firearm-trafficking activity in Estonia and, at least partly as a consequence, the low levels of firearm violence in the country, no significant research has been conducted into the illicit firearm scene.

Before exploring the scope and characteristics of illicit firearm-trafficking in Estonia, it is worth developing an understanding of the pre-existing pool of illicit firearms held in the country that comprises the basis of illicit firearms. As mentioned, it is not possible to get the full picture of illegal firearm possession, but inferences can be drawn from data that are collected which can enable an insight into the trends and patterns of illicit firearms. Data provided by Estonian authorities displayed in Table 1 show the number of offences related to the handling of firearms or their essential components and ammunition from 2010 to 4 October 2020.

¹ Given the inherently opaque nature of illicit firearms, knowing with certainty the numbers of illegally possessed firearms is an impossible task. At best, estimates may provide some degree of understanding which can help to highlight trends, although they should be used and interpreted with the utmost caution nonetheless. Aaron Karp of the Small Arms Survey estimated that in 2017 some 18,000 firearms were possessed illegally in Estonia. A similar 2007 estimate suggested there were some 76,000 illegally possessed firearms. However, this earlier number is likely an overestimate; while firearms have been removed from illegal possession, this has not been to the same extent as the reduction in numbers.

Karp, A. (2018) *Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017. Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Karp, A. (2007). *Completing the Count: Civilian Firearms, Small Arms Survey 2007: Guns and the City, Small Arms Survey, Annexure 4.*

The table shows that the annual level of unlawful possession offences is low and has decreased slightly over the period. Although the data for 2020 do not comprise a full year, the figures are lower and likely to remain lower than at the start of the 2010s. The period from 2014 to 2016 saw the lowest levels of unlawful possession in what was a clear downward trend, whereas towards the end of the decade there was a slight fluctuation back to previously higher numbers of unlawful possession offences. Nonetheless, these levels remained lower than they had been at the start of the decade and are altogether low in absolute terms. The table also shows that the number of offences for the unlawful possession of firearms or their essential components and ammunition prohibited for civilian possession is very low and has continued to decrease since 2010. There were only five cases in 2019, the last full year of data available, which is a 75% reduction from 2010. Although the numbers available for 2020 highlight an increase, they are nonetheless likely to fall to within the low teens, as has been the general pattern.

Table 1: Offences related to the handling of firearms

Weapons offences	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
§ 418. Unlawful handling of firearms or essential components thereof or ammunition	99	118	107	82	74	67	66	85	92	85	88
§ 4181. Unlawful handling of firearms prohibited for civilian use or essential components thereof or ammunition	20	13	14	12	10	12	11	15	10	5	10
§ 419. Negligent storage of firearms	2	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	1
§ 420. Unlawful handling of silencers, laser sights or night sights of firearms	12	3	12	10	5	15	3	8	7	4	6

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 October 2020

These data show that levels of illegal firearm possession have generally decreased slightly or remained stable over recent years. In absolute terms, the levels of unlawful

possession remain very low. In addition, it should be highlighted that the data do not just include firearms but also their essential parts and ammunition and therefore each offence does not necessarily indicate a firearm per se but could instead be ammunition or firearm parts. Therefore, an inference can be drawn that the level of illegal firearms in circulation in Estonia is low; this is especially apparent in the case of firearms prohibited from civilian ownership. This analysis concurs with interviews conducted with Estonian officials, who have consistently highlighted the low levels of illegal firearms in Estonia and the lack of a firearm problem in the country.^{11 12 13}

Illegally held firearms in Estonia are largely a legacy of the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when firearms proliferated rapidly from Soviet military personnel. That collapse resulted in a significant and systematic diversion of firearms from Soviet military forces based in Estonia to Estonian private citizens and, more specifically, to OCGs in the country. For Soviet personnel, the sale of their firearms and weapons provided a rare means of obtaining money. Firearms such as Kalashnikov rifles and Makarov pistols were sold at a fraction of their legal cost and such sales led to Estonia gaining a reputation during the 1990s as a supplier of weapons to both East and West. Simultaneously, Estonians, for whom firearms had largely been unobtainable while under Soviet occupation, sought firearms for self-defence during the period of political and social upheaval and tumult.^{14 15}

However, interviews with the Estonian Internal Security Service have highlighted that there was also a systematic effort on the part of the Soviet forces in Estonia to supply weapons to local criminals and Russian crime groups operating in the country in what is understood to have been an attempt to bolster Russian-friendly actors. As a result, it is understood that OCGs in Estonia often have weapons caches that include various Soviet firearms, grenades and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. These caches of weapons are not used by OCGs but held in reserve in case a conflict arises in which they may be needed. The Estonian authorities have targeted these groups and their stockpiles heavily since the 1990s to remove their access to firearms, and these raids have resulted in the discovery and seizure of such weapons. One raid against an organised crime leader resulted in his arrest and the seizure of several Kalashnikov-type firearms, silencers, optics, grenades and RPGs.¹⁶

There are also older weapons from the Second World War as well as weapons that have been hidden or passed down over generations and which were never legalised. According to Estonian police, it is not uncommon for such old firearms to be found: 'it is common for an old man to have an old firearm.'¹⁷ A sub-section of these older illegal firearms and their owners are firearm collectors who possess illegal firearms, often Second World War weapons, in their collections. A recent significant problem flagged in KAPO annual reports, most recently the 2019 report, highlights the popularity of 'dirty archaeology' or 'black digging' – the illicit excavation of weaponry or explosives from

former battlefield sites.¹ In 2019, KAPO seized the highest quantity of explosives in two decades, most of them from one individual with an obsession for Second World War munitions who was found with 200 kg of explosives, 10 kg of explosive charges and hundreds of units of ammunition and firearm components.¹⁸

Interviews with authorities also indicated that the supply of illicit firearms, as previously discussed, has been dwindling. This is partly as a result of Estonian authorities investigating, seizing and removing firearms from illicit circulation, but also the evolution and development of the Estonian state, with citizens no longer facing the dangers of the 1990s after the country regained its independence and underwent a transition. Citizens therefore no longer required illegal firearms for self-protection but were instead using legal means to surrender illegal firearms.

The Estonian Internal Security Services highlighted the case of an individual long known to Estonian authorities for his association with illegal firearms. Historically, the individual has been known to have a ready supply of illegal firearms; however, more recent engagement with the individual has revealed that his access to firearms has decreased, while he was found in possession of replica firearms.¹⁹ This serves as anecdotal evidence that supports our understanding that the level of illegal firearms in circulation has dropped.

Interviews also suggest that there is not a problem with the supply of ammunition for OCGs. Here, gun dealers and legal firearm-owners offer a route of diversion, as ammunition is not traced. A possible scenario described during an interview was that of a legal firearm-owner who could claim to have shot 100 units of ammunition at a shooting club but instead fired only 50 and could sell the other 50 on the black market.²⁰

2.2 Scope and characteristics of firearm trafficking

Trafficking in firearms in Estonia is a story in two parts since Estonia regained independence in the early 1990s. The country has transitioned from a country notorious for its easy flow of illicit firearms in the immediate aftermath of independence to a state that has largely stamped out systematic firearm-trafficking, to the point where this can be described largely as a non-issue.

Table 2 below shows the number of firearms and firearm parts and the amount ammunition seized by Estonian Customs from 2014 up to the first half of 2020. Similarly to our understanding of the number of firearms possessed illegally, it is not possible to obtain a full picture of the firearms trafficked into Estonia due to its very

¹ 'Black digging' of firearms in neighbouring Latvia from old battlefield sites is a known significant source of illicit firearms. The black digging of firearms in Estonia appears to be far less common than in Latvia, although, as KAPO reports have highlighted, black digging of explosives is a known and dangerous phenomenon.

nature.^I Moreover, customs data show only those firearms seized by customs; weapons seized by KAPO, for example, believed to have been trafficked, are not included. Customs data, however, provide a strong inference as to the levels of firearms being trafficked into and out of Estonia. The table clearly shows that firearm-trafficking is a marginal problem in Estonia and not a significant source of the supply of illicit firearms. The numbers of firearms seized is generally in the low single figures, which, according to interviews with customs, is around the routine level of seizures.²¹ In comparison, the years 2015 and 2016^{II} stand out for their high levels of seizure, although these figures are driven by two separate criminal cases in each year – which have contributed the vast majority of the firearms. In the 2015 case which is covered below, Estonia was largely a transit state that intercepted the trafficked firearms.

Table 2: Firearms, ammunition and parts seized by Customs, 2014–2020

Year	Total number of firearms seized	Number of essential components seized.	Quantity of ammunition seized
2014	0	N/A	103
2015	51	N/A	57
2016	34	8	1,725
2017	3	8	17
2018	2	2	161
2019	3	0	265
2020*	2	2	0

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities / *Up to the first six months of 2020

^I In addition, no law in the body of Estonian legislation covers firearm-trafficking as an act in itself and therefore it is not possible to provide data on the number of cases brought against arms trafficking. Instead, the penalties that cover firearm-trafficking are found in the penal code, which includes offences against the handling of weapons, namely, the unlawful possession of firearms, including sub-sections of firearms prohibited for civilians and military firearms.

^{II} Customs received a cargo delivery from Germany in 2016, with the German exporting company wishing to make an export declaration and to export the cargo to Norway. The cargo was initially declared as airsoft guns, with no fake invoice. But instead the cargo contained 27 Walter pistols, magazines and weapon parts. The case was handed to the Internal Security Service, who closed the case and had the firearms sent back to Germany.
Written communication with a representative of Estonian Customs.

It is certain that the trafficking in firearms in Estonia is not a major problem. The 2017 KAPO annual report highlights that the number of arrests made during recent years suggests that, although the black market still exists, the trade in illicit firearms is dwindling.²² The risk of firearms being trafficked across the border in Estonia is said to be low.²³ Although these cases often involve small quantities, they are nonetheless still a security concern and pose a risk to society. There have been cases of concerted firearm-trafficking in Estonia by groups driven by criminal motives, while at times Estonia has been a transit state for trafficked firearms. These cases often share similar characteristics, namely, they are focused on the reactivation or conversion of firearms which have been brought into Estonia before their conversion, although Estonia is often not the final destination for the now live-firing weapons. KAPO's 2017 annual review highlighted an increased threat factor for reactivated firearms,²⁴ but there is little evidence currently for the actualisation of this threat. The following cases provide an insight into and a description of this kind of illicit firearm-trafficking.

In 2017, the Internal Security Service investigated a group involved in the reactivation of firearms, charging the participants with the unlawful possession, storage and transfer of firearms, ammunition, explosives and explosive devices. The investigation resulted in the seizure 'of more than 19,000 cartridges of various calibres, 73 firearms, 42 barrels, 1,056 fixed ammunition projectiles, gunpowder and 12 electric detonators' from one of the key participants in the criminal endeavour.²⁵ Unfortunately, no information is available about where the weapons came from and the types of weapon.

A group of six were caught by KAPO reactivating deactivated firearms in Estonia in 2016 and selling the firearms on the black market. The weapons, which were largely Kalashnikov-type rifles, were purchased online before being sent via the post to Estonia, where they were reactivated. One of the individuals involved was from the Estonian Defence Forces, where he worked as an armourer, responsible for the repair and maintenance of weapons, skills that he used in the reactivation of firearms. Moreover, the individual was also accused of stealing weapon parts from the Defence Forces to restore them to a live-firing condition. During the search, the authorities found numerous weapons, weapon parts and ammunition.^{26 27}

A case from 2015 highlights such an instance of concerted organised criminal effort to reactivate and traffic firearms. A total of 11 individuals working in two groups were arrested during investigations which found that the groups had been acquiring weapons in Estonia and Finland as well as purchasing some weapons online from the Czechia, Slovakia and Germany and receiving them via the post. The group then reactivated the weapons in a barn in Raasiku before selling them on. It is known that some of the reactivated weapons were trafficked into Russia, while others were sold on in Scandinavia, although the total number of firearms sold is not known. Countries in which they sold on weapon were Sweden, where there is a high demand for firearms, and Estonia. The authorities seized 11 firearms prohibited for civilian purposes (automatic firearms, machine guns and a semi-automatic pistol), 18 essential components of firearms prohibited for civilian purposes, 26 firearms in restricted

commerce (rifles, pistols and hunting guns), 16 essential components of firearms in restricted commerce, 6,631 cartridges, five silencers and explosives. Reportedly, reactivated Kalashnikovs sold for €1,200, Uzi's sold for €500, a rifle with an optical sight for €1,300 and a rifle with a silencer fetched €1,000. This case of trafficking and reactivation was massive in Estonian terms.^{I 28 29}

Also in 2015, Estonian Customs intercepted a Land Rover on its eastern border with Russia that had been flagged for control from intelligence, which suspected the vehicle was being used to smuggle narcotics. An X-ray scan of the car revealed that many firearms had been hidden in the car – a total of 51, the majority being pistols, although there were also five machine guns.^{II} The weapons were deactivated firearms that had been purchased in Slovakia. An interview with customs highlighted that the weapons had been reactivated but they had most likely not been reactivated in Estonia, their final destination being Russia. Valerii Sergeev, the Russian citizen trafficking the firearms, received a five-year sentence of imprisonment, of which five months was served immediately and the rest was conditional, while he was also deported from Estonia and given a five-year prohibition of entry.^{30 31}

In 2013 Estonia's North Regional Prosecutor's Office brought charges against three men in connection with unlawful handling of firearms. They belonged to an OCG aiming to profit from firearm-trafficking. As with the cases mentioned previously, they purchased deactivated firearms from central European arms dealers which were reactivated in Estonia before being sold on. The weapons included ten CZ submachine guns and two pistols, while an unregistered firearm and further weapon parts were discovered during investigations.³²

The organised trafficking in firearms is a relatively rare phenomenon in Estonia, the above cases highlighting the rare instances in which it occurs. These cases all share similar characteristics that were supported by interviews with Estonian authorities, namely, that they focus on the reactivation of weapons. It is rare to find cases of the smuggling of manufactured live-firing weapons. Moreover, these deactivated firearms are generally sourced from European countries outside of Estonia, with groups often receiving the firearms by post. An instructive characteristic is that the reactivated firearms are often trafficked outside of Estonia, sometimes to Russia but also other European countries. This tends to highlight the lack of demand for firearms from inside Estonia. Accordingly, a 2015 report suggests that about two-thirds of the weapons reactivated illegally in Estonia are trafficked out of the country.³³ Estonian authorities, including the Internal Security Service, emphasised that they keep constant vigilance for evidence of illegal gunsmiths in the country who are producing reactivated or converted firearms and will target the individual or group immediately when there is

^I Sergei Olar, a leader in the group who had a previous weapons charge, was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment, a Russian courier received eight years, a mediator six years, while the rest of the members received lower penalties.

^{II} Customs seized 40 TT pistols, six unidentified smaller pistols, five submachine guns, 25 magazines of ammunition, five cartridge pouches and seven packages of weapon parts according to interviews with Estonian Customs.

evidence.¹ However, according to interviews, there are currently no ongoing cases or evidence of firearm reactivation or conversion in Estonia. Moreover, the authorities indicate that some have tried to *convert* firearms but have been unsuccessful, and that poor conversion standards may make the firearm more dangerous to the perpetrator than the victim.³⁴

A potential concern raised in interviews with the police and the Internal Security Service, although one not yet manifested in Estonia, is the role of biker gangs. The Estonian authorities are concerned that biker gangs such as Bandidos and Hell's Angels appear to be trying to establish themselves in the country. There is concern that should this potential be realised, then the gangs would possibly be involved in drug-smuggling but also in firearm-smuggling, as has been seen in neighbouring Scandinavian countries; they could also possibly pose an increased risk of conflict. It was also noted that there is already a strong relationship between Estonian and Finnish gangs.^{35 36}

While there have been a few limited cases of organised firearm-trafficking in Estonia in recent years, there have also been attempts at arms-smuggling at the other end of the spectrum that are ad hoc or opportunistic. Interviews with the police highlighted another form of cross-border firearm-smuggling that occurs into Estonia: the smuggling of firearms stolen from private homes and property in Latvia into Estonia. Certainly, this *modus operandi* is based wholly on opportunism and is not seen as a systematic approach to supplying firearms. Instead, it is the result of low-level criminals who commit burglaries, finding and stealing firearms during a burglary which had the general purpose of stealing valuable items.

According to police, this phenomenon of smuggling stolen firearms can be seen in the twin town of Valga-Valka, a town which straddles both sides of the Estonian-Latvian border. Reportedly, the town is popular among smugglers who, among other items, may smuggle people, drugs and firearms. Firearms are said to be kept on both sides of the border on an ad hoc basis. The direction of the smuggling is generally from Latvia to Estonia, and it includes low levels of firearms, which are often believed to be stolen goods. These firearms generally have their serial numbers removed and are of various types, in line with the opportunism leading to their theft.³⁷

Similarly, the Estonian authorities may discover illicit firearms when investigating and intercepting the smuggling of narcotics. However, these firearms are said often to be present for self-protection in case of conflict instead of as other goods being smuggled.³⁸

Estonian Customs may also seize older firearms from the Second World War. Often rusty, they are being kept for individual collection purposes illicitly but not connected to other criminal activities or intents.³⁹ Neighbouring Latvia is also known to have a

¹ Interviews with the Internal Security Service highlighted that it was operationally harder to combat arms traffickers working alone as opposed to in groups because it is significantly harder to gain intelligence on the operations and workings of individual traffickers, whereas groups are more easily penetrated.

moderate level of non-regulated war firearms that have been illegally found and dug up. It would not be surprising if some of these firearms ended up being smuggled to collectors in Estonia.

Interestingly, the police noted that a number of smuggling groups or individuals are active on the Estonian–Russian border; they smuggle a wide variety of items, including drugs, cigarettes and people, yet the police do not detect any firearm–smuggling.⁴⁰ This is despite the known demand for firearms from Russia, as seen in the previous case studies.

The Estonian authorities also highlighted the case from a few years previously when it was still legal to sell unregistered firearm parts. A Chechen from Belgium had been trying to acquire firearm parts in Estonia, most likely to take back to Belgium. The individual had driven to Estonia in a rented car from Belgium and attempted to purchase three Glock frames and a trigger mechanism from an arms dealer, without buying other essential components. The gun dealer believed the order to be suspicious and alerted the authorities, who arrested the individual at the border. There they found the firearms parts hidden in the petrol tank. He was as a result prohibited from entering Estonia for five years.⁴¹

Given the low levels of firearm–trafficking in Estonia and the opportunism that is often associated with the smuggling of firearms, there is generally no pattern or general characteristic to the types of firearm smuggled. In the cases of organised reactivation, though, the weapons have tended to be pistols and Kalashnikov–type weapons that are readily available in their deactivated form. There is no demand for illegal firearms in Estonia⁴² and, as a resultant, there is no systematic supply of illegal firearms. Even with the rare cases of OCGs’ trafficking firearms, these have often been trafficked out of Estonia after reactivation.

2.3 Evolution of firearm trafficking

The absence of illicit firearm–trafficking in Estonia as currently witnessed has not always been the case, however. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the years of transition following Estonia’s regaining of independence, firearm–trafficking was rife, and Estonia developed a notorious reputation for the illicit supply of firearms as a result.

The 1990s saw Estonia become a significant source of illicit firearms, among other goods such as metal, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakened Estonian state being in transition. After regaining independence, Estonia was not a member of any arms control treaties and did not have sufficient arms regulations in place, either legislatively or institutionally, to stop the illicit trade.⁴³ Throughout the 1990s, large illicit transfers of firearms occurred against the backdrop of weak state enforcement and supervision capacity. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw the proliferation of Soviet military weaponry in Estonia, which fell into the hands of

Estonian criminal groups and citizens. This made it possible to traffic arms to both the East and the West. Moreover, in addition to the supply of weapons, Estonia became a popular transit state for trafficking in both directions. According to a report by Paul Holtom, an article in the Russian media in the 1990s claimed that 90 per cent of the illicit firearms trafficked into Russia originated in Estonia.⁴⁴

This period of trafficking also saw corrupt generals and high-ranking officials facilitate and enable the trafficking in firearms. One of the most well-known cases occurring between 1994 and 1995 involved the transfer of 1,421 handguns, rifles, shotguns and ammunition from a Finnish company to Estonia, where they were supposed to be received by the Estonian Civil Guard. However, only 109 firearms were officially received, whereas some of the weapons were believed to have been sold by Saluste and Smirnov, the high-ranking officials involved, 'within the armed forces, although the majority of the sales were to criminal gangs in Estonia, Russia and beyond.' In another case, the head of the Information Bureau at the Estonian General Staff was caught using a false guard unit to cover his trafficking in small-calibre weapons. Politicians were also accused of being involved in illicit firearms shipments to illegal end-users in Russia and Estonia: in 1994, the Minister of Interior granted a permit for 25,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and 40,000 Tokarev handguns which were diverted.⁴⁵

Towards the latter half of the 1990s and thereafter, the Estonian authorities began to take control of illicit firearm-trafficking and introduced measures to roll back the proliferation of weapons as the Estonian state re-emerged and asserted its sovereignty over its borders and territory. The re-establishment of the state reduced both the supply and the demand of illicit firearms because both the illegal supply of firearms was curtailed and the internal demand for firearms, driven by the desire to own a weapon for self-protection, was also reduced.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, there were occasional incidents in the following decade that involved the trafficking in substantial numbers of firearms, although by then the Estonian authorities were much more effective in dealing with them. For example, in 2005 a consignment of 2,000 PPS submachine guns was trafficked into Estonia and the authorities managed to intercept 500 of them.⁴⁷ In 2007, a criminal group involved in the large-scale trafficking in drugs and firearms was intercepted and arrested, which resulted in the seizure of very large quantities of narcotics, 4.5 million cigarettes, 103 machine guns and eight other firearms, and more than 4,000 rounds of ammunition. Reportedly, the group smuggled from Latvia to Estonia and then from Estonia to Russia. The operation was the outcome of cooperation between the Estonian and the Latvian authorities.⁴⁸ Another report highlights that in 2007 the Dutch National Crime Squad received information about firearms possibly being trafficked from a military base in Estonia to a harbour in Rotterdam. This operation involved the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia, with an estimated 25,000 Kalashnikov and HK-G4-type assault rifles being implicated.⁴⁹ However, there is no further evidence that this trafficking materialised.

The 2000s marked a much lower level of illicit firearms movement in and through Estonia compared to the 1990s as the state began to clamp down on firearm-trafficking. As mentioned, though, there were some high-profile cases involving the movement of substantial numbers of firearms, but this was also the last time manufactured live-firing firearms were smuggled in a concerted and significant way. Since the end of the 2000s there has been little evidence of the trafficking in manufactured live-firing weapons; instead, trafficked firearms have tended towards modifying firearms, namely, reactivated firearms.

The Estonian Internal Security Service's 2011 annual review highlighted a reactivated firearm-trafficking group that they had shut down; it had been in operation from spring 2009 to March 2011. The group had trafficked a number of firearms as well as silencers, ammunition, grenades and explosives from Estonia to Latvia. At least 14 firearms had been delivered, including six reactivated firearms, two converted firearms (from airguns) and four self-manufactured guns.⁵⁰ After that, reactivated firearm cases are mentioned in several KAPO annual reviews. The 2013 review, for example, contains a warning that a significant risk was posed by criminals reactivating deactivated weapons.⁵¹ This warning was echoed in 2015, during which year there were high-profile cases in Estonia of reactivated firearms, as mentioned earlier.⁵² The last mention of reactivated firearms in KAPO's annual reviews was in its 2019 edition: although there was no mention of any specific cases, there was a repeated warning about the continued problem of reactivated firearms.⁵³ Interviews with the Internal Security Service highlighted that over the past five years there had been no cases involving significant numbers of firearms and there were no ongoing cases of firearms being trafficked into Estonia.⁵⁴

The conversion of firearms is rare in Estonia. The Estonian authorities emphasise that there have not been many cases of converted firearms and that the conversion of firearms is not a problem in Estonia. This is perhaps notable, given the proliferation of converted firearms in nearby Lithuania from the 2000s to the early 2010s. Instead, the Estonian authorities say that while some people have tried to convert firearms, they have often been unsuccessful.¹ Moreover, such poorly converted firearms are a danger to the user due to their tendency to backfire. The interviews did nevertheless highlight that in the case of converted firearms there has been a shift in the preferred models for conversion. The current models of choice are Turkish-made blank-firers, such as Zorakis, whereas previously Baikals were preferred. The authorities were unable to suggest where Zorakis were being sourced from before being converted.^{55 56}

The scope and characteristics of firearm-trafficking in Estonia have changed drastically since Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union. As the country rebuilt its

¹ A double homicide case in which the victims were stabbed and beaten to death that involved a conflict between two criminal groups highlights the fact that, during the fight, one of the perpetrators pulled out a 'rebuilt' weapon and attempted to shoot the victim in the head, but the gun did not fire.

Lamp, D. (18 June 2020) EESTI RÕIMAD) Poseidoni ööklubi topeltmõrv: Kemerovo grupi brigadirid maeti lõpuks saunapõranda alla, elu24.ee, <https://www.elu24.ee/6999633/poseidoni-ooklubi-topeltmorv-kemerovo-grupi-brigadirid-maeti-lopuks-saunaporanda-alla>, consulted 18 November 2020.

institutions and codified new firearms legislation and regulations, the trafficking in firearms has been greatly diminished from being a significant regional source of and a transit state for illicit firearms to a situation where the trafficking in firearms is no longer a significant problem and the supply of illicit firearms, in general, has diminished significantly. This evolution and change in the supply of firearms are reflected in the scope and characteristics of gun violence, as seen below.

3

Gun violence



3.1 Scope and nature of gun violence

Mirroring the scope and nature of Estonia's firearm-trafficking, the level of gun violence in Estonia is also low and is not considered as a major threat. Since regaining its independence, Estonia has experienced a significant decrease in the overall level of homicides over the past few decades. For example, from 2000 to 2017, Estonia recorded the joint largest decrease in homicides globally with a 78% reduction,⁵⁷ while the number of violent deaths per 100,000 halved from 2008 to 2018 (from 7.3 to 3.9).⁵⁸ Moreover, as the total level of homicides has decreased, the absolute number of firearm homicides has also decreased, although not at the same rate. Naghavi et al, in a global study of firearm mortality from 1990 to 2016, found that Estonia had the largest annualised decrease in firearm-related deaths globally during the period, with an average annual decrease of 6.2%.⁵⁹

Table 3 shows the annual numbers for manslaughter and murder from Statistics Estonia data and the number of firearm homicides using data from gunpolicy.org from 2003 to 2009 to provide a wider perspective.⁶⁰ Table 4 shows the annual number for manslaughter and murder using data from Statistics Estonia and the number of firearm homicide casesⁱ using data from the Estonian authorities. It must be emphasised that this data should be approached with a degree of caution,ⁱⁱ as the police data provided

ⁱ Data from the Estonian authorities from 2010 to 2020* cover only the number of cases, although a representative from the Ministry of Interior highlighted that, while it is possible for there to be more than one victim in a case, it is very rare.

ⁱⁱ It should also be highlighted that these police data are registered immediately after the incident and not changed afterwards, while the prosecutor's office makes the final decision on what the suspect is charged with. This means that the police data can end up being inaccurate depending on the circumstances. For example, the 2020 shooting case described later in which a woman shot her husband is entered as a case of manslaughter, although the victim survived being shot in the head and recovered and the woman was then charged with attempted murder. As a result, the table shows four incidents of firearm homicide (two murders and two manslaughter cases) when in fact only three firearm homicides had

show differing levels of firearm homicide than UNODC data from 2010 to 2015 (the most recent data provided by the UNODC), as well as divergence from data collected through open-source research.¹ Nevertheless, the official statistics provided by the Estonian authorities remain the primary and most direct and reliable source of information available.

The tables clearly show the overall decrease in homicides, from a total of 188 in 2003 to 34 in 2019. The level of total homicides has decreased almost annually except for a few years. The decreasing levels of violence and lethal violence generally in Estonia are an important context for understanding the levels of and reductions in firearm violence. Estonian society has become safer and firearm violence has followed this trend.

The tables show that, since 2003, the highest number of firearm homicides was 14 in 2003, comprising 7.4% of all homicides. The level of firearm homicides has generally held stable, with a very slight decrease over time. Many years recorded the same number of firearm homicides back-to-back. On average, there are around five firearms homicides a year, although some years see fluctuations above or below that figure – for example, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2016 saw higher than average rates, whereas 2015, 2017 and 2019 saw below average rates.

Table 3: Homicides and firearm homicides, 2003–2009

Type of offence	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Manslaughter	147	104	137	107	90	88	64
Murder	41	23	19	12	20	16	31
Total homicides	188	127	156	119	110	104	95
Firearm homicides	14	5	5	9	5	3	7
Percentage of firearm homicides	7.4%	4%	3.2%	7.6%	4.5%	2.9%	7.4%

Source: Statistics Estonia for manslaughter and murder, and gunpolicy.org for firearms homicides

occurred in the partial year of 2020. For the sake of consistency, and lacking any other recent data relating to firearms homicides, this report has made use of the unedited police data.

¹ For comparison, UNODC, gunpolicy.org data from amalgamated sources and open-source data are shown in the annexure along with the police data used.

Table 4: Homicides and firearm homicide cases, 2010–2020

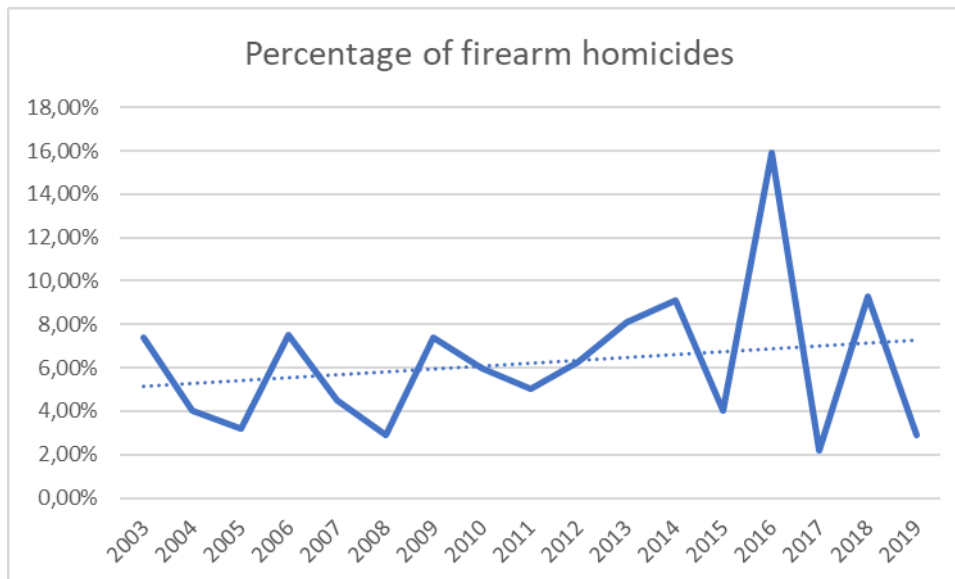
Type of offence	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Manslaughter	62	81	59	50	42	38	35	37	36	29	-
Cases using a firearm	4	2	4	4	4	2	6	0	4	1	2
Murder	22	19	21	12	13	12	9	8	7	5	-
Cases using a firearm	1	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total with firearm	5	5	5	5	5	2	7	1	4	1	4
Percentage of homicides with a firearm	6%	5%	6.3%	8.1%	9.1%	4%	15.9%	2.2%	9.3%	2.9%	-

Source: Statistics Estonia for manslaughter and murder data from 2010 to 2019 and data provided by Estonian authorities for firearms cases from 2010 to 2019 and data for 2020

* up to 4 October 2020

Looking at the percentage of firearm homicides in overall homicides, there has been a slight increase over time, as shown in the trendline in Figure 1 below. During the 2003–2019 period covered in the tables, the trendline has shifted from around 5% to more than 7%. The more recent period of 2010 to 2019, the last full year, which uses the previous police data of firearm homicide cases, has an average of 6.7% of total homicides cases comprising firearm homicides (40 firearm homicide cases and 597 homicide cases in total). Salla et al’s study on homicides in Estonia from 2007 to 2010 found firearms were used in 6% of homicides,⁶¹ a finding that largely mirrors these more recent findings.

Figure 1: Percentage of homicides committed with a firearm



It is important to note that, as mentioned above, the decrease in overall homicides has significantly outpaced the marginal decrease in firearm homicides. Therefore, although the percentage of firearm homicides has marginally increased, firearm homicides are themselves not increasing. Moreover, as the tables show, the number of firearm homicides is already low which may also make fluctuations look more significant. Figure 2 below displays these developments.

Figure 2: Homicides and firearm homicides, 2003–2019

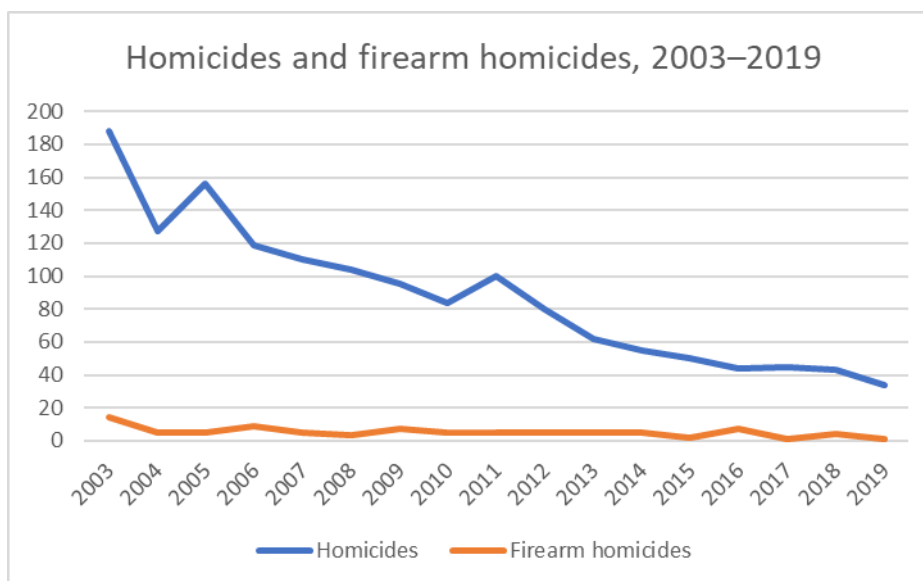


Table 5 below shows cases of negligent homicide and negligent serious health damage cases with firearms from the same police data, not included in the above analysis. Over the period covered from 2010 to 4 October 2020, there were 12 cases of negligent

homicide by firearm and six cases of serious health damage from negligent firearm use. The table shows clearly the incident rate of negligent firearm cases is low with just a few cases per year registered at the maximum.

Table 5: Negligent homicide and serious harm with firearms

Penal Code	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
§ 117 (Negligent homicide)	1	3	1	0	0	3	0	1	2	0	1
§ 119 (Causing serious health damage through negligence)	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 October 2020

Table 6 shows an overview of other cases of firearm crimes committed over the 2010–2020 period. The table shows that in general, firearm crimes and violence is low in Estonia. Moreover, the table also shows that for most acts, there is not an increasing or decreasing trend or pattern in the number of incidents, but instead slight fluctuations around similar levels. For the penal code of causing serious health damage, firearm cases were registered only seven times over the period. There was no year with more than two cases of firearms causing serious harm, while generally there was either one incident or none. Notably, the number of firearm-related robbery cases is extremely limited, with only three incidents reported. Furthermore, there was only one reported case of violence against representatives of state authority which occurred in 2018.

There were more incidents of firearms being used in relation to the penal code of threatening behaviour, with a total of 27 over the period. There is no noticeable trend in the incident rate of this act, with the number of such incidents fluctuating between zero to four throughout.

The number of cases related to physical abuse which involved a firearm from 2010 to October 2020 totalled 15 cases. It appears that such cases were frontloaded towards the first half of the 2010s while the second half has experienced fewer cases. However, with data from 2017 missing, this is not certain. Moreover, given such low numbers are involved, the significance of any such trend is likely negligible.

Aggravated breach of public order with a firearm was the most reported offence overall other than manslaughter with a firearm, which had the same number of incidents. Similar to incidents of threat (see § 120 below), these cases occurred slightly more commonly in the first half of the decade, though again, the significance thereof is limited.

Table 6: Offences that took place using a firearm

Penal Code	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
§ 118 (Causing serious health damage)	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	7
§ 120 (Threat)	2	4	2	0	4	3	1	3	4	1	3	27
§ 121 (Physical abuse)	0	2	2	2	4	1	2	-	1	0	1	15
§ 200 (Robbery)	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
§ 263 (Aggravated breach of public order)	6	1	6	5	1	2	0	4	5	2	1	33
§ 274 (Violence against representative of state authority)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 November 2020

The data show that overall firearm violence and usage in criminal incidents in Estonia is low. The implication from this is that criminals in Estonia, either by choice or a lack of availability, opt to not use firearms when carrying out criminal acts. This was highlighted in interviews with Estonian authorities who stated that criminals in Estonia do not use firearms as it would bring greater focus and attention to their activities, therefore creating greater personal risk and risk to their criminal activities. A representative of the Internal Security Service stated that criminals know ‘blood is bad for business’.^{62 63} Though criminal structures remain in Estonia, they are no longer marked by the hooliganism and violence of the 1990s.⁶⁴ The Estonian experience of gun violence has not always been as limited as it is in contemporary Estonia, the 1990s was significantly bloodier with criminals and others using firearms to a greater degree.

3.2 Evolution of gun violence

Estonia during the 1990s was a state in transition after regaining independence from the Soviet Union but not yet with its own developed institutions and regulations. The authority of the state was quite often weak, with law and order occasionally absent and the justice system in disrepair, providing rife conditions for criminals to flourish. As a result, there was a significant increase in criminality and violence as criminals and individuals alike exploited the new freedoms and opportunities that had not been possible under the Soviet regime, which notably included, among other factors, a free market and the supply of alcohol.⁶⁵ Russian and Chechen OCGs rushed to Estonia after the country regained its independence in order to take advantage of such opportunities – clashing with existing Estonian OCGs in the process.⁶⁶ Thefts of cars and apartments increased, as well as robberies and homicides in general as budget deficits hampered attempts to reform the police and provide security.⁶⁷

During the so-called ‘metal age’, criminal conflicts in Estonia reached their zenith. Between 1992–1994 there was a boom in the illicit trade of metal, fed by stolen non-ferrous metal that came from Russian military–industrial plants, which passed through Estonia where they were sold on the black market. Owing to the illicit trade Estonia became the sixth-largest metal exporter in the world despite lacking any non-ferrous resources.⁶⁸ The trade initiated the increased conflict between OCGs who fought over control. The criminal conflict also saw Estonian groups fighting Russian and international groups who tried to seize territory. This occurred concurrently with the proliferation of firearms previously mentioned, with OCGs finding themselves with capable weaponry. Homicides, including shootings and bombings, were endemic in Tallinn, nicknamed Metallinn, due to its role in the metal trade. Tallinn in the early 1990s became one of the most violent capital cities in the world.^{69 70}

The level of homicides in Estonia peaked in 1994 at 426 deaths, with homicides having risen precipitously, in 1991, 170 homicides had been recorded. The autumn of 1994 saw more than 100 gang-related homicides alone.⁷¹ The violence began to wane in the second half of the 1990s, though by 2001 the homicide level was still above 200.⁷² As homicides peaked in 1994, so did firearm homicides with a high of 121 comprising more than a quarter of all homicides. The number of firearm homicides gradually decreased throughout the 1990s until reaching the single figures from the mid-2000s onwards.^{1 73}

From 1994, Estonia and Russia passed legislation and regulation to control the trade in metal and increased cooperation to tackle organised crime. At the same time OCGs moved towards more profitable businesses that had less conflict volatility. At the same time, the Estonian criminal landscape settled, with Estonian groups not welcoming newcomers but having established links with OCGs in neighbouring countries.⁷⁴ Estonia’s economy stabilised and law-enforcement reforms came to fruition and began

¹ Firearm homicides in the intervening years, according to gunpolicy.org, are 1995: 91, 1996: 55, 1997: 31, 1998: 40, 1999: 31, 2000: 23, 2001: 18 and 2002: 21.

tackling OCGs successfully.¹ Accordingly, by the early 2000s, most of the violent OCGs operating in Estonia, as well as the foreign groups such as Russian and Chechen groups, had been tackled. Interviews highlighted that law enforcement has heavily targeted and disrupted these serious OCGs, with half in jail or otherwise disrupted.⁷⁵ According to Mark Galeotti, a second wave of Russian criminal groups entered Estonia from the late 2000s, however, this time their focus was on supply of illicit goods and financing, not controlling street crimes but instead working with local Estonian groups. Their new operations have foregone the use of violence for a lower profile.⁷⁶ Some 20 OCGs are now reported to be operating in Estonia, of which seven or eight are considered dangerous.⁷⁷ Interviews with police reported there were six groups in Estonia with significant power.⁷⁸

As Salla et al highlight, despite criminals playing a significant role in the increased homicide rate in the 1990s, they comprised only 20% of homicides. The greatest contribution to the increased homicide rate was cases of murder committed by family or acquaintances after drinking, comprising around two-thirds of homicides during the 1990s.⁷⁹ Although no data are available providing a breakdown of the number of firearms homicides vis-à-vis criminal conflicts and between family or acquaintances, it is likely both contributed to the increase in the firearm homicide rate. The proportion of overall homicides committed using firearms during the 1990s was around 32%, significantly higher than near 6–7% Estonia has experienced over the past decade, especially considering the homicide rate was so much higher.

3.3 The contexts of incidents of gun violence

3.3.1 Alcohol consumption

The biggest risk factor and most common contextual element in gun violence in Estonia is the consumption of alcohol. The connection between alcohol consumption and lethal violence and criminal acts has been a societal problem in Estonia, according to Salla et al, since at least the Soviet occupation from the 1940s. Accordingly, the high consumption of alcohol has been something of a cultural tradition – one shared with neighbouring Russia and Finland. Alcohol consumption increased markedly in the 1960s and has stayed high ever since, despite anti-alcohol campaigns conducted under both the Soviet regime and by Estonian governments. The easing of alcohol restrictions after Estonia regained independence also increased consumption. A study of Estonian homicides from 2007 to 2010 found that nine-tenths of homicides involved the perpetrator, victim, or both, being under the influence of alcohol.⁸⁰

¹ Interviews highlighted that the development of investigative tools, such as technical means and DNA, played a significant role in dealing with the violent and organised groups. Law enforcement stringently imposed penalties on criminals, such as for extortion, and made sure that criminals knew that violence would result in strong measures against everyone involved.

According to interviews with representatives from the Estonian Police and the Ministry of Interior, alcohol is the factor endemic in lethal violence, including firearm violence. The consumption of alcohol can lead to arguments between family members, friends and acquaintances, which can escalate into cases of lethal violence. Although such acts of violence are more often conducted with knives or sharp objects, firearms are also used. From the beginning of 2020 until May 2020, Estonia recorded double the number of homicides that were recorded over the same period in the previous year. The homicides were mainly domestic cases that had arisen after the consumption of alcohol.⁸¹ Of the shooting incidents that had occurred in 2020 as at the time of the interviews in November, alcohol had been consumed in every firearm homicide case and in most of, if not all, the cases of firearm violence.^{82 83}

For example, in June 2020 in Elva Parish, Tartu County, a 59-year-old male was shot dead by one of the two 53-year-old twins he was drinking with in his garden. The twins were reportedly his drinking friends, and the lethal shooting was with a hunting rifle. Although the exact circumstances are not yet known, it is said that there was probably an argument in the lead-up to the shooting. The twins are said to have been hobby hunters.⁸⁴

The June 2020 Lihula shooting which shook Estonia was also connected to the consumption of alcohol. The shooter, Mikk Tarraste, was initially involved in a crash at a petrol station in Lihula from which he fled. Virgot Rägastik, a motorcyclist in the vicinity of the crash, followed Tarraste, who was driving suspiciously, in an attempt to prevent a further crash while he contacted the police. Tarraste stopped his car and shot and killed Rägastik. He then opened fire on another car that happened to be passing the scene. That vehicle contained three children and their two grandparents. Tarraste killed the 61-year-old grandmother and injured two of the children. He also returned fire with the police who arrived at the scene, hitting but not injuring a police officer, before he surrendered.

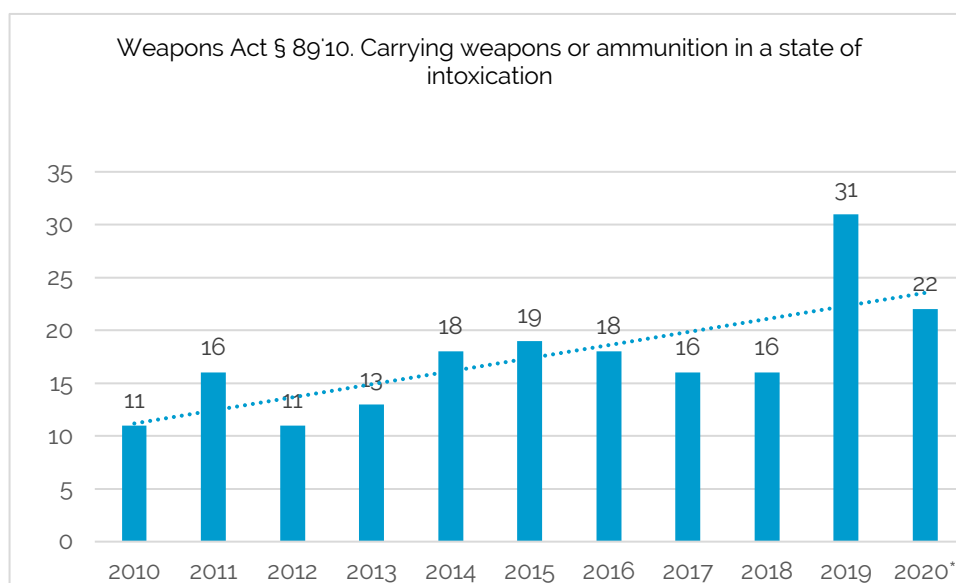
A former member of the Estonian Defence League until 2013, Tarraste had a valid weapons licence for the four firearms he possessed, of which three were in the car at the time, though it is not yet known what type of firearms they were. And although the circumstances which led to Tarraste's shooting spree are as yet unknown, it is known that he was under the influence of alcohol at the time.^{85 86 87}

In May 2020, in Kuusalu municipality, a 44-year-old woman shot and seriously injured her husband, a firearms dealer and well-known shooting instructor who, among other things, had been helping the Ministry of Interior negotiate new firearm legislation. The perpetrator and victim were both under the influence of alcohol, the woman being described as being intoxicated when the police arrived at the scene. The woman has been charged with attempted murder. Moreover, the police found 12 firearms during a search of the premises, three of which were illegal.^{88 89}

In 2018, a 67-year-old man, who was reportedly drunk at the time, fired his air rifle at his 55-year-old neighbour in Raigla village, R apina municipality, hitting him on the shoulder. The two neighbours are known to have had a long-running dispute.⁹⁰

Figure 3 below shows the number of cases related to the possession of a weapon or ammunition under the Weapons Act^I while intoxicated from 2010 to 4 October 2020. It should be noted that not every case may involve the possession of a firearm, but it is nonetheless a helpful indicator of trends. The table indicates that there has been a gradual increase in the number of cases registered since 2010, whereas since 2014 there have been annual cases recorded in the higher teens. The most recent years of 2019 and the partial year of 2020 stand out for their significant increases.

Figure 3: Cases of handling of firearms while intoxicated



Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

To be sure, the presence of alcohol consumption is one of the most common contexts in firearm violence in Estonia, as well as lethal violence more broadly.^{II} ⁹¹ The rate of both firearm violence and the overall level of alcohol consumption has decreased over the longer term, although registered cases of possession of weapons while intoxicated have increased in the 2010s. The influence of alcohol remains one of the most prevalent characteristics of Estonian gun violence.

^I See the annexure for the full table of weapons offences from 2010 to 2020*.

^{II} According to an analysis by the Ministry of Justice, in 2017 most homicides involved both the perpetrator and the victim being under the influence of alcohol.

3.3.2 Family; friends; partners and acquaintances

A second characteristic, which often coincides with the consumption of alcohol, is the high proportion of firearms violence that occurs between perpetrators and victims who know each other. Homicides, in general, are characterised by the close relationships between those involved, often lacking a clear motive. Salla et al found that homicides in Estonia were often the result of an argument, with domestic cases being preceded by a heated argument.⁹² This dynamic is compounded by the involvement of alcohol. Three of the four previous cases mentioned involved persons who knew each other as either family, friends or (hostile) neighbours.

In 2018, a drunk male in Narva went to his ex-girlfriend's house with a legal Glock 19 pistol, where he declared his intention to kill her. There was a struggle during the incident in which the man assaulted the woman, who struggled to escape before eventually managing to run away. The man was sentenced to imprisonment for attempted murder. In another case in 2018, Heiki Hansalu shot at his brother five times through the door and twice through the window with a Makarov pistol. The brothers had been in a disagreement over an inheritance which saw the perpetrator visit his brothers' house. His brother refused him entry, which resulting in his being shot. The victim died from his injuries and the perpetrator was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment.⁹³ A third case from 2014 highlights the case of a 15-year-old schoolboy who fatally shot his German-language teacher during class. The incident reportedly occurred after an ongoing dispute with his teacher and with the boy having previously threatened to kill the teacher. The boy had stolen the firearm from his father's safe.⁹⁴

A case from 2018 involved a man who stole a revolver from a friend to shoot his stepfather. However, he was disturbed by the noise coming from the apartment above his own before he could conduct his planned shooting and instead shot through the door of the apartment above, missing a mother and her child. He then shot at a man and a woman walking in the corridor, hitting the man in the back and killing him.⁹⁵ Although this incident resulted in the death of a man unknown to the perpetrator, the event was driven by the intention to shoot his stepfather.

Interviews with representatives of the Police and the Ministry of Interior highlighted the fact that Estonia still had a significant domestic violence problem, although the violence involves all kinds of weapon.^{96 97} This finding reflects that found in the case of alcohol, while the two are compounding factors: that firearm violence follows general societal trends without having any unique characteristics specific to gun violence. Homicides in Estonia are carried out mainly by perpetrators and suspects who know each other and/or are in close relationships. 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 perpetrators' or the victims' home or property.

3.3.3 Criminal groups

Firearm violence is rare in Estonia in the context of OCGs or criminal conflicts. OCGs have moved away from violence since the 1990s as law enforcement made violent groups their target and began dismantling such groups. The use of violence became untenable because of the legal consequences and their impact on criminal activities. Moreover, the conflict between indigenous local OCGs and foreign or international groups largely ended in the 1990s. The conflict between Estonian OCGs had mostly been minimised by changes in their operations and law-enforcement pressures. This occurred partly because of the role played by Nikolai Tarankov, a leading crime figure born in Belarus with past connections to the KGB. Tarankov created and ran the “Common Fund”, an umbrella group which received a fixed sum from criminals and in return helped criminals and their families when needed, but also helped to settle disagreements between criminals and criminal groups.⁹⁸ The criminal use of firearms is not a defining characteristic of contemporary Estonian gun violence and is currently a marginal concern for law enforcement. Ongoing concerted efforts are still being made to deal with criminal groups’ supply of illicit firearms as intentions could change. But this is currently unlikely because these groups still retain significant arsenals. The authorities stressed that they had no reason or indication to believe that OCGs would return to or use violence in any meaningful way.⁹⁹

In September 2016, Nikolai Tarankov was killed in a shooting incident at a lake while fishing. Yuri Vorobei, the son of one of Tarankov’s friends and who was involved in the crime scene himself, reportedly had had a conflict and fallen out with Tarankov over a previous business at the start of 2016. Vorobei had reportedly heard that Tarankov had been disparaging him and, despite having a legal firearm licence, he acquired an illicit firearm before approaching Tarankov at his usual fishing place. It is reported that Vorobei had asked Tarankov to talk but had been threatened instead, which he inferred to be a threat to have him killed. Vorobei then decided to kill Tarankov, shooting him seven times – the last shot to the head – before hiding the pistol.^{100 101} The killing shook Estonia’s criminal underworld, of which Tarankov had been a stable figurehead for years. No new leader has emerged in his place.

Another case of gun violence in the criminal underworld occurred in 2017. Reports suggest that it may have been a consequence of the vacuum following Tarankov’s death. In February of that year, a conflict between two groups who knew each other arose in a hotel bar where they met coincidentally. During this altercation, one Paata Sakhokia shot another man in the leg. The shooter is believed to have been connected to a Georgian gang attempting to gain a foothold in Estonia. The victim had previously been Sakhokia’s superior until a disagreement arose between his former gang and the Georgian gang.^{102 103}

Gun violence cases may also occur in contexts which are not related to *serious organised crime*. For example, in July 2017, an elderly Russian male broke into an empty house to look for any valuable goods left behind and triggered the security alarm, which called two security guards to the site. Upon being found and approached by the guards, the

man pulled out an illegally held Makarov pistol, shooting one guard twice and the other once in their lower torsos. Both survived. The shooter was allegedly a shooting champion during the Soviet Union period and had long worked in and shot with shooting clubs. He also claimed to have intentionally fired non-fatal shots. The pistol had been converted by the individual at some time around 2000. The police seized a number of firearm parts and ammunition during their searches.¹ 104 105

One pattern that bucks the trend is Lithuanian car thieves operating in Estonia. According to a report in the media, these Lithuanian groups are becoming more “brutal” and some are armed with firearms.¹⁰⁶ It does not appear that the firearms are actively used, no cases having been reported of a thief using a firearm during a robbery.

The criminal use of firearms is very limited in Estonia, with cases few and far between. Criminal behaviour has shifted away from violence and those few cases that occur, as seen above, are the result of individual-level behaviour, such as in the Tarankov killing case or the coincidental bar fight in the second case. No systematic or routine use of firearms is orchestrated by criminal groups. Estonian authorities have a greater concern over tackling and removing the remaining arsenals of firearms held by OCGs, because they provide an ongoing capability of gun violence, even as current criminal behaviour suggests using firearms has been disparaged.

3.4 Locations of gun violence

Salla et al found in their 2012 study that homicides in Estonia generally happen in private property and rarely occur in public places, but when they do happen in public places, they are more likely to be the result of a stabbing or a beating.¹⁰⁷ There has not been any research into the spatial characteristics of firearm homicides or gun violence more generally in Estonia. Nonetheless, it is apparent from an analysis of firearm homicide and violence cases covered in the media that these incidents mirror general homicide trends, namely, that they often occur in private residences or on private property. This tallies, given the other characteristics of firearm violence in Estonia being linked to alcohol consumption and violence between individuals in close relationships. Firearms are more easily accessed from homes where the combination of alcohol consumption and arguments with persons in close relationships are also present, posing a greater risk factor.

Many of the cases mentioned thus far have occurred on private property. There are, however, a few instances of gun violence in public areas. For example, in 2018, following an argument between two men in the centre of Tallinn, Taavi Sõnajalg picked up a Sig Sauer pistol and shot the other man through the arm, before aiming the gun at other people nearby. Sõnajalg had consumed cocaine before the incident.¹⁰⁸ In 2019, a

¹ Among other items, the police found 25 firearm locks, 54 Kalashnikov parts, 13 Mosin rifle parts, 20 Nagi rifle parts, six TT pistol parts, 53 Margolin pistol parts plus 7,652 cartridges or cartridge parts. The man claimed to have received these when working at Tallinn Central Prison after they had been ‘written off’.

man who had previously been a taxi driver shot at two taxis in Telliskivi, apparently at random. The shooter killed one person and seriously injured the second, with a total of 11 shots being fired from a legally owned TT pistol. The shooter, who had no connections with alcohol or drugs and a clean criminal record, fled the scene. He was traced down to a bus stop, where a patrol approached him, upon which he committed suicide with his gun. In a 2018 *Delfi* article published after the 2018 case just mentioned, it was highlighted that over the previous seven years, at least 12 shootings had occurred in public places in Tallinn. These include an incident in which the shooting was conducted by police, while some incidents could be classified as occurring in a private place.¹⁰⁹ The higher prevalence of shootings in and around the Tallinn area is not surprising, given that Tallinn comprises just under a third of Estonia's population.

Interviews with the Estonian authorities highlighted that there was no significant geographic pattern of the occurrence of firearm violence across the country. Instead, they commented that firearm violence occurs generally throughout the country, regardless of urban or rural, regional or other factors.^{110 111}

3.5 Characteristics of the perpetrators and the victims of gun violence

The demographic characteristics of firearm perpetrators and victims are similarly understudied. An analysis from 2007 to 2016 shows 632 *homicide* victims, among which three times more men died than women. The declining murder rate has been greatest among male victims. There were similar dominant traits in the ages of victims of homicide: two-thirds of those killed were between the ages of 30–59. Within that range, the 40–49 age group comprised the largest strata of homicide victims, followed by 50–59 and then 30–39. One-fifth of victims were older than 60. Overall, there has been little significant change in the age proportions of homicide victims because the general number has decreased. These data highlight that young people have not tended to be victims of homicide. Understanding the overall homicide demographic trends helps to make the characteristics of the perpetrators and victims of gun violence more comprehensible. The characteristics of firearm homicides have generally been the same as those of homicides in general.

Interviews and analyses of media reports and case studies have highlighted the fact that, in Estonia, firearm violence is male-dominated – that is, both perpetrators and victims are more likely to be male.¹ Males appear to be more likely to be the perpetrator of a shooting incident than a victim, although they are predominant in both categories.¹¹² Male–male firearm violence appears to occur across different contexts and

¹ According to the Estonian authorities, it is very difficult to obtain breakdowns of data from the police database regarding to sex, age or other characteristics of perpetrators and victims of firearm violence. Every case in the database would have to be searched manually, placing a high demand on time and resources.

is the most common form of violence. These incidents are often linked to alcohol or drug consumption, but also take the form of disputes not induced by the abuse of a substance. Criminal cases are heavily male dominated. Male–female firearm violence is much more closely connected to domestic abuse cases between intimate partners or previously intimate partners. Cases of female gun violence perpetrators are considerably rarer, while no examples of female–female shootings have been found. The Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2015 report provides one of the only gender breakdowns of firearm violence in Estonia: it highlights that from 2007 to 2012, the average proportion of female firearm–homicide victims was around 10%.¹¹³

No data are available about the ages of firearm perpetrators or victims. Of the cases of gun violence reported in the media, a broad range of ages are involved in the perpetration of gun violence and victimhood, mirroring that seen in overall homicides. There is, however, a notable absence of shooting perpetrators below the age of 30. This is supported by comments during an interview which speculated that young persons in Estonia do not appear to have much interest in firearms.¹¹⁴

Concerning ethnicity, there does not appear to be any significant differences in the perpetrators or victims of gun violence. Salla et al noted that, in the 1990s, ethnic Russians were three times more likely to be found guilty or be the victim of a homicide.¹¹⁵ Interviews with the Estonian authorities highlighted the phenomenon there were no notable patterns or trends in contemporary cases. At the time of the interviews, every firearm violence case in 2020 had been committed by an ethnic Estonian.

4



Characteristics of firearms used in gun violence

4.1 Types of firearm uses gun violence

According to interviews with the Estonian authorities, there are no significant patterns or defining characteristics of the types of firearm used in gun violence in Estonia. Instead, police emphasised that firearm crimes mostly make use of whatever firearm the individual has at hand, whether that is a pistol or a hunting weapon such as a rifle. These firearms are generally old – for example, Tokarev pistols from the 1980s which were later diverted during the years after Estonia regained independence.¹¹⁶

Unfortunately, there is no available official analysis of the types of firearm that have been used in firearm homicides or firearm violence more generally. From an analysis of firearm cases covered in Estonian media reports, pistols appear to be the most common firearm used in shootings. In those cases involving pistols, the firearms have been used in a variety of contexts, commonly in shootings after arguments and/or alcohol consumption, but also in violence between intimate or previously intimate partners and in criminal contexts. Not every shooting case reported in the media contains specific information related to the type of gun used, and in the case of pistols there does not appear to be a common model.

Given the characteristics of firearm violence in Estonia – namely, rash and unpremeditated as a result of alcohol consumption and usually following arguments – it follows that the types of firearm used do not have a specific pattern. The firearms used in gun violence are instead those at hand found in Estonian society. They have largely not been acquired to commit a shooting but are circumstantial to the violent event.

A notable trend reported during interviews has been the increasingly common use or possession of fake or replica firearms by criminals. This reflects the limited supply of illicit firearms and firearm-trafficking.¹¹⁷ A replica or fake firearm may be sufficient for

achieving criminal goals anyway, because for those otherwise unaware, it still has the same level of threat and psychological trauma.

4.2 Legal status of the firearms used in gun violence

Similarly, no official analysis is available of the legal status of firearms used in gun violence. The Estonian Forensic Science Institute suggested that based only on their own experience with firearms, concerning violence committed with firearms, there was around a 50–50 split between legal and illegal firearms.¹¹⁸ Data provided by Estonian authorities on the number of cases that occurred with an unregistered firearm allow for further analysis, as shown in Tables 8 and 9. Table 8 shows the number of unregistered firearms used in homicides and cases of serious harm. It should be noted again that owing to the small numbers of firearm-related incidents in Estonia, fluctuations can appear dramatic.

Homicides committed with an unregistered firearm comprise 61% of all cases from 2010 to 2020. For most years, especially in the early 2010s, unregistered firearms accounted for nearly all of the firearm homicides recorded. The only years where registered firearms accounted for more than 50% of homicides were 2016 and the partial year of 2020. Similarly, acts of serious harm committed with an unregistered firearm comprised 71% of all acts of serious harm with a firearm.

Table 7: Unregistered firearms

Type of offence	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
Homicide committed with an unregistered firearm**	5 (5)	4 (5)	4 (5)	4 (5)	3 (5)	1 (2)	3 (7)	1 (1)	1 (4)	1 (1)	0 (4)	27(44)
Proportion committed with an unregistered firearm	100%	80%	80%	80%	60%	50%	42.9%	100%	25%	100%	0%	61.4%
Serious harm committed with an unregistered firearm	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (1)	0 (0)	5 (7)

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 October 2020

**Total number of all firearm cases in brackets

Table 8 shows the number of incidents of negligent homicide and the causing of serious health damage through negligence with unregistered firearms. Of the 12 cases of negligent firearm homicide overall, five cases or 42% were accounted for by unregistered firearms. The incident rate for causing serious health damage with firearms through negligence was lower, with six cases, of which one used an illicit firearm.

Table 8: Negligent homicide and serious health damage with unregistered firearms

Penal Code	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
§ 117 (Negligent homicide)	0 (1)	1 (3)	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (3)	0 (0)	1 (1)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (1)	5 (12)
§ 119 (Causing serious health damage through negligence)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (2)	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (1)	0 (1)	0 (0)	1 (6)

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 October 2020

**Total number of all firearm cases in brackets

Table 9 shows the number of acts committed with illicit firearms, according to the remaining penal codes, from 2010 to 4 October 2020. The table shows that in incidents of threat with a firearm, unregistered firearms accounted for 44% of cases. The code which saw the smallest proportion of cases committed with illicit firearms was physical abuse with a firearm, only 27% of which were unregistered. Incidents of aggravated breach of public order with unregistered firearms accounted for 52% of all cases.

Table 9: Acts involving the use of unregistered firearms

Penal code with an unregistered firearm	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
§ 120 (Threat)	2 (2)	1 (4)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (4)	0 (3)	1 (1)	1 (3)	3 (4)	0 (1)	2 (3)	12 (27)
§ 121 (Physical abuse)	0 (0)	0 (2)	1 (2)	0 (2)	1 (4)	0 (1)	2 (2)	-	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (1)	4 (15)

§ 200 (Robbery)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (3)
§ 263 (Aggravated breach of public order)	4 (6)	0 (1)	3 (6)	3 (5)	1 (1)	0 (2)	0	3 (4)	1 (5)	1 (2)	1 (1)	17 (33)
§ 274 (Violence against representative of state authority)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (1)

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

*Data to 4 October 2020

**Total number of all firearm cases in brackets

According to the data supplied by the Estonian authorities from 2010 to 4 October 2020, as has been shown in this report, overall, there were 148 registered cases using firearms. Of these, 73 or 49% were accounted for by unregistered firearms.

Our analyses indicate that trafficked firearms do not contribute significantly to the number of firearms used in violence. Firearm-trafficking is largely marginal to the occurrence of contemporary firearm violence in Estonia. This is a result of the low levels of firearm-trafficking experienced in the country, in combination with the low level of firearm violence. From 2010 to 2020, 61.4% of firearm homicides and serious health damage cases, and just under 50% of overall gun cases, have involved unregistered firearms. These firearms have generally been possessed illicitly in Estonia for a long time. Very little evidence connects firearm-trafficking with firearm violence. The characteristics and supply of these firearms, as has been described in the illicit firearm possession section, were largely diverted and have remained unregulated since the period around when Estonia regained its independence and the period of transition began, or even before that. The firearms may have been hidden in houses or passed down through the generations, but for the most part these weapons have not moved around in or through any trafficking or supply systems. This is a driving factor behind the Estonian authorities' efforts to reduce the pre-existing supply of illicit firearms by encouraging their voluntary surrender through amnesty and awareness campaigns.

5



National policy and initiatives to combat illicit firearm trafficking and gun violence

Estonia has sought to combat illicit firearm-trafficking and gun violence through various measures since the 1990s, while efforts continue to decrease their incidence further. According to Sven Põierpaas from the Criminal Policy Department of the Ministry of Interior, legislative, preventive and supervisory measures have been effective in reducing the levels of gun violence.¹¹⁹

Estonia's strict firearm regulation and enforcement are seen as central to combatting firearm violence. The firearm application procedure requires applicants to show their understanding of firearms, both in practice and in theory, therefore screening out those unsuitable to possess a firearm. The process also encompasses checks against criminal records, medical history and any ongoing investigations or previous activities which may suggest it is not appropriate for that individual to hold a firearm licence. Furthermore, the electronic firearm database has enabled the police to enforce the firearm regulations more effectively. The digital registry has allowed for greater scrutiny in the course of firearm applications, ensuring that firearm permits are not granted to those who may otherwise pose a threat or danger. The Estonian authorities impose these regulations stringently to keep firearms out of the wrong hands.¹²⁰ In addition to the strict firearm regulations and their enforcement, the number of legal gun-owners has not been high in Estonia, which has reduced the likelihood of gun violence.¹²¹

The 2020 Lihula shooting has resulted in the Estonian authorities conducting a proactive extensive check against all registered firearm-owners, of which there are around 26,000, to make sure there are not any firearm permit-holders who have been granted a permit but who should not have. The perpetrator in the Lihula shooting had a previous firearm conviction but had been wrongly granted a firearm licence that enabled him to own four legal firearms, of which three were in his car and used during the shooting. Police are now conducting an extensive re-check against all firearm-owners for criminal records and intelligence which indicate that the individual should not have a permit. These criteria are those that apply during the routine procedure for

granting or extending a firearm permit, including participation in past crimes, driving under the influence, domestic abuse and mental health. Where police do find firearm permit-holders who are not appropriate gun-owners, firearm licences are revoked, and firearms are removed.¹²²

Estonian legislation has developed markedly since the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Moreover, since joining the European Union, Estonia has adopted European Union Firearms Directives and, in some instances, adopted measures beyond European legislation. The Estonian authorities are satisfied that the firearms legislation in place provides an effective deterrent against gun crime and there are no plans to change the sentencing regime. An interesting facet of Estonian legislation is the lack of any specific legislation or sentencing for firearm-trafficking. Instead, firearm-trafficking is covered in the penal code under the same penalties as illicit firearm-handling.^{I 123}

As at 2013, Estonia has in amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure codified the process for the voluntary surrender of firearms, explosives, ammunition and essential parts. Estonian civilians are therefore able to surrender and remove from illicit circulation illegal firearms that they may possess without fear of facing prosecution, provided the firearms are not connected to any crimes. Estonia had previously employed amnesty campaigns run with awareness-raising measures as a means of tackling the illicit supply of firearms. However, the programme was discontinued as it lacked clear legality until the 2013 amendment. Currently, civilians can surrender a firearm at any time of the year by contacting the police, who will go to the individuals' property to remove the firearm. Estonian authorities run annual awareness campaigns to emphasise and encourage opportunities to legally surrender an illicit firearm and also to stress the dangers of illegal firearms.^{124 125} The October 2020 annual awareness campaign, for example, resulted in the surrender of 49 firearms, 31,000 units of ammunition, 17.5 kg of explosives as well as gunpowder, detonators, grenades and an anti-tank mine.^{II 126} These campaigns are planned to continue to reduce further the number of illicit firearms held and limit the possibility of gun violence.

More generally, Estonia's economic and social development since the 1990s has played a significant role in the decline of lethal violence overall, including gun violence. Societal changes in values and attitudes, such as corporal punishment of children, has shifted overall norms and understanding of the acceptance of violence. The use of violence as a problem-solving tool has consequently been heavily marginalised.^{127 128}

^I The illicit handling of firearms, essential parts of them and ammunition is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment, although if it is the second case, or involving large quantities, or committed by a group, it is punishable by up to five years. In cases concerning the illicit handling of firearms, their essential parts and ammunition prohibited for civilian use, it is punishable by from one to five years. Similarly, for a second time, or in large quantities, punishment increases to between 5 and 15 years. The unlawful handling of military weapons, essential components of them and military ammunition is punishable by 2–10 years, and for the second time, or committed by a group, or in large quantities, it is punishable by 5–15 years.

^{II} The Rescue Board has run awareness campaigns before in 2008–2010, 2013, 2014, and 2019. The 2019 campaign collected 124 firearms, 12,400 units of ammunition, gunpowder, detonators and various missiles. Overall, the explosive collections throughout all the campaigns total 140 kg of explosives and 1,447 detonators.

Likewise, Estonia's institutions such as the police and the judiciary have developed with time, with significant strides having been made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These efforts saw criminals, and with them firearms and violence, dealt with more effectively. Following the adoption of the Police Law in 1990, law enforcement has developed from the militia system (a Russian-speaking military organisation under the Soviet system) into a police force grounded as a civilian organisation in a democracy. These institutional developments happened at a rapid pace, with expertise and knowledge being acquired in the process.¹²⁹ These developments helped to tackle and reduce the crime rate and build trust in the police. This resulted in the creation of a safer and more secure environment in which crime was combatted and the demand among civilians for firearms for self-protection reduced. Moreover, law enforcement has transitioned to focus on preventive measures, seen in the enforcement of the strict firearm regulation, investigations against illicit firearms supply and a focus on removing non-regulated firearms from ordinary citizens. Similar developments have been taking place in the judicial system. For example, during interviews, it was stated that judges had been lenient on criminals and suspects until after 2000, when the societal impact of criminals and their groups came to be fully realised. Judges have since imposed greater penalties, which have helped to reinforce the deterrence of crime and the use of violence, including gun violence.¹³⁰

During the research, a few challenges relating to data-collection and analysis were highlighted. First, data collected by police relating to firearms and unregistered firearms used in crimes are entered immediately after a crime has taken place and are not later amended with the final information related to the case. Yet it is possible for the details in a case to change, such as a victim recovering or not. As a result, the data are not fully accurate and, consequently, any analysis drawn, or overviews taken from the data may not be truly representative. Another issue raised during interviews was the challenge of recording data related to lost or stolen firearms. Reportedly, the data collected about these firearms are not very clear and therefore it has been hard to say how many weapons or what type of weapons have been lost or stolen.¹³¹

Another challenge relating to firearm data-collection and analysis is that police data are very hard to use for analysis. Estonian police input all data available in a firearm-related criminal case, including as much information about the firearm as possible, however, this information is entered manually. As a resultant, any analysis of the data, such as analysis of firearm-related violence by gender, must be conducted by searching through each case manually, which is time-intensive and has been described as 'almost impossible to do easily'.¹³² This makes analysis and continuing up-to-date analysis of firearms violence and crime more difficult and impedes the ability to obtain an accurate understanding of the dynamics and characteristics of firearm crime and violence.

6

Conclusion



This report has shown that firearm-trafficking and firearm-related violence are relatively rare phenomena in Estonia. The scope and characteristics of both firearm-trafficking and gun violence have changed drastically in Estonia since the country regained its independence from the Soviet regime. It is apparent that Estonia does not face a significant security and safety threat from firearms.

Firearm-trafficking, though rife in the years of transition during the early to mid-1990s, has dwindled to a state of almost non-existence. Where there have been contemporary cases of trafficking, these have been conducted by groups engaged in the reactivation of firearms. Notably, many of the firearms that have been reactivated in the various cases were then trafficked out of Estonia, highlighting the low levels of demand from within the country. No cases of OCGs involved in firearm-trafficking have been reported since 2017, and with it no evidence of any recent or ongoing systematic attempts at firearm-trafficking. Whereas there may be occasional incidents related to the trafficking in one or two firearms, these are generally ad hoc and driven by opportunism and conducted at an individual level – for example, in the smuggling of stolen firearms from Latvia. Overall, it is clear from the data and cases available, and from interviews with the Estonian authorities, that firearm-trafficking is not a significant problem in Estonia.

Perhaps of greater concern to the authorities, though still limited in scope, is the number of illicit firearms in Estonia already possessed by civilians. As previously mentioned, these guns have often been held illicitly for a long period. Often these are firearms that have been held since the Second World War or since the proliferation of firearms after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These guns are held by criminal groups and civilians alike, although criminal groups are said to have larger caches of former Soviet Union-supplied hardware. These non-regulated firearms are largely static that is, they do not move around like trafficked firearms, but often remain in the same place, perhaps hidden or forgotten about for long periods. The Estonian authorities' increasing experience of firearm replicas and fake guns suggests that the pool of illicit

firearms is continuing to shrink and that obtaining firearms has become increasingly difficult.

Firearm violence in Estonia has declined dramatically since the 1990s to the very low levels seen in contemporary Estonia. The use of violence, including firearm violence, by criminals in Estonia is marginal as criminals have moved away from violence and publicity. Firearm violence largely follows broader societal patterns of violence. It is characterised by the consumption of alcohol by the perpetrator and often by the victim too. Another common characteristic, compounded by alcohol consumption, is the close relationships between perpetrator and victim, whether family, friends, partners or acquaintances. Shootings often occur on private property where both the risk factors of individuals in close relationships – the consumption of alcohol and the presence of firearms – are present. These are characteristics found in homicides more broadly, while the problem of alcohol consumption is also acknowledged.

Estonia has managed successfully to counter firearm-trafficking and firearm violence, although it is difficult to differentiate between the effectiveness of specific policies and the drastic overall change in Estonian society. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a “remarkable” decrease in the number of homicides and a marked improvement in overall safety.¹³³ It is perhaps more accurate to describe such measures as dovetailing with the socio-economic development of Estonia. As has been seen, the rates of both homicides and firearm homicides have decreased steeply, mirroring Estonia’s development and the marginalisation of violent crime. The specific countermeasures employed by Estonian authorities are largely preventive, aimed at further stymieing the availability of illicit firearms and working to ensure that firearms are kept out of the hands of those who may pose a threat.

There is not a significant connection between firearm-trafficking and firearm violence in Estonia. This report found that from 2010 to the partial year of 2020, 61.4% of firearm homicides were committed with an unregistered firearm and therefore just under 40% were committed with a legal firearm. These unregistered firearms are generally those that had been diverted for some time and not the product of firearm-trafficking. Given the very low levels of firearm-trafficking, it is not surprising that trafficked firearms are not a common source of firearm violence, especially since many of the perpetrators are not criminals and would lack the connections for acquiring a trafficked firearm.

Estonia has successfully reduced the levels of firearm-trafficking and firearm violence since the country regained its independence. This has been both a result of broader socio-economic development and of measures put in place to deal with the availability of illicit firearms and denying firearms to those who may pose a threat. Estonia continues to focus on preventive measures concerning firearms, specifically by targeting the continuing pool of unregistered firearms and stringently enforcing its strict firearm regulations. Further broader societal changes relating to alcohol consumption and violence between individuals in close relationships are required to reduce firearm violence further.

Annexure

Variable data for all possible times and offences, 2010–2020

Table 10: Offences related to the handling of firearms

Offences related to the handling of firearms	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (until 4.10)
§ 418. Unlawful handling of firearms or essential components thereof or ammunition	99	118	107	82	74	67	66	85	92	85	88
§ 418 ¹ . Unlawful handling of firearms prohibited for civilian use or essential components thereof or ammunition	20	13	14	12	10	12	11	15	10	5	10
§ 419. Negligent storage of firearms	2	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	1
§ 420. Unlawful handling of silencers, laser sights or night sights of firearms	12	3	12	10	5	15	3	8	7	4	6
Registered firearms used in crimes	133	135	134	104	91	94	81	108	110	95	105
Registered misdemeanours (Weapons Act)	337	276	262	310	408	498	510	427	417	421	202
Total offences related to the handling of weapons	470	411	396	414	499	592	591	535	527	516	307
the proportion of crimes in them	28%	33%	34%	25%	18%	16%	14%	20%	21%	18%	34%
Crimes committed using or threatening to use a weapon, an object used as a weapon or a weapon-like object	423	455	445	437	409	468	424	414	431	439	353

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

Weapons Act	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (until 4.10)
§ 89 ¹ . Violation of requirements for handling of or procedure for keeping records and registration of weapons, essential components of firearms or ammunition, or requirements for handling deactivated weapons which do not meet requirements	101	67	58	64	76	61	55	59	46	64	50
§ 89 ² . Unlawful handling of electric shock weapons and cut-and-thrust weapons use of which for civilian purposes is prohibited	113	109	100	136	220	331	331	295	274	260	101
§ 89 ³ . Unlawful handling of gas, pneumatic, projectile and cut-and-thrust weapons	44	31	47	30	32	43	51	32	46	29	18
§ 89 ⁴ . Violation of requirements for handing over weapons and ammunition	45	7	7	9	27	8	1	1	1	6	0
§ 89 ¹⁰ . Carrying weapons or ammunition in state of intoxication	11	16	11	13	18	19	18	16	16	31	22
§ 89 ¹³ . Handling of insignificant quantities of ammunition	14	40	39	54	23	36	55	31	34	31	11
Total	328	270	262	306	396	498	511	434	417	421	202

Source: data provided by the Estonian authorities

Table 11: Homicide data and sources

Homicide data and sources		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Source	Classification											
Police data	§ 114 Murder- firearm was used (Cases)	1	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
	§ 113 Manslaughter: firearm was used (Cases)	4	2	4	4	4	2	6	0	4	1	2
	Total firearm homicides (Cases)	5	5	5	5	5	2	7	1	4	1	4
UNODC	Homicide by firearm	5	9	2	3	2	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gunpolicy.org*	Gun Homicides	5	9	2	3	2	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Open source***	Media cases of gun homicide†	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	0	1	1	3
Range of difference		0	4	3	2	3	2	4	1	3	1	1‡

*Up to 4 November 2020

**Gunpolicy.org uses an amalgamation of sources

***Open-source research of media documents was largely extensive, although language differences may have stopped some cases being found despite extensive searches in Estonia

† Number of homicide victims overall, not cases

‡ Actual number of firearm homicides is three – to 4 November 2020

There are discrepancies in the data on firearm homicides in Estonia. The police data are known to contain inaccuracies, as footnoted on page 20 and as shown in ‡ above; moreover, the Lihula shooting is entered as two separate cases. Whereas the 2020* police data show four cases, there have been only two lethal shootings with three fatalities overall.

Endnotes

- ¹ Eesti.ee. (nd) *Weapons and Weapons Permits*, <https://www.eesti.ee/en/security-and-defense/safety-and-security/weapons-and-weapons-permits/>, consulted 29 September 2020.
- ² Politsei. (29 September 2020) *Weapons Permits for Individuals*, <https://www.politsei.ee/en/instructions/weapons-permits-for-individuals/weapons-permit>, consulted 29 September 2020.
- ³ Aibast, M. (14 February 2018) Marju Aibast: Praeguste ja tulevastele relvaomanikele – mis muutub uue relvaseadusega?, *Postimees*, <https://arvamus.postimees.ee/4409007/marju-aibast-praeguste-ja-tulevastele-relvaomanikele-mis-muutub-uu-relvaseadusega>, consulted 29 September 2020.
- ⁴ Raal, K. (9 October 2018) Graafik: Kui palju ja millised relvad on Eesti kodudes?, *Postimees*, www.postimees.ee/4267863/graafik-kui-palju-ja-millised-relvad-on-estis-kodudes, consulted 9 December 2019.
- ⁵ Verbal communication with a representative of the Police and Border Guard, November 2020.
- ⁶ Raal, K. (9 October 2018) Graafik: Kui palju ja millised relvad on Eesti kodudes?, *Postimees*, www.postimees.ee/4267863/graafik-kui-palju-ja-millised-relvad-on-estis-kodudes, consulted 9 December 2019.
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