



# **BEYOND FIREARMS: THE EUROPEAN ILLEGAL ARMS MARKET THROUGH A CRIMINOLOGICAL LENS**

**Piotr Chlebowicz, Doctor Habilitated**

*University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn  
Professor  
Poland*

**Szymon Buczyński, MA**

*University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn  
Assistant  
Poland*

**Keywords:** illicit markets, illicit firearms trafficking, organised crime

DOI: ...

## ABSTRACT

Each year, approximately 600–700 homicides are committed with firearms in the EU. Despite this, the subject of the illicit arms market in Europe has only recently become the focus of in-depth criminological study. Moreover, so far, only a limited number of studies have been undertaken to thoroughly analyse the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun-related violence in Europe. The authors of this paper describe several dimensions of the illicit firearms market and note that the problem of illicit firearms trafficking is interdisciplinary, with the criminological perspective reflecting the essence of illicit trafficking only to some extent. The paper addresses the issue of basic concepts related to illicit firearms trafficking and their use in the context of the Polish black market for weapons. The Analytical Research Team for Illicit Markets was established at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn in 2012. The theoretical considerations presented correspond directly with the research activities conducted within its framework. The availability, possession, and use of illicit firearms should be considered a factor significantly destabilising society. As such, this phenomenon has broader social and economic consequences than typically perceived. In addition, the observed turbulent geopolitical changes in the region provide a compelling case for continuing international studies of the phenomenon carried out by national research teams.

## INTRODUCTION

The illicit firearms trade, viewed through a criminological lens, presents a critical area of study with profound implications for public safety and criminal justice systems worldwide. The illegal trafficking of firearms poses a significant threat to societal well-being, contributing to violent crimes, homicides, and acts of terrorism. Despite its detrimental impact, the subject of illicit arms dealing remains a complex and underexplored phenomenon within criminological research.

This article aims to delve into the illicit firearms trade from a criminological perspective, examining its various dimensions, dynamics, and consequences. With an estimated 600–700 homicides committed annually with firearms in the European Union alone, there is a pressing need for an in-depth analysis of the interplay between illegal arms trafficking and gun-related violence.

By elucidating the key concepts associated with illegal arms trafficking and their implications for crime prevention and law enforcement efforts, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the underground firearms market. Through a criminological framework, this study aims to uncover the root causes of illicit arms trade, assess its societal impacts, and explore strategies for effective intervention and regulation. Rooted in the activities of the Analytical Research Team for Illicit Markets, established at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn in 2012, this article aligns theoretical insights with empirical investigations conducted by dedicated research teams.

This article aligns with the broader academic literature on theoretical and empirical considerations of the illicit arms market, reflecting a growing scholarly interest in understanding the complexities of illegal firearms trafficking. By actively participating in this scholarly dialogue, the authors aspire to foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of illicit arms trafficking and promote effective strategies for combating this pervasive criminal activity.

Furthermore, in light of the transnational nature of illicit firearms trafficking and its implications for global security, this research underscores the importance of international cooperation and evidence-based

policy-making in addressing the challenges posed by illegal arms dealing. Recognising the illicit possession and use of firearms as more than criminal acts, it becomes imperative to sustain international research efforts, drawing on the collaborative work of national research teams. Against the backdrop of tumultuous geopolitical shifts in the region, there is a compelling argument for sustaining international research on this phenomenon, drawing on the insights derived from national research teams.

## 1. ARMS PROLIFERATION PARADOX

It is beyond doubt that illicit firearms trafficking is a dangerous practice producing multiple negative effects not only at the level of individual states but also regionally and globally. From a criminological point of view, the issue is complex; there are considerable difficulties in obtaining empirical data and there are no theoretical elaborations that deal specifically with the issue of illicit firearms trafficking in European Union states. This paper seeks to identify some of the most important theoretical issues related to this problem using data collected during studies conducted in the Department of Criminology and Forensic Science of the Faculty of Law and Administration of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn by the authors (including, among other things, in connection with work in an international research project co-financed by the European Commission and coordinated by the Flemish Peace Institute and Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University nt. Illicit firearms trafficking and gun-related violence in Europe, Project TARGET) (Chlebowicz et al., 2022)<sup>1</sup> as well as using data from studies on the criminal careers of perpetrators operating in

---

<sup>1</sup> The aim of Project TARGET was to bridge the gap identified in the scientific literature concerning the impact of illicit firearms trafficking on gun-related violence in Europe. In the three-phase research plan, scientific teams from Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain, and Sweden were tasked with conducting the research activities. Associate partners in this project included Europol, the Dutch National Police, UNDP-SEESAC, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The results of the comparative analysis of all the data collected during the various phases of Project TARGET were published in the report "Targeting Gun Violence and Trafficking in Europe." The report, titled "Pulling the Trigger: Gun Violence in Europe," includes the seven country studies carried out as part of the second phase of the project. More information about Project TARGET and its findings can be accessed on the website: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/en/target/>. The research focus of the project also aligns closely with the work conducted by the Analytical and Research Team on Illicit Markets, established in 2012 at the Faculty of Law and Administration of UWM in Olsztyn.

organised crime groups carried out by M. Kotowska, a researcher at the Department of Criminology and Forensic Science at the Faculty of Law and Administration of the UWM in Olsztyn. Accordingly, the data presented refer to the Polish black market for weapons. The analyses suggest that there is no unified market for illicit firearms in Europe and that there are significant differences in the way firearms are distributed to organised crime, extremist, and terrorist groups. In this context, attempts to traffic firearms rarely used by organised crime groups but sought by extremist and terrorist organisations into the Schengen area should be regarded as particularly alarming (Buczynski, 2021; Buczynski, 2022). The availability, possession, and use of illicit weapons need to be recognised as a factor significantly destabilising society. Accordingly, this phenomenon entails wider social and economic consequences than is generally acknowledged.

The phenomenon of illicit firearms trafficking constitutes a substantial research domain that can be examined and elucidated across various levels, two of which are presented below. The first level is a perspective that considers weapon transfers in terms of arms control and disarmament. This issue is analysed under the framework of political science and international relations. It should be noted that after 1990, there was a sharp increase in illicit transfers, with small arms and light weapons as the primary focus of illicit firearms trafficking. This marked a tremendous change as illicit weapons transfers began to be perceived as a significant source of threats to the newly designed international security. The motivations of actors in the global market also changed. Political ideology became less relevant as a driving force behind transfers during this period. Instead, economics came to the fore with the overriding motive of profit-making. This is illustrated by the example of the international arms dealer W. Bout, who supplied firearms to anyone who offered to pay<sup>2</sup> (Chlebowicz, 2012). The relevant literature emphasises

---

<sup>2</sup> The study concludes that it should be emphasized that the loss of control over governmental or military arms depots following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc was less widespread in Poland compared to most other countries in the region (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine). What is even more important for institutional control over the arms market is that it occurred for a much shorter time since Poland was not stuck in the limbo of transition between the socialist and democratic systems. This problem in the European dimension is being tackled by a number of international, governmental, and non-governmental initiatives, such as the Regional Approach to Stockpile Reduction (RASR) funded by the US Government in 2009. In the Polish perspective, the greatest hopes were pinned on EU and NATO-backed programmes involving Ukraine (2004–2006). Their positive, although still insufficient, results have since been almost entirely nullified by the present armed conflict.

that the rise of the illicit small arms and light weapons market is linked to structural changes in the nature of the armed conflict. Wars have moved from clashes between regular armies to civil wars becoming the dominant form of conflict (Klare, 1999). Due to the warring parties' low quality of training and equipment, the characteristics of SALW made light weapons the principal means of warfare. It needs to be mentioned that the players in conflicts frequently include irregular troops, militias, and guerrillas of various provenience and the main objective is often the extermination of the civilian population. According to M. Zachara, the main recipients of this type of weaponry have been countries in unstable regions involved in long-term armed conflicts with highly militarised political and social relations (Zachara, 2010). However, this way of looking at illicit firearms trafficking seems to exclude a criminological understanding of the problem.

Hence, it is possible to determine the other research areas where illicit arms transfers are viewed from the perspective of combating and preventing crime (Davis, 2000). However, crime is not a homogeneous phenomenon, so various forms of crime are distinguished based on different criteria for academic and practical purposes.

## **2. GUNS AND CRIME: THE COMPLEX WEB OF ILLICIT ACTIVITIES**

Illicit firearms trafficking is an internally diverse category. It reveals links with crime types such as violent crime, economic crime, and, last but not least, organised crime. Therefore, it seems appropriate to attempt to map the connections between illicit firearms trafficking and the various crime categories.

Additionally, the illicit firearms trafficking phenomenon has an inherently international dimension since Europe is primarily a source of weapons that are trafficked to conflict zones in Africa, South America, and Asia (The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment, 2010). The cross-border nature of transactions is explicitly emphasised in international law. The United Nations Firearms Protocol defines illicit trafficking in firearms as follows:

‘Illicit trafficking’ shall mean the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from or across the territory of one State Party to that of another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it in accordance with the terms of this Protocol or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with article 8 of this Protocol.

From a global perspective, illicit firearms trafficking represents just a fragment of the so-called lethal transfers (Mandel, 1999) circulating between the rich North sending arms and toxic waste and the poor South ‘exporting’ drugs and waves of illegal immigrants. This state of affairs clarifies the role of crime that ‘manages’ the trafficking channels. From this point of view, organised crime is an important factor that either creates or at least significantly facilitates arms trafficking (Chlebowicz, 2015, p. 49).

However, this brings up the issue of black markets for firearms to meet the demand for weapons generated by criminal environments within individual EU states (Buczynski, 2021). According to Europol’s assessment, “the market for firearms in the EU remains modest in size” (Europol). Hence, the volume of demand is not large and motorbike gangs are a significant player in this market. Therefore, the opinion presented by D. Sagramoso that “criminal groups need weapons, but they do not need arsenals” (Sagramoso, 2001, p. 6) remains valid.

The problem of violence is one of the key areas in criminological science. The literature points out that violent crimes include both robbery, during which the perpetrator wounds the victim with a gunshot, and an act during which the perpetrator only threatens to use a firearm (Błachut, Gaberle, Krajewski, 2001). From a criminological perspective, violence is the actual use of physical force against a human being or the threat of its use if the perpetrator’s intention includes causing physical harm in the form of death or bodily harm, regardless of whether the perpetrator’s action constituted an end in itself or was instrumental (Błachut, Gaberle, Krajewski, 2001). In this context, homicide, offences of violence (robbery, aggravated theft, extortion), bodily harm, and kidnapping for ransom using firearms are most frequently cited. However, arms trafficking, understood as a series of activities related to the sale, purchase, storage, and transportation of firearms, does not contain an element of violence.

It is an activity of a strictly economic nature, except the products traded are subject to strict rationing (Chlebowicz, 2015). This, in turn, means that violent crimes committed with firearms cannot be equated with firearms trafficking.

At the same time, studies conducted as part of the TARGET project indicate that the long-term downward trend associated with gun violence in the EU may have been halted or even reversed. In light of the quantitative data collected, this general trend slowed down around 2012. This may suggest, among other things, the availability of weapons on the black market and the renewal of old and the formation of new trafficking channels. It also provides a self-evident rationale for continued analysis in this area. Further thorough monitoring of this phenomenon is required.<sup>3</sup> In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, there is already a significant increase in gun-related violence. This phenomenon is also reported by The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), among others. This change can be linked to the illicit market for psychoactive substances and rivalry between criminal groups. Brå links this increase primarily to the number of killings with the use of firearms, especially in a criminal environment. In the Netherlands, an important factor influencing the level of homicides and other forms of gun-related violence is the activity of the so-called Moco mafia (Moroccan drug mafia). Studies suggest that we may even discuss an arms race within the criminal underworld. The situation in these countries, revealed by the source material collected, can be viewed as a deviation from the general trend or a signal of impending change, which will involve other actors.

<sup>3</sup> Data collected during the Project TARGET relating to the number of gun-related homicides in Europe (EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and the United Kingdom) after 2000 show that in the case of Luxembourg, Portugal, Austria, the Netherlands, Serbia, Sweden, Croatia, Bosnia, and Italy, it was reported that there is a medium to high percentage of the use of firearms (21% ≥ 40%) to commit homicide (the limitations of the analysis due to availability, quality, completeness, or complexity of the data are further reported in the post-project paper cited above). The following five actors showed high rates (41% ≥ 100%): North Macedonia, Cyprus, Montenegro, Albania, and Malta. It is worth noting that European micro-states form a special group. In their case, a few incidents per year can change the statistics of the phenomenon. The problem of gun-related homicides in Europe should be considered relevant socially and research-wise (this was also the conclusion of the evaluation of the project undertaken by the EC), but, at the same time, it is worth emphasising that the global average use of firearms in homicides is 40%, and countries with high firearms use only rank above the global average in light of this study. With the exception of the five countries with a high use of firearms in homicides indicated above, all other actors included in the study fall below the global average. One of the modifications introduced by the Polish team into the assumptions of the Project TARGET was the indication of the Ukrainian direction in the context of research on the quantitative and qualitative change in the availability of weapons on the European black market.



According to the analyses carried out in these two European countries, the perceived increase in the number of homicides can be attributed to an increase in gun-related homicides (Buczyński, 2022).

Based on the data gathered from the gunpolicy.org project, hosted by the Sydney School of Public Health at the University of Sydney, it can be posited that the level of firearm and ammunition smuggling in Poland can be considered moderate. This estimation similarly applies to Poland's neighbouring countries within the European Union, i.e. the Federal Republic of Germany, the Republic of Lithuania, and the Slovak Republic. However, the report suggests the issue is less severe in the Czech Republic. It should be noted that the reliability of such estimations is called into question by the fact that, between the 2014 and 2017 reports, the total number of firearms (both legal and illegal) possessed by civilians in Poland increased by 68.34% (from 575,000 to 968,000) due to newly available data. Importantly, no regulatory changes were identified that could account for this significant increase during the specified period. The report's authors outline various factors in the introduction that may have influenced the actual situation. Furthermore, Poland falls within the intermediate category in classifying global firearm manufacturers according to size.

The 2014 'Study to Support an Impact Assessment on Options for Combating Illicit Firearms Trafficking in the EU' highlights the grave issue of illicit firearms trafficking in Europe. This problem not only poses a direct threat but also serves as a significant contributing factor to other criminal activities, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, and acts of terrorism, which jeopardize the security of EU Member States and their citizens. The study estimates that between 2004 and 2014, at least 10,000 deaths in EU Member States can be attributed to illicit firearms trafficking. According to the study, the primary sources of illegal weapons within the EU include the reactivation of neutralised firearms, burglaries and thefts, the misappropriation of legal firearms, the diversion of legal firearms to the illicit market, decommissioned firearms from military or police forces, and the conversion of gas pistols.

Furthermore, data collected for the UNODC Study on Firearms in 2015 reveals that Polish law enforcement confiscated 90,810 units of ammunition in 2013 and 136,131 in the preceding year. During the same period,

they also seized 1,567 and 1,850 firearms and 367 and 1,001 firearm parts and components, respectively. Between 2010 and 2013, the annual rate of firearms reported as seized by the police reached 4.7 per 100,000 residents.<sup>4</sup> Poland has been categorised as a country with a seizure rate of crafted or rudimentary firearms exceeding 5%. The research conducted for the FIRE project (Savona, Mancuso 2017), which aimed to analyse the illicit firearms market in all 28 EU member states, revealed that Poland had the highest number of firearm seizure cases (36.11%) in Eastern Europe between 2010 and 2015.

Additionally, Poland accounted for the largest proportion of firearms seized (16%) in the region. The report also mentioned literature indicating the infiltration of Polish black market firearms by Italian, Russian, and Georgian organised crime groups. The illicit firearms market in Poland is further connected to other criminal activities, as funds acquired from various illicit sources are reinvested in this market, including the illicit art market.

It is worth noting that the report entitled 'The Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union' (UNODC, 2020) provided less detailed data on firearms seizures in Poland compared to the information gathered through our research.<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize that many EU Member States did not report seizure data and that the types of seizure data reported varied among the member states.<sup>6</sup> This means it was impossible to adequately compare the available national numbers on seized firearms across the EU. At the same time, the authors indicated that Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania reported shares of 7–10 per cent of seized machine guns from 2010–2013. According to the report, all EU Member States granted

---

<sup>4</sup> According to data gathered for the project, the rate of illegally owned firearms per 100,000 inhabitants in the years 2014–2016 was, respectively, 3.23, 3.49, and 4.34.

<sup>5</sup> The results of these studies will be disseminated in the journal 'Archiwum Kryminologii' (Archives of Criminology) in an article entitled 'Tracing the shadows. Inside Europe illegal arms market, the case of Poland'. This journal is the oldest and one of the most prestigious Polish criminological publications, issued since 1960 by the Institute of Law Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The journal serves as the spiritual successor to the first Polish criminological journal entitled 'Criminological Archives', which published its inaugural issue in 1933.

<sup>6</sup> The aim of the report was to analyse illicit firearms trafficking and related forms of crime from a specific geographical angle, namely the European Union region, and to deepen the understanding of the illicit firearms trafficking situation in the region and its interconnection with the rest of the world.

firearms export licences in 2018. Poland was among the most important exporting countries in terms of value (EUR 102 million). The report's authors also indicated that Poland was among the countries reporting significant amounts of seized parts and components, especially in 2012.

The question arises as to whether illicit firearms trafficking falls into one of the categories of economic crime. In the Polish literature on the subject, this view is represented by H. KołECKI, who correctly states that the illegal trade in firearms and explosives falls within the scope of prohibited economic activity, which is one type of economic crime (KołECKI, 2004). Participants in illicit trafficking, especially traffickers and intermediaries, usually align with the characteristics of white collar criminals. The negative effects of this crime are high; arms transactions are discreet and concealed, violence is avoided, and the motives of the perpetrators are primarily financial (Chlebowicz, 2015). In this regard, it is worth pointing out that in British criminology, there is a distinction between predatory crimes – a broad catalogue of violent acts against property, commercial crimes, and market-based crimes. The latter involves the production and distribution of illicit goods and products, the consensual nature of the transfers, the clandestine nature of the transactions, and the 'moral ambiguity' that accompanies these transfers (Levi, 2002; Buczynski, 2014). It can therefore be concluded that illicit firearms trafficking falls within the scope of economic crime. Indeed, the characteristics listed herein create the specificity of illicit firearms trafficking.

In the literature on the subject, there is a well-established view that illicit firearms trafficking should be discussed together with the problem of organised crime. When attempting to apply this division to the problem of illicit firearms trafficking in the context of organised crime, it can be assumed that in the first case, illicit firearms trafficking will play an auxiliary, subsidiary role to the main areas of activity of groups committing violent crimes (murder, robbery, extortion, kidnapping for ransom). The firearms' role is reflected in the fact that they constitute an important element of the modus operandi of such groups.

Regarding criminal terror, firearms serve important purposes related to expanding organised crime and widening its spheres of influence. It can therefore be assumed that internal rivalry within organised crime may provide an additional factor stimulating demand for weapons and

explosives. Such a situation occurred in Poland in the 1990s, where criminological studies identified a new form of crime: vendetta-driven.

The second type of organised crime, commercial crimes, refers to groups that provide illegal goods and services. In this case, illicit firearms trafficking is viewed through the prism of criminal groups whose activities involve obtaining firearms and selling them to customers. Therefore, illicit firearms trafficking needs to be viewed as a source of funding for these groups and, at the same time, their primary area of operation.

Depending on changing trends in illicit markets, illicit firearms trafficking may constitute the dominant aspect of a given criminal organisation's activities at a particular time. From this perspective, we can speak of multi-criminal activity.

The above observations correspond with the opinions of police experts from Italy, Colombia, Brazil, and the United States, as well as Interpol, who participated in the work of the UNODC on the 10th anniversary of the Palermo Convention (UNODC, 2012). They reviewed individual criminal cases in which organised crime themes were present. The individual cases of organised crime groups active in the black market for weapons can be placed into three categories.

The first category exemplifies large, organisationally elaborate structures that carry out large-scale trafficking operations. They are usually formed based on ethnicity. The objects of trafficking are drugs and other illegal products. However, if a buyer is found, firearms are also sometimes trafficked. This attests to the high degree of flexibility and changeable profile of the 'criminal enterprise'.<sup>7</sup>

The second category comprises groups whose activity is aimed predominantly at smuggling weapons for the black market. The recipients include other criminal groups that use weapons for self-defence, power struggle, and as a means of intimidation. The volume of trafficked firearms and ammunition is not particularly large compared to grey market

---

<sup>7</sup> The case studies cited in the aforementioned UNODC report from 2012, while not providing detailed information on the firearms component of criminal conduct, illustrated how well-established criminal groups can adjust their illicit trafficking operations by utilizing their robust organizational framework and power structures, along with established partnerships with trustworthy collaborators. *Ibidem*, p. 102.

transactions. One case involved a Serbian group supplying weapons (Kalashnikovs) to the French black market for weapons.

The other identified criminal groups trade in weapons only occasionally. Weapons are used mainly to pursue the group's objectives; they are not regarded as a good to be exchanged or traded and constitute an attribute of the world of organised crime.

As far as Polish organised crime groups are concerned, based on the data collected by M. Kotowska (Kotowska, 2019), who surveyed 157 convicted members of various organised crime structures, information on firearms trade within organised crime groups appeared sporadically. Excerpts from the statements and information taken from the justifications of the sentences, which addressed the illegal weapons present in three criminal groups, are presented below. It should be stressed again that data on firearms was scarce.

Interviewee X was sentenced to life imprisonment. He led an organised armed criminal group in central Poland, which was dismantled in 2006. The criminal group he led concentrated on extortion, controlling prostitution, and drug trafficking. Weapons were used to murder rival criminal group members and intimidate victims. X testified as follows regarding the origin and unlawful use of weapons and ammunition held by the criminal organization:

We got weapons from ex-military men who had got them from military units, and they were also charged, and one was remanded in custody, one of us was in charge of weapons for the group, and he worked with his colleagues in this regard. When they arrested him, he informed on his colleagues who worked with him, we only bought weapons from him, he would ask his colleagues for them. Our group's weapons included 2 Kalashnikovs, 3 CZ 75, one rifle with a scope, one Scorpion submachine gun, one sachra, a colt, two grenades, a hexogen mining explosive, and an infinite amount of ammunition – that's what they wrote because they didn't want to count it all.

Also, we sold weapons to other groups we were on good terms with – mainly the CZ 75, they were fairly cheap and reliable, they didn't jam; Kalashnikovs if anyone wanted them. Kalashnikovs were used for

assassinations, and so were CZs, you won't get up after a round from Kalashnikov, it's the most reliable weapon, even bullet-proof vests don't help, 'cause gangsters often wear them, I wore them too, sometimes I had a feeling that maybe my life was in danger, I was shot once, the ambush was prepared a couple of times at meetings, but without success, e.g. I had my car shot at, once we went to beat up some bodyguards and a gunfight ensued, my friend got shot. After that shooting, I became more careful, I might as well have been dead, I had a lot of enemies, my ex-boss who argued with me about money and we split up, he also got a life sentence, his brother – dead, I also had enemies in other groups, a lot of people wished me dead. We used to go shooting a lot, we had a few shooting ranges in this fortress of ours, I liked shooting, it's a cool feeling, it makes you excited, I shoot well and I used all kinds of guns because I practiced a lot, every gun shoots the same, it's just that it's hard to move with a Kalash. Wholesale trade in weapons is profitable, while retail is not; because how much can you get? 1-2 thousand for a piece, groups would buy from us only a few pieces at a time, so it wasn't a big deal. After the shooting, when I got hit in the leg, I would always carry a gun because I was afraid they would kill me. And I always wore a vest to meetings.

A criminal group operating in the region of Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot concentrating on operating gambling machines, distributing drugs and protection rackets, covering other persons committing crimes in the Tricity area (source: criminal case file of the Regional Court in Gdańsk, file ref. No. IV K 183/07):

Expecting the potential conflict with other criminal groups, defendant Y also began purchasing weapons, ammunition and explosives. Back when he was still cooperating with XX, he bought three 'CZ75'-type pistols, a 'Makarov'-type pistol and an explosive device in the form of a TNT charge with an electric detonator from unidentified persons. After taking up independent leadership of the group, he continued to expand its arsenal. In 1999, he acquired three hand-held anti-tank grenade launchers 'RPG 76', training models with warheads elaborated with inert material, from unidentified persons, and with the help of YY (an ex-police counter-terrorist officer), he bought a rifle and a sniper scope. The weapons were stored by the charged individual CC and then on the

premises of the Indoor tanning xxxxx. After the shooting near the club 'Relax' in 2000, Y purchased a vial of nitro-glycerine from RR.

An organised armed criminal group was operating in central Poland; the main area of activity was drug trafficking and extortion. The group achieved a monopoly on drug trafficking in a town near Warsaw. In the course of its activity, weapons were used to coerce the obedience of dealers and to ensure exclusive rights to drug trafficking (source: criminal case file of the Regional Court in Warsaw, file ref. No. XVIII K 77/15):

The group owned about 40 firearms stored in a warehouse in Konstancin. Arsenal: 7.62 mm calibre machine guns, 'Scorpion' submachine guns, TT pistol, CZ and others. The weapons were available to the leaders of the group: XX, YY. Moreover, those people had their own weapons, i.e. small-calibre 6.35 mm weapons.

The above descriptions illustrate the problem of arms dealing among organised crime groups. Usually, the arsenals of groups consisting of a dozen to several dozen people were not extensive. They usually ranged from a dozen to a few dozen firearms at most.

Profits from the sale of a single weapon to a friendly group were small compared to the income obtained from drug trafficking and extortion or sums obtained from ransoms for kidnapped individuals.

Arms transactions were not regular, as even within organised crime groups, the demand for illicit firearms was low.

Based on the available data on the phenomenology of individual criminal groups and networks, it can be assumed that most of the known criminal structures are, or at least sometimes are, active in the black market for firearms for their own purposes and as a source of income. In this context, the Japanese yakuza, the Chinese triads, biker gangs, Italian mafia variations, Russian gangs, and other groups are all mentioned.

From this perspective, on the one hand, organised crime arranges illegal arms transfers; on the other, it is a beneficiary of the arms trade. There are, of course, other issues, such as gun violence and illegal possession of firearms, but the links between illicit firearms trafficking and organised

crime seem to be at the forefront. Hence, according to the UNODC's position, it is possible to analyse the criminal structures that generate crime – broadly defined organisational forms, including both classical mafia organisations and criminal networks or the black markets operated by these structures. It is believed that “There are two ways of looking at transnational organized crime (TOC): some focus on multi-crime groups of professional criminals, while others focus on illicit markets” (UNODC, 2010, p. v).

### **3. GUNS FOR SALE: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ECONOMICS OF ILLEGAL WEAPONS**

It seems that in the case of illicit firearms trafficking, it would be useful to use the category of the illicit market as the basic unit for analysis. This also implies taking into account the divisions of the market into so-called white, black, and grey markets. It is worth mentioning that this criterion is also used concerning money laundering.

The market concept is linked to the economic model of crime, which is based on the central assumption that the primary function of criminal syndicates is to provide illegal products and services to society. In this context, the concept of an illicit market forms the basis of criminological analyses inspired by economic science. It should be mentioned here that economic science defines the market in various ways. For the purposes of further consideration, it can be assumed that it refers both to “the set of conditions that make it possible to carry out transactions for the purchase and sale of goods and services” (Kamersche et al., 1991, p. 4) and also to “the process by which buyers and sellers determine what they want to buy or sell and under what conditions” (Ibid, p. 4). The adjective ‘illegal’ shifts further considerations into the criminal legal and criminological sphere.

In the case of illicit firearms trafficking, it is emphasised that there are three types of markets (Stohl, Schroeder, Smith, 2012).

The first of these, the legal (white) market, is characterised not only by the legality of the transaction but also by its size. Indeed, it is estimated



that in the case of the small arms and light weapons trade, for example, legal transactions account for 80–90% of all transactions made (Small Arms Survey, 2001). White market transactions constitute legitimate business and political activity, although the ethical aspect of the business and arms industry may be called into question.

Furthermore, it should also be considered that even the legal arms market is characterised by high criminogenic potential. This mainly concerns the actual functioning of the mechanisms underlying the decision-making processes and tenders for weapons systems and military technologies. Practical experience proves the existence of political and economic corruption phenomena in this area.

The second type of market (grey market) perfectly reflects the *signum specificium* of the arms trade. Although it is possible to find primarily non-state actors (e.g. guerrilla groups) among the recipients of transfers, transactions are frequently concluded with the active participation of the state agent. This is the classic example of a recipient being the government of an embargoed country. A different situation arises when arms supplies are treated as part of foreign policy. In this case, the secret services play an important role in enabling such transfers.

The third type of market is the black market. It is the quintessential illicit market. The UN defines the black market as “international trade in conventional arms, contrary to the laws of States and or/international law”(Report of the Disarmament Commission, United Nations A 51/42, 1996, p.10). A similar definition is formulated by the Small Arms Survey, which states that “Black arms transfer occurs in clear violation of national and/or international law without official government consent or control; these transfers may involve corrupt government officials acting on their own for personal gain” (Stohl, Schroeder, Smith, 2012, p. 13). Given the context of the three types of markets indicated above, it seems that the most prominent element of this definition is to emphasise that the operation of the black market takes place outside state structures. Thus, it can be assumed that the black market in arms includes transactions contrary to national and international law, and these transactions are carried out outside the knowledge and control of state agents.

The conceptual framework of the market presupposes the functioning of supply and demand mechanisms. The extent of the diversity of beneficiaries of the black market can be evidenced by the fact that the recipients range from so-called failed states, criminal groups, and terrorist organisations to private individuals. In the latter case, the motives for acquiring weapons are also highly diverse. For personal protection reasons, collecting passions and various psychopathological motives may come into play (Chlebowicz, 2015).

Another issue relates to the product and the weapons being illegally traded. In the case of the Polish black market, we can observe trends reflected in the changes in both the offer and demand.

The 1990s were dominated by self-made weapons (e.g. shooting pens), gas and alarm weapons, and converted gas and alarm weapons (most often to work with the Browning 6.35 mm calibre pistol cartridge).

At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, weapons trafficked from the Czech Republic and Slovakia predominated, e.g. SCORPION submachine guns and CZ pistol models 1975 and 1985. These were the years when criminal groups from, inter alia, Pruszków and Wołomin were active.

In the following years, weapons imported from the countries of the former Soviet Union appeared in growing numbers.

Since 2011, many Turkish-made 9 mm P.A. calibre gas-operated pistols have appeared on the Polish market, which, following an erroneous opinion, were sold as firearms of up to 6 mm calibre, for which no permit is required. Several thousand of these weapons were distributed across the Polish market.

There was also an increase in the number of black powder guns in the survey (particularly suicide cases).

Ukraine has long been a hotspot on the global map of illicit arms trafficking, a situation that has only intensified since 2014. Consequently, this area has remained a focal point of research interest for the team. The ongoing armed conflict has compounded the already complex internal

situation related to the lack of adequate control over the availability and procurement of black market weapons. Preventing these pathologies was further complicated by the absence of regional and central registries of civilian firearms. Within the armed forces, which are not immune to societal divisions, cases of misappropriation of armament stocks have been identified. Moreover, the flow of weapons into areas controlled by separatist forces remains beyond any real control by central authorities. Ukraine has been rightfully positioned as a confirmed source of arms for areas that the international community associates with the most serious human rights and humanitarian law violations (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Darfur, South Sudan, or Equatorial Guinea). This is also clearly indicated by the research of criminologists from Olsztyn. Positive, albeit still painfully insufficient, outcomes of international programmes focusing on stockpile reduction in the realm of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) have been completely squandered due to the observed armed conflict. Research conducted by criminologists from Olsztyn suggests that since 2014, there has been a troubling – unequivocally speaking to the need for continued research – upward trend in the seizure of firearms and ammunition by the Polish Border Guard.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, among the confiscated weapons, there have been those sought after by radical extremist and terrorist groups (examples of thwarted smuggling attempts are presented below).

Several significant cases can exemplify the issue of the illicit firearms market in Poland within the context of combating transnational crime. One of the most notorious instances of exploiting the volatile internal situation in Ukraine, establishing and re-establishing transit routes, and infiltrating Ukraine by organisations openly flouting European laws was the apprehension of Grégoire Moutaux at the Polish-Ukrainian border on 21 May 2016. This French national attempted to smuggle five Kalashnikov-type assault rifles, 5,000 rounds of ammunition, two anti-tank grenade launchers, detonators, and 125 kg of TNT into EU territory (Buczyński, 2021; Buczyński, 2022). The subsequent case corroborates the possibility that criminal, extremist, and terrorist groups may endeavour

---

<sup>8</sup> In the literature on the subject, there has been a lively debate for years regarding the usefulness of official statistics in determining the actual level of a specific type of crime. It is pointed out that such statistics may better reflect the direction of current police policies and the focus of their actions rather than depict the characteristics of a specific segment of reality. These perceived statistics are more of a social construct than a phenomenological representation of the phenomenon (Black, 1970).

to acquire not only significant quantities of firearms but also heavier armaments from Ukrainian sources. On 31 March 2017, an endeavour to transport components of an AK-630 30-mm artillery system into Poland was intercepted at the Dorohusk border crossing. The cannon, equipped with a breech block and originating in the Soviet Union, was being transported in a van bearing Ukrainian licence plates. The weapon was falsely declared as a hydraulic component. Two Ukrainian nationals were apprehended in connection with this incident. In January 2018, one RPG-22 and six RPG-18 grenade launchers were confiscated at the Hrebenne border crossing. During the night of 3/4 January at the Dorohusk crossing, border guards discovered parts of a 122-mm Howitzer valued at approximately USD 100,000 concealed in wooden crates within the cargo area of a light commercial vehicle. The trafficking attempt into the Schengen zone was perpetrated by a Ukrainian citizen (for the latest research on the European illicit firearms market from the Polish perspective, please see Chlebowicz, Buczyński, 2023). The undeniable significance of this issue for security on a transregional scale, as well as its unquestionable research potential requiring international cooperation, is excellently demonstrated in the 22nd volume of *Security Spectrum* entitled 'New Challenges for Internal Security due to the War on Ukraine'.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the examination of the illicit firearms trade from a criminological perspective reveals the intricate web of factors contributing to the proliferation of illegal arms trafficking and its detrimental consequences for society. This research has shed light on the complex dynamics of the underground firearms market, highlighting the need for comprehensive understanding and targeted interventions to address this pressing issue.

Furthermore, the findings presented in this article contribute to the broader academic discourse on the theoretical and empirical considerations of the illicit arms market, adding valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge. By actively participating in this scholarly dialogue, the authors aim to stimulate further research and policy discussions

aimed at mitigating the impact of illegal arms trafficking on public safety and security. It is crucial for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and researchers to collaborate in developing evidence-based strategies to disrupt illicit firearms networks and prevent the devastating consequences of gun-related violence.

Like their legal counterparts, illegal markets are subject to change and transformation. Accordingly, the multidimensional nature of criminal reality requires criminological science to be under constant review. In this state of affairs, it must be acknowledged that the results of criminological research are of limited use and therefore need to be regularly updated. Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that outdated knowledge becomes a dead weight. The methodology of the research outlined above remains a separate issue. The interdisciplinarity of criminology and the increasing complexity of the research subject also require significant modifications to the research instrumentation. Concerning the study of illicit firearms trafficking, international scientific cooperation is a key issue, as it does seem ineffective to study only domestic illicit markets without taking into account the cross-border context. The further process of intra-EU standardisation and simultaneous significant expansion of the pool of extracted phenomenon variables within the framework of the Schengen acquis seems necessary. Undoubtedly, a factor that is already changing the geography of illicit firearms trafficking in Central and Eastern Europe is the war in Ukraine, which, by generating armament flows, creates favourable conditions for the development of new sources of weapons to feed the black markets. Consequently, it seems expedient to concentrate research efforts in this area, also in the format of the Baltic Criminological Seminars.

Moving forward, continued research and cooperation at both national and international levels is essential to effectively combat the illicit firearms trade and safeguard communities from the threats posed by illegal weapons. By remaining vigilant, informed, and proactive in addressing the root causes of illegal arms trafficking, stakeholders can work towards creating a safer and more secure environment for all individuals within Europe and beyond. Ultimately, through sustained efforts and collaborative initiatives, it is possible to stem the tide of illicit firearms trade and promote a culture of peace, security, and justice in our societies.

**Contacts:**

**Piotr Chlebowicz, Doctor Habilitated**

E-mail: [piotr.chlebowicz@uwm.edu.pl](mailto:piotr.chlebowicz@uwm.edu.pl)

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

**Szymon Buczyński, MA**

E-mail: [szymon.buczynski@uwm.edu.pl](mailto:szymon.buczynski@uwm.edu.pl)

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

## REFERENCES AND SOURCES

- Błachut, J., Gaberle, A., and Krajewski, K. (2001). Kryminologia. Gdańsk.
- Black, D. J. (1970). Production of crime rates. *American Sociological Review*, 4, 733-748.
- Buczyński, S., (2021). The ring of fire, kryzys ukraiński z perspektywy badań nad europejskim czarnym rynkiem broni [The ring of fire, the Ukrainian crisis from the perspective of research on the European arms black market]. In W E. Pływaczewski, D. Dajnowicz-Piesiecka & E. Jurgielewicz-Delegacz (Eds.) *Badania kryminologiczne a praktyka. Perspektywa krajowa i międzynarodowa [Criminological research and practice. National and international perspective]* (pp. 162-176). Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer.
- Buczyński, S. (2022). Projekt TARGET. Fenomen przemocy z użyciem broni w Unii Europejskiej – wybrane zagadnienia [Project TARGET. The phenomenon of gun violence in the European Union – selected issues]. In W E. Pływaczewski, D. Dajnowicz-Piesiecka & E. Jurgielewicz-Delegacz (Eds.) *Prawo karne i kryminologia wobec kryzysów XXI w. [Criminal law and criminology in the face of 21st century crises]* (pp. 40-57). Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer.
- Buczyński, S. (2014). Finansowanie organizacji ekstremistycznych na przykładzie funkcjonowania rynku towarów podrabianych [The financing of extremist organizations on the example of the market of counterfeit goods] In W. Pływaczewski & P. Lubiewski (Eds.) *Współczesne ekstremizmy. Geneza, przejawy, przeciwdziałanie [Contemporary extremisms. Genesis, manifestations, and counteracting]* (pp. 158-171). Olsztyn: Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie.
- Chlebowicz P. (2012). Nielegalny rynek broni z perspektywy kryminologicznej. In W. Pływaczewski & P. Chlebowicz (Eds.), *Nielegalne rynki. Geneza, skala zjawiska oraz możliwości przeciwdziałania* (pp. 169-180). Olsztyn: Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie.
- Chlebowicz, P. (2015). *Nielegalny handel bronią. Studium kryminologiczne*, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer.
- Chlebowicz P., Buczyński S., Safjański T., Moszczyński J. (2022). The success story? A in-depth analysis of illicit firearm trafficking and gun violence in Poland. In N. Duquet (Eds.) *Pulling the Trigger: Gun Violence in Europe* (pp. 205-258). Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.
- Chlebowicz, P., Buczyński S. (2023). Tracing the shadows: Inside the European illegal arms market-the case of Poland. *Archives of Criminology/Archiwum Kryminologii*, 45(1), 75-113.
- Davis, I. (Eds.). (2000). *Controlling the Flow of Small Arms and Light Weapons from and Through an Enlarged EU: Developing a Joint Action*

- Programme for EU and Candidate Countries: Warsaw, 17 & 18 March 2000. Saferworld.
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. (2014). Study to support an impact assessment on options for combatting illicit firearms trafficking in the European Union – Final report. Publications Office.
- Europol, Illicit firearms trafficking. [www] <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas/illicit-firearms-trafficking> [Viewed on 9.05.2024]
- Kamerschen D. R, McKenzie R. B., Nardilelli C. (1991). *Ekonomia*. Gdańsk.
- Klare M. T. (1999). The International Trade in Light Weapons: What Have We Learned? In J. Boutwell. & M. T. Klare (Eds.), *Light Weapons and Civil Conflict* (pp. 9-27). New York.
- Kołecki H. (2004). Niespójność kryminalistyki uniwersyteckiej z realiami i potrzebami praktyki zwalczania zorganizowanej przestępczości gospodarczej w Polsce. In Janiszewski B. (Eds.) *Nauka wobec współczesnych zagadnień prawa karnego w Polsce. Księga pamiątkowa ofiarowana Profesorowi Aleksandrowi Tobisowi* (pp. 123-144). Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Kotowska M. (2019). *Kariery kryminalne członków zorganizowanych grup przestępczych*. Warszawa: Difin.
- Levi. M. (2002). The Organization of Serious Crime. In M. Maguire & R. Reiner (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (pp. 887-889). Oxford University Press.
- Mandel R. (1999). *Deadly Transfers and the Global Playground. Transnational Security Threats in a Disorderly World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sagramoso D. (2001). *The Proliferation of illegal small arms and light weapons in and around the European Union*. Saferworld Centre for Defence Studies.
- Savona E. U. and Mancuso M. (Ed.). (2017). *Fighting Illicit Firearms Trafficking Routes and Actors at European Level. Final Report of Project FIRE*. Milano: Transcrime – Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.
- Stohl. R, Schroeder, M., Smith, D. (2012). *The Small Arms Trade*. Simon and Schuster.
- Zachara M. (2010). *Broń i dyplomacja. Eksport uzbrojenia w polityce zagranicznej Stanów Zjednoczonych*. Wydawnictwo UJ.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2010). *The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. Vienna.
- United Nations. (1996). *Report of the Disarmament Commission*. A 51/42



United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2012). Digest of organized crime cases. A compilation of cases with commentaries and lessons learned. Vienna.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2015). Study on Firearms. Vienna.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2020). The Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union. Vienna.

