

ANALYSIS:

Tackling firearms trafficking: Policy, priorities, and police action

2nd March 2022 | Andrew Staniforth | Policing Insight



Three recent high-profile firearms cases involving the UK's National Crime Agency have underlined the continuing fight against the flow of illegal guns into criminal hands; and as Policing Insight's Andrew Staniforth reports, tackling the trade and trafficking in illicit firearms is a challenge that will involve collaboration and co-operation across Europe.

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Mark McCormack, NCA Branch Commander

Last month officers from the UK's [National Crime Agency \(NCA\)](#) attended a property on Moor Lane, Westfield near Hastings and [recovered numerous weapons](#), including forward venting [Zoraki hand guns](#), modified ammunition and firearms conversion paraphernalia from the house and various outbuildings.

A 46-year-old East Sussex man was arrested on suspicion of firearms offences and has since been released under investigation while enquiries continue. [Mark McCormack, Branch Commander at the NCA](#) said it was a “significant outcome”.

“I have no doubt that this was a firearms conversion factory,” continued Cmdr McCormack, “which could have been responsible for the modification of a significant number of firearms and ammunition into lethal weapons.”

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Threat to threat

The discovery of a firearms conversion factory is a major success in the fight against the illicit firearms trade in Britain. The NCA operation followed a separate investigation into the supply of firearms in the West Midlands, resulting in seven people being charged with firearms related offences.

The defendants are suspected of being linked to a loaded pistol and ammunition that was seized from a car in East Birmingham in 2018. All seven people were due to appear at Birmingham Magistrates Court on 1 March 2022.

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Neil Gardner, NCA Operations Manager

The NCA also revealed earlier this month that a further [seven men had been jailed](#) following an operation which uncovered plots to sell a terrifying haul of automatic and semi-automatic firearms.

The men all pleaded guilty to charges that arose from [Operation Venetic](#) – the UK law enforcement response to the takedown of encrypted communications platform [EncroChat](#). The trial at Manchester Crown Court heard that the seized firearms included [AK47 assault rifles and Skorpion and Uzi machine guns](#).

Speaking following the Manchester trial, [Neil Gardner, NCA Operations Manager](#), said: “The weapons we took off the street and out of the crime groups’ hands were some of the most lethal around with a truly devastating capability. In seizing these weapons, which are capable of firing multiple rounds per second, we have saved lives and protected the public.”

All three NCA-led operations have raised serious concerns among national security policymakers in both the serious and organised crime and counter-terrorism domains.

The availability and ready access to all manner of firearms in the UK has exposed potential fault lines in the international multi-agency fight against firearms trafficking – especially those lethal weapons traced to European member states.

Cross-border

The [2020-2025 European Union Action Plan on Firearms Trafficking](#) reveals that 35 million illicit firearms were owned by civilians in the EU in 2017 (56% of the estimated total of firearms). According to those estimates, illicit firearms would outnumber legally held firearms in 12 EU Member States.

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Research into [firearms in the EU](#), undertaken by the [European Commission, Directorate-General for Home Affairs](#), revealed that one in 10 European citizens owned or had previously owned a firearm, with the highest incidence of firearms ownership in the EU in Cyprus, where three out of 10 respondents either own or used to own a firearm.

The rate of firearms ownership across Europe may surprise many in UK law enforcement, especially when the EU’s Action Plan on Firearms Trafficking reveals that extreme right-wing activists are increasingly under the limelight for the accumulation of lethal weapons. Moreover, many EU member states are experiencing critical threats from gun-related crimes.

A comprehensive study published in 2019 by the [Flemish Peace Institute](#) identified 23 mass-shooting incidents that occurred in public places in Europe between 2009-2018, which killed 341 people.

Europol’s [Terrorism Situation & Trend Report \(TE-SAT\) of 2017](#) recorded that there were 57 terrorist incidents in which a firearm was used during 2015; the [2018 TE-SAT Report](#) revealed that during 2017, firearms were used in 41% of all terrorist attacks, a slight increase compared to 2016 (38%).

Rising tide

The scale of the successful use of firearms by terrorists and criminals operating across Europe is a major concern, but law enforcement agencies are fighting back.

During July 2020, Europol, together with national law enforcement agencies in France and the Netherlands, announced the results of a large, cross-border joint investigation against a major criminal network which led to the seizure of dozens of automatic firearms in the Netherlands.

Earlier that same year a police operation in Spain dismantled a large firearms trafficking network, with the seizure of 730 weapons and 21 arrests throughout the

country. These are all examples of excellent multi-agency operations to tackle the threat of illicit firearms in Europe and provides an insight to the scale of the challenge.

Recognising the rising tide of threats from firearms, the European Commission proposed in its firearms trafficking action plan that both the EU and its south-east Europe partners (Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine) progress efforts around the following four specific priorities:

“Such action will address the remaining legal loopholes and inconsistencies in firearms controls that hinder police co-operation, and the plan defines activities for a shared understanding and a common way forward.”

- Safeguarding the licit market and limiting diversion.
- Building a better intelligence picture.
- Increasing pressure on criminal markets.
- Stepping up international co-operation.

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Of significant interest to UK law enforcement agencies in the post-Brexit security landscape is the fourth priority – ‘Stepping up international co-operation’ – as cross-border collaboration and joint operations, underpinned by rigorous intelligence sharing protocols, will prove essential to stem the future flow of firearms from European member states reaching UK streets.

And while law enforcement is increasing efforts and improving collaboration across country borders to tackle the flow of guns and bullets, members of the public can still play their part. Anyone who has any information about illegally held firearms or ammunition in the UK should contact their local police on 101. Alternatively, if people wish to remain anonymous, they can contact the independent charity Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or via www.crimestoppers-uk.org.

Link to online article at Policing Insight: <https://policinginsight.com/features/analysis/tackling-firearms-trafficking-policy-priorities-and-police-action/>



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