



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# NEIGHBOURS OF CONFLICT

ARMS TRAFFICKING  
IN TÜRKIYE, BULGARIA  
AND GREECE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**E**ver since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been concern that the conflict may act as a source of illegal arms flows into Europe, following the pattern of the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s. To be sure, the risk is significant. The conflict in Ukraine is the most protracted mechanized war in Europe since the Second World War, and materiel of all descriptions has flooded into the battlefield. There are now millions of unregistered weapons circulating in civilian Ukraine, many of which are trophy weapons collected from the battlefield, and the situation is similar in Russia, which has seen a spike in gun-related violence in regions adjoining the occupied territories.<sup>1</sup> The prospect of these weapons falling into the hands of organized criminals in Europe and beyond is a major risk to countries' internal security.

But with this heightened attention there is a danger of tunnel vision. The conflict in Ukraine is only one risk among many. The illicit firearms market in Europe is diverse, with multiple sources, paths to market and types of weaponry for sale; from Soviet-era stockpiles to cutting-edge 3D-printed guns.

This report maps out the illicit firearms dynamics in three countries to the south-east of Europe – gateways for illicit weapons into the EU and elsewhere but which have distinct ecosystems in their own right – Türkiye, Greece and Bulgaria.

For organized crime, these three countries serve multiple purposes: transit routes, consumer markets and points of origin for a variety of illicit flows along the so-called 'Balkan route'. In recent decades, the flow of illicit drugs (particularly heroin) and migrants through these countries has dominated global headlines, especially in light of the conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. But the movement of illegal firearms – and their threat to Europe – has been little discussed in comparison. The one exception is the issue of gas guns originating from Türkiye, which have grown in popularity among criminals in Europe because they are cheap and low risk to transport as legal unconverted weapons.<sup>2</sup> Close to the point of sale they can be converted into lethal firearms. But as this report makes clear, converted gas and blank guns are just one issue among many in the region, each with their own criminal dynamics.

This report considers the illicit arms markets of each country and how they are interconnected. This analysis is intended to complement two previous reports, 'Smoke on the horizon', which described trends in arms trafficking in Ukraine and assessed the marketplace for illicit weapons in Europe,

and 'Tomorrow's fire', which mapped how arms trafficking in Europe may develop depending on the outcome of the Ukraine conflict.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these three reports provide a holistic view of how the European illicit firearms market interacts with its south-eastern flank, and how it may evolve in the future.

This report highlights how complex the illicit arms markets are in Bulgaria, Greece and Türkiye, and the cultural, criminal and political factors that must be taken into consideration in assessing the risk. It also spotlights the responses that these countries have formulated, including through international forums and joint operations. Finally, the report offers a series of recommendations that aim to integrate analysis of the region into the broader picture of European threats.

## Methodology

Assessing illicit firearms markets is a complicated endeavour. Estimating the number of illegal firearms in a given country, for example, is highly challenging, and poses several methodological issues.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, price is a complex metric, given variations in weapon type, condition and age, among other factors, including the tendency of sources to exaggerate or underplay prices according to their own interests. Since this report focuses on mapping the arms trafficking economies of each country, the data presented is best understood as broadly illustrative, not definitive.

That said, at every opportunity this study sought to supplement publicly available information with in-depth interviews with those involved in the arms trafficking market, whether in law enforcement, civil society, the media or the criminal underworld.

To compile the information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with state representatives, community leaders, retired law enforcement, journalists, academics, specialized civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders in Türkiye, Greece and Bulgaria. Desk research was conducted regarding arms legislation and relevant national research, including reports by police forces, CSOs, media and trade ministries; and international research from the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), Europol and Frontex. This report also draws on information from established observatory networks of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Fieldwork took place between September and December 2024.



# INTRODUCTION

**T**ürkiye, Greece and Bulgaria are often seen as a collective gateway for weapons entering into the European space. But this radically oversimplifies the complex webs of inflows, outflows and supply chains that characterize each country. Variations in attitudes to guns, historical experience and proximity to regions in conflict have all combined to create distinct arms trafficking ecosystems in the three countries.

## Key findings

### Millions of illegal arms

Illegal weapons represent a large proportion of the overall number of firearms in all three countries – and in Türkiye, an overwhelming majority. In Bulgaria, an estimated 41% of all firearms are illegal (held without a permit or licence), rising to 57% in Greece and (by one estimate) 90% in Türkiye.<sup>5</sup>

The raw numbers are also illuminating, and point to stark differences in the region. In Türkiye, the number of illegal weapons has been put at 36 million; in Greece estimates range between 800 000–1 000 000; while in Bulgaria, only 244 267 weapons are held illegally, for reasons explained below. This equates to 0.42 weapons per person in Türkiye, 0.11 in Greece and 0.04 in Bulgaria. To put this into context, the Small Arms Survey estimated the number of illegal firearms in Europe as a whole in 2017 to be 35 million – roughly the same as Türkiye alone today.<sup>6</sup> Although this figure is now slightly dated, it provides a useful benchmark to understand the relative picture.



**FIGURE 1** Illegal firearms ownership, per capita.

Raw firearms figures include a variety of weapon types, of which some may be more involved in crime than others. For example, hunting shotguns – commonly owned in rural Greece – present a very different level of risk compared to the submachine guns, pistols and grenades sought by organized crime in Athens and Thessaloniki. Not included, however, are the numbers of unconverted gas guns and non-lethal traumatic weapons that have the potential to be converted; artisanal or handmade guns that may lack firepower but can still be lethal and are impossible to trace; and the rise of 3D-printed guns (noted in Greece and Türkiye) with ever more sophisticated and deadly capacity. As such, raw figures – while providing a glimpse into the situation – must be treated with caution; data must be matched with user motivations to generate accurate analysis.

## A transnational marketplace

As well as hosting domestic markets with varying levels of demand, each country has strong trading connections with their Middle Eastern and Balkan neighbours – many of which have long histories of instability and conflict that have continued to fuel arms trafficking.

Bulgaria's land border with Türkiye is the main crossing point for Turkish-produced gas guns on their way to Europe, especially the high-traffic border point at Kapitan Andreevo. Greece's proximity to Albania and the broader Western Balkans region makes it a natural receiver of weapons from the 1990s conflicts, as well as those looted from Albanian military stockpiles in 1997. Türkiye's south-eastern border is a particularly active area for cross-border smuggling of weapons to and from Iraq and Syria, involving transnational organized crime groups, Kurdish militant organizations – such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is a proscribed terrorist group in the US, UK and EU – and migrants, who may carry weapons for self-protection and sometimes bury them in caches where they can be retrieved later.<sup>7</sup>

This transnational influence is also present in Greece, where the higher end of the arms market is largely controlled by Russian and Georgian organized crime, while Albanians control the lower quality supply (mainly old weapons from the Balkan conflicts and stolen from military stockpiles).

Weapons from the conflict in Ukraine do not seem to have entered the ecosystem yet, but given the geography – with Bulgaria and Türkiye sitting just across the Black Sea from Ukraine, Russia and the occupied regions – weapons from the conflict may find their way into existing illicit channels. New inflows from Russia should be of particular concern, given its current scale of production (which risks creating a huge oversupply when the conflict ends) and the comparative weakness of its domestic arms trafficking controls (and lack of international cooperation on the issue).<sup>8</sup> Mapping these potential routes, actors and customers will help policymakers prepare for the future.



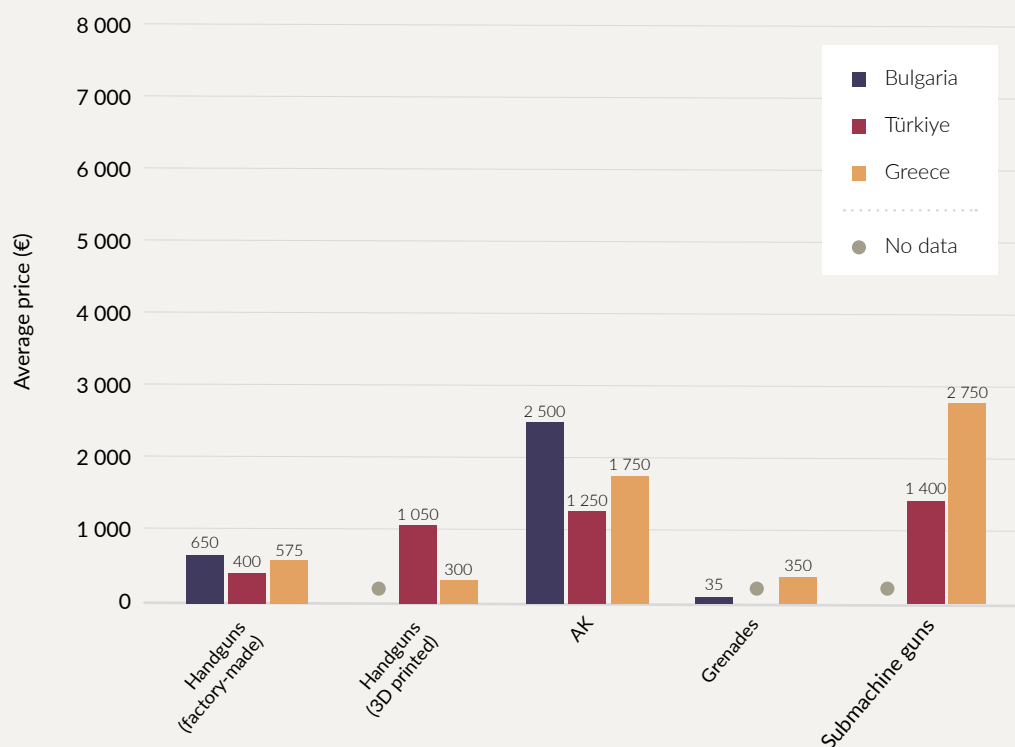
**FIGURE 2** Main routes for illicit arms flows through Türkiye, Greece and Bulgaria.

## Price variation

Black market pricing is complicated. Many things affect the value of a weapon, such as age, history of use and demand. In Greece, weapons that are 'clean' – i.e. lack a criminal history – come at a premium, as do weapons sold by Russian criminals, which are of a higher quality than those touted by Albanian criminals. Certain brands, such as Glock and Skorpion machine pistols, are in high demand among criminals for their status and ease of use. This has driven up their prices in Greece compared to the Soviet-era Tokarev pistol, while Heckler & Koch sniper rifles attract top prices in Bulgaria.



In general, the greater the availability of a weapon, the closer the price banding in the region, as can be seen in the fairly consistent Kalashnikov AK prices across all three countries. Data on prices for 3D-printed weapons, by contrast, is scant and varies hugely. The very high prices paid for grenades in Greece is also intriguing considering that they can be bought very cheaply across the border in the Balkans. More research is required to understand this anomaly; it may be that customers in Greece simply prefer other types of explosives (significant quantities of dynamite and other explosives substances were seized in 2024) leading to a lack of regular supply.<sup>9</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Average black-market weapons prices by country in 2024 and 2025.

## Bulgaria a regional outlier

When it comes to illicit firearms, Bulgaria is very different to Greece and Türkiye. Gun ownership is relatively low and organized crime is not a major domestic customer for firearms. Close surveillance of the population during the Communist era meant that criminals had kept away from armed crime, and confined themselves to less violent enterprises such as counterfeiting and fraud. Likewise, a concerted campaign against organized crime around the turn of the millennium directed criminals away from weapons and towards drugs and human trafficking.

If the criminal market was limited, the licit market was thriving; Bulgaria became a powerhouse of arms production during the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many weapons from official stocks were exported in shady state-sponsored deals to the Middle East and North Africa. After Bulgaria joined the EU these flows stopped, but domestic production has ramped up again since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine with Bulgaria exporting significant quantities of weapons to Poland, intended for Ukraine. Managing these new domestic stocks both during and after the conflict should be a high priority.

## **Lack of dedicated arms trafficking strategies**

Although Bulgaria and Greece adhere to EU directives on small arms and light weapons, and Greece and Türkiye have stepped up enforcement operations (including through the creation of a Greek 'FBI'), national strategies dedicated to illegal firearms are lacking in all three countries, hampering effective management and control. Türkiye's position outside the EU adds further complexity to standardizing arms control initiatives across the region.

There is a strong baseline of international cooperation – flagged in each country section – showing that progress has been made. But these international efforts must also be supplemented by strategic national-level initiatives that address each country's unique challenge. This is most urgent in Greece and Türkiye, where youth violence has grown amid a general sense of disaffection. In such cases, sweeping weapons off the streets will not be sufficient. Rather, tackling embedded cultures of gun ownership will address the incentive to buy illegal weapons in the first place.



# TÜRKIYE

## Key points

- Türkiye's location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East makes it a key transit and destination country for arms trafficking. Its proximity to conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq, and the role of terrorist groups in the south-east exacerbate the issue.
- Türkiye is also a major source country. The black market includes handmade weapons, blank-firing pistols and mass-produced firearms, as well as emerging trends such as 3D-printed firearms.
- Approximately 90% of guns in Türkiye are unlicensed, representing some 36 million firearms. Gun violence in Türkiye has surged in recent years: every year approximately 3 000 people lose their lives to gun crime.
- Türkiye is likely to remain a source of blank-firing weapons, despite changes in legislation designed to make these weapons more difficult to convert. The land border crossing at Kapıkule–Kapitan Andreevo is the main entry point for weapons into Europe through the Balkan route.

## The domestic market

Türkiye's illicit arms market is certainly transnational. Weapons of Turkish origin have been seized across the globe, not only in neighbouring countries such as Syria and Iraq but also as far afield as Africa<sup>10</sup> and South America.<sup>11</sup> But there is also a well-established local market.

There are an estimated 36 million unlicensed weapons in Türkiye, representing about 90% of the total number of weapons in the country.<sup>12</sup> In part, Türkiye's current gun culture is a legacy of the Ottoman period, when almost everyone carried weapons; until the establishment of the republic, the population, mostly men, carried weapons, while typically, houses hid three to four weapons.<sup>13</sup>

Today, gun ownership, whether legal or illegal, is commonplace: 'In Türkiye, owning a firearm is seen by many as a natural part of life, similar to owning a TV or a car,' one journalist told us.<sup>14</sup> And, when asked about current ownership levels, an NGO specialist said, 'One out of every three households has a gun, and one in every two people possesses a gun'.<sup>15</sup>

Various explanations are offered for why gun ownership is so deeply ingrained in Turkish society. According to a local journalist, the country's gun culture is rooted in tradition, with guns being used to celebrate holidays, marriages and even sporting victories.<sup>16</sup> But self-protection also appears to be a powerful motivation – one source claimed that 70% of owners carry their firearms for self-defence.<sup>17</sup>

Statistics certainly back up the idea that guns are a threat in civilians' daily lives. In the last 10 years (2014–2024), there have been 34 197 incidents of armed violence in Türkiye, in which 21 434 people were killed and another 31 207 injured.<sup>18</sup> Illegal weapons are used in the vast majority of gun crimes. In 2023, 5 020 out of 6 478 firearm-related crimes were committed with unlicensed firearms, and the trend continued into 2024, with 3 662 out of 4 904 crimes involving unlicensed guns – a full 75%.<sup>19</sup>

The key players in the illegal arms market fall broadly into three main types. First, there are criminal networks, both national and transnational. Mafia-style organizations are prevalent – operating out of cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Adana and Gaziantep – who use firearms for extortion, racketeering and territorial control.<sup>20</sup> These groups typically supply handguns and shotguns (mainly of Turkish origin) to the domestic market and to neighbouring countries.

Illegal firearms often intersect with other illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, smuggling of migrants and human trafficking. Migrants frequently claim that people smugglers are armed, with reports of migrants and people smugglers alike sourcing weapons in Türkiye on their way to the Western Balkan route. In some cases, they bury weapons in forests to get rid of them on the way to Europe and mark the spot so they can return for them someday. An increased level of violence among irregular migrants has also been reported. There have been several instances where migrants and people smugglers have used weapons against police officers and border guards.<sup>21</sup> According to a member of UNICEF, since 2014 there has been widespread concern in the country over minors coming from the Middle East with weapons, especially in the regions of Gaziantep and Sanliurfa near the Turkish–Syrian border.<sup>22</sup> Migrants traveling through Türkiye often carry firearms due to serious safety concerns, including threats from human traffickers, rival smuggling groups, criminal gangs and aggressive border patrols.<sup>23</sup> Most of these weapons originate from conflicts in the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq, and are made available to migrants by smuggling networks in Türkiye.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, however, firearms are tools to boost criminals' power rather than the main focus of their operations.

This is not the case for the second category of actors: sophisticated arms-trafficking coalitions that supply more advanced and profitable weapons. These networks are well-coordinated and usually operate across national borders, making them difficult to dismantle.<sup>25</sup>

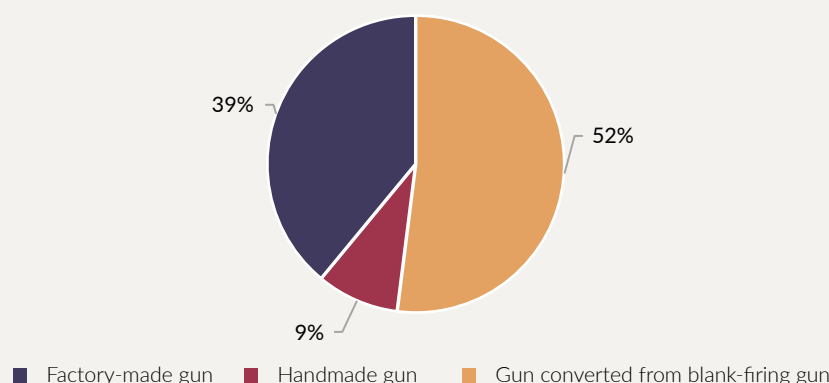
Finally, state-embedded individuals, as well as private-sector actors with close ties to the government, are thought to be involved in illegally transferring weapons to groups fighting in Syria and Libya, as well as paramilitary groups within Türkiye.<sup>26</sup> In this last category, the arms-trafficking market overlaps with the Turkish state's internal and external political objectives.

In addition to these actors, foreign criminal organizations and terrorist groups also contribute to firearms trafficking in Türkiye, often collaborating with domestic networks. The PKK and the Islamic State, for example, have used their presence in the border areas of south-eastern Türkiye to smuggle arms for their own operations and also to move arms for other factions or criminal entities. That said, the disbanding of the PKK in May 2025 will remove a major customer for weapons in the region.<sup>27</sup>



## Supply and demand

Türkiye's supply situation is diverse, ranging from the artisan/handmade guns manufactured near the Black Sea (with skills passed down from generation to generation),<sup>28</sup> to gas guns, to industrially produced firearms.<sup>29</sup> This mixed weapons market is reflected in the breakdown of seizures between 2017 and 2021 (see Figure 4).



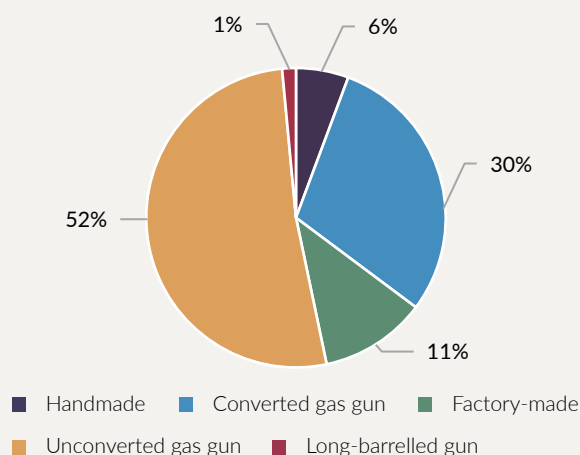
**FIGURE 4** Percentage of firearms seized in Türkiye, 2017–2021, by production type.

SOURCE: Turkish National Police, Anti-smuggling and organized crime report, 2022

The legal domestic market is mostly supplied by firearms from Turkish, European or US manufacturers. However, these are expensive and are generally used for hunting or sport. Most criminals use pistols, either obsolete, undeclared, inherited or other traditional Glock-type pistols.<sup>30</sup> The leaders of elite criminal groups prefer to use Glock and SIG Sauer as a sign of prestige.<sup>31</sup> Some criminals also prefer to use shortened long-barrel guns (carbines with shortened barrels).

Gas and signal guns, which are also legal in Türkiye, are increasingly common, especially among minors.<sup>32</sup> Türkiye has several manufacturers specializing in blank and signal pistols, commonly used for non-lethal purposes such as theatrical props, training or signalling. Notable companies include Zoraki (Atak Silah), renowned for models like the Zoraki 914 and Zoraki 925; Retay Arms, which produces a wide variety of blank and signal pistols; Voltran, a leading manufacturer of blank and signal pistols as well as revolvers; and Aksa Arms, which offers blank, gas and rubber ball pistols. These guns can be bought legally in stores but must be registered. They are used in either converted or non-converted form by young people to intimidate rivals or commit minor crimes.

Indeed, police data suggests that in recent years demand has shifted to easily accessible handmade and modified blank guns as a low-cost alternative. In 2020, the breakdown of weapon types from one police operation suggested that gas guns accounted for almost two-thirds of all weapons (63%), with factory-made weapons representing 25% and handmade guns 12%.<sup>33</sup> Their rise in popularity was even more pronounced in data gathered from 573 operations conducted in 2021, where converted and unconverted gas guns accounted for 82% of all seizures (see Figure 5).<sup>34</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Breakdown of weapon types seized in Türkiye in 2021.

SOURCE: Turkish National Police, Anti-smuggling and organized crime report, 2021

There is also regional variation in the types of weapons being sought. On the border with Syria and Iraq, small arms, like pistols and rifles, are the most commonly trafficked weapons. These are often used by smugglers as well as by migrants and refugees for self-defence or sold on the black market. However, in areas where organized crime is established, more advanced firearms (such as Glocks and modern rifles) are used in robberies, murders and turf wars between gangs.

Arms traffickers have long been adaptable to changing conditions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw foreign-origin weapons increase in price and heightened restrictions on movement, weapon smugglers shifted to a supply of handmade weapons produced in the Black Sea region.<sup>35</sup> They also found new methods of delivery, switching to courier companies and online sales, including through social media.

Now 3D-printed weapons are potentially the new game changer. The FGC-9, a semi-automatic firearm largely fabricated using 3D printers, first appeared on Türkiye's black market in mid-2022. By 2023, at least two variants of the FGC-9 were available for sale in Istanbul. These weapons were priced higher than traditional handcrafted pistols due to their novelty and features such as select-fire capability (potentially enabling full-auto fire). Although not confirmed; they seem to have been priced at 18 000 and 20 000 Turkish lira (around €1 000 and €1 100).<sup>36</sup> While these weapons are currently more expensive than traditional black-market options, their price may decrease as the technology becomes more widespread and refined.



Zoraki (Atak Silah) and Voltran models.

Type	Name	Price (€)
Pistol	BRG9 Elite 9mm	250
Pistol	Tisas 1911A1	370 (320 used)
Pistol	Stoeger STR-9	340
Pistol	SAR B6 and SAR 9X Platinum	250 and 550
Pistol	Girsan MC28SA	230
Pistol	9mm Canik TP9SA	320–350
Glock Pistol	Glock 19 Gen 4	2 300–2 800
Glock Pistol 19 clone	System Defence C9	150
Rifle		500–1 500
AK-45		1 000–1 500
Uzi		1 000–1 800

**FIGURE 6** Arms prices on the Turkish black market, 2024.

SOURCES: Interviews with retired police officers, investigative journalists and CSO representatives conducted in Istanbul and Ankara, December 2024



The FGC-9 semi-automatic firearm.

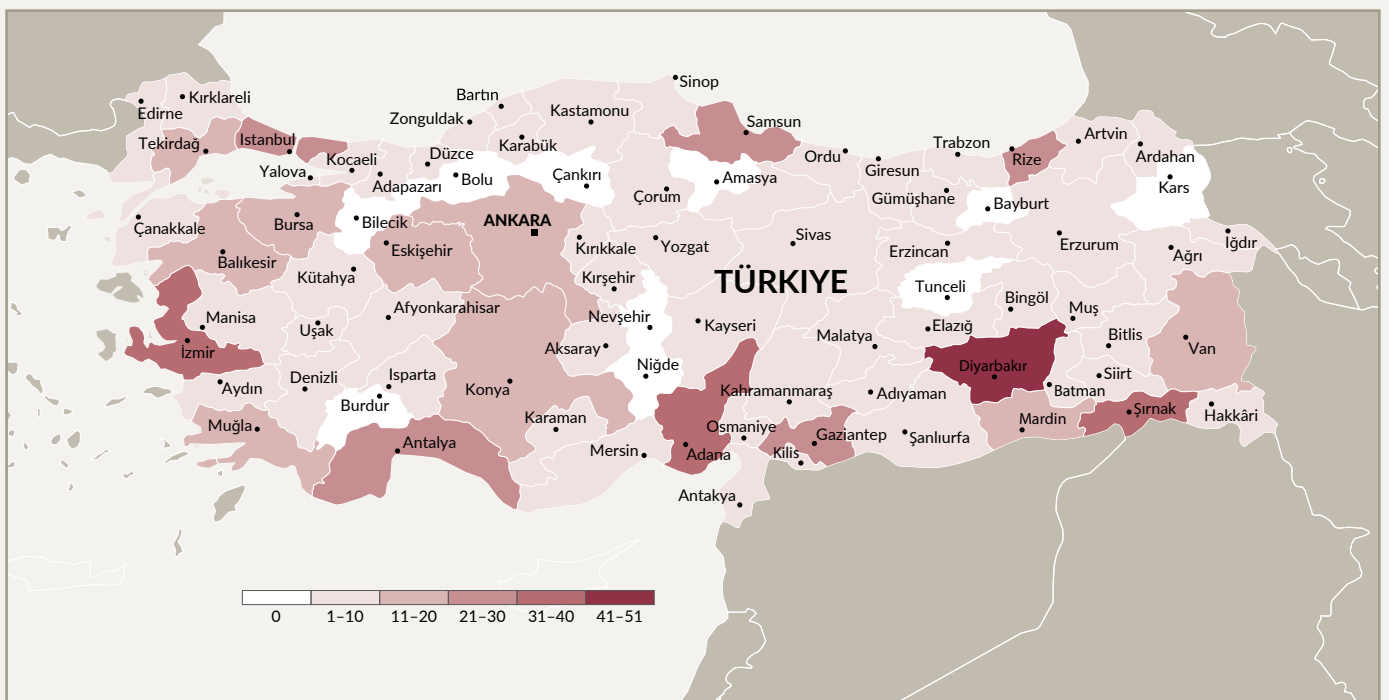
## The routes

Türkiye's location makes it a natural hub for weapons flowing in across the Taurus and Zagros mountains from Syria, Iraq and Iran; and weapons flowing in and out of Europe via the Balkan route (see Figure 7). The main cross-border flows over land and sea are indicated by Turkish police data on counter smuggling operations in 2022. This highlights particular hotspots along the south-east border with Syria and Iraq (see Figure 8); the Black Sea coastline, reflecting the strong tradition of handmaking weapons in the northern regions; and in the provinces surrounding the three largest cities: Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara.



**FIGURE 7** Firearms trafficking routes through Türkiye to Europe.

SOURCES: Interviews conducted in Türkiye in December 2024, as well as desk research, reviewed publications and media



**FIGURE 8** Distribution of police arms smuggling operations by province in 2021.

SOURCES: Turkish National Police, Anti-smuggling and organized crime report, 2021

The smooth running of these channels depends on the collaboration of Turkish criminal groups with international networks. For example, Turkish groups work with Balkan criminal networks to send goods in opposite directions – heroin flows into Europe and weapons from surplus Balkan caches are sent the other way, either to stay into Türkiye or be rerouted to markets in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>37</sup> Turkish mafia groups have also expanded their operations as far afield as Latin America, establishing connections with the Sinaloa Cartel, which include arms trafficking alongside other criminal enterprises.<sup>38</sup>





**Turkish security forces control the border with Iran to prevent cross-border smuggling. Türkiye's location makes it a natural hub for weapons flowing in from Syria, Iraq and Iran.** © Ozkan Bilgin/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

In the south-east, along the border with Iraq and Syria, smugglers take advantage of the remote and mountainous terrain, although more recently they have had to contend with the presence of the Turkish military looking to interdict Kurdish militants trafficking weapons through the Diyarbakir region.<sup>39</sup>

The European route has begun to see arms travelling the other way too, with large numbers of signal/gas guns manufactured in Türkiye entering Bulgaria.<sup>40</sup> From there, they are often transported to other parts of Europe, where they are converted into live-firing weapons.<sup>41</sup> These gas guns are cheap to buy in Türkiye and legal to export in their non-converted form, making them a grey area of arms trafficking for Turkish authorities and a relatively low-risk money-spinner for organized crime. Legislative changes in 2019 designed to make gas guns harder to convert have not stemmed the flow.<sup>42</sup> There is also a regular low-level flow of weapons across these borders. On 28 August 2024, 10 counterfeit pistols (stamped as Croatian-made but actually made in Türkiye) and 15 empty magazines were seized at the Lesovo border with Bulgaria. They had been hidden in a trailer carrying a machine from Türkiye to Germany.<sup>43</sup>

While most of these illicit flows involve relatively small quantities of weapons, maritime trafficking offers far greater possibilities. Seizures at international ports from ships arriving from Türkiye have highlighted the sheer volume of weapons being sent by sea, some of which (in the case of Libya) have contravened UN embargos.

## Maritime seizures of Turkish weapons

- September 2015 – Greek authorities seize undeclared weapons from Türkiye en route to Libya from the *Haddad 1* freighter.<sup>44</sup>
- January 2018 – Greek authorities intercept the *Andromeda*, a Tanzanian-flagged ship carrying explosives, allegedly loaded in Turkish ports. The ship was en route to the Libyan port of Misratah.<sup>45</sup>
- December 2018 – Libyan authorities seize 3 200 pistols, 400 rifles and 4.8 million bullets produced by the Turkish companies Zoraki and Retay, hidden inside two shipping containers that had arrived from Türkiye to Al-Khums port, Libya – a violation of the UN embargo.<sup>46</sup>
- July 2024 – Nigerian authorities seize 844 firearms, including rifles and shotguns, as well as 112 500 rounds of ammunition, from a concealed shipping container that had arrived at Onne Port from Türkiye.<sup>47</sup>

## Responses

Türkiye's police and security forces have made significant efforts to combat the illegal arms trade. They regularly seize illicit weapons and have strengthened border controls to prevent smuggling. For example, the port at Istanbul has a triple layer of security with port officers, customs officers and private security, while military police are stationed in all high-level facilities.<sup>48</sup>

However, the problem persists, made worse by the ongoing refugee crisis and the porous nature of many border regions. One of the biggest challenges is monitoring the movement of people, particularly in areas that have been flooded with refugees. The sheer number of people crossing the border, combined with the ease of hiding small arms, makes it difficult for authorities to stop every attempt at smuggling.

Türkiye has implemented strict firearms legislation to regulate gun ownership and reduce gun-related violence, and has developed a strategy to limit weapons and ammunition smuggling. CSOs, academics and state institutions play a significant role in its implementation and the strategy is updated regularly in line with innovations in the field. The national police has a specialized unit responsible for arms trafficking and the Turkish authorities have increased penalties for those found in possession of unlicensed firearms.

A new law stipulates that individuals caught carrying, purchasing or possessing unlicensed firearms can face a prison sentence of two to four years, up from the previous one to three years. Those involved in smuggling firearm parts or converting blank guns into live weapons face sentences of up to 12 years.<sup>49</sup>

Over 90 000 unlicensed weapons were seized between 2017 and 2021, and the pace of operations has increased.<sup>50</sup> Roughly the same number of unregistered weapons were seized in the first 10 months of 2024 as in those five years between 2017 and 2021, with legal action taken against over 100 000 people as a result.<sup>51</sup> A major operation in 2024, coordinated across 16 provinces, dismantled the Baygaralar arms and drug smuggling network, seizing around 60 unlicensed firearms in the process.<sup>52</sup>

However, the effectiveness of legal and operational efforts is being undermined by the sheer scale of illegal firearm possession and lax general enforcement. Real change in Türkiye's gun culture will require more than just legal action. 'Changing people's mindsets is key,' said one journalist. 'It's not just about the law; it's about transforming the culture around firearms. This will take time, but the country can move towards a safer, less gun-reliant society in the future'.<sup>53</sup>

## International collaboration

Türkiye is a NATO member and a candidate country for EU membership. It actively cooperates with police and law enforcement organizations such as Europol, the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training, Frontex, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and SELEC, and participates in joint activities, especially in the fight against drugs. However, there has been no such formal bilateral, regional or international police cooperation on arms trafficking specifically.

Since July 2004, cooperation between Europol and Türkiye has been based on the Strategic Agreement on Cooperation.<sup>54</sup> This does not include the possibility of sharing personal data, but it facilitates cooperation in various areas. A Turkish liaison officer has been seconded to Europol since 2016. Türkiye is connected to and configured for the full use of the Secure Information Exchange Network Application with third parties and EU member states. The EU (through Europol) and Türkiye are jointly interested in stepping up law enforcement cooperation to address common challenges effectively.

The completion of an international agreement between the EU and Türkiye on the exchange of personal data between Europol and the Turkish authorities is still pending – partly because Turkish data protection legislation is still not aligned with the EU acquis.

As far as participation in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) is concerned, Türkiye has not participated in any EU joint investigation teams focused on arms trafficking.<sup>55</sup> ■



# GREECE

## Key points

- Greece is primarily a transit country for illegal weapons from the Middle East, Türkiye and the Balkans; and illegal exports go to Türkiye, Iraq and Syria. The domestic market for illegal weapons among criminals is concentrated in urban hubs such as Athens and Thessaloniki, although illegal gun ownership is widespread, (with Crete a particular hub for unlicensed civilian possession).
- According to data from the Ministry of Citizen Protection, there are approximately 800 000–1 000 000 illegal firearms currently circulating in Greece. Other sources estimate that of 1 920 000 firearms in Greece, approximately 1 110 000 are unregistered.
- Various international organized crime groups are active in arms trafficking in Greece, mainly Albanians, Russians and Georgians. Although working autonomously for years, Albanians and Georgians now appear to be working with Russian groups.
- Greece has no national strategy for small arms and light weapons (SALW) specifically. However, the country actively tries to incorporate transnational measures into national law, including the EU strategy against illicit firearms, SALW and ammunition, and other international commitments.

## The domestic market

Gun culture in Greece is complex and varies significantly across regions, which in turn influences patterns of illegal weapon ownership. In Crete, for example, guns are symbolic of national resistance (from when the island was under Ottoman rule, and later German occupation),<sup>56</sup> and family heritage, contributing to a robust black market for illicit arms alongside legal ones. Celebratory gunfire during weddings and festivals is still customary around the islands, although it has diminished over time. Similar gun-related traditions persist in other areas, such as the Peloponnese (e.g., the Mani Peninsula) and in the mountain villages of central Greece. Rural areas often have a stronger attachment to firearms for historical and cultural reasons than urban centres. In Crete, firearms incidents are more prevalent in the western part of the island, particularly in the regional unit of Rethymno. In the mountain villages on this part of the island road signs are often riddled with bullet holes.<sup>57</sup>





A road sign riddled with bullet holes in Crete, where guns are symbolic of national resistance and passed down as family heirlooms. © Ralf Adler via Getty Images

Today, one in 10 Greeks owns a private collection of guns and ammunition.<sup>58</sup> Used carbines, hunting rifles and police weapons are the most commonly owned 'traditional' weapons, both on the mainland and the islands, and are often passed down as family heirlooms.<sup>59</sup> Even small-time criminals now typically own at least one black-market weapon – a fact reflected in the frequency with which firearms are used in criminal activities.

According to data collected by the Ministry of Citizen Protection, there are approximately 800 000–1 000 000 illegal firearms circulating in Greece.<sup>60</sup> Other sources estimate that of the 1 920 000 arms in the country, approximately 1 110 000, or 57%, are unregistered.<sup>61</sup> Many of these are hunting shotguns kept by individual owners, but others are more sophisticated weapons originating from Albanian military stockpiles that were stolen in 1997.<sup>62</sup> Domestic demand around this time was fuelled by the economic crisis in the 2000s. Gun-related violence is relatively low compared to other countries but tends to involve illegal firearms when it occurs.<sup>63</sup>

3D-printed weapons have also begun to emerge in Greece. According to the Greek police, there are cases of young people printing guns to sell or exchange for drugs. On Samos in the Aegean, for example, a group of men aged between 19 and 20 managed to create copy pistols using plans they found on the internet.<sup>64</sup>

Widespread demand has made arms trafficking one of the most profitable businesses in Greece (after drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling), although transit business outweighs domestic demand. Albanian criminals dominate the illegal firearms market in Greece, but Russian and Chinese groups also operate. Organized criminals of varying nationalities also form a broad customer base for weapons (see Figure 9). At least 10 foreign mafias are active in the country, leading one source to dub Greece the 'Colombia of the Balkans'.<sup>65</sup> The Greek mafia is another significant player; it is organized regionally and operates in large urban centres.

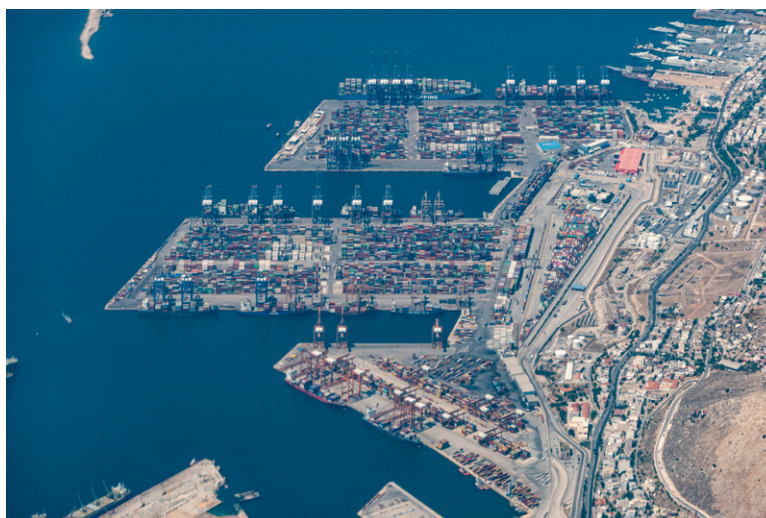
Country of origin	Core activities	Area of operation
<b>Greek mafia</b>	Weapons, drugs, homicides, robberies, human trafficking	Nationwide (urban centres)
<b>Turkish mafia</b>	Weapons, drugs, investments, money laundering, human trafficking	Attica (Athens) Islands (Aegean)
<b>Russian organized crime</b>	Weapons, corruption of state actors, commodity smuggling	Nationwide (urban centres)
<b>Albanian mafia</b>	Weapons, drugs, commodity smuggling, extortion, homicides	Attica (Athens) Islands (Ionian)
<b>Serbian mafia</b>	Weapons, drugs, homicides, robberies, commodity smuggling, investments	Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki)
<b>Georgian mafia – vory v zakone (thieves in law)</b>	Commodity smuggling, drugs, robberies, extortion, money laundering, human trafficking, executions	Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki)
<b>Kurdish mafia</b>	Weapons, drugs, human trafficking	Attica (Athens)
<b>Pakistani mafia</b>	Weapons, importing precursors for synthetic drugs	Attica (Athens) Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki)

**FIGURE 9** Mafia groups active in Greece.

SOURCE: Interview with a police officer in Athens, November 2024

The market is highly transnational: organized crime groups in Crete, for instance, receive weapons from Albania and other Balkan countries before distributing firearms locally and to different parts of Greece, with Athens, Thessaloniki and Piraeus serving as distribution hubs.<sup>66</sup> That said, arms dealers do not operate in the Piraeus, Thessaloniki and Heraklion ports themselves. All buying and selling occurs in abandoned or warehouse storefronts, which the police have started to check.

The Port of Piraeus, the largest port in Greece, serves as a key logistic hub for both licit and illicit trade. © Nicolas Economou via Getty Images



These urban centres, while lacking the traditional gun culture of Crete and rural areas, have seen an uptick in gun crime. Law enforcement officials have expressed growing concern about how easily perpetrators resort to pulling out guns in the centre of Athens, often in response to trivial disagreements and minor provocations.<sup>67</sup> The use of illicit weapons among young people in Greece is also a growing concern, with the number of 13–17 year olds arrested for gun crimes rising from 330 in 2020, to 427 in 2021, and 447 in 2022 – a 35% increase in just three years.<sup>68</sup> This matches a broader trend seen in other countries of young people carrying lethal firearms, notably Sweden and France.

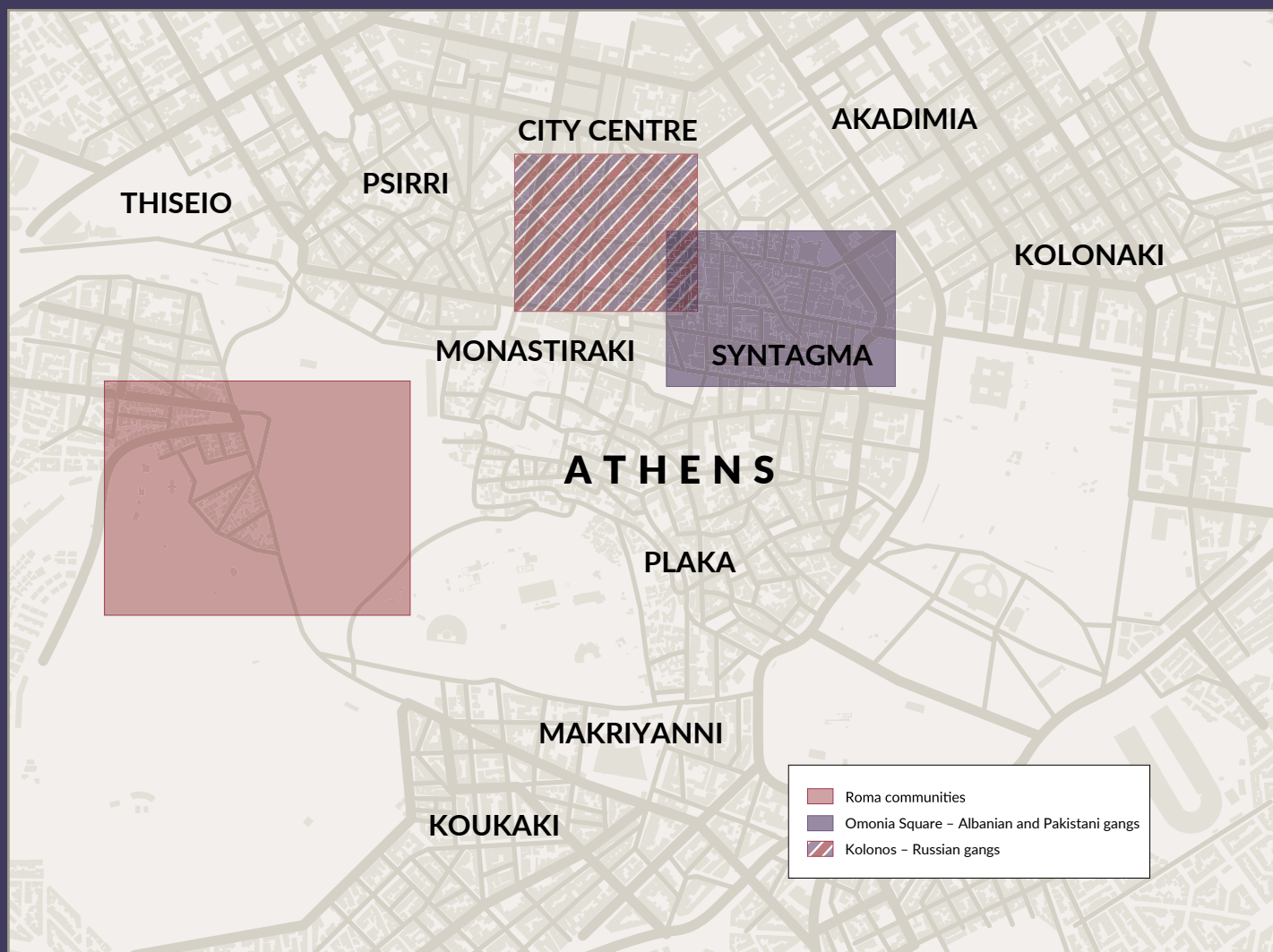
## Buying guns in Athens

Until recently, acquiring a firearm without the necessary documentation in Athens was a challenging task. But times have changed. Today, Omonoia Square and the surrounding streets have become a veritable weapons market. When night falls, anyone can acquire anything from a simple knife to an Uzi submachine gun.<sup>69</sup> In between are Kalashnikov rifles, revolvers and grenades, mostly of Albanian origin. Those interested in carrying a ‘piece’ without the necessary firearms licence no longer have to look far or have special connections with the criminal underworld to meet a weapons dealer. Simply asking foreigners loitering in dimly lit corners, selling their own wares, will quickly lead someone to the mainly Albanians and Pakistani criminals, who have claimed the square as their turf.

The more discerning and demanding buyers need to head to Kolonos, where Russian mobsters offer grenades, Skorpion and Tokarev submachine guns, as well as Kalashnikovs. The Russian-sourced weapons are in much better condition than those from Albania. However, anyone purchasing their weaponry from Kolonos must have the right connections, as no Russians will be waiting in the street to guide them to their hideouts. This part of the city operates under a code of silence, where no one speaks or acknowledges anything.

In the west of Athens, mainly in Roma communities,<sup>70</sup> the police have found military explosives, gunpowder of various kinds and carbines that are believed to be used for robberies and extortion of companies and people. The Pakistani mafia also stock explosives and pistols according to the Greek police.

More serious weaponry – from machine guns to rockets and anti-tank weapons – can also be found if you know where to look and who to ask.<sup>71</sup> ■

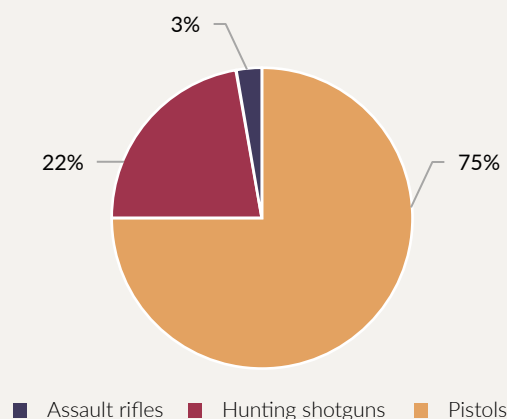


**FIGURE 10** Areas of Athens associated with illegal arms dealing.

NOTE: This map is based on interviews conducted with police officers, undisclosed criminal sources and news reports, between October and December 2024.

## Supply and prices

The most smuggled firearms in Greece are pistols, followed by hunting rifles, submachine guns and assault rifles such as AK-47s.<sup>72</sup> Among the most popular are Tokarev and Glock pistols, which are highly sought after on the Greek black market. In many cases, weapons are assembled from component parts of different productions and origins – including from Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Germany – making tracing highly challenging. Most of the swaps and modifications are of excellent quality to ensure that the gun will perform. Some weapons, mainly from Central Europe, have been so heavily modified that their serial number can no longer be identified.<sup>73</sup>



**FIGURE 11** Weapons seizures in Greece, 2021.

NOTE: These numbers reflect a consistent pattern of annual seizures dating back to 2017.

SOURCE: <https://gunviolence.eu/country/greece/>

The boom in the illegal arms trade in Greece has driven prices down. The cheapest weapons on the market (mostly old or Chinese manufactured) are those offered by Albanian dealers. Old-fashioned pistols are priced between €100 and €300, while grenades cost up to €200 – a very high price in regional terms. An Albanian AK does not exceed €1 500. In contrast, Russian weapons are much more expensive. A well-maintained, polished and oiled Kalashnikov starts at €2 500 and can sell for up to €4 000, depending on its year of manufacture. Russians grenades similarly attract a premium, with prices ranging from €400 to €600, while smuggled Uzis and Skorpions sold by Russian dealers start at €3 000 and go up based on quality and performance. Finally, 9mm Glock pistols sell for €800 to €1 000 – comparable to their prices on the legal market (see Figure 12).

Some dealers have even started offering promotions: drug traffickers, for example, are now giving away a Kalashnikov rifle with the purchase of a kilogram of cannabis, worth about €1 500;<sup>74</sup> and authorities have even seen serious weaponry such as heavy machine guns and RPGs being offered with all their accessories free of charge. ‘Weapons have lost their value,’ said a senior officer in the Hellenic Police, ‘a revolver or another firearm can now end up in anyone’s hands without them having to pay for it’.<sup>75</sup>

However, there is one exception to the trend for low prices – unused or ‘clean’ pistols, which pose no risk of the holder being implicated in a previous crime. Terrorists and criminals are willing to pay significantly more for ‘clean’ weapons from reliable smugglers, who acquire such weapons from military bases, police stations, war zones or even legitimate dealers.<sup>76</sup>

The online marketplace for weapons is relatively small compared to other Balkan countries, the US and other European nations. As elsewhere, the surface web is predominately used by licensed firearm owners looking to sell or trade their weapons within lawful boundaries; those looking to acquire weapons illegally tend to use the dark web: as officers from the Attica Security Division pointed out, ‘those seeking illegal weapons don’t browse Greek websites; they use Tor-based sites and often collect the weapons from postal drop points’.<sup>77</sup>



Prices on the dark web start at €280 for a worn-out 9mm Tokarev and can reach up to €1 000 for an ‘unused’ Kalashnikov with two magazines. The dark web also offers anti-tank RPGs, sniper rifles, spare parts, ammunition and grenades of various types. Some listings even include shipping options to Greece, though shipping costs are expensive, especially for larger items like sniper rifles with scopes or dangerous items like grenades. Buyers should beware though – sellers are often police or intelligence officers looking to find would-be arms purchasers.<sup>78</sup>

Type	Name	Price
<b>Semi-automatic rifle</b>	SVT-40 ( <i>Samozaryadnaya Vintovka Tokareva, Obrazets 1940 goda</i> )	€800–1 000
<b>Pistol</b>	Plastic 3D copy	€300
<b>Pistol</b>	TT-30 Tokarev 9mm	€250
<b>Grenade</b>	Gas/Combat	€200 (Chinese/Albanian) to €600 (Russian)
<b>Pistol</b>	Glock 9mm	€800–1 000
<b>Assault rifle</b>	Kalashnikov rifles (Russian: Автоматы Калашникова)	€1 000–1 500 (Albanian) and €2 500 (Russian)
<b>Submachine guns and machine pistols</b>	Uzi	€2 500–3 000
<b>Submachine guns and machine pistols</b>	CZ Skorpion Evo 3 9mm	€3 000
<b>Explosives</b>	Military explosives	€500
<b>Fibre optic sight</b>		€800–1 000

**FIGURE 12** Indicative arms prices on the black market, 2024.

SOURCE: Interview with a former police officer, Athens, November 2024

## The routes

Illegal firearms are smuggled into Greece by land and sea routes that form part of the broader Balkan networks.<sup>79</sup> Pistols and submachine guns are primarily sourced from Albania, Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria, and typically enter Greece overland through the mountainous Epirus and Western Macedonia regions that border Albania.<sup>80</sup> These weapons are then distributed southwards, sometimes as far as Crete.<sup>81</sup> Borders with North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Türkiye (particularly in the Evros region) are also critical transit points for weapons entering or leaving Greece.



**FIGURE 13** Transit routes for illegal weapons in Greece, including entry and exit points.

SOURCE: Interviews conducted in Greece in November and December 2024, as well as information from desk research, reviewed publications and media reports

In the maritime sphere, the main port for weapons in Greece is Piraeus, which meets the demand for weapons in the capital, and covers the needs of several groups active in Attica. Next is the port of Thessaloniki, which sees imports and exports from the neighbouring Balkan countries. The third is the port of Heraklion, which is not crucial for international cartels but rather to local Cretan organized crime.<sup>82</sup> Smugglers also use less formal channels in Crete than the port, landing their illicit shipments at beaches around the island to evade coast guard inspections. The weapons are then transported to sleepy villages in Rethymno and Heraklion, where the local mafia maintains warehouses overseen by the organization or family members.<sup>83</sup>



Local mafias receive and distribute illegal weapons shipments in small cities, such as Rethymno in northern Crete. © Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images

The Aegean Sea is a major route for smuggling arms from Türkiye, North Africa and the Levant. Ports and the remote coastlines of the near 6 000 Greek islands are vulnerable entry points for illicit shipments, such as the island of Gavdos, which has been identified as a location where illicit arms are unloaded.<sup>84</sup>

Although less common than land and sea routes, air transport is occasionally used to smuggle high-value or small quantities of weapons into Greece. There have been cases of small arms and various other items being moved through the airport in Athens. According to a Hellenic Police investigation, suspects imported weapons into Greece by air through parcels sent from the US, Germany and Hong Kong, before trafficking them to Evia and Attica.<sup>85</sup>

## From Ukraine to Greece to Ukraine again: Repurposing illegal guns

In November 2013, a cargo ship carrying a hidden arsenal of weapons was intercepted by the Hellenic Coast Guard in the eastern Aegean. Sailing under a Sierra Leonean flag, the *Nour M* was transporting 20 000 Kalashnikov assault rifles concealed inside 56 containers of grain. The ship had originally departed from the Ukrainian port of Mykolaiv and made a stop in Istanbul before continuing its journey south. According to the ship's documents, it was officially headed to the Turkish port of Iskenderun. However, Greek authorities suspected that the true destination was Libya, which was under a strict United Nations arms embargo at the time.<sup>86</sup>

The seized weapons remained in Greece for nearly a decade, stored under government control. But in 2022, the Kalashnikovs made headlines again when Greece sent military aid to Ukraine in response to the Russian invasion. Reports revealed that the rifles originally destined for Libyan fighters were now being shipped to Ukrainian forces.<sup>87</sup> ■

## Responses

Greece maintains strict gun control laws, limiting civilian ownership to licensed hunting rifles and shot-guns. Handguns are generally restricted to members of shooting clubs or those who can demonstrate a specific need. Open or concealed carrying requires a special permit that is rarely issued.

While Greece does not have a formal national SALW strategy, it has established a strong regulatory framework aligning with international and EU standards. As an EU member, Greece adheres to the European Firearms Directive, which strictly prohibits unauthorized firearms manufacturing, including by 3D printing. Arms trafficking can carry penalties of up to 15 years in prison, especially when linked to organized crime or threats to public safety.<sup>88</sup>

One of the most significant developments in countering arms trafficking and organized crime in general was the establishment in October 2024 of the Directorate for Combatting Organized Crime, commonly known as the Greek FBI.<sup>89</sup> An electronic database, the National Central Authority for information exchange, has also enabled authorities to track legally transferred weapons. The database provides the history of each weapon, from its import to its last legal holder in the firearms registry, and facilitates information exchange regarding firearms with other authorities in Greece and abroad.

The Hellenic Police have made efforts to crack down on illegal weapons possession. In 2024, Greek authorities conducted several operations, resulting in the seizure of significant quantities of illegal arms, explosives and ammunition. Although official data is not yet available, experts estimate that at least 10 000 illegal weapons were confiscated in 2024.<sup>90</sup> Raids in December 2024 targeting the Turkish mafia in southern Greece resulted in the seizure of 49 weapons.<sup>91</sup> Large quantities of explosives were also seized across several operations during the year.<sup>92</sup>

## International collaboration

**T**he Greek legal framework is harmonized with EU directives, such as Directive 91/477/EEC, and international treaties, such as the UN Firearms Protocol.<sup>93</sup> Greece participates in EU-wide initiatives to combat the illicit accumulation and trafficking of SALW and combat serious organized crime. This includes coordinated actions led by Europol as part of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) 2022–2025 initiative, which has led to 566 arrests, 69 of which were related to firearms trafficking.<sup>94</sup>

Greece has also entered into multilateral agreements on police cooperation with its neighbouring countries and participates in international, regional and bilateral organizations such as the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, SELEC, SEESAC, Croatia's Centre for Security Cooperation, Europol and INTERPOL. ■



# BULGARIA

## Key points

- Gun ownership in Bulgaria is relatively low compared to Greece and Türkiye. Partly due to repressive state security during the Communist period, organized criminals are not a major customer either, having opted to focus on 'soft' crimes such as counterfeiting.<sup>95</sup> Since then – and despite an increase in drugs and human trafficking in the country – organized crime has generally shied away from violence, though assassinations do (rarely) take place.
- In the 1990s, as it looked to liquidate its vast Cold War weapons stocks, Bulgaria's arms industry was embroiled in cases of illegal exports to sanctioned entities using fake end-user certificates. Domestic production has ramped up again since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- Bulgaria remains a transit zone for Turkish-made gas guns en route to Europe, where they are converted into lethal firearms. Gas guns can be a money spinner for Bulgarian criminal syndicates, with profits of as much as 500%.

## The domestic market

Like Türkiye, the sources of weapons in Bulgaria are varied, including factory and handmade firearms produced domestically, weapons stolen from military depots and weapons imported from elsewhere, notably gas guns.<sup>96</sup> The firearms that pass through Bulgaria are usually imported from Türkiye and, to some extent, Serbia and Greece.

The internal demand for illegal firearms in Bulgaria is not high. Although Bulgaria has a proud history of producing and exporting weapons, there is no embedded gun culture, although celebratory shots are sometimes fired on public holidays, at weddings and traditional country gatherings. Bulgarians also attach great prestige to sports shooting and hunting, which is the third most commonly cited reason for wanting to own a legal gun.<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, Bulgaria has strict regulations for those attempting to acquire a gun permit. People with histories of recent substance abuse, domestic violence or mental illness are barred, and to be able to own a legal weapon, one must pass a training course on how to handle it. There is little by way of recent data, but a 2017 survey estimated that civilians held 590 000 firearms in Bulgaria. Of those, 345 733 were registered and the remaining 244 267 were considered unregistered – approximately 41%.<sup>98</sup>



One reason for this relative lack of a gun culture – in stark contrast to Türkiye and its Balkan neighbours<sup>99</sup> – is the legacy of the very strict totalitarian system that existed in Bulgaria between 1945 and 1990, which had a strong influence on the Bulgarian social model. Bulgarians avoided owning or dealing in weapons as a general rule due to the watchful eye of state security; criminals instead confined themselves to ‘softer’ crimes such as counterfeiting and forgery.

Even after the collapse of Communist rule – which saw an explosion of mafia activity – organized crime groups tended to steer away from the arms trade. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, international pressure – especially from the EU – forced the Bulgarian government to crack down on organized crime, introducing strict laws and harsh penalties for offences connected to arms. Whether this has had a direct impact or not, the local mafia has focused more on human and drug smuggling, while other criminal groups plumped for white-collar crime.

As a consequence, Bulgaria does not have a culture of organized criminal weapons trafficking. Firearms are often used for intimidation during disputes between criminal clans, including Turkish or Bulgarian organizations operating in the country, but the emphasis is more on scaring rivals.<sup>100</sup> Assassinations are extremely rare: the most recent case, in August 2023, was the shooting in Sofia of Aleksei Petrov, a prominent Bulgarian businessman and former state security agent who was allegedly caught up in criminal activities.<sup>101</sup> (He had previously survived at least two assassination attempts, one with a grenade launcher.)<sup>102</sup> Violence does not manifest among young people on the scale that it does in some Balkan countries, and they have had no increased interest in arming themselves.<sup>103</sup> In 2023, there were 214 reported firearms incidents in Bulgaria, and 53 from January to March 2024.<sup>104</sup> As noted above, over 90 000 unregistered guns were seized in Türkiye in the first 10 months of 2024 alone, with legal action against over 100 000 people as a result.<sup>105</sup>

Organized crime may not be a major player in the firearms market, but other entities in Bulgaria, often with state connections, have increasingly participated in this business. After the fall of Communism, the arms industry was in disarray and sought to offload its unprofitable surplus production by exporting to the Middle East and North Africa through shady state deals and illicit networks. In the 1990s, state-owned company Kintex was caught supplying weapons to Iraq and Libya using falsified end-user certificates. When the country became an EU member state in 2004, it terminated firearms exports to the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>106</sup> But with the eruption of conflict in Syria and Iraq in the last 15 years, Bulgarian arms manufacturers (who specialize in affordable, lightweight weaponry) have found profitable markets in the Middle East again.<sup>107</sup> Companies including VMZ Sopot have exported weapons worth over €1.2 billion, with many ending up in the hands of radical Syrian opposition groups.<sup>108</sup>

A smaller source of weapons outflows has been illegally manufactured guns. Weapons production and repair facilities in Bulgaria were largely privatized during the transition period in the 1990s. This process was accompanied by a rise in corruption related to export licences in the country and with manufacturers from Russia. In 2018, one party in power controlled the military industry and established special relations with Russian arms manufacturers. By doing so, in the early 2000s, Bulgaria acquired a licence that allows it to be the only country from eastern Europe that exports weapons to Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>109</sup>

On a much smaller scale, current and former factory workers are also a source of black market weapons. In one case, employees of a weapons factory stole AKs, pistols and other equipment and sold them to local hunters.<sup>110</sup> Munitions workers have long used their know-how to open side businesses in weapons production. In fact, the cottage arms industry among ex-factory workers was so common that it led to a spike in gun conviction rates for older Bulgarians in the early 2000s – people aged

over 50 accounted for 28% of all possession charges, despite only committing 5% of crimes overall.<sup>111</sup> More recently, police investigations have uncovered small businesses producing counterfeits of well-known brands like Winchester, Taurus and Springfield over the years, some of which have shown up in Brazil and Peru after being smuggled into the Latin American black market.<sup>112</sup>

### Supply and price

Handguns are the most commonly used weapon in Bulgaria, although criminal cases involving their use are relatively rare. Assault rifles like the AK-47 are also popular. Prices for both categories broadly track with those in Greece and Bulgaria, although high-end handguns are relatively expensive at €1 000. Similarly, sniper rifles also attract premium prices, with brands like Heckler & Koch fetching over €15 000.<sup>113</sup> There are also rumours that modern assault rifles like the M16 can be found on the black market, but cost more because they are harder to find.<sup>114</sup> Older Soviet grenades can also be bought relatively cheaply, while plastic explosives and detonators are more expensive, often sold for a few hundred euros.

Unconverted and converted blank-firing weapons are often used in gun crimes in Bulgaria.<sup>115</sup> No facilities for illegal weapon conversion have been found so far in the country, indicating that the majority of conversions take place closer to the final customer in Western Europe. 3D-printed weapons are not yet widespread in Bulgaria.<sup>116</sup>

Type	Price (€)
Handgun	300 to 1 000
Assault rifle	1 500 to 3 500 (AK-47)
Rifle	500–1 500
Sniper rifle	2 000 to 15 000 (M48, Dragunov, Heckler & Koch)
Grenade	20 to 50 (RGD-5)

**FIGURE 14** Black market arms prices in Bulgaria, 2024.

SOURCE: Interview with journalist, Sofia, November 2024

## Supplying the conflict in Ukraine

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, arms and ammunition production facilities in Bulgaria scrambled to intensify production to supply Ukraine. Former munitions workers were called out of retirement and, in 2022, there was a record-breaking increase in the legal production and export of arms.<sup>117</sup> Due to internal political agreements, weapons are not exported to Ukraine directly, but to Poland.<sup>118</sup>

There have been no reports of any weapons pledged to Ukraine being illegally diverted. However, in October 2023, 12 people led by a Greek citizen from Georgia were arrested in Plovdiv over the illegal export of dual-use goods (civilian goods with military applications) to the Russian Federation.<sup>119</sup> The gang, operating through a company, had bought €2 million worth of goods to send to Russian special forces units in Ukraine. Under the guise of legal purchases from Bulgaria, Greece and other countries, binoculars, optical sights and aviation radios were smuggled through Sofia airport in personal luggage or through forwarding companies.<sup>120</sup> Details about the case – including the suspect’s identity and progress of legal proceedings – remain scarce, as the matter is still tied up within Greek institutions and has not yet reached wider public disclosure. ■

## The routes

Since the early 2000s, Bulgaria has been a transit point for gas guns manufactured in Türkiye on their way to Europe, often ferried by bus or private vehicle to Romania and Croatia or dispatched onto the Balkan route via North Macedonia, Serbia or Kosovo. In their unconverted state, these weapons are legal to buy in Bulgaria (the only prerequisite being buyer registration in the gun shop's register), and other EU member states; once converted, they become lethal firearms, and widely sought by organized crime in Europe. Turkish counterfeit weapons also move along the same route into Western Europe.<sup>121</sup>



**FIGURE 15** Transit routes for illegal small arms and light weapons, including entry and exit points.

SOURCE: Interviews conducted in Bulgaria in November 2024, as well as information from desk research, reviewed publications and media reports

Unlike traditional small-scale arms trafficking, where profit margins are relatively narrow (unless the weapons are stolen), the profit from selling a converted gas gun can reach 500%.<sup>122</sup> Gas guns predominately move overland through the main border crossings. Kapitan Andreevo–Kapikule is the busiest and largest crossing for passengers and freight; Lesovo–Hamzabeyli a less crowded option often used by regional traffic; while Malko Tarnovo–Dereköy is a smaller crossing located in a mountainous area, mostly for light traffic.<sup>123</sup> But there is evidence of maritime trafficking too. Some officials say that arms trafficking is shifting from ports in Türkiye to Western European ports, allowing for greater volumes.<sup>124</sup> There has also been a case of gas guns from Bulgaria being smuggled by sea to Brazil.<sup>125</sup>



A Bulgaria–Turkey border crossing, February 2024. Since the early 2000s, Bulgaria has been a transit point for gas guns manufactured in Türkiye on their way to Europe. © Nikolay Doychinov via Getty Images

To a more limited extent, Bulgaria is also a source country for traditional arms trafficking to the EU. In July 2018, Greek law enforcement officers seized 16 firearms and 2 773 rounds of ammunition originally from Bulgaria during house searches targeting a criminal group that was illegally smuggling weapons into Greece.<sup>126</sup> Spain has also seen a sustained but small flow of weapons from Bulgaria since 2001, and more so after Bulgaria became an EU member in 2007, mainly due to Bulgarian nationals relocating and taking their weapons with them.<sup>127</sup> Bulgarian weapons have also appeared in the Netherlands, including in the murder of a Dutch investigative journalist.<sup>128</sup>

In terms of inflows, small quantities of weapons enter Bulgaria with migrants arriving by land from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Upon entering south-eastern Bulgaria, they have been known to bury weapons in forests, marking the spot so they can return for them later.<sup>129</sup> Weapons linked to murders in Bulgaria have also been traced as being of Serbian origin.<sup>130</sup>

## Responses

The perception of a relatively low threat level regarding illegal weapons in Bulgaria partly explains the lack of a dedicated framework for tackling arms trafficking. Bulgaria does not have, for example, any strategy documents on the issue of illegal SALW. The issue has not been addressed in interior ministry annual reports in the last few years, nor was it included as a section in the Serious Organized Crime Threat Assessment in 2021, although the police do have a unit responsible for arms trafficking, drug trafficking and terrorism.

That said, Bulgaria has tightened the regulation of gas pistols through internal guidance documents (not law) from the interior ministry – a development initiated by police officers. This allows the police to take some measures to increase control and documentation over the possession of gas guns.

Compared to other Balkan countries, criminals face sterner punishments for arms trafficking. A person convicted of illegal arms trafficking in Bulgaria can face up to eight years in prison, rising to a life sentence if they are part of an organized crime group involved in serious crimes.

## International collaboration

The Bulgarian government was active and constructive in regional SALW controls during the Balkan conflicts and in the years after, most specifically through the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, the Stability Pact (the Third Table) and SEESAC. It organized and hosted regional workshops and conferences with law enforcement personnel and actively participated in related research projects.

Police and customs cooperation with neighbouring countries occurs within a framework of agreements on cooperation against organized crime, including arms trafficking. Regional cooperation takes place through the SELEC centre in Bucharest, where South East Europe countries have permanent law enforcement representatives.

Cooperation on arms trafficking through Europol is intensifying. In February 2023, an operation under the EMPACT framework known as 'Conversus', led by Romania and Bulgaria, saw law enforcement from 31 countries target individuals suspected of purchasing weapons from firearms traffickers.<sup>131</sup> ■





## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**ürkiye, Greece and Bulgaria can be seen purely as sources of firearms entering the European space, but to do so risks underestimating the extent to which each country forms its own ecosystem, both in terms of criminal dynamics and state responses. As this report has shown, variations in gun culture, historical experience and proximity to other countries (especially those affected by conflict) all have a bearing on how arms trafficking operates in a certain country, both in terms of its domestic market and its transnational links.

For criminals, the motivation for engaging in arms trafficking varies widely. In Bulgaria, trafficking is largely limited to moving traumatic weapons (gas and blank guns) into Western Europe; domestic organized crime is not generally violent, and so the demand for lethal weaponry is limited. In Greece, by contrast, organized crime is more diverse and varied, including many foreign actors. A strong gun culture, and demand for weapons by nationalist and extremist groups, also serve to foment a broad arms trafficking scene. Finally, in Türkiye, the sheer number of weapons make their own headlines, but must be parsed carefully to judge the true extent of the trafficking risk: for historical and cultural reasons, weapons are pervasive among the general population and the country has links to Iraq and Syria. Domestic criminal demand stems from extortion and racketeering, as well as the drugs trade. But for organized crime, it is traumatic weapons that are now the main export – a high-yield, low risk venture compared to trading in weapons of war. Time will tell what effect the Ukraine conflict will have on these dynamics.

Taken as a regional grouping, these three countries highlight the striking differences there can be across border neighbouring countries, but they also point up commonalities – particularly the influence of conflict on arms trafficking patterns. Weapons from the Western Balkans still make their way into Greece three decades after the end of that conflict; and Greece's own experiences, from the Second World War through to the wave of revolutionary terrorism that began in the 1970s, have had a lasting effect on its gun culture. More recent conflicts in Iraq and Syria feed Türkiye's illicit arms market, where, like Greece, domestic terrorists are both buyers and transporters of arms. Even in Bulgaria, the legacy of the Cold War has cast a long shadow: the authoritarian state's mass production of arms built the surpluses that made the dodgy deals of later years possible. Indeed – as shown by the supply of weapons to Libya and Russian forces in Ukraine – conflict is not only a driver of arms trafficking but also its end customer.

The geopolitical fault line running through the region also makes it notable, with Greece and Bulgaria in the EU and Türkiye outside the bloc. This creates hurdles for common legislation, intelligence-sharing and joint operations, although as this report has shown, there is promising cooperation in multilateral forums. Nevertheless, a more coordinated bilateral and regional approach is essential to confront these challenges effectively. To this end, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Develop comprehensive SALW strategies:** Formulate and implement national SALW action plans that align with international frameworks, such as the UN Firearms Protocol, and effectively address arms proliferation in national strategies.
- **Foster a broader response:** Enable the private sector, academia, local authorities and CSO stakeholders to play a more significant role in national bodies, especially in implementing the strategies.
- **Catalyze regional collaboration:** Enhance transnational cooperation by increasing joint patrols along land borders and maritime routes to intercept smuggling operations. Implement advanced surveillance technologies, such as X-ray scanners, at critical border crossings such as Kapitan Andreevo (Türkiye–Bulgaria) and Evros (Greece–Türkiye) to detect illegal arms shipments. Expand intelligence-sharing mechanisms through established platforms like SELEC and Europol (although it is worth noting that Türkiye does not participate in Europol's operations related to SALW).
- **Focus on dismantling networks:** Strengthen anti-corruption measures within law enforcement agencies to address the complicity of officials in arms trafficking activities. Invest more resources in specialized units to dismantle organized crime syndicates involved in SALW trafficking.
- **Regulate emerging threats:** Closely monitor advancements in 3D-printing technology and implement regulations to restrict online access to firearms blueprints. Work with international partnerships aimed at curtailing the rise of 'ghost guns' and their proliferation. Europol, for instance, has relevant analytics and holds closed meetings with national law enforcement. It also implements training on 3D-printing technology and its abuses for criminal purposes, and analyzes criminal cases related to 3D printing.
- **Shift cultural norms:** Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge existing cultural attitudes to illegal firearm ownership, particularly in regions with deep-rooted traditions, such as promoting alternatives to using firearms for celebration.



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