

WORLD

Weapons smuggling in Sweden out of control: expert

Weapons sent to Ukraine end up in hands of Swedish gangs, reports say

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File photo



Sweden has one of the highest rates of firearm-related violence in Western Europe, a result of an ever-increasing number of gangs and criminal networks responsible for the high inflow of illegal firearms to Sweden, according to experts.

Despite one of the world's strictest gun laws, the country still faces significant firearm-related bloodshed, with many experts calling for additional policies to combat the illegal flow of firearms and gang criminality.

According to a 2021 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Serbian pistols, and Yugoslav-era hand grenades are fueling the country's rising gang violence that is partially due to the legacy of the currently dissolved, so-called "Yugoslav mafia" that dominated Stockholm's criminal underworld through the 1990s.

At the time, Serbian war crimes suspect Zeljko Arkan Raznatovic effectively dominated significant parts of the urban criminal economy in Sweden, another report, published in 2021 by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, said.

However, recent reports suggest that while Balkan weapons greatly contribute to ever-escalating firearm smuggling in the Scandinavian country, there are other factors also playing a significant part.

For instance, there are fears among the country's experts that criminal networks may have access to weapons allegedly shipped from Ukraine, according to reports by the local Sveriges Radio.

In Sweden's second-largest city, Gothenburg, arms smugglers have been requested to acquire weapons from war-torn Ukraine for further sale to criminal gangs in the country, the radio broadcaster said.

Weapons smuggling expert at the Swedish Customs Service Jesper Liedholm expressed fears that criminals may have access to more powerful weapons to smuggle in Sweden and that any type of weapon provided to Ukraine as Western aid may also come back to the country, it added.

But Mathias Stahle, a journalist and an author of the book *Vapensmederna* (The Gunsmiths: The Men Who Are Arming Sweden's Criminals), told Anadolu that while the Moscow-Kyiv war is still ongoing, he does not think that there is "a lot of leakage of weapon from Ukraine today."

However, he added that "one day, the war will end, and then, those weapons, they need to go somewhere, someone will want to make money from them."

Sweden may not be the only Scandinavian country where criminals may have access to weapons that are meant for Ukraine, as last October, the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation said weapons sent to Ukraine may have found their way back to criminals in Finland.

- Out of control

Ardavan Khoshnood, a criminologist and a political scientist researching violent crimes and gang violence in Sweden at Lund University, told Anadolu that in Sweden, weapons smuggling is out of control.

According to Khoshnood, hundreds of various types of weapons, including automatic guns, semi-automatic weapons, grenades, and also explosives, get smuggled into the country daily, from various countries, mostly from Eastern Europe, due to high demand by many gangs and criminal networks in Sweden.

“There are some very serious conflicts between these gangs and criminal networks,” and as long as there is such a huge demand, there will be “a huge influx of weapons into the Swedish society,” he added.

Also, Stahle said the country has gone from zero shootings 20 years ago to now hundreds of shootings every year.

Over the past decade, the gun violence in Sweden has been constantly escalating and it is “relatively simple to acquire illegal weapons,” he noted.

Apart from firearms smuggled in from other parts of Europe, the domestic illegal gun market is also to blame, as criminals have discovered that they can buy parts needed to repair and maintain often dysfunctional old weapons in the local stores, “without any control at all,” Stahle stressed.

“A lot of them are from the Cold War era,” or even older than that, he added.

- Toy guns turned into lethal weapons

According to Stahle, the Nordic country is struggling to cope with weapon smuggling also because many EU member states have legalized toy guns or starter pistols that are only supposed to produce a loud bang without any bullets.

These weapons are today manufactured by companies that make them look like exact copies of lethal weapons, but they are extremely easy to convert into lethal weapons.

Under the current law, it is illegal to own such a weapon in Sweden unless you have a license for it.

But criminal networks manage to find a way around it by simply making a journey to another EU country where they can buy these weapons legally.

- No border controls

“Since we don't have any border controls in Sweden, as most European countries don't have, it's very, very simple to take them with you back home,” in a car, by bus or ferry,

said Stahle.

Criminals manage to hide firearms inside vehicles that are stopped and searched even, as they are sometimes built into the car itself, in the engine room, hidden doors, or under the passenger compartment, he noted.

Khoshnood also pointed out that the Swedish authorities must pour more resources into the country's Swedish customs to enable them to fight the influx of illegal weapons into Sweden.

He said the country's parliament must rethink its law and come up with a new regulation that will "give more power to customs" to stop cars or trucks carrying illegal weapons into Sweden.

Until then, dozens of gangs competing for control of Sweden's drugs, illegal gambling, and sex markets, which usually share the same arms suppliers, are managing to break through the Swedish borders without getting caught.

weapons smuggling

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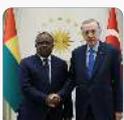
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