



AN OVERVIEW OF MOTOR VEHICLE CRIME FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2006

Introduction

In the EU we observed a general increase in the figures for vehicle theft in the years leading up to 1993. This was largely due to the changes in political structures and also the advent of the single European market, which meant that there were no longer border controls between the EU Member States. For example, it is now possible to drive from Portugal in the West of Europe across Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, to the German – Polish border, without being checked at any border. Similarly, there has been a greater freedom of movement in all the Eastern European States after the breakdown of the FSU. This situation has created an increased demand for automobiles in Eastern Europe and is, to a large extent, being exploited by criminal networks involved in the theft and trafficking of motor vehicles.

From 1994 onwards, the EU has seen a slight decrease in vehicle thefts, particularly in the main manufacturing countries. This may be due to enhanced police efforts, improved security and detection systems, modified regulations in insurance contracts or even the beginning of the saturation of the market. According to the latest EU legislation, vehicle manufacturers are obliged to install alarms and other security features in their new car models. In addition, a number of other methods of tracking and locating stolen vehicles have appeared on the market. While the overall number of thefts in Western Europe has decreased it would seem that the incidence of organised international vehicle trafficking is on the increase.

Organised Crime Situation

As far as car theft is concerned, no other type of criminal activity is as lucrative for such minimal risk. A theft of 100

top of the range cars can generate a net profit of Euro 1 to 2 million. This criminal activity is more profitable than prostitution or other black market activities. It is estimated that around 450,000 stolen cars are trafficked from the European Union annually. Taking into account the disappearance of about 450,000 cars in 2004 with an estimated criminal profit of 15,000 Euro per stolen vehicle, the criminal profit is estimated to be 6.75 Billion Euro.

This type of criminality is mostly very well organised, particularly when it concerns the international trafficking of stolen vehicles. Groups of criminals are organised just like a large international company. They have very sophisticated structures, for example, some will specialise in the production of forged vehicle and identity documentation, others are skilled mechanics who undertake the alteration of the vehicle identity (VIN/ Chassis number, production number, number plates etc.). Then there are the couriers who are hired to drive the vehicles from one country to another. Finally, another person sells the car to a sometimes innocent purchaser at the end of the chain. These organisations may consist of many different nationalities along the chain.

Modus operandi

It is clear that the modus operandi of the groups evolve as quickly as the circumstances change. A few years ago, it was quite a simple matter for the thieves to break into a parked car. However, since most of the cars are now being equipped with very sophisticated locks, alarms, immobilisers and other security features, other methods have been used. Increasingly car- and home-jacking is the method used to obtain the vehicles. Threats of violence

and the use of firearms to steal vehicles is becoming a worrying trend.

This has the advantage of taking possession of the vehicle and the original keys at the same time. So it is not necessary for the offenders to overcome the very sophisticated immobilisers installed in the vehicle. There have been a large number of such incidents reported in Belgium and Germany in recent years.

We have also learnt that thieves carry out burglaries in houses for the purpose of obtaining the keys of the vehicle in the garage. Once the keys have been stolen, the vehicle is taken shortly afterwards.

In Italy, the so-called "Highwaymen" are causing panic because they have begun holding up motorists and stealing their cars. The method of the robberies is simple but highly effective. These groups of criminals, thought to be mainly Albanians, crash into high value cars. When the driver pulls up to assess the damage, the gang immobilises him before taking his car by force. According to the Italian police, it takes 14 hours to deliver a stolen car from central Italy to Tirana, where there is a growing demand for cars, especially high value cars.

To some extent reported thefts are in fact insurance frauds, where the owner reports a car stolen but has actually either sold the car to a third party or destroyed the vehicle himself, in order to obtain the insurance value.

In lots of incidents encountered, offenders made use of forged documents (such as insurance cards, passports, identity cards, registration documents etc.). This enabled the traffickers of stolen motor vehicles to overcome problems caused by possible police checks and/or border controls. In order to give an impression of authenticity, in some cases license plates have been changed to those of the country of destination. Furthermore, it has appeared that the VIN/serial number and engine number were also altered or falsified.

In another method to overcome the problems of acquiring forged documents, traffickers sometimes prefer to steal rented vehicles, particularly in Germany.

Destination countries

According to information provided by Member States, it is believed that the final destinations are mainly Eastern European, Central European and South East European countries. The Russian Federation is the top receiving country of stolen vehicles. Only a small proportion of the vehicles are destined for Africa, the Middle and Far East, whilst a small amount of stolen vehicles are trafficked within the European Union.

Transit Areas

There are four principal routes:

- From the EU to Eastern and Central Europe;
- From the EU to the South East of Europe;
- From the EU to the Middle and Far East;
- From the EU to the African Continent.

According to information provided by some Member States, vehicles stolen mainly in Germany, Belgium, France and Italy are transported principally towards the Russian Federation, Czech Republic, Poland, the Baltic States and towards South-eastern Europe; Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia & Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania.

Three main transit countries or groups of countries have emerged: Germany and to a lesser extent Italy and the Nordic countries. Looking at the UK and Spain, it appears that both these countries are distribution centres for African countries.

Statistics

The following table indicates the volume of stolen vehicles in the European Union in 2004, but there is a good reason for treating such statistics with some caution. The problem recently identified is the variation in the definition of a vehicle theft between EU Member States. The figures include different types of offences and categories of vehicles in different countries. Some Member States figures, for example the United Kingdom, declare all vehicles when recording thefts, Germany and Italy only record thefts of cars and no other type of vehicle, whilst France records all vehicles except buses and others incorporate motorbikes in their vehicle theft figures.

| Country | Vehicles Stolen | Vehicles Not Recovered |
|----------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Austria | 5,973 | 3,536 |
| Belgium | 19,104 | 8,173 |
| Cyprus | 427 | 225 |
| Czech Republic | 24,230 | 3,786 |
| Denmark | 9,838 | 1,391 |
| Estonia | 1,209 | 625 |
| Finland | 12,353 | 2,469 |
| France | 18,6430 | 11,6472 |
| Germany | | 35,034 |
| Greece | 15,010 | 6,468 |
| Hungary | 7,869 | |
| Ireland | 9,065 | 5,399 |
| Italy | 221,925 | 115,641 |
| Latvia | 3,306 | 1,865 |
| Lithuania | | |
| Luxembourg | 526 | 296 |
| Malta | 825 | 238 |
| Netherlands | 22,989 | 9,598 |
| Poland | 49,701 | 51,319 |
| Portugal | 14,832 | 9,222 |
| Slovakia | 4,801 | 1,107 |
| Slovenia | 1,026 | 380 |
| Spain | 122,248 | 85,001 |
| Sweden | 38,058 | 3,304 |
| United Kingdom | | |
| Total | 771,745 | 455,087 |

(Statistics 2005 - Europol)

Conclusion

The problem of trafficking stolen vehicles still exists and very similar patterns can be found throughout the EU. There is always a market for second-hand vehicles at a cheap price - particularly in those countries which are not so economically developed or do not manufacture vehicles themselves. Certainly, some types of vehicles are valued more than others: four-wheel drive vehicles are in high demand. Moreover, it is also important not to forget lorries and trucks as well as Construction Plant Machinery, which in recent years has also become a target.