GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

STEMMING THE TIDE

ARMS TRAFFICKING DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

Trpe Stojanovski | Aleksandar Srbinovski

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Trpe Stojanovski is a senior advisor to the GI-TOC and professor at the Faculty of Security, Skopje, North Macedonia. Previously, he held a number of key roles in the law enforcement sector in North Macedonia.

Aleksandar Srbinovski is the GI-TOC's field coordinator for North Macedonia. His work covers organized crime, cyber, defence and security issues in Macedonia and the Balkan region more broadly.

Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically, regulatory gaps in deactivation standards and conversion practices positioned parts of central Europe – particularly the Czech Republic and Slovakia – within broader European firearm trafficking networks, while Poland functioned primarily as a transit corridor. These vulnerabilities facilitated illicit flows into western and northern European criminal markets.

Over the past decade, harmonized European Union (EU) standards, strengthened export controls and sustained multinational enforcement operations have significantly altered this landscape. Conversion-driven trafficking has declined from earlier peak levels, and the region today is characterized by low rates of gun violence and criminal activity that is largely non-weapons-centric. Poland and Slovakia illustrate how coordinated legislation and enforcement can reduce trafficking risks, while the Czech Republic presents a more structurally complex profile due to its civilian firearms framework and manufacturing base.

The strategic challenge now lies in the future. The scale of weapons circulating as a result of the war in Ukraine creates the potential for post-conflict proliferation pressures that could test existing systems. Should significant diversion occur, expanded black market supply could reshape criminal dynamics and intensify organized criminal activity. The central policy question is whether current institutional capacity can scale effectively to manage such a scenario. This research investigates the arms trafficking landscape within Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to identify common dynamics and differences, regional vulnerabilities, and opportunities for improving European security.

As a secondary objective for this report, a preliminary scoping exercise of Romania, Hungary and Moldova was also conducted, lightly examining arms trafficking dynamics in those countries with a view to providing a full picture in the future. While there are many commonalities between these two sets of countries – and the report points to some of them – this report focuses on findings from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Although current evidence does not indicate substantial Ukrainian weapons inflows into these three countries, the volume of weapons circulating within Ukraine creates a structural risk environment. Should large-scale diversion occur, this could expand black market supply, increase criminal access to firearms, and potentially intensify gang activity and organized crime operations across the region. Proactive contingency planning and strengthened regional coordination will therefore be essential.

Critically, the risks extend beyond trafficking. International experience from the Western Balkans and other post-conflicts regions demonstrates that large-scale weapon proliferation, combined with

FIGURE 1 Focus countries in central and south-eastern Europe.

widespread combat trauma among returning veterans, produces sustained increases in homicide, domestic violence and suicide by firearm – consequences that persist for decades. With Ukrainian firearm-related crime already rising sharply during the conflict and an estimated 2 million military personnel facing inadequate psychological support, the conditions for such dynamics are present. For neighbouring states with historically low levels of gun violence, even modest spillover could significantly alter patterns of interpersonal violence and public health.

Key findings

- **Regional roles and trafficking patterns:** A decade ago, the Czech Republic and Slovakia functioned primarily as source countries, providing converted, reactivated and poorly deactivated weapons that flowed towards western and northern European criminal markets. Poland primarily served as a transit corridor, facilitating movement to destination markets while absorbing limited volumes for domestic use. The situation has now changed; regulatory response has demonstrably reduced trafficking from conversion sources. Fewer reported trafficking cases in recent years, compared to the peak period of 2010–2016, suggest that harmonized regulatory approaches can effectively address transnational threats. However, legacy stockpiles continue circulating through criminal networks, and weapons deactivated under older, less rigorous standards remain in circulation.
- **Calm domestic situation:** Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia exhibit exceptionally low levels of firearm violence by European and global standards. The dramatic growth in legal ownership across the region, driven by geopolitical anxiety following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has been successfully integrated into regulatory frameworks without corresponding increases in violence.

Organized crime has largely transitioned away from weapon-based operations towards non-violent activities, including drug distribution, fraud and cybercrime.

- **Institutional capacity and cooperation:** The three countries actively participate in EU-level joint enforcement operations and demonstrate high clearance rates for firearm-related offences. Coordinated investigations and intelligence-sharing frameworks indicate operational capacity that has contributed to reducing trafficking risks. The remaining challenge concerns scalability in the event of large-scale post-conflict proliferation.
- **Emerging south-eastern vulnerabilities:** Early findings suggest that Romania, Hungary and Moldova occupy secondary but strategically significant positions within central and south-eastern European firearm trafficking dynamics. Open-source investigations and law-enforcement reporting indicate their growing relevance as transit corridors and potential spillover routes, particularly under post-conflict scenarios involving Ukraine.
- **Harmonized regulatory approaches can effectively address transnational threats.** After the implementation of common deactivation standards, trafficking of poorly deactivated weapons and blank-firing guns manufactured in these countries demonstrably reduced.
- **Export control challenges:** Research unearthed suggestions of export control failures. Slovak-manufactured Grand Power weapons were documented in Russian hands. Czech weapons, including CZ-brand firearms and Sellier & Bellot ammunition, have reached the Russian market via Kazakhstan and Türkiye, despite a decade of sanctions. These cases suggest sophisticated sanctions evasion mechanisms that current verification systems fail to prevent; it will be important to widen and deepen research to strengthen the case for improving export control mechanisms.
- **Ukraine war impact:** Current evidence indicates minimal weapons smuggling from Ukraine into the region. However, intelligence assessments uniformly anticipate significant post-conflict proliferation risks.
- **Emerging threats:** The shift of organized crime away from weapons-based violence may be changing with the emergence of new actors. Georgian criminal groups operating in Poland have been identified as 'the most brutal' and most likely to use firearms. Digital radicalization pathways are also emerging through online social networks and the dark web.

Country profiles

Poland

- Approximately 367 000 licensed firearm owners with roughly 1 million registered weapons against a total population of 37.7 million.
- Number of firearm licences have quadrupled since 2020, driven significantly by security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Functions primarily as a transit corridor.
- Global Organized Crime Index (OC Index) arms trafficking score (2025): 4.50/10 (unchanged across all three Index editions: 2021, 2023, 2025).

Czech Republic

- Over 314 000 registered gun owners with more than 1 million legally registered firearms, against a total population of 10.7 million.
- Only European nation to constitutionally recognize citizens' right to own firearms for self-defence.
- Home to major manufacturers, including Colt CZ Group SE (€890 million revenue in 2024) and the Czechoslovak Group (CSG) (€4 billion revenue in 2024).
- Functions as both a source and a transit hub.
- OC Index arms trafficking score (2025): 5.0/10 (unchanged from 2023; up from 4.50 in 2021).

Slovakia

- Some 152 809 registered gun owners with 461 724 registered firearms, against a total population of 5.5 million.
- Historical source of poorly deactivated weapons and Flobert firearms.
- Home to Grand Power (pistols and submachine guns) and CSG facilities.
- Functions primarily as a source country.
- OC Index arms trafficking score (2025): 5.0/10 (unchanged from 2023; up from 4.50 in 2021).

Six vulnerabilities emerge from this assessment:

- Post-conflict preparedness gap: Authorities recognize anticipated threats from Ukrainian weapons proliferation and research identifies a requirement to enhance preventive frameworks in some areas.
- Export control enforcement failure: Some evidence of diversions to sanctioned destinations may indicate weaknesses in end-user verification.
- Legacy stockpile circulation: Weapons deactivated under older, less rigorous standards remain in criminal circulation.
- Marking and traceability gaps: Inadequate serialization at source undermines post-seizure attribution.
- Digital threat vectors: Encrypted platforms facilitate both trafficking coordination and radicalization.
- Reactive policy frameworks: Reform typically follows mass-casualty events rather than anticipating emerging risks.

Recommendations

This report offers targeted recommendations across six thematic areas:

- Establish preventive frameworks before anticipated post-war challenges materialize.
- Strengthen export control implementation to address documented diversion patterns.
- Enhance online monitoring and digital platform cooperation.
- Improve marking standards and traceability mechanisms.
- Deepen regional cooperation frameworks.
- Develop comprehensive Ukraine contingency planning.

The window for implementing robust contingency mechanisms is narrowing as the invasion in Ukraine continues, making proactive policy responses increasingly urgent.

Methodology and purpose of the report

This report builds on the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s sustained work on firearm trafficking across Europe and Eurasia. Through the Global Organized Crime Index, the European Arms Monitor and the Eurasia Observatory, the GI-TOC has tracked diversion risks, conversion and reactivation markets, export control weaknesses, and the evolving security implications of the war in Ukraine. The report should be considered as part of a series following recent GI-TOC publications on the issue. It is written as a prelude to an international arms trafficking conference in Poland on 18–19 March 2026, and is intended as a marker for discussion at the conference.

The assessment is grounded in deployed, in-country research conducted across all states covered in this study. Fieldwork included interviews with law enforcement officials, policymakers, forensic specialists, investigative journalists and security practitioners. By combining direct field engagement with cross-border analysis under the Eurasia Observatory framework, the report situates national findings within wider European trafficking dynamics and identifies emerging vulnerabilities before they crystallize into systemic risk. Primary fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2025. The methodology was designed to triangulate official data sources with practitioner perspectives and investigative reporting, providing a comprehensive view of the dynamics involving small arms and light weapons (SALW) across the three countries.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders in Warsaw, Szczytno (Police Academy), Prague and Bratislava between October and December 2025. Interview subjects included: law enforcement officials from national police services and specialized units; interior ministry officials responsible for firearm policy; academic researchers specializing in criminology, security studies and organized crime; investigative journalists with expertise in arms trafficking and organized crime; civil society organizations working on security sector issues; and private security consultants with relevant industry experience. Interview subjects were granted confidentiality protections; some are identified by institutional affiliation, while others remain anonymous at their request.

The volume of weapons circulating in Ukraine creates a risk for organized crime across central and south-eastern Europe. *© Genya Savilov/AFP via Getty Images*

The research draws on a comprehensive array of sources, including national police statistics and annual reports from all three countries, EU documentation such as Europol assessments (Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessments), EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) case summaries, and European Commission evaluations. It also incorporates academic literature from the Flemish Peace Institute (TARGET, Project SAFTE), Small Arms Survey, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the GI-TOC. Additionally, the study includes investigative journalism from outlets like Investigace.cz, The Insider, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Bellingcat, as well as corporate documentation from Colt CZ Group and CSG annual reports. Relevant legal instruments, including the Arms Trade Treaty, EU Firearms Directive, and Commission Implementing Regulations on deactivation standards, further inform the analysis.

This assessment acknowledges certain data limitations that affect comprehensive analysis. First, there is statistical inconsistency, as comparable seizure statistics across EU member states remain inconsistent, as acknowledged by the European Commission in its 2021 assessment of member state implementation of the EU Firearms Directive. Second, data currency is an issue, with seizure data from 2023–2026 remaining incomplete, and most available statistics covering the 2021–2024 period. Additionally, access limitations were encountered, as some officials from the Czech Republic and Slovakia declined interview requests, citing security reasons, or were unavailable during the fieldwork period. Lastly, verification challenges persist, as information from underground sources and investigative journalism has been triangulated where possible, but cannot always be independently verified. These gaps affect the precision of quantitative assessments but do not undermine the core findings regarding trafficking patterns, institutional vulnerabilities and the urgent need for post-conflict preparedness. The qualitative evidence from law enforcement interviews, investigative journalism and documented enforcement operations provides a robust foundation for the conclusions and recommendations presented.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia occupy a distinctive position in the European small-arms landscape. All three countries maintain remarkably low levels of domestic firearm violence; their homicide rates rank among Europe's lowest; and organized crime has largely transitioned from weapon-based operations to non-violent activities.[1] Despite this relative tranquillity, the region has historically played a significant role in shaping the illicit circulation of arms across Europe.

Over the past decade, however, a combination of harmonized EU legislation, strengthened enforcement cooperation, and intelligence-led joint operations has demonstrably altered this picture. While weapons continue to be seized (indicating that residual trafficking persists), the coordinated, regular nature of enforcement responses suggests a region that has substantially improved its capacity to manage firearm threats. The analytical challenge now lies not in explaining a paradox of peaceful societies fuelling trafficking, but in assessing whether these proven institutional capabilities can scale to meet the potentially far greater pressures of post-conflict proliferation from Ukraine.

Common dynamics across the region

Several common threads unite these three countries despite their distinct national contexts. First, all three maintain low-violence environments and have limited domestic criminal demand for firearms. Law enforcement officials across the region consistently report that firearms serve only supporting roles for criminal activities, with no organized crime groups treating arms as their primary business.[2] Second, the post-communist transition fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of organized crime. While the gang culture of the early 1990s featured weapon-based violence, contemporary criminal networks have decisively shifted away from armed operations, preferring economically lucrative, lower-risk activities including drug distribution, fraud and cybercrime. Third, all three countries have historically functioned as part of a regional trafficking system rather than isolated national markets. The Czech Republic and Slovakia served primarily as source regions, providing converted, reactivated and diverted weapons that flowed towards western and northern European criminal markets, while Poland functioned predominantly as a transit corridor. While elements of these dynamics persist, confirmed by ongoing seizures of Czech- and Slovak-origin weapons in destination markets, investigative sources across all three countries report significantly fewer active trafficking cases than during the 2010–2016 peak, indicating that coordinated legislative and enforcement responses have materially altered the landscape.[3] Finally, none of the three countries has yet experienced significant weapons inflows from Ukraine, but all anticipate this as a serious post-conflict risk requiring preventive preparation.

The vulnerability of Cold War-era weapon stockpiles became evident in 2014, when Russian military intelligence operatives detonated 58 tonnes of munitions destined for Ukraine at the Vrbětice ammunition depot in the Czech Republic. *Photo: Czech Republic Police*

Historical context: Cold War legacy and post-1989 transformation

Understanding current trafficking dynamics requires an appreciation of the region's distinctive historical trajectory. All three countries inherited substantial arms manufacturing capacity and military stockpiles from the communist era. Following NATO accession, the Czech Republic and Slovakia faced the mammoth task of disposing of millions of tonnes of surplus Warsaw Pact munitions.[4] Cost pressures led to problematic disposal practices: surplus arms were frequently donated or sold to intermediaries who could not guarantee secure end use, while ammunition was sometimes transferred to private companies for disposal without adequate safeguards against resale.

The vulnerability of these legacy stockpiles was demonstrated dramatically in 2014 when operatives from Russian military intelligence (GRU) Unit 29155, later identified as the Skripal poisoners,[5] infiltrated the privately leased Vrbětice ammunition depot in the Czech Republic and detonated 58 tonnes of munitions destined for Ukraine, killing two workers and causing over 1 billion koruna (about €41 million) in damage.[6] This incident illustrated how inadequate oversight of Cold War-era stockpiles created vulnerabilities that state and non-state actors alike could exploit.

The post-1989 transition also transformed gun culture in different ways across the three countries. Poland maintained restrictive firearm regulations throughout the transition, resulting in a society where gun ownership remains concentrated among rural hunters, sports shooters and a recent wave of urban residents seeking self-defence options following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Czech Republic, by contrast, developed one of Europe's most liberal gun ownership frameworks, becoming the only European nation to constitutionally recognize citizens' right to own firearms for self-defence. Slovakia occupies a middle position, with a moderate gun culture tradition that neither celebrates nor restricts civilian ownership as strongly as its neighbours.

Regional trafficking patterns

Past research identified a southward flow of arms in the region. As documented by the Flemish Peace Institute in 2018, 'a permanent feature of the geography of arms and ammunition smuggling routes is the so-called "southerly direction": the Czech Republic and Slovakia are the predominant countries of origin of illegal arms'.[7] While this pattern remains broadly valid, the label itself can be misleading, as the trafficking flows described often combine other directional flows (see Figure 2). In 2022, Europol linked these routes to Western Balkan countries, which continue to represent a primary source of legacy military weapons in Europe. Slovakia contributed a distinct trafficking stream involving deactivated, acoustic expansion, Flobert and reactivated firearms.[8] These flows have significantly decreased following the implementation of common deactivation standards (Commission Implementing Regulation 2015/2403, updated in 2018), although it is likely that some stock remains in criminal hands.

Comparative data

Violence rates and ownership patterns

All three countries maintain exceptionally low firearm-related crime rates by both European and global standards. Poland's homicide rate peaked at 2.4 per 100 000 in 1993 during the height of organized crime violence, before declining steadily to 0.8 per 100 000 by 2023,[9] a reduction of more than 66% over three decades. The Czech Republic's firearm homicide rate stands at just 0.1 per 100 000

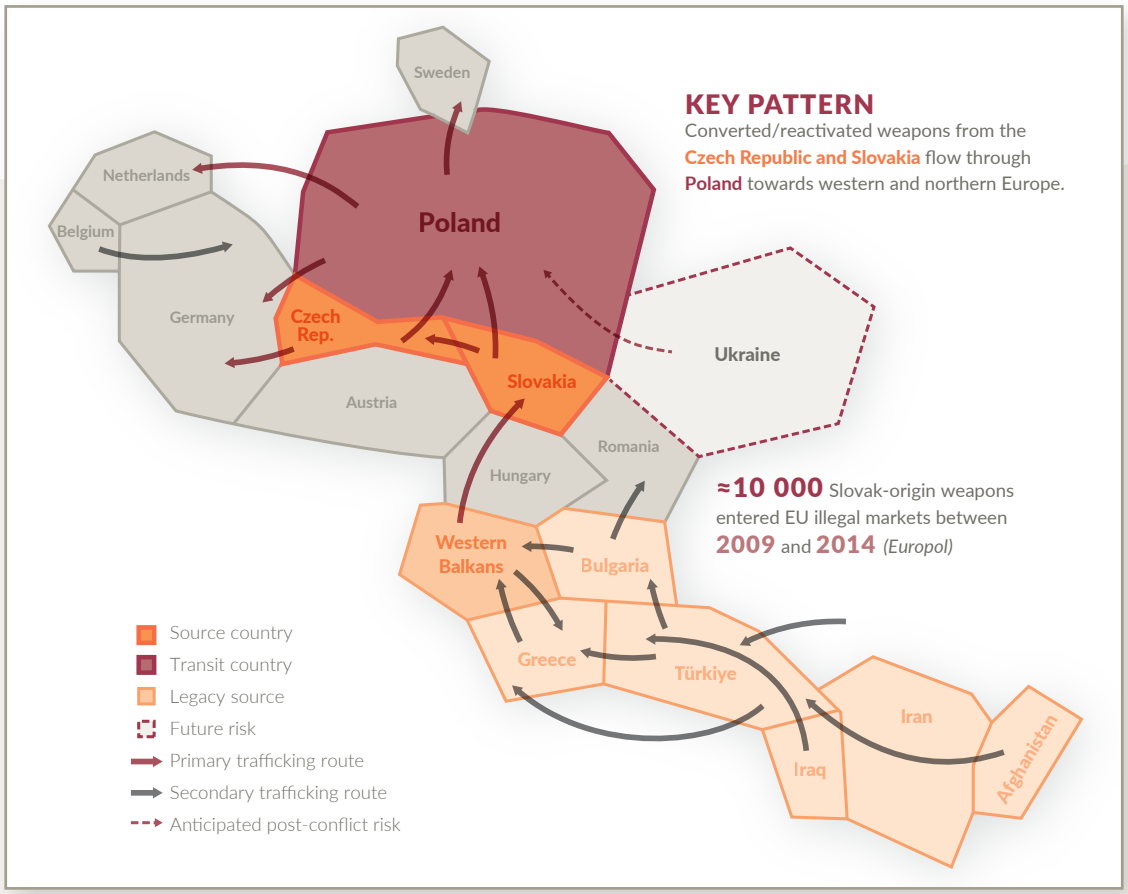

FIGURE 2 Central European arms trafficking routes.

population, equivalent to Germany, Austria and Poland, while the overall homicide rate of 0.77 per 100 000 is among Europe's lowest. The country ranks 12th globally on the 2024 Global Peace Index. Slovakia's UNODC homicide statistics show a rate of 1.1 per 100 000 inhabitants, somewhat higher than its neighbours and above the EU average (0.9/100 000 for 2023).[10]

Indicator	Poland	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Hungary	Romania	Moldova
Population	37.7 million	10.7 million	5.5 million	9.6 million	18.8 million	2.4 million
Licensed gun owners	~367 000	~314 000	~153 000	unknown	71 000 (2023)[11]	61 000 (2024)[12]
Registered firearms	~1 million	~1 million	~462 000	300 000–350 000 (2024)[13]	170 000 (2023)[14]	71 600 (2024)[15]
Homicide rate (per 100 000) (imperfect indicator)	0.8 (2023)	0.7 (2023)	1.1 (2023)	0.77 (2023)[16]	1.1 (2023)[17]	2.54[18]
OC Index arms trafficking score	4.50	4.58	4.30	4.0	5.0	7.0
Primary role	Transit corridor	Source country	Source country	Transit corridor	Transit country	Transit country

FIGURE 3 Central and south-eastern European firearms by the numbers.

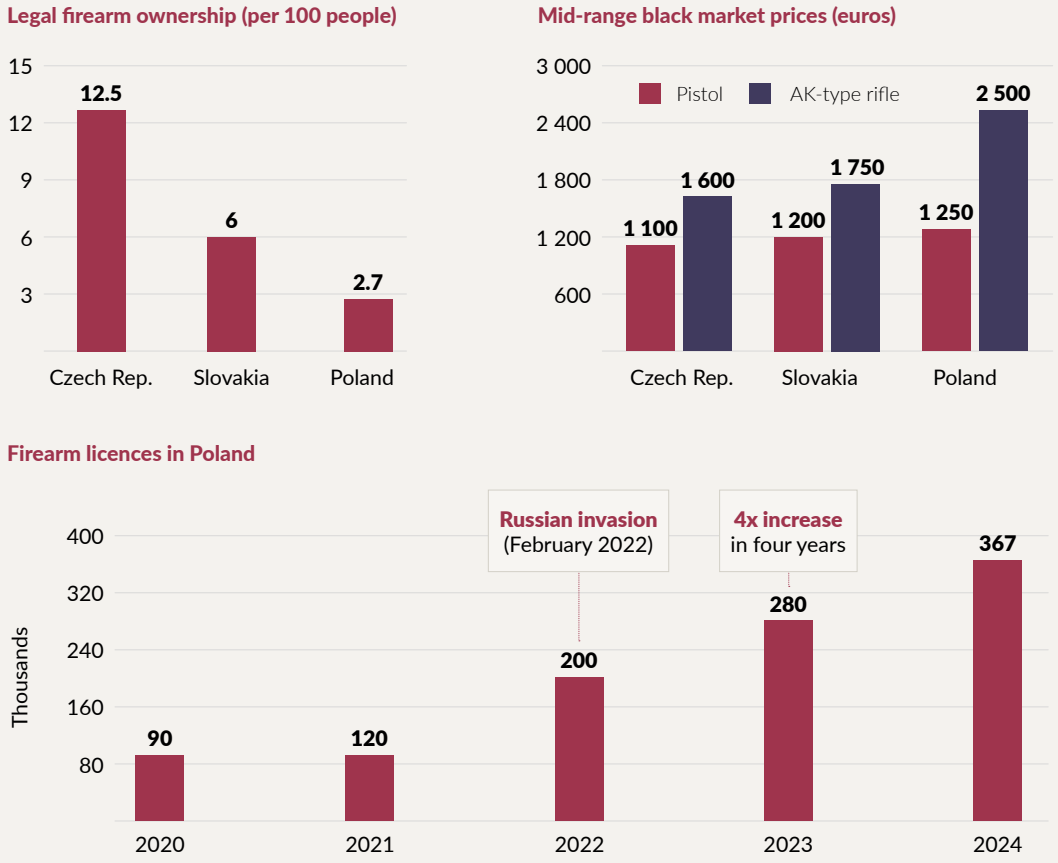

FIGURE 4 Central European firearms: comparative statistics.

SOURCES: Ministry of Interior statistics 2024; Global Organized Crime Index; UNODC data; field research

Black market price dynamics

Black market price differentials across Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia reflect both relative enforcement risk and each country's functional position within regional trafficking networks (see Figure 3). Poland consistently registers the highest prices, indicating higher transaction risk and stronger downstream demand. Slovakia occupies an intermediate position, and the Czech Republic remains marginally cheaper, although this gap has narrowed in recent years.[19]

In practical terms, pistols in the Czech Republic typically trade between €700 and €1 500, and AK-type rifles between €1 200 and €2 000, whereas in Slovakia, pistols are commonly priced at approximately €900–€1 500 and rifles at €1 000–€2 500. Poland represents the upper end of the spectrum, with pistols regularly priced at €1 000–€1 500 and rifles frequently exceeding €2 500. Ammunition prices have likewise increased across the region, with 9mm rounds approaching €1 per unit, suggesting tighter supply conditions and elevated risk premiums.

Country	Pistols	AK-type rifles
Czech Republic	€700–€1 500	€1 200–€2 000
Slovakia	€900–€1 500	€1 000–€2 500
Poland	€1 000–€1 500+	€2 500+

FIGURE 5 Regional illicit firearm prices.

SOURCE: Interview data collected from criminal sources and law enforcement in three countries, October–December 2025

Legislative landscape

The conversion of blank-firing pistols and the reactivation of deactivated weapons represented the most significant contribution of the Czech Republic and Slovakia to European firearm trafficking networks in the period before EU regulatory harmonization. Before the implementation of common deactivation standards (Commission Implementing Regulation 2015/2403, updated in 2018), large quantities of poorly deactivated weapons and blank-firing guns manufactured in these countries entered European illegal markets.[20]

The situation has now changed; regulatory response has demonstrably reduced trafficking from conversion sources. Investigative sources across all three countries report significantly fewer trafficking cases in recent years compared to the peak period of 2010–2016, suggesting that harmonized regulatory approaches can effectively address transnational threats. However, legacy stockpiles continue circulating through criminal networks, and weapons deactivated under older, less rigorous standards remain in circulation.

Divergent public attitudes to gun ownership

While these three countries exhibit many similarities in terms of incidence of gun violence and other aspects, they all show subtly different attitudes to gun ownership.

Polish society does not exhibit militarized gun culture characteristics. Researchers found that Poland is not a militarized society; gun owners are mainly hunters and sports shooters, with some self-defence ownership.[21] However, firearm licences have quadrupled between 2020 and 2024, driven significantly by security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the weeks after Russia launched its

full-scale invasion, Polish shooting ranges reported sharp rises in visitors, reflecting heightened security consciousness among citizens. This indicator suggests a change in the country's gun culture.

The Czech Republic presents a paradox: substantial legal civilian firearm ownership combined with minimal gun violence. With over 1 million registered firearms among 314 000 licensed owners, approximately three weapons per licensee, the country has one of the highest per capita gun ownership rates in Europe.[22] Yet the firearm homicide rate remains among Europe's lowest. The Czech Republic is the only European country whose constitutional order explicitly guarantees the right to defend one's own life or the life of another person with a weapon, as enshrined in Article 6(4) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms.[23]

Slovakia is between the two in terms of gun culture, with 461 724 registered firearms and 152 809 registered holders as of 2024.[24] The topic of small arms is not particularly present in the media, suggesting limited public discourse on the issue, despite the country's documented role in international trafficking networks.[25] This lack of media coverage may contribute to the disconnect between domestic perceptions of safety and the reality of Slovakia's involvement in the broader European arms trade. When gun-related topics do receive attention, the focus tends to be on suicides and murders within families. These are the most commonly reported cases involving guns, and most involve legal weapons.

POLAND

Poland occupies a distinctive position within central European arms trafficking dynamics. Unlike its neighbours to the south, Poland functions primarily as a transit corridor, facilitating the movement of weapons towards western European markets while absorbing only limited volumes for domestic criminal use. The country combines exceptionally low firearm violence with a recent surge in civilian ownership, driven by security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Arms trafficking landscape

Domestic gun culture and ownership patterns

Poland's regulatory approach to civilian firearms has consistently emphasized restriction and state control since independence in the 1920s. This principle was codified in a 2005 Supreme Administrative Court ruling:

> The right to possess a weapon cannot be included in the category of freedoms and personal rights of a citizen, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Thus, access to weapons by citizens is subject to significant restrictions, which result from both the state's monopoly on the use of violent means and the need to ensure public safety and order.[26]

This restrictive regulatory model has remained fundamentally unchanged across various political systems, persisting even during the post-1989 transition to democracy and a market economy, distinguishing Poland from some neighbouring countries that liberalized access to firearms.

As of 2024, Poland has approximately 367 000 licensed firearm owners, with roughly 1 million legally registered weapons among a population of 37.7 million.[27] This represents a dramatic recent increase: firearm licences quadrupled between 2020 and 2024, with 43 400 permits issued in 2024 alone. The surge reflects multiple converging factors. The Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly heightened security consciousness among Polish citizens.[28] Legislative changes in 2011 and subsequent years eased access for members of uniformed services and expanded grounds for self-defence permits, creating structural conditions for growth.

Despite these substantial ownership numbers, Polish society does not exhibit militarized gun culture characteristics. Interview subjects consistently emphasized this distinction, with one security

researcher stating: 'We are not a militarized society … gun ownership remains concentrated in specific demographics: rural hunters, sports shooters, and urban residents seeking self-defence options.'[29] An academic researcher concurred: 'I don't think any people care about guns.' He went on to describe weapons incidents in Germany and Austria, expressing this as something that never happened in Poland: 'Guns are not a common thing in the country.'[30]

Use of weapons and violence patterns

Poland maintains exceptionally low firearm-related crime rates by both European and global standards. Poland's homicide rate peaked at 2.4 per 100 000 in 1993, during the height of organized crime violence, before declining steadily to 0.7 per 100 000 by 2014, a reduction of more than 70% over two decades.[31] Total homicides fell by nearly 50% between 1999 and 2022, with 499 homicides recorded nationally in 2022 and a detection rate approaching 99% by 2023.[32] Academic forensic research corroborates this transformation: a 2023 study found that Poland's contemporary homicide rate (0.73 per 100 000) was more than six times lower than neighbouring Lithuania's, and that firearms accounted for only 4.7% of homicide mechanisms in the Tri-City metropolitan area between 2010 and 2019.[33]

Polish law enforcement maintains a distinctly non-threatening assessment of the civilian firearm situation. In 2023, authorities recorded 1 725 criminal offences related to the illegal manufacture, possession and trafficking of firearms and ammunition, with an exceptionally high clearance rate of 94.7%.[34] Police consultations emphasized the limited role of weapons in Polish criminality, saying gun smuggling and gun violence were marginal phenomena and therefore not a priority.[35]

A Polish soldier demonstrates how to use a rifle during a military training day for civilians in Warsaw in 2025. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has heightened security consciousness among Polish citizens, driving private gun ownership. *© Damian Lemanski/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

Actors and criminal dynamics

Poland's most violent organized crime period occurred during the 1990s transition, when two major gangs (the Pruszków and Wołomin groups, based near Warsaw) fought for territorial control, leading to the emergence of 'retaliation crimes'.[36] Contemporary dynamics differ fundamentally. One researcher explained the transformation: 'The gangs have been a part of the country's history. Now it's more official. Poland became super westernized. The thing that we had, classical post-communist, post-Soviet corruption and oligarchs, we changed this to monopolist corporations and lobbyists.'[37]

Today, Polish law enforcement consistently emphasizes that domestic organized criminal groups do not specialize in weapon trafficking as their primary business. The illicit firearm trade is carried out as a secondary undertaking, making use of the 'organizational resources, structures, contacts, trafficking routes and formal and informal connections' established during other criminal activities.[38]

Foreign criminal networks demonstrate more significant involvement with firearms. Interview subjects identified Georgian groups as particularly active and dangerous. Police officials stated: '[Criminal groups from Georgia] use arms. And they are the most brutal … For example, they have somebody who deals with buying the guns, but the purchase and provision of weapons is understood as an integral element of the iconography of the criminal group, while their priority is the violence they manifest on the ground.'[39] Russian-speaking networks from Georgia and Ukraine participate in human smuggling across Poland's eastern borders. Dutch groups influence drug markets, while the Italian 'Ndrangheta has limited but notable links to local networks.[40]

Routes and supply chains

Europol frames the illegal firearm trade as a serious and organized crime problem and a recurring EU priority area.[41] In the past, firearms smuggling into and through Poland was mainly done by organized criminal networks (often transnational), supported by brokers, couriers/logistics facilitators, and workshop specialists who convert/reactivate weapons. Polish Ministry of Interior reports from 2009–2013 clearly identified Czech Republic and Slovakia as the main countries of origin of illicit firearms and found that 'a relatively constant feature of firearm trafficking routes is a southerly direction'.[42] This pattern reflected the liberal rules for deactivating firearms that existed in the former Czechoslovakia, which made it relatively easy to purchase both operational firearms and legally 'deactivated' weapons that could be readily restored to full functionality, attracting traffickers to these markets.

Research by Polish police and intelligence services documented that Czech and Slovak businesses with firearm trading licences operated webpages in Polish and maintained stores in border areas, facilitating cross-border acquisition.[43] Weapons were subsequently mailed from Polish post offices near the border further into the country, exploiting the Schengen zone's absence of internal border controls.[44] Research in 2022 also identified Belgium as a significant source of illegal firearms reaching Poland.[45]

Poland's borders are now more secure in some areas; researchers found the state borders with Belarus and Russia well secured with physical barriers, electronic surveillance and military presence. Police officials explained: 'The border with the Russian Federation in the north-east part of Poland and with Belarus, it's rather under good control … we have the army just near the border.'[46] The Ukrainian border, while well secured, experiences intense traffic at border crossings due to the large number of refugees from the war, estimated at 1.5–2 million people.[47] Yet internal EU borders present distinct challenges. One officer noted: 'Unfortunately or fortunately, [Poland] is inside the border of the EU, so it is completely unprotected. You can move easily inside the EU; it is challenging for us to find this kind of trafficking.'

'It's easier to buy an illegal gun than to convert a gun into a combat weapon.'

– Polish law enforcement officer

Prices and market dynamics

Black market prices in Poland exhibit substantial markups over legal retail prices and sit at the upper end of the central European spectrum, indicating higher transaction risk and stronger downstream demand. Police officials provided estimates during interviews, identifying pistol prices at 3 000–5 000 złoty (around €1 000) for standard handguns.[48]

Weapon type	Indicative price
Pistols	€1 000–€1 500+
AK-type rifles	€2 500+
Glock pistols (street estimate)	€700–€1 100

FIGURE 6 Poland – indicative illicit firearm prices.

SOURCE: Interview data, October–November 2025

Technical methods and innovations

Before EU implementation of common deactivation standards (Commission Implementing Regulation 2015/2403, updated 2018), large quantities of improperly deactivated weapons purchased in central European countries entered illegal markets.[49] The Flemish Peace Institute noted: 'The lack of common deactivation guidelines within the EU resulted in a situation where several EU Member States implemented deactivation procedures that were either insufficiently invasive or permanent. Improperly deactivated firearms can easily be reactivated.'[50]

However, interview subjects indicated the domestic conversion problem has diminished. Police data for 2024 recorded only five converted gas pistols seized, suggesting either effective enforcement or limited conversion activity within Poland itself.[51] One police official explained the economic logic: 'It's easier to buy an illegal gun than to convert a gun into a combat weapon.'[52] This may explain the relatively small scale of domestic conversion operations compared to direct smuggling of functional firearms.

Poland has experienced minimal cases of 3D-printed firearms. Only 4% of cases (of all firearm-related criminal cases or investigations) in 2022 involved homemade weapons, which include both 3D-printed weapons and more rudimentary examples.[53] Cases involving 3D-printed firearms remain relatively uncommon in Poland compared to those involving other types of illegal firearms, and there is no recently published breakdown that shows a significant surge or precise percentage for 2025/26.

Globally, and in the EU, law enforcement is aware of and responding to this trend, but published national statistics are not always up to date or they aggregate such cases under broader categories.[54]

Multiple interview subjects described online firearm trafficking as present but not dominant in Poland. One journalist stated: 'I have heard a lot of reports about people being active in Tor, but maybe this is something that scares some part of the potential clients. But Telegram seems to be much safer. I haven't heard about weapons too, but generally about illegal stuff, mostly drugs.'[55] Another researcher noted that all services and goods are available on the darknet, but that this is more of a problem in other western European countries, and less so in Poland.[56]

Selected major enforcement operations

Polish authorities have conducted numerous successful operations against firearm trafficking networks, often in coordination with European partners. Notable cases include the 2014 Łódź network (Poland's central bureau of investigation uncovered organized criminal groups trafficking modern firearms with silencers), the June 2017 conversion network seizure (22 firearms, five silencers, ~8 000 rounds) and the December 2018 joint operation with German, Dutch, and French authorities that dismantled an organized criminal group selling approximately €5 million in explosives.[57] The 2023 'Ghost' drug gang operation demonstrated connections between drugs and weapons, yielding 30 firearms and over 1 000 rounds of ammunition.[58] In 2024, authorities dismantled a conversion workshop near Warsaw that had produced at least 100 illegal firearms, seizing 56 weapons, including Glauberyt and Skorpion machine pistols.[59]

Responses

Legislative framework and recent changes

Poland does not maintain a single dedicated national SALW strategy and action plan. Instead, the country addresses small arms control through integrated national security and defence strategies that encompass firearm policy within broader security frameworks.[60] The national security strategy emphasizes strengthening defence forces, modernizing equipment, enhancing deterrence and protection systems, and supporting national resilience. A specific focus includes expanding domestic defence production, including ammunition manufacturing, as part of 'Project 400', to increase self-sufficiency in defence supplies.[61]

Recent reforms have eased access for specific populations while maintaining the overall restrictive framework. Key changes included expanded eligibility, with legislation broadening the grounds for issuing self-defence permits to members of uniformed services and civilians with a demonstrated need, contributing significantly to the quadrupling of licences since 2020.[62] Government-subsidized programmes expanded shooting range construction (405 ranges created or upgraded since 2018) and introduced voluntary military skills training for citizens.

Poland maintains centralized registration systems managed by the central forensic laboratory, including automatic registration of legal purchases, a ballistic database for seized weapons, cross-reference capability for ammunition recovered from crime scenes and integration with police investigative databases. As one researcher assessed: 'The history and culture towards weapons, accompanied by quality registration, gives the impression of a system that works and there are no official complaints in the media that it needs to be changed.'[63]

Law enforcement approach

Polish law enforcement treats firearm trafficking as a secondary concern within broader organized crime frameworks, reflecting the marginal role of weapons in domestic criminality. This approach appears justified by the consistently high clearance rates for firearm-related offences (94.7% in 2023) and the limited scale of domestic trafficking operations. However, authorities maintain vigilance regarding emerging threats and cross-border networks.

A significant 2020 operation demonstrated capabilities against online trafficking. After Polish central bureau of investigation officers noticed offers posted on advertising portals for firearms with 9mm PAK cartridges, sold by a store legally operating in the Czech Republic, coordinated action across 16 provinces involved nearly 300 police officers. Searches of approximately 100 locations resulted in the seizure of 74 illegal firearms (some adapted for live ammunition), 3 500 rounds of ammunition, gunpowder, three weapon components and two artillery shell fuses.[64]

International cooperation

Polish authorities maintain active cooperation through Europol, Eurojust and bilateral agreements. Interview subjects consistently praised the effectiveness of international coordination. One officer stated: 'We cooperated with their counterparts in Germany, the Netherlands and France.'[65]

Notable collaborative operations demonstrate this cooperation in practice. The 2021 Slovak–Czech–Polish–Dutch joint investigation resulted in six arrests and the seizure of approximately 340 converted firearms, beginning when 22 converted Flobert guns were intercepted at the Dutch port of Hoek van Holland.[66] The 2022 multi-national operation resulted in 81 suspects detained, over 300 site searches, and approximately 250 firearms seized from networks spanning Germany, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.[67] The 2023 US–Polish cooperation dismantled an international smuggling network using sea and air freight, resulting in 10 arrests and seizure of 46 firearms.[68]

Current and future risks

Impact of the Ukraine war

Polish authorities report no substantial evidence of increased arms smuggling from Ukraine since the 2022 invasion. Police interviews consistently confirmed this assessment. One officer stated: 'I was talking to my Ukrainian colleagues about smuggling firearms to Poland. And they said that they didn't notice this route.'[69] Ukrainian counterparts indicated different trafficking patterns, with weapons accumulating in Baltic states like Latvia and Estonia rather than Poland.[70]

Several documented incidents illustrate potential risks, however. In January 2018 at the Hrebenne border crossing, one RPG-22 and six RPG-18 grenade launchers were seized; in January 2019 at Dorohusk, guards discovered components of a 122mm howitzer (worth approximately US$100 000) hidden in wooden crates.[71] In June 2025, containers with ammunition and weapons (including possible anti-aircraft systems) were found at a private airstrip in south-eastern Poland near the Ukrainian border.[72]

Future scenarios and preparedness

Police officials expressed serious concerns about post-conflict scenarios. One stated: 'There is a huge number of firearms and explosives in Ukraine nowadays. So we will have some very big problems with explosives and firearms in Poland after the war in Ukraine, in my opinion. It's not only my opinion, but it's a very dangerous situation for all European countries, not only Poland.'[73]

Poland's interior minister has articulated this strategic concern publicly:

> The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine is a source of ever-new threats to our internal security. We must identify and monitor these threats on an ongoing basis and react quickly and adequately. We must also be ready for new challenges after the end of this war, such as an increase in the smuggling of weapons and ammunition from Ukraine.[74]

The combination of vast Ukrainian weapons stockpiles, a large Ukrainian population in Poland (estimated at 1–1.5 million), proximity and established trafficking routes from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, creates conditions for future proliferation that authorities recognize and seek to prepare for. The historical parallel of the Yugoslav war aftermath, which flooded European criminal markets with military weapons for decades, provides a sobering precedent.

Institutional capacity and knowledge retention

Poland appears relatively well-positioned institutionally. The country maintains specialized units, active international cooperation channels and effective coordination mechanisms. The high clearance rates for firearm-related offences and successful multinational operations suggest operational capacity to address increased threats. However, the anticipated scale of post-conflict challenges (potentially including military-grade weapons, explosives, and new trafficking networks) may require additional resources and enhanced regional coordination.

The shift in ownership demographics since 2020 (with firearm licences quadrupling among a population previously unfamiliar with gun culture) presents both opportunities and risks. Expanded civilian training programmes and shooting infrastructure may contribute to national resilience but will also require ongoing attention to safe storage, mental health screening and preventing diversion from legal ownership to criminal markets.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic occupies a paradoxical position in European firearms dynamics: a country with exceptionally low gun violence that nonetheless functions as a significant source and transit hub for illicit weapons flowing towards western European markets. Unlike Poland's transit-oriented role, the Czech Republic's substantial defence manufacturing industry and historically permissive deactivation standards have made it a primary source of converted and reactivated weapons.

While historical conversion markets and the presence of a significant manufacturing base have created diversion risks in the past, current levels of institutional cooperation and active participation in European enforcement mechanisms reflect a structured and engaged regulatory environment. The Czech case remains more nuanced due to the country's distinctive civilian firearms framework and industrial profile, rather than as a consequence of enforcement deficiencies.

Arms trafficking landscape

Domestic gun culture and ownership patterns

The Czech lands maintain a centuries-long tradition of civilian firearm ownership, with the first firearms legislation dating to 1524.[75] Following the 1989 fall of communism, laws were liberalized, restoring civilians' rights to own and carry firearms. In 2021, the Czech Republic became the only European nation to constitutionally recognize citizens' right to own firearms for self-defence, a provision adopted partly to protect domestic gun owners from increasingly restrictive EU regulations.[76]

As of 2024, the Czech Republic has over 314 000 registered gun owners, with more than 1 million legally registered firearms among a population of approximately 10.5 million.[77] Notably, the country permits concealed carry for self-defence purposes, a significant departure from most European jurisdictions. Despite these substantial ownership numbers, Czech society does not exhibit militarized gun culture characteristics. Security consultants describe the situation plainly: 'We are not a militarized society in this way as is, for instance, Serbia, Denmark or the US.'[78] Gun ownership remains concentrated in specific demographics: rural hunters, sports shooters and urban residents seeking self-defence options.

The war in Ukraine prompted a notable shift in firearms licensing patterns. Following Russia's invasion, applications for firearm licences increased substantially, with women obtaining 23% of new licences, a significant demographic change reflecting evolving security perceptions.[79]

Use of weapons and violence patterns

The Czech Republic has generally low levels of gun violence. The Czech firearm-homicide rate in 2022 was approximately 0.094 per 100 000 population, the third-lowest in the available European dataset, with only Hungary and Slovakia recording lower rates.[80] However, the country has witnessed four mass shooting events in recent years, mostly carried out by individuals with mental illness or after domestic disputes: Petřvald (March 2009), Uherský Brod (February 2015), Ostrava (December 2019) and the Charles University shooting in Prague (December 2023), which claimed 14 lives and represented the worst mass shooting in Czech history.[81]

Czech law enforcement maintains a distinctly non-threatening assessment of the small arms situation. According to police consultations: 'There are no strong, organized criminal groups in the Czech Republic which are involved in arms trafficking.'[82] Police characterize the Czech criminal landscape as fundamentally non-violent regarding firearms usage. Contemporary organized crime has shifted from violent street operations to white-collar activities. As one investigative source noted: 'In terms of organized crime, it seems that the majority of organized crime is white collar. It's not that many shootings on the streets.'[83]

Actors and criminal dynamics

The most recent Global Organized Crime Index assigns the Czech Republic a relatively low score of 2.50 (out of 10) for mafia-style groups, noting that 'there is no official or credible evidence that traditional domestic mafia-style groups systematically operate in the country at present.'[84] The Index confirms that while 'loose criminal networks' are involved in various sectors, including arms trafficking, these constitute decentralized actors rather than hierarchical organizations focused on weapon trading.[85]

Notably, the Index scores financial crimes (6.0) considerably higher than arms trafficking (5.0), reflecting the orientation of Czech criminal activity toward economic rather than weapons-related offences.[86] Financial crimes, including fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion, are described as 'common practices', with private sector actors such as development companies, real estate agencies, exchange offices and casinos 'heavily engaged in financial crimes as well as money laundering'.

Prague as an international laundering hub

Prague and the Karlovy Vary region, in particular, host a significant Russian presence engaged in money laundering. Russians, Ukrainians and various nationals utilize the Czech financial infrastructure for illicit proceeds.[87] Balkan criminal clans (including networks associated with Darko Šarić and the Osmani brothers) use Prague for logistics, fake companies and drug routes to Germany. They own pubs, casinos, and shell companies for laundering proceeds.[88] When firearm trafficking cases emerge, connections to Middle Eastern sources, rather than Balkan sources, appear more frequently.[89] ■

Routes and supply chains

The Czech Republic has historically functioned as both an origin and a transit country for illegal firearms and ammunition. In 2005, the Royal United Services Institute described the Czech Republic (and Slovakia) as transshipment hubs for surplus arms bound for the Caucasus, central Asia and Africa, often relying on corrupt networks and forged documentation.[90] A report in 2017 suggested that alongside Slovakia, the country is a source for arms flows; trafficking patterns revealed weapons moving along major transport corridors connecting the Czech Republic with Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Austria. Law enforcement reports indicated that the Czech Republic served as a storage location for weapons destined for German criminal groups.[91]

Recent police assessments indicate that firearm trafficking involves individuals connected to Slovak and Polish networks rather than established Czech organized criminal groups.[92] Firearms seized typically indicate intent to resell rather than operational use by Czech-based criminal organizations.

The Czech armaments industry

The Czech Republic ranks among Europe's top producers of small arms, with production heavily export-oriented.[93] Two major industrial groups dominate the sector:

Colt CZ Group SE, the parent holding company encompassing Česká zbrojovka, Colt, Sellier & Bellot, and other brands, has emerged as one of the world's top 10 small-arms manufacturers. The company's 2021 acquisition of the iconic American Colt brand marked a significant expansion of its global footprint. In 2024, the group reported revenue of 22.4 billion koruna (approximately €890 million), a 50.6% year-over-year increase, and sold 633 739 firearms.[94] The company employs approximately 3 800 people across manufacturing facilities in the Czech Republic, the US, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland and Hungary. The May 2024 acquisition of Sellier & Bellot further strengthened Colt CZ's position as a vertically integrated firearms and ammunition manufacturer. Operating from a 370-acre facility in Vlašim, Sellier & Bellot produces 3–4 million rounds of ammunition daily across more than 70 calibres, exporting approximately 90% of production.[95]

Major products include the Bren 2 assault rifle, the primary weapon of the Czech armed forces, which is now also being manufactured under licence in Ukraine (branded the 'Sich') to replace AK-pattern weapons in Ukrainian military service.[96] The company's CZ Skorpion vz. 61 submachine pistol has been prevalent in criminal markets for over 60 years, favoured for its concealability and ease of use. This weapon was notably employed by terrorist groups including the Irish Republican Army and the Italian Red Brigades, and remains one of the more common illegal weapons found during European police raids.[97]

CSG, under the ownership of Michal Strnad, is the largest defence company not only in the Czech Republic but also across central Europe, with facilities in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Spain, Italy, the UK and the US. CSG reported consolidated revenues of €4 billion in 2024 (a 131% year-over-year increase), driven significantly by Ukraine-related demand.[98] The group employs over 14 000 people across 37 production facilities. ■

Prices and market dynamics

Black market prices in the Czech Republic sit at the lower end of the central European spectrum, consistent with the country's role as a source rather than destination market. The relatively low prices reflect proximity to supply and the availability of converted and reactivated weapons.[99]

Weapon type	Typical price
Pistols	€700–€1 500
AK-type rifles	€1 200–€2 000
Converted/reactivated weapons	€300–€800

FIGURE 7 Czech Republic – selected illicit firearm prices.

SOURCE: Interview data and Flemish Peace Institute price surveys

Technical methods: conversion and reactivation

The conversion of blank-firing pistols and the reactivation of deactivated weapons represent the most significant Czech contribution to European firearm trafficking networks. Before the EU-wide implementation of common deactivation standards (Implementing Regulation 2015/2403, updated in 2018), large quantities of poorly deactivated weapons and blank-firing guns manufactured in the Czech Republic and Slovakia entered the European illegal market.[100] French investigators examining weapons used in the 2015 Paris attacks noted that reactivating improperly deactivated firearms required only 'two hours for a mid-experienced gunsmith'.[101]

While legislative tightening appears to have reduced some easy 'legal-to-illegal' diversion channels in Slovakia, particularly after the 2015 reforms and the EU's post-2016 deactivation standards, Czech enforcement continues to report high salience of deactivated weapons. Today, police report that 'almost every investigation is about deactivated weapons', indicating the prevalence of this trafficking modality.[102] The scale of this legacy challenge is significant: Europol estimates that between 2009 and 2014, approximately 10 000 deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons were smuggled from Slovakia into other EU markets, while a single Slovak retailer dispatched over 4 000 packages to 24 member states during 2013–2014. Although EU-harmonized deactivation standards (Regulation 2015/2403, updated 2018) and subsequent national legislation in both countries have reduced new flows, seizures confirm that weapons converted or reactivated from this earlier supply continue to circulate. The 2021 dismantling of a network that had trafficked an estimated 1 500 converted firearms to seven EU countries illustrates the persistence of these pipelines.[103] No consolidated European-level seizure data exists for the post-reform period, representing a knowledge gap that limits precise current quantification. The most common technical methods for reactivation include barrel changes, milling operations and lathe machining. These conversions typically occur in local workshops rather than through organized industrial operations.

Major enforcement operations, 2021–2025

A series of significant enforcement operations reveals consistent patterns in Czech firearm trafficking, particularly the prevalence of conversion activities and the persistence of legacy stockpiles from the post-communist era.

In 2021, Operation KOVAL saw the Czech national centre against organized crime (NCOZ) conduct searches across multiple locations, discovering over 90 weapons alongside quantities of conversion components.[104] The same year, a joint Slovak–Czech–Dutch investigation supported by Eurojust dismantled a transnational network after 22 converted Flobert guns were intercepted at the Dutch port of Hoek van Holland in a vehicle bound for the UK. The operation ultimately resulted in six arrests and the seizure of approximately 350 converted firearms.[105]

More recent cases confirm the continuation of these patterns. In April 2024, an operation orchestrated by the Czech national centre against terrorism, extremism and cyber crime (NCTEKK) resulted in the seizure of 44 short firearms, 26 long firearms (including automatic army-grade weapons), over 80 main parts ready for reactivation and more than 5 800 rounds of ammunition.[106] The September 2025 discovery of an extensive arsenal in Breclav revealed materials held since the 1990s, including Tokarev pistols, seven submachine guns (vz. 26 and vz. 61 models) and vz. 59 machine guns, thousands of rounds, signal rockets and approximately 2 kilograms of TNT.[107]

Responses

Legislative framework

The Czech Firearms Act (Act No. 119/2002) establishes comprehensive regulation of civilian ownership.[108] The licensing system encompasses six categories: collecting (21+), sport (18+), hunting (18+), professional use (21+), self-defence (21+) and pyrotechnics. Each category requires specific justification, medical examination, psychological screening when deemed necessary, and successful completion of written and practical examinations. The acquisition process typically requires two to five months.

The Czech Republic maintained one of Europe's most permissive firearms regimes prior to December 2023. Unlike most EU states, Czech law permits concealed carry for self-defence – over 268 000 of 324 000 gun owners held such authorizations by end-2025.[109] A 2021 constitutional amendment enshrined 'the right to defend one's own life or the life of another person also with arms' in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, originating from a 102 000-signature petition opposing EU firearms restrictions.[110]

Tragedy at Charles University leads to reform

Following the December 2023 Charles University mass shooting (the worst in Czech history, claiming 14 lives) parliament enacted significant legislative changes:[111] medical checks increased from 10-year to five-year frequency; mandatory reporting requirements for suspicious firearms purchases; enhanced doctor access to firearms registries for medical screening; expanded authority for pre-emptive confiscation when risks are identified; and strengthened digital registration systems to improve tracking. Public polling showed 80% support for mental health reporting mandates.[112]

These measures address vulnerabilities in mental health screening without fundamentally restricting civilian ownership rights. The reforms reflect incremental policy adjustments rather than a paradigm shift in Czech firearms regulation philosophy, the Czech response post-2023 illustrates how mass-casualty events create narrow windows for policy change that would otherwise face insurmountable political barriers.

Export control oversight

As a significant arms-producing state, the Czech Republic operates within a multi-layered international export control framework. The country ratified the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in 2014 and served on the ATT Management Committee (2021–2023), highlighting transparency, universalization and implementation as priorities.[113] At the EU level, Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP establishes eight binding criteria for assessing export licence applications, including evaluation of diversion risk.[114]

The ministry of industry and trade's annual export control reports document licensing and control measures for military material. In 2023, customs officials detected 24 cases of possible violations involving military material, though not all constituted direct illegal exports.[115] Concerns persist about insufficient monitoring of exports and re-exports. A January 2025 journalistic investigation documented how Czech weapons (including CZ-brand firearms and Sellier & Bellot ammunition) continue to reach the Russian market via third-country intermediaries despite a decade of sanctions, tracing routes through Kazakhstan and Türkiye.[116]

The Global Organized Crime Index identifies these gaps as potential vulnerabilities in preventing the diversion of weapons to sanctioned destinations or conflict areas.[117] Given the Czech Republic's substantial defence manufacturing base (with exports potentially reaching €4.87 billion in 2025), these weaknesses carry significant implications for international security.

Law enforcement and international cooperation

Czech law enforcement maintains active monitoring capabilities for digital platforms, including Telegram channels and dark web marketplaces. Police report that unsophisticated purchasers attempting to acquire weapons online are identified quickly: 'If you are some random person, the police will spot you immediately.'[118] European law enforcement agencies employ multiple complementary methods, including cyber-patrolling, undercover operations, blockchain analysis and, increasingly, artificial intelligence applications through projects like Ceasefire (Horizon Europe 2022–2025).[119]

Major operations demonstrate that digital anonymity provides less protection than traffickers assume. In 2025, Europol's Operation RapTor resulted in 270 arrests across 10 countries and the seizure of over 180 firearms, based largely on intelligence gathered from previously dismantled dark web marketplaces.[120]

Current and future risks

Ukraine war impact assessment

While police acknowledge awareness of accumulated weapons in Ukraine and theoretical risks of post-conflict diversion, they report no current evidence of organized arms trafficking from Ukraine through Czech territory. One officer stated: 'There is no information on guns being smuggled to the Czech Republic.'[121] The primary concern involves potential future criminal activity by Ukrainian nationals residing in the Czech Republic, rather than weapons flows per se.

However, intelligence services maintain heightened awareness of potential future risks. Predictions suggest problems may emerge after the conflict's conclusion when accumulated weapons in Ukraine potentially enter black markets.[122] These concerns draw parallels to historical precedents following Balkan conflicts, in which post-war proliferation of weapons created lasting security challenges across Europe.

Defence industry expansion and governance challenges

The Czech defence industry has experienced significant growth in support of Ukraine. The country initiated ammunition procurement initiatives, providing substantial quantities of 155mm and 152mm artillery shells.[123] CSG facilities have boosted capacity significantly, with Excalibur Army establishing a Kyiv office in 2025 to localize production. The firm pledged readiness for over 100 000 155mm rounds and 50 000 105mm rounds upon state orders, starting at 50% local content and scaling to 80%, backed by Czech-supplied components.[124]

This expansion positions the Czech Republic among top suppliers, rivalling the US and UK, with Ukraine effectively becoming a second domestic market for its arms sector.[125] Ukrainian firms are producing the Bren 2 rifle under licence from the Czech Republic to equip its forces. The rapid scaling of defence cooperation, while beneficial for Ukrainian defence capabilities, introduces governance challenges regarding technology transfer, end-use monitoring and potential diversion risks that require careful management.

Institutional capacity and preparedness

The Czech Republic faces a distinctive challenge: balancing its role as a major arms producer and key Ukraine supporter with the need to prevent diversion and address legacy trafficking networks. The combination of substantial defence manufacturing capacity, historically permissive deactivation standards (now tightened) and geographic position on major trafficking routes, creates ongoing vulnerabilities.

Positive indicators include the post-2021 registration requirements for blank-firing weapons, enhanced post-2023 mental health screening and active participation in European law enforcement cooperation. However, documented export control gaps (evidenced by Czech weapons reaching Russia despite sanctions) and the anticipated post-conflict trafficking of weapons from Ukraine suggest that institutional capacity will face significant tests in coming years. The Czech experience with reactive rather than preventive policy reform raises questions about whether current frameworks are adequate to address emerging challenges.

SLOVAKIA

Slovakia shares many characteristics with its Czech neighbour: low domestic violence, a significant role in European firearm trafficking networks and substantial defence manufacturing capacity. However, Slovakia's distinctive contribution lies in its historical role as a source of poorly deactivated weapons and Flobert firearms that armed criminal organizations across western Europe. Additionally, documented cases of sanctions evasion (with Slovak-manufactured weapons reaching Russia and Yemen) raise serious questions about export control effectiveness.

Arms trafficking landscape

Domestic gun culture and ownership patterns

The gun culture in Slovakia reflects growing interest and acceptance of firearms ownership, particularly since the fall of communism in 1989. The number of legal gun owners nearly doubled from approximately 61 600 in 1993 to over 120 000 by the early 2000s, with diverse motivations including sports shooting, hunting, self-defence and collecting.[126] As of 2024, Slovakia had 461 724 registered firearms and 152 809 registered holders.[127]

Gun ownership is viewed by many as a source of personal safety and freedom, with legal ownership subject to regulations and licensing processes. Slovak gun owners include ordinary citizens, businesspeople and politicians. The general legal framework requires gun licences with strict controls, including bans on drinking before using firearms and restrictions on storing guns in vehicles. The rise in licensed gun ownership has coincided with some increase in crimes involving guns, but most violent incidents involve illegal firearms rather than those legally owned.[128]

Social and economic conditions play a more significant role in motivating people to invest time and money to obtain firearms legally, rather than foreign geopolitical fears, a notable contrast to the post-2022 surge in Czech and Polish licence applications driven by the war in Ukraine.

Use of weapons and violence patterns

Slovak police characterize the small-arms situation as non-threatening from a domestic security perspective. Police officials state that 'small arms and light weapons are not a high priority issue in Slovak society'.[129] The standard pattern of discovery involves identifying illegal possession during investigations of other criminal acts, homicides or after an owner's death, when relatives inform police

A projection on a hotel in Montepellier commemorates the 2015 attack on the offices of French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris, which allegedly used a Slovak-made AK-47. *© Pascal Guyot/AFP via Getty Images*

about arms found on premises. Police assessment indicates that 'there is no intention by the young generation to be militarized or to use arms, and from that perspective, Slovak society is pretty safe'.[130]

Slovakia's gun crime rate is relatively low compared to many European neighbours. UNODC homicide statistics show a rate of 1.1 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants for 2018.[131] Despite generally low statistics, Slovakia has experienced significant mass shooting events: in 2010, seven people were killed and some 15 injured in Devínska Nová Ves, with possible racist motivation;[132] in 2022, an anti-LGBTQ+ hate crime at the Tepláreň bar in Bratislava killed two people.[133] Critically, the 2022 perpetrator used his father's legal gun, highlighting the vulnerability created by household access to legally owned firearms.[134]

Actors and criminal dynamics

Investigative sources describe a significant evolution in the character of Slovak organized crime. Contemporary criminal operations appear to have shifted away from violent street crime towards white-collar and non-violent activities. This transition is significant for understanding the SALW landscape: while organized crime remains present and active, the operational model no longer relies on frequent firearm use for territorial control or enforcement.

Police report no current presence of organized criminal groups from the Balkans, noting that it has been decades since such groups were present.[135] Similarly, there is no strong influence from organized criminal groups in the Caucasus, particularly from Georgia, though some civil society experts suggest there may be a limited presence.[136] Investigative reporting reveals a complex relationship between legal gun ownership and individuals with ties to organized crime. Sources indicate that many individuals connected to organized crime actually own guns legally, rather than rely on black market weapons.

Routes and supply chains

Slovakia was noted especially for supplying deactivated firearms that are easily reactivated, as well as easy-to-reconvert acoustic expansion weapons.[137] According to Europol, by 2014, approximately 10 000 Slovak-origin deactivated firearms had entered the European illegal market, with several used in terrorist attacks.[138] Slovakia's arms trafficking is linked to transnational criminal networks from eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Criminal groups use trafficked firearms, particularly Flobert conversions and acoustic/blank-firing weapons, mainly for robberies, attacks and protection.

The Slovak armaments industry

Slovakia's arms industry and exports have grown significantly. In 2024, for instance, arms exports more than doubled compared to 2023.[139] Slovak arms exports in a legal context were approximately US$71 million in 2022.[140] Central Slovakia has historically had significant military production, including tanks and infantry vehicles under Soviet licence.

Grand Power, located in central Slovakia, manufactures pistols and submachine guns. The company historically struggled to secure state procurement contracts but recently achieved breakthrough success. As investigative sources report: 'For 15 or 20 years, they've been trying to hit the market, but they were never able to get any state procurement. But now this year, it has changed.'[141] The company also produced for Russia and owned a 50% joint venture with a Russian producer before the war, selling its stake in 2021, though guns continue to be produced in Russia under their patents.[142]

The Czechoslovak Group, owned by a Czech billionaire, operates major facilities in Slovakia, particularly in Dubnica nad Váhom. These facilities produce artillery ammunition and are described as having close ties with current government officials. The production facility is structured as 50% private and 50% state ownership.[143] ■

Prices and market dynamics

Interestingly, even in high-profile robberies, firearms are not always the weapon of choice. Describing a recent major gold shop robbery, one source noted: 'They used axes, they don't use guns. Even in these cases, they don't use guns.'[144] This pattern suggests that operational decisions about weapon use are driven more by tactical considerations and risk management than by availability constraints.

The prices of weapons on the black market in Slovakia are around double compared with legal retail prices, indicating a significant profit margin for traffickers while still maintaining accessibility for criminal purchasers.[145] This pricing structure suggests robust demand and relatively efficient distribution networks.

Weapon type	Typical price
Pistols	€900–€1 500
AK-type rifles	€1 000–€2 500

FIGURE 8 Slovakia – selected illicit firearm prices.

SOURCE: Interview data

Technical methods: the Flobert loophole and deactivation

Flobert firearms are low-power, small-calibre rimfire guns (typically 4–6 mm) that were historically used for target shooting. In Slovak law, they fall under Category D when their muzzle energy is ≤7.5 joules, a classification that has drawn EU attention because Flobert-category weapons have been used to exploit cross-border regulatory differences and to facilitate trafficking.[146] Under the current Firearms and Ammunition Act (No. 190/2003 Coll.), a Category D Flobert may be acquired only on the basis of a police permit or by holders of a firearm licence, with requirements including being over 18 years old, fully legally capable and assessed as of good character.[147]

The history of arms production in Slovak society provided 'much more liberty for buying the Flobert guns'.[148] The abuse of Flobert guns usually happens in other EU countries when they are upgraded to serve other purposes, indicating that the primary security concern relates to export and conversion rather than domestic misuse.

Blank/gas pistols, acoustic/blank-firing weapons and poorly deactivated former firearms have been systematically converted into lethal, live-firing weapons across Europe, with Slovakia identified as a significant source.[149] Before the EU's common deactivation rules, large numbers of cheaply made blank/gas guns and substandard deactivated weapons were manufactured and sold in Slovakia, often to individuals over 18, creating a supply of items that could be easily converted. Today that loophole has closed, but the legacy continues, albeit in reduced numbers.

Major cases and enforcement operations

Charlie Hebdo connection (2015): A particularly significant case involved weapons allegedly used in the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack. According to investigative sources: 'Allegedly an AK-47, Slovak-made, was used in Charlie Hebdo … And it was like the guns that were disabled from shooting, but some people in Slovakia remade them.'[150] The weapons were converted back into functional firearms.

Slovak–Czech–Dutch operation (2021): Eurojust supported Slovak, Czech and Dutch authorities in halting a criminal network trading in illegally converted firearms. Six suspects were arrested and approximately 350 weapons seized.[151] Investigations began in February 2020 when 22 converted Flobert guns were seized at the Dutch port of Hoek van Holland in a vehicle bound for the UK.

Hungary–Slovakia operation (2024): Police in Hungary and Slovakia arrested Slovak arms dealers in Rajka, Hungary, who had sent 600 weapons to Sweden, Spain and South Africa.[152] This operation demonstrates the continuing scale and reach of Slovak-origin weapon trafficking networks.

Post-regulatory assessment: Following the Charlie Hebdo attack and the subsequent tightening of firearms regulations, investigative journalists report that conversion-related activities in Slovakia appear to have significantly declined. Over the past three to four years, despite repeated requests from international colleagues to investigate the issue, they were unable to identify problems on the same scale as previously. This suggests that stricter regulatory measures have had a tangible impact in reducing the extent of such activities.[153]

Responses

Legislative framework

Legal possession of firearms in Slovakia requires a firearm licence issued by the police department. Only upright and reliable individuals who are at least 21 years old can apply, with some exceptions for younger individuals for hunting or sports shooting.[154] Applicants must have full legal capacity, medical and psychological certificates proving fitness, pass a professional competence exam, have Slovak residency, and justify the need to possess or carry a firearm. The licence is typically valid for 10 years.

Psychological testing requirements were strengthened following several murders and incidents during 2010 and the following years. As one police officer explained, initially, 'there were no psychological tests', but authorities 'invented strict psychological tests' after recognizing patterns of concern.[155] This represents significant evolution in the licensing framework.

Slovakia does not have a publicly available national SALW strategy and action plan document. Instead, small arms control is conducted through distributed frameworks and regional/international commitments, including cooperation with the EU's SALW Strategy and participation in SEESAC's regional SALW control initiatives.[156]

Slovakia has implemented several amnesties to ensure gun control. The Third Weapons Amnesty (2015) allowed citizens to surrender unregistered weapons without legal consequences. Experts examined 2 857 guns and 41 533 rounds of ammunition during the campaign.[157] Investigative sources note that 'a lot of guns at the time were collected through these amnesties'.[158]

Export control oversight and sanctions evasion

The most troubling findings from investigative research involve documented sanctions evasion by Slovak manufacturers. Despite EU sanctions on Russia, weapons produced by Grand Power have been confirmed in Russian hands through verifiable serial numbers.

Russian diversion

Investigative journalists documented that some weapons ended up in Russia, despite sanctions. With gun ID numbers, they verified around 100 pistols and 15 submachine guns were imported to Russia after sanctions were proposed.[159] The mechanism involved selling weapons to an EU intermediary: 'The investigative journalists asked the manufactured company to whom they sold it. The manufactured company only said that they sold it to a company in the EU. So, they sold it to someone. And then we don't know, but the weapons are in Russia.'[160]

Yemen diversion

A parallel diversion pattern was documented involving the conflict in Yemen. Slovak-manufactured weapons were reportedly transferred to a Czech company with Russian ownership, subsequently re-exported to buyers in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, and eventually surfaced in Yemen. Investigative reporting indicates that as many as 320 Slovak-made Grand Power pistols were exported to Yemen, a country under strict international arms embargoes.[161] The case emerged after a Yemeni gun dealer posted a video of a 'Made in Slovakia' Grand Power X-Calibur Mk23 pistol for sale in Sana'a, a city controlled by the Houthi movement.[162]

These cases demonstrate sophisticated sanctions evasion mechanisms that current verification systems fail to prevent. The weapon transfers underscore structural vulnerabilities in export-control frameworks, particularly the reliance on intermediary markets and the difficulty of tracking end users once arms leave the EU. When asked about current cases of end-user certificate abuse, police sources said there were none.[163] This assessment contrasts sharply with the findings of investigative journalists.[164]

International export control obligations

The documented diversions to Russia and Yemen represent potential violations of Slovakia's international obligations under multiple frameworks:

Arms Trade Treaty: States parties must conduct risk assessments before authorizing exports, deny transfers where there is an 'overriding risk' of diversion and take measures to prevent diversion, including examining parties in the transfer chain.[165]

EU Common Position 2008/944/CFSP: Criterion 7 requires evaluation of diversion risk, with member states obligated to deny licences where there is 'clear risk' of diversion to unauthorized end-users.[166]

The pattern of weapons reaching sanctioned destinations via EU intermediaries (with manufacturers claiming limited responsibility for post-sale destination) suggests either wilful blindness or inadequate due diligence in export control compliance. ■

Law enforcement and international cooperation

Law enforcement agencies actively participate in the international activities of Europol, Interpol and Frontex to suppress SALW. Police cooperation with international bodies is characterized as 'pretty good', with Europol serving as the main focal point for their work on crime.[167] Law enforcement typically deals with individual criminals rather than organized criminal groups – a pattern similar to that in the Czech Republic.

Although Slovakia serves as a hotspot for firearm trafficking, levels of firearm seizures remain relatively low. Between 2016 and 2020, seizures included war weapons (14), rifles/shotguns (1 117) and handguns (1 977).[168] Handguns account for the majority of seized weapons, likely reflecting their preference for criminal use because of their concealability.

Current and future risks

Impact of the Ukraine war

Investigative sources report that they have not observed an increase in guns smuggled into Slovakia as a result of the war in Ukraine.[169] However, sources acknowledge significant future risk, with one journalist saying: 'I think whenever the war ends, it could become a problem when the criminals start to be more aggressive.'[170]

This situation would mirror 'historical patterns seen during the Yugoslav civil war, where military arms flooded the population and then the black market', as one police officer explained.[171] The large quantity of weapons on the battlefield, including those supplied by Western partners to Ukraine, has raised concerns about possible diversion to black markets. Ukraine's position as a transit hub risks arms moving to groups ranging from European criminals to Balkan paramilitaries.

Digital threats and radicalization

Encrypted platforms like Telegram host communities that facilitate the transfer of knowledge related to weapons. One journalist described 'a certain part of the society which uses Telegram, especially the part of society which is pro-Russian, anti-Western, anti-democratic' and noted that 'if they are radical enough, they could even motivate themselves to find exchange guns or buy guns'.[172]

The Terrorgram case

The most significant documented case of arms trafficking intersecting with social networks involves online radicalization. A young Slovak engineering student became a key figure in an international terrorist network known as 'Terrorgram'. This individual was not merely consuming extremist content but actively facilitating violence by distributing technical manuals. 'He allegedly published instructions and diagrams for the production of improvised cold steel weapons, the domestic production of automatic firearms made in combination with printable parts on a 3D printer and homemade metal parts.'[173] He was sentenced to six years in prison in 2022.

According to law-enforcement sources, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation contacted Slovak police after the individual shared an online guide about 3D-printing an AR-15-related component intended to increase the weapon's rate of fire. He had studied engineering in Brno, Czech Republic, and was reported to have had access to a 3D printer there, but authorities said they lacked evidence that he produced any firearm components.[174] ■

Institutional capacity and media environment

Despite Slovakia's significant role in European arms trafficking, domestic media coverage of small-arms issues remains limited. One journalist speculated that the limited coverage may be because these activities are hidden.[175] When small arms do appear in coverage, the focus tends towards domestic incidents, like suicide and family murders involving guns.[176]

This limited media attention creates a peculiar dynamic: while Slovakia plays a documented role in European arms trafficking networks, domestic public awareness remains minimal. This disconnect may facilitate continued trafficking operations by maintaining low public scrutiny and political pressure for enhanced controls. The contrast between documented export control failures and police assertions that there are 'no current cases of end-user certificate abuse' suggests either limited police visibility into sophisticated export control violations or institutional reluctance to acknowledge systematic weaknesses.

Slovakia faces a distinctive set of challenges: a legacy of being a major source of poorly deactivated weapons (now largely addressed through EU harmonization), ongoing concerns about sanctions evasion through its defence industry, limited domestic media scrutiny and the emergence of digital radicalization pathways. The anticipated post-conflict proliferation risks from Ukraine will test whether current institutional capacity is adequate to prevent Slovakia from resuming its historical role as a significant node in European firearm trafficking networks.

ROMANIA, HUNGARY AND MOLDOVA

To supplement the analysis of arms trafficking patterns in the key central European countries, a scoping exercise was conducted on the south-eastern countries of Romania, Hungary and Moldova, given their proximity to Ukraine and the future risks that may emanate from the conflict. The preliminary research conducted for this report points to areas of overlap with Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as more nuanced dynamics for exploration in a future standalone report.

Arms trafficking landscape

Domestic gun culture and ownership patterns

Mirroring trends seen in the central European countries, Hungary, Romania and Moldova have strict gun ownership regulations, resulting in comparatively few weapons in public hands.[177] This is particularly the case in Romania, which has almost the same number of registered gun owners as Moldova, despite having a population almost eight times as large. Moldova further tightened laws in December 2025, making citizens who have not lived in Moldova for at least five consecutive years ineligible, and banning residents of Transnistria from owning weapons entirely.[178] Hungary also has some of the strictest gun laws in Europe, although Budapest was instructed by the European Commission to improve compliance with EU legislation over the conversion of gas and alarm guns, among other issues, in March 2025.[179]

Indicator	Hungary	Romania	Moldova
Population	9.6 million	18.8 million	2.4 million
Licensed gun owners	Unknown	71 000 (2023)[180]	61 000 (2024)[181]
Registered firearms	300 000–350 000 (2024)[182]	170 000 (2023)[183]	71 600 (2024)[184]
Homicide rate (per 100k)	0.77 (2023)[185]	1.1 (2023)[186]	2.54[187]
OC Index arms trafficking score (2025)	4.0	5.0	7.0
Primary role	Transit corridor	Transit country	Transit country

FIGURE 9 South-eastern European firearms by the numbers.

Use of weapons and patterns of violence

Gun violence is very rare in the three countries. In Romania and Hungary, gun-related violence has been on a downward trajectory for many years.[188] Information is patchier for Moldova, but indications are levels are low: between 2020–2024, there were 708 incidents of firearms, resulting in 41 deaths.[189]

As with the other countries in this study, many of the incidents involving firearms derive from domestic disputes or accidents. Mass casualty events are very rare.[190] One exception to this broad trend is firearms-related incidents involving migrants around the Hungary–Serbian border, a key crossing point into the EU. According to one Hungarian NGO, violence involving firearms in Hungary has become more common among migrant smuggling gangs (mostly directed at migrants) near the border with Serbia since 2022, with incidents every two or three months.[191] There have been claims that smuggling gangs have used automatic weapons (reportedly sourced from Kosovo) and grenades.[192] GI-TOC fieldwork suggests that migrants have increasingly been used to transport weapons or weapon components in return for a reduction in their cost of passage.

In terms of illegal weapons, one of the most notable trends is the steep increase in the number of weapons seized in Romania, from around 3 000–3 100 in 2022 and 2024, to over 4 500 weapons in 2025, an increase of approximately 50%.[193] Data is not readily available for Hungary, but historical trends suggest low numbers, although there have been exceptional cases, such as a farmer arrested in 2024 with 69 firearms (including machine guns), grenades and explosives on his property.[194] Other incidents have involved collectors who accumulated large quantities of explosives and heritage firearms.[195] Official data is again absent in Moldova, but some indication can be gleaned from the regular 'melting exercises' that the country has held since 2005.[196] In the most recent such exercise in March 2025, 2 177 small arms and light weapons were destroyed.[197]

As in the other three countries under discussion, blank/alarm guns represent a significant part of the shady firearms market. In June 2025, for example, Romania's Operation Jupiter seized only 10 lethal

Hungary typically has low numbers of weapon seizures, but there have been a few exceptional cases: in 2024, a farmer was arrested after 69 firearms, grenades and explosives were found on his property. *Photos: Hungarian Police*

weapons but 444 non-lethal weapons.[198] In Hungary, a January 2024 operation against a suspected militant nationalist group discovered a stash of handguns, an AK rifle, and gas and alarm guns.[199] (Gas and alarm guns, in their non-converted state, can be bought without a permit in Hungary or Romania, with limitations regarding muzzle velocity; in Moldova such weapons must be registered with the police.[200])

Interestingly, given the lack of widespread gun culture, illegal weapons prices in these three countries were found to be at the lower end, or lower than those in Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic (with the exception of semi-automatics in Romania). In part, this may reflect local purchasing power, but it may also reflect lack of demand among organized crime groups, although there was admittedly high volatility, with sources saying that prices may double or triple depending on the individual case. (With handguns, for instance, Colts were preferred – and more expensive – than Glocks.) This can be seen especially in Romania, where gathered prices for semi-automatics varied very widely.

Other pricing data collected included 9mm ammunition selling for €0.45 a round, according to a criminal source. Turkish-made blank-firing pistols cost around €200 new in Romania and as little as €50–€70 second-hand.

Country	Handguns, 9mm	Semi-automatic firearms
Hungary	€800	€1 100
Romania	€700–€800	€1 300–€4 000
Moldova	€500	€500–€900

FIGURE 10 Regional illicit firearm prices.

SOURCE: Interviews with members of criminal groups

Actors and criminal dynamics

In general, demand for firearms among criminals in Hungary, Romania and Moldova remains muted, with the exception of migrant smuggling gangs along the Hungaria–Serbia border.[201] Following the example of Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic, organized crime was most violent in the 1990s and early 2000s before resorting to relatively quieter ways of working.[202] Today, Hungarian organized crime is largely directed by Serbian gangs and focused on drugs, with weapons playing more of a supplementary role. In Moldova, organized crime has historically focused mainly on cigarettes and sex trafficking; weapons were primarily the domain of Ukrainian/Russian organized crime.[203] According to an EU advisor to Moldova, no new trend in weapons smuggling had been recorded, and data from SEESAC showed there were only six firearms incidents linked to organized crime in the first quarter of 2025.[204] Small-scale smuggling of cigarettes and alcohol remains the major illicit activity, along with smuggling military-age men from Ukraine.[205] In Romania, a different story emerged, with one investigative journalist claiming that there had been an increase in the proliferation of drugs and weapons due to Romania fully entering the Schengen Area (which removes controls at borders for participating states) in January 2025.[206] This aligns with the uptick in seizures reported in 2025, which was approximately 50% higher than the year before.

Routes and supply chains

According to the Global Organized Crime Index 2025, Romania serves as a transit hub for arms trafficking, with weapons smuggled from Türkiye and eastern Europe into western European markets.[207]

GI -TOC fieldwork in August 2025 found that the border crossing with Bulgaria at Giurgiu is one path that illegal weapons travel. Following Romania's full Schengen land accession in January 2025, Romanian authorities reported increased reliance on risk-profiling and mobile controls at the Giurgiu corridor, compensating for the removal of fixed internal border checks. Open-source reporting and interviews suggest that while systematic controls have decreased, targeted inspections – particularly using mobile scanners and intelligence-led selection – remain central to interdiction efforts. The most frequently employed means of small-scale smuggling is by inserting the parts of weapons into fuel tanks of cars and trucks.[208] According to a member of a criminal group in Romania, weapons are also sometimes hidden in the void of composite sandwich panels produced at a factory near the Bulgarian border.[209]

Moldova remains a much-discussed but little-known quantity. Long characterized as a key transit hub, especially for weapons moving out of Ukraine, and a potential source of leakage from the large weapons and ammunitions storage facility at Cobasna in Transnistria, hard data is difficult to come by. The Cobasna ammunition depot, dating back to the Soviet period, is estimated to contain tens of thousands of tonnes of legacy munitions and has been identified as one of the largest unsecured stockpiles in Europe. Persistent concerns over aging infrastructure, limited transparency and the unresolved Transnistrian conflict continue to frame the site as a latent proliferation and diversion risk. However, there have been several interesting cases of late, such as a November 2025 bust on the Romania–Moldova border that saw what appeared to be several anti-tank grenade launchers and a Geran-2 drone recovered from a vehicle, were they had been disguised. Moldovan officials were quick to state that this was not a case of systematic weapons smuggling, although the size and nature of the weapons does raise questions about the intended end user.[210] The transport documents stated Israel, but this appears unlikely given the geography.

Hungary, by contrast, does not host a significant arms trafficking market, although there have been reports of arms trafficking to Romania. One security analyst in the region also claimed that weapons were being smuggled from Batyovo, in Ukraine's Transcarpathia region, into Hungary. This flow was apparently small-scale, with weapons being disassembled and packaged with cigarette smuggling across the Tisza River.[211] The presence of a railway station in Batyovo also offers another potential logistics option for smugglers. However, no verification was found for the existence of this flow, and two Ukrainian law enforcement officers based in the region said they had not heard of any such flows in the district. However, 14 weapons were seized by local police in 2024, indicating some level of illicit arms activity.[212]

Serbia remains a significant source of firearms for Romania and Hungary. Seizures on the Serbian–Hungarian border – particularly at Röszke – reveal weapons hidden in fuel tanks or false compartments, often trafficked by Serbian groups attempting to move pistols, submachine guns and ammunition into the EU.[213]

Responses and future risks

Arms trafficking is not extensively covered in the media of these three countries as a systematic criminal issue; understandably, media focus tends to be on large seizures and cases where firearms are used in anger, such as domestic disputes. In Hungary, the media has very little access to state data on firearm trafficking, according to one journalist, resulting in a situation where 'nobody knows' the true state of affairs.[214]

FIGURE 11 Post-conflict arms trafficking risks linked to Ukraine.

Formally, there appears to be good cooperation between law enforcement agencies, although some interviewees did cite issues. According to a Hungarian police officer, although formal cooperation with Romanian and Moldovan authorities functions well, this does not translate into investigations of concrete cases. At senior levels, there were also concerns about the level of autonomy of the Romanian police, given their close reporting lines to intelligence services.[215] An EU advisor to Moldova said there was strong interest in cooperation and information exchange between Moldova and Romania.[216]

On the international level, Moldova has been the focus of multilateral efforts to stymie arms trafficking from Ukraine, largely through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), which have regularly convened working groups and other initiatives focused on arms trafficking. However, the mission's mandate expired on 30 November 2025.

Looking ahead, particular attention should be paid to vulnerable border segments where scanner coverage remains uneven, intelligence sharing is fragmented, or traffic volumes exceed inspection capacity. Early-warning indicators may include shifts in seizure locations, increased use of professional concealment methods, and convergence with established smuggling routes used for drugs or excise goods. Monitoring these signals can provide advance notice of post-conflict proliferation pressures before they translate into sustained criminal supply.

All three countries participate in Europe-wide operations and initiatives against arms trafficking. Hungary and Romania, being EU states, participate in Europol and European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) initiatives,[217] while Moldova has a liaison officer posted with Europol and has conducted joint investigations. It has also increased its cooperation with EMPACT since 2022.[218]

The war in Ukraine is the major future risk facing these countries, and signals of readiness are mixed. While official pronouncements, especially in Moldova, acknowledge the severity of this scenario, it remains less clear whether Hungary and Romania have the institutional capacity to meet the challenge. According to a former Hungarian official, the Hungarian interior ministry and intelligence services (civil and military) have lost much of their operational capacity and coordination, making them unable to handle complex transnational smuggling cases. Since Romania's entry into Schengen, Hungarian authorities have had limited strategic oversight of arms trafficking between Ukraine and Romania.[219]

Ultimately, although the flow of weapons transiting these three countries may be relatively low at present, there is a well-established smuggling architecture in the subregion that has the potential to be repurposed for higher volumes, capitalizing on holes in border enforcement and geographical features such as the Danube delta. GI-TOC fieldwork consistently points to the Ukrainian border with Romania and Moldova in the region of Bessarabia as a likely hotspot for future weapon trafficking. It remains to be seen how the criminal ecosystem in these three countries will react to a mass influx of arms, both in terms of facilitating their onward movement and the impact on local crime dynamics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Central Europe's SALW landscape is a paradox. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia tightly regulate civilian ownership, keep weapons-related crime low, and boast effective justice systems, yet they are firmly plugged into Europe's firearm trafficking networks. Their role is not driven by domestic gun violence but by the export of converted, reactivated and poorly deactivated weapons, plus export control failures that have sent arms to sanctioned destinations such as Russia and Yemen.

Ukraine fallout: a looming threat

For now, weapons smuggling from Ukraine is minimal. Borders hold steady, and traffickers favour routes up to Estonia and Latvia rather than west through Poland. But the danger is in the aftermath. Vast Ukrainian stockpiles, sizable diaspora populations, proximity to the front, and existing trafficking routes echo the post-Yugoslav pattern – a surge of illicit arms flooding Europe when the fighting ends. The risk from Ukraine is one of both quantity and quality: many more weapons, and more powerful weapons entering the market. Current effective responses need to have contingency to rapidly scale up to meet the challenge, working in coordination with other relevant government departments and agencies.

Yet the challenge extends beyond interdiction. Post-conflict weapon proliferation carries profound consequences for public safety and social stability that neighbouring states must anticipate. International experience – from the Western Balkans, where an estimated 3–6 million firearms remained in civilian hands after the Yugoslav wars, to post-conflict Central America, where firearms-facilitated homicide rates exceeded 100 per 100 000 – demonstrates that widespread availability of weapons, combined with large populations of psychologically affected veterans, produces sustained increases in homicide, suicide and domestic violence. In Ukraine, where firearm-related crime rose from 275 cases in 2022 to over 13 000 in 2024, and an estimated 67% of soldiers exhibit symptoms of PTSD, these dynamics are already visible. With active and reserve military forces exceeding 2 million personnel and mental health provision estimated at one psychologist per 400–500 soldiers, the scale is without precedent in modern Europe. Should significant quantities of these weapons migrate into neighbouring Central European markets (countries with historically low firearm-related violence but established, if diminished, trafficking infrastructure), the consequences would extend beyond organized crime to affect broader patterns of violence, suicide and public health across the region. Proactive engagement with Ukrainian demobilization planning, veteran support frameworks and cross-border public health cooperation will be as important as enforcement-focused strategies.

FIGURE 12 Major firearm trafficking enforcement operations in central Europe, 2021–2025.

Shifts in organized crime

The wild 1990s of street-level violence have given way to white-collar crime. Today, foreign networks drive the weapons risk. Georgian groups in Poland focus on extortion; Balkan networks use Prague for logistics and drug distribution; Middle Eastern networks dominate Czech firearms cases; Russian-linked groups prefer laundering over guns. Global crime is taking root. The Mexican Sinaloa cartel now cooks meth in Poland, with major raids in 2025 seizing 300 litres. Meanwhile, encrypted platforms like Telegram fuel digital radicalization and knowledge transfer, shifting the threat from physical shipments to diffuse, tech-driven networks.

Institutional strengths and failures

Europol and Eurojust cooperation delivers results; hundreds of weapons have been seized. All three countries maintain ballistic databases and centralized registries. But fragmented agency data, weak links with civil society, and Slovak institutional reshuffles erode resilience. The biggest failure is in export controls. Slovak Grand Power pistols and Czech rifles keep surfacing in Russia and Yemen, despite official insistence that end-user certificates are intact.

Critical vulnerabilities

Contingency planning for post-war Ukraine weapons inflows could be strengthened. Counterfeit and hybrid guns are still evading tracing systems. Persistent export control lapses continue to feed sanctioned markets, while legacy stockpiles of poorly deactivated weapons still circulate. Inadequate serial marking and forensic recovery capacity exacerbate the issue. Additionally, digital threats such as radicalization and knowledge-sharing are outpacing the development of 3D-printed gun cases. Policies remain reactive, following tragedies instead of pre-empting risks.

Policy priorities

To effectively address the challenges posed by the illicit arms trade, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This includes creating national SALW strategies, conducting regular threat assessments, focusing on known smuggling corridors, tightening mental health screening, and establishing early warning systems for radicalization. Additionally, fixing export controls by verifying end-users post-shipment, scrutinizing re-export chains, screening intermediary actors, and holding manufacturers accountable for diversion to sanctioned states is crucial.

Dominating the digital space involves monitoring encrypted platforms and dark markets, tracking manuals and 3D-print files, deploying AI surveillance, and coordinating cross-border digital investigations. Mark and trace measures should enforce EU marking standards, expand forensic labs for serial recovery, build regional marking databases, and support Europol-led research. Strengthening regional links requires harmonizing data systems, partnering with SEESAC and civil society, protecting specialist law enforcement teams, and continuously improving deactivation and conversion standards.

Preparing for the Ukraine surge involves establishing a central EU coordination hub, upgrading borders and customs, formalizing intelligence-sharing with Ukraine, tracking surplus and diverted arms, supporting domestic collection programmes, monitoring diaspora criminal indicators, and preparing rapid regional amnesty schemes. Central Europe's next security test will come not when the war rages, but when it ends. Without urgent action, the region risks fuelling the next wave of Europe's illicit arms trade.

NOTES

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