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# Wildlife Trafficking: An Emerging Threat to European Security?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Illegal wildlife trade is a multidimensional phenomenon that is present in every state. Although, the repercussions of this criminal activity are mainly linked with biodiversity and the survival of rare species, many dangers occur regarding national and supranational security. Given the fact that wildlife trafficking currently thrives in European states, this paper intends to explain the ways that wildlife trafficking has affected the EU and examine its connection with security strategies. Therefore, the essay proposes specific measures that need to be adopted at European level to bridge the differences among national policies. In the end, concrete assumptions are provided concerning the efficiency of the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in relation with the topic.

**Keywords:** Wildlife Trafficking; European Union; Environmental Crime; Security; European Defense Fund; EU Action Plan; CITES

## Introduction

Wildlife trafficking is a serious transnational crime that poses a threat not only to the environment but also to national and supranational security (Biegus & Bueger, 2017). Albeit that it is primarily linked with African states (UNODC, 2019), incidents of this criminal activity have taken place in EU countries as well, with Belgium and the Netherlands being on top of the list (TRAFFIC, 2020). The EU maintains a neutral position without adopting efficient measures. Given the fact that during the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027), 8 billion euros have been attributed to the European Defense Fund (EDF) (European Commission, 2021), it is time for the Union to revise its security priorities. Bearing in mind this information, this essay aims to respond to the following research question: In which ways wildlife trafficking represents a security threat and how the EU could contribute to the resolution of the problem?

Bearing in mind the importance of this issue, the paper tends to present all the aspects of wildlife trafficking and examine the ineffective European approach towards the problem. The analysis begins with the definition of two crucial terms regarding the issue while a theoretical framework is outlined. In the meantime, certain key figures regarding the issue are cited. In order to understand the importance of the topic area, the repercussions of the issue are thoroughly analyzed, giving great emphasis on the security aspect. Therefore, an important mention of the EU's involvement is

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highlighted, focusing on what has been done so far. The analysis concludes with the provision of specific recommendations to the issue while some final remarks are included.

## **Definitions and Theoretical Framework**

For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to define two terms that are of paramount importance in order to better approach the topic area under discussion:

- **Environmental Crime:** According to EUROPOL (n.d.) an environmental crime «covers a wide range of activities that transgress environmental laws and cause significant harm or risk to the environment, human health or both». These activities refer to the improper collection, transport, recovery and disposal of waste, the killing or trade of protected flora and fauna, the illicit operation of a plant in which a dangerous activity is carried out and the importation or exportation of ozone depleting substances.
- **Wildlife Trafficking:** Wildlife trafficking is defined as a «criminal activity that includes the illegal trade, smuggling, capture or poaching of endangered species or products thereof» (UNODC, 2019). In particular, the exchangeable goods encompass animal derivatives such as corals, reptile skins, timber and fisheries products and live animals as parrots, raptors and primates for the pet trade (Pires & Moreto, 2016).

Bearing in mind that this analysis centralizes its interest on the security repercussions of wildlife trafficking, this essay tries to interpret the EU actions through the theory of Neofunctionalism. More specifically, it focuses on the connection between Neofunctionalism and high politics, regarding security and defense issues, trying to identify the gaps of the European policy making in this area and to propose specific guidelines so as to ameliorate the EU's approach.

As it is well known, Neofunctionalism supports the progressive transfer of state functions at supranational level to achieve the unification of European states (Ifaistos, 2016). This procedure, commonly known as the spill-over effect, prioritizes the enhancement of cooperation, the establishment of international institutions and the ultimate restriction of state sovereignty (Dunn, 2012). According to this theory, integration is firstly carried out in low politics and after in high politics (Ifaistos, 2016). Although the EU has proven its capabilities to unify low politics by reaching bilateral trade agreements with third countries or by the creation of the Customs Union and the Free Trade Association, its efficiency in the discipline of high politics is under discussion.

The reality has proven that wildlife trafficking is a potential threat to national and supranational security. Although it is difficult to conceive how the illegal trade of endangered species and the

conservation of security are linked, this analysis aims to prove their connection and to highlight the necessity of further integration in this security domain. According to the second pillar of the EU that was firstly defined by the “Maastricht Treaty” the promotion of CFSP must be a top priority. By reading this paper it will be clarified if the EU has adopted adequate measures to protect itself from this international threat or if further elaboration in the security field is required.

### **Key figures of illicit wildlife trafficking**

First and foremost, it is important to identify the different parameters that wildlife trafficking consists of. As it is clear from the above definition, wildlife trafficking refers to the sale and exchange of plants and animals (Pires & Moreto, 2016). In order for this business to be as profitable as possible, the traders mistreat and sell at exorbitant prices large quantities of plants, animals and animal derivatives, leaving them at the verge of extinction. According to research made by the European Commission (2015):

- The number of elephants illegally killed has doubled over the past decade and the quantity of ivory seized has tripled.
- The illegal poaching of rhinoceros has escalated in South Africa leading to a serious decline in their population since 2016.
- The total population of tigers has decreased from 100.000 a century ago to less than 3.500 today.
- The average value of rhino horn is approximately 40.000 € per kilo, while the price of 1 kilo of gold is estimated at 31.000 €.
- The value of raw ivory is 620 € per kilo and the value of tiger bones is on average 900 €.
- The global value of illicit trade is estimated at between 10 € and 20 € billion per year.

All these findings prove that wildlife trafficking is a multibillion euros industry driven by an ongoing demand for wildlife products all over the world (European Commission, 2015). The worst feature of this crime is the modus operandi of the traders that is similar to the methods used by drug dealers. The smugglers tend to hide animals or products in concealed compartments in luggage or in their body (Van Uhm, 2016). For example, many smugglers are found in airports with reptiles or birds strapped around their legs or with turtles squeezed in their luggage (Van Uhm, 2016). As a result, these animals are kept for hours captured without access to water or food and with their survival being at stake.

## The impact of Illicit Wildlife Trade

Illegal wildlife trade might lead to severe repercussions from the deterioration of biodiversity to security and public health risks. Although many things could be said about the impact of wildlife trafficking, this research analyzes the security aspect of the problem, as an example to illustrate the inefficiency of the EU to achieve an immediate integration in the domain of high politics. Also, given the fact that the world is currently plagued by the COVID 19 pandemic, the connection between wildlife trade and human illnesses will be presented.

To begin with, illicit wildlife trade represents a clear threat to national and thus, supranational security. According to a recent Interpol report (2016), 80% of governments worldwide stated that this environmental crime is a top security priority. The main reason behind this belief is that wildlife trade functions as a method of funding for criminal groups such as Boko Haram and Al Shabaab (Royce, 2018). In particular, this industry attracts the interest of international crime networks since the risk of detection and the sanctions provided for are different from state to state and insignificant in comparison with the potential revenue (Felbab & Brown, 2018). It is no coincidence that illegal wildlife trade is among top three illicit enterprises along with drug trafficking and firearms smuggling with an estimated annual value between 10 to 20 billion € (Barber-Meyer, 2010).

In reality, this technique mainly appears in failed states where official governments and national sovereignty are absent. Nonetheless, we must bear in mind that we live in a world without borders in which the circulation of goods, people and capital is unlimited and uncontrollable. Recent history has proven that Western world has often been the center of attention for criminal groups which spread the terror by killing thousands of innocent people. To eradicate this threat and prevent any future massacre, the responsible decision-making bodies need to focus on tackling the problem from its roots. As a result, in the European context, member-states need to prioritize the fight against wildlife trafficking since it constitutes a form of organized crime, the elimination of which could promote further integration.

Apart from the security threats, wildlife trafficking is considered as the prime source of the coronavirus outbreak. It is a matter of fact that the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of emerging diseases are transmitted directly from animals to humans (Bauer-Babef, 2021). Moreover, in February 2021, China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress recognized that the source of coronavirus is possibly linked with the consumption of wild animals' meat (Izquierdo, 2020). All this information generates the following question: If wildlife trafficking was regulated and prevented by international actors as the EU, could the pandemic have been averted?

## The illicit wildlife trade in the EU region

It is no surprise that this type of illegal trade thrives in developing states either in Asia or Africa. However, wildlife trafficking is also an emerging criminal activity in developed countries. To make things worse, the EU is currently the third largest importer of wildlife trafficking (Bauer-Babef, 2021), while it is also a major transit hub and a final destination for these products (Banos-Ruiz, 2017). The incentives for the spread of this trade in European developed states vary. First of all, in the context of globalization, the extensive use of the internet functions as a channel which facilitates the conduct of illegal activities without being detectable. On the other hand, the establishment of a common market has resulted in fewer controls on wildlife trade within the EU region (UNODC, 2016), meaning that it is de facto difficult to separate the legal from the illegal trade. In the meantime, for the vast majority of European states, wildlife trafficking is a low political priority (UNODC, 2016). For this reason, the risk of detection stays low, while the predicted penalties are light in relation with the enormous value of animal and plant derivatives.

Given the fact that illegal trade is a hidden activity, the access to reliable data about the scale and the total value of the market is a difficult procedure. Nonetheless, according to a recent report of the European Commission (2016) approximately 2000 live reptiles, corals and ivory quantities were seized in EU borders within a period of only a year. In addition, the known proportion of the exchanged fauna and flora represents around 10% to 15% of the total wildlife products in illicit trade (Banos-Ruis, 2017), meaning that the unknown dimensions of the problem are even greater with their repercussions being unpredictable. In order to have a spherical view of the EU's wildlife trafficking, the following graph presents the main trade routes and partners of the Union.

**Figure 1: Routes of wildlife trafficking across Europe**



Source: Europa (in Banos-Ruiz, 2017)

Albeit that various endangered species are either imported or exported from the EU, the main concern is the trafficking of the glass eel (*Anguilla-Anguilla*) – a “catadromous” fish that is born and raised in European wetlands (European Commission, n.d.a). The production of eel-meat is a multi-billion euros industry in Europe, since its demand is extremely high in Asian food markets (UNODC, 2016). Due to the huge exploitation of this industry, the EU, in 2010, was obliged to prohibit every export of this kind from its borders. However, this form of illegal trade has taken great dimensions today while its annual value is estimated close to 50 million € (European Parliament, 2019).

It is pivotal to clarify that this trade and in general these illicit transactions are taking place in European states that are the de jure inspirators of the creation of the EU. On the one hand, in Belgium, live animals such as reptiles and birds are traded illegally online. Only in 2020, 106 suspicious posts from 65 different sellers were recorded in Belgium (TRAFFIC, 2020). These posts were mainly found on social media (25%) and wildlife specialist websites (50%) in which the access was feasible to every internet user (TRAFFIC, 2020). On the other hand, the Netherlands is a crucial final market and a transit hub for illegal trade. Between 2001 and 2015, 14% of the total seizures in the EU took place in the Netherlands (European Parliament, 2016). At the same time, 250 traders and 640 private individuals are involved in the Dutch illegal industry.

The EU is confronted with a serious impediment to the achievement of its supranational integration. Bearing in mind that the final target of the EU is the establishment of a fully integrated union – both in low and high politics, the responsible authority organs should not neglect the security aspect of the issue and thus, focus on adopting feasible and efficient measures in this domain.

### **Actions of the EU to combat illicit wildlife trade**

Throughout the years, the EU has launched a series of initiatives to address the issue of illicit wildlife trade. The most important legal action is the adoption of the “EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trade” which entered into force in 2016 and lasted until 2020. The Action Plan has three main points of interest: the more effective prevention of wildlife trafficking and the concentration on its roots, the better enforcement of existing rules referring to this type of trade and the enhanced cooperation among source, transit and consumer countries against wildlife trade (European Commission, 2016). By recognizing all the dimensions of the issue – including the security one, the Action Plan contains in total, 12 aims and 32 actions that need to be fulfilled until the Plan is in force (European Commission, 2016).

As it highlighted by the recent Progress Review of the European Commission (2018) the Action Plan proposes innovative guidelines to the member states but simultaneously, several points that need further enhancement exist. In particular, the EU Plan does not include indicators or quantified data and targets. As a result, the monitoring and the evaluation remains a difficult procedure (Lemaître & Hervé-Fournereau, 2020). Moreover, the proposed commitments are generic and broad, meaning that concrete actions to combat wildlife trafficking are not guaranteed (Lemaître & Hervé-Fournereau, 2020). Albeit that the EU Action Plan is an important legal framework for the definition of the problem, future improvement is necessary.

On the other hand, since 2015, the EU is a party of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). The CITES is the most well-known Convention at international level that protects 5.000 rare animals and 29.000 plants (CITES, n.d.). It was signed in 1973 among 80 states and entered into force in 1975 (European Commission, n.d.b). The basic aim of this Convention is to guarantee that international trade of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival (European Commission, n.d.b). To achieve this, the CITES subjects international trade of selected species to certain controls, based on a categorization of species in three Appendices. In particular, the Appendix A is the most strictly controlled list that contains species threatened with extinction while the Appendix C is the least strict category (CITES, n.d.). At the EU level, the CITES is implemented via the EU Wildlife Trade Regulations which contain EC No. 338/97, EC No. 865/2006 and EC No. 338/97. These provisions define how wildlife trade should be conducted at European level and which restrictions can be applied by the EU Commission (European Commission, n.d.b).

Although the CITES is an essential agreement for the protection of wild species at international level, several concerns regarding its efficiency arise. At this point, it is important to clarify that the Convention cannot substitute national laws. Albeit that CITES is a legally binding treaty to the Parties, it does not predict sanctions in case of non-compliance with its obligations. As a result, plenty of states have not tightened their legal framework and thus, illegal transactions of wildlife trade are multiplied. In the meantime, the CITES' main concern is to protect biodiversity by guaranteeing the survival of the endangered species (CITES, n.d.). In this way, it is evident that this Convention does not encompass measures for other areas of the issue apart from safeguarding sustainability. Hence, the security aspect of wildlife trafficking is neglected.

It is evident that the EU focuses more on promoting soft power measures rather than adopting strict to guarantee its safety. Given the fact that the EU has not the exclusive competence neither in the security nor in the environmental domain, this approach is completely reasonable. Nonetheless, political commitments must turn into actions. To achieve this, the EU shall radically modify its



actions by providing a concrete common policy which must be embodied and respected by national authorities.

## **Recommendations**

Since Environmental Policy is a shared competence of the EU, constructive cooperation between European legislative bodies and member states is imperative in the fight against wildlife trafficking. Today, the expiration of the EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking is a great opportunity for the adoption of new concrete orientations and the expansion of the already existing ones in order to eradicate this environmental threat. Bearing in mind the aforementioned gaps in EU policies, the researcher proposes the creation of special scoreboards and indicators included in EU annual reports concerning the progress made in this field. In particular, these scoreboards will analyze which states consider wildlife trafficking as a “serious environmental crime” – term defined by the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, what type of sanctions are predicted by each country and how many animals, animal derivatives or plants are seized by each member state annually. This method could be a useful tool for the decision-making organs to propose new policies or changes to existing programs.

Furthermore, during the European Semester, specific guidelines should be provided for the proper distribution of the national budget in the fight against environmental crimes based on the aforementioned reports. For the time being, the majority of states still consider illicit wildlife trade as a low political priority. As a result, a small part of the provided European funds are devoted towards this orientation. In contrast, the guidelines, defined during the European Semester, should underline the potential security risks to national sovereignty and the amount of money that needs to be invested in this field, as well. Only in this way it will be possible to guarantee a common European political direction and thus, contribute to the elimination of the problem. Lastly, given the fact that the issue of wildlife trafficking has a clear security aspect, adequate funds should be provided via the EDF to the member states for the period 2021-2027. More specifically, approximately 5.3 billion euros have been allocated to the EDF in order to invest them in collaborative capability development projects (European Commission, 2021). These funds could ameliorate the quality and increase the quantity of the controls in the European borders so as to facilitate the detection of suspicious transactions and thus, limit the illicit trade.

## **Conclusions**

All in all, these solutions could be part of a long-term strategy that combines the elimination of environmental crimes with the strengthening of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Although the CFSP remains a European policy, it has specific terms that restricts its supranational nature. The states remain a key-component to the CFSP since the intergovernmental bodies of the EU (Council of the EU and the European Council) are the basic tools for the policy making process in this field. In addition, according to article 17 of the TEU, in order to complete its operational tasks, the EU shall use “capabilities provided by the member states”, implying the lack of a European army that clearly undermines an effective integration in issues of high politics. For all these reasons, Europe will continue to evolve at different speeds with the adoption of a uniform approach towards security topics being an idealistic concept for the near future.

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