Report

December 2025

WEAPONS COMPASS

Proliferation and Control of Arms and Ammunition in Wartime Ukraine

CENSS
Center for Security Studies

small arms survey

WEAPONS COMPASS

Proliferation and Control of Arms and Ammunition in Wartime Ukraine

A joint report by the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS', with financial support from the German Federal Foreign Office

Credits

Published in Switzerland by the Small Arms Survey

First published in December 2025

Citation: Schroeder, Matt, Taras Fedirko, Gergely Hideg, Viktoriia Voronina, Vadym Chernysh, Aline Shaban, and Nicolas Florquin. 2025. *Weapons Compass: Proliferation and Control of Arms and Ammunition in Wartime Ukraine*. Geneva and Kyiv: Small Arms Survey and Center for Security Studies 'CENSS'.

Project coordination: Aline Shaban (Small Arms Survey) and Viktoriia Voronina (CENSS)

Editors: Mira Fey, Nicolas Florquin, and Aline Shaban

Production and communications coordination:
Olivia Denonville, Katie Lazaro, and Lionel Kosirnik

Fact-checkers: François Fabry and Lionel Kosirnik

Copy-editor: Alessandra Allen

Design and layout: Rick Jones

Cartography: Lisa Gaetjens Cartography

Proofreader: Stephanie Huitson

ISBN 978-2-940747-21-4

The Small Arms Survey and CENSS take no position regarding the status or name of countries or territories mentioned in this publication.

Cover photo: An instructor holds a rifle during a firearm training for civilians, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, 29 April 2022. Source: Elena Tita (www.elenatita.com)

About the Ukraine project

The project 'Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risks of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation from the Russian War of Aggression' is a joint initiative implemented by the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS', in partnership with other experts working on arms monitoring and control. It seeks to provide policymakers, practitioners, and the public with timely, relevant, and high-quality research on various aspects of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Ukraine. It does so by maintaining a baseline data set of arms seizures and producing regular publications on illicit arms, public perceptions of arms proliferation and security, and weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine. It also promotes information exchange and learning on small arms proliferation matters among a growing and inclusive network of Ukrainian practitioners, academics, and NGOs working on security issues.

For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org/project/supporting-ukraine-addressing-salw-proliferation-risks.

About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors and projects can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website.

For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

About the Center for Security Studies ‘CENSS’

The Center for Security Studies ‘CENSS’ is a non-governmental organization that conducts research and provides expertise on national and international security issues. CENSS analyses threats, develops recommendations, and creates tools for conflict prevention and resolution, and the promotion of peace as a global objective.

Bringing together specialists in security, international relations, media, law, and sociology, the Center collaborates with local and international experts to strengthen democratic institutions and societal resilience. Its mission is to support governments and organizations in protecting democratic order, sovereignty, and human rights, while enhancing the quality of security policies.

Through multidisciplinary research, CENSS identifies vulnerabilities, designs strategies for crisis response, and builds the capacity of institutions to manage threats and foster stable, resilient communities.

For more information, please visit: https://censs.org.

About the authors

Vadym Chernysh is an expert in intelligence studies, national security, and conflict resolution with extensive experience in both academic and governmental roles. In 2012, he co-founded the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS', where he currently serves as head of the Governing Council. His governmental experience includes serving as minister for temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine from 2016 to 2019. He was also a negotiator in the Minsk peace process, addressing the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Vadym holds a PhD in Law, with a dissertation focusing on control over Ukraine's intelligence agencies. He teaches the author's course 'National Security' for master's students in Public Administration and Conflict Resolution and Mediation.

Taras Fedirko is a political and economic anthropologist studying how social movements organize to transform war economies, political institutions, and capitalist value and labour regimes. He is a lecturer (assistant professor) at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, and senior research fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

Gergely Hideg is a survey specialist and methodology adviser to the Survey. He has advised a multitude of international clients on statistical issues. He has conducted multi-country, policy-relevant quantitative social research and statistical surveys—with a focus on living and working conditions, well-being, crime victimization, and discrimination—for the European Union, the UN, and other international clients. Currently, he is also advising and collaborating with research institutes, including Ipsos and several international organizations.

Maryna Maleoniuk (a pseudonym) is a journalist, social researcher, and filmmaker based in Ukraine. Her work focuses on homelessness, social inequality, and informal economy of war.

Matt Schroeder is a senior researcher at the Survey where he studies the illicit proliferation of small arms and strategies for mitigating the threat. His recent work has focused on illicit proliferation in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Europe, and the Caribbean.

He is a specialist in image-based weapons identification and the analysis of both restricted and open-source seizure data sets, and in mining court documents for firearm-related data. He holds a master's degree in International Security Policy from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

Viktoriia Voronina is executive director of CENSS and former deputy minister for temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, with extensive experience in public administration and security policy. Since 2019, she has managed CENSS initiatives in small arms and light weapons control and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; social cohesion; resilience; and countering hybrid threats. Working as an expert with international organizations—including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—and an adviser to the minister of veterans' affairs (2023–24), she also lectures in the Public Administration Department at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute.

Aline Shaban is an associate researcher at the Survey with a background in transnational organized crime, criminology, and human rights. Her work and publications centre on the prevention of the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons, with a focus on civilian firearm registries and craft firearms production. She coordinates the Survey's multi-year project on Ukraine that supported this Report. Aline holds an MA in International Relations and Political Science from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and a BA in International Criminal Justice from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

Nicolas Florquin is the Survey's head of data and analytics and a senior researcher. He employs innovative mixed methods to generate a better understanding of the illicit proliferation of small arms and its effects, illicit markets, and armed actors' self-governance mechanisms. He led the Survey's recent research on the illicit proliferation of privately made firearms and ammunition in Europe, and has overseen the implementation of several projects dealing with Ukraine since 2014. He holds a PhD from the University of Brighton's School of Applied Social Sciences.

Preface

Shortly after the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS' strengthened their ongoing partnership to tackle the challenges posed by the widespread circulation of weapons resulting from the war. Our shared motivation led to a new project in 2023 aimed at generating timely and policy-relevant analysis and strengthening capacities among Ukrainian experts to address wartime weapons proliferation. This Report presents the results of this joint analysis and identifies actionable policy recommendations for the short-, medium-, and long-term future of Ukraine.

Ukraine's long-term security and democratic resilience depend not only on the strength of its armed forces, but also on the capacity of its institutions to manage the unprecedented flow of weapons and ammunition generated by the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion. As millions of arms circulate across active front lines and liberated territories, the risks of diversion and illicit proliferation are significant. Weapons abandoned in combat, captured from retreating forces, or exploited by opportunistic smugglers have already begun to spread beyond conflict areas. Without sustained and coordinated action, these flows could grow as the conflict evolves—undermining public safety, empowering criminal networks, and complicating reconstruction, governance, and the consolidation of the rule of law.

Experience from other post-conflict settings shows that the unchecked spread of weapons can hinder recovery for years. For Ukraine and its partners, addressing this challenge is essential to building a stable and secure peace. Support must extend beyond military assistance to include strengthening arms control systems, recovering and registering abandoned or lost weapons, and expanding law enforcement and judicial capacities to investigate trafficking networks. A wide range of international actors have already contributed to these efforts, yet the scale and complexity of the threat demand continued long-term engagement.

Several areas have emerged as especially critical. Increasing the operational capacity of law enforcement, border, and customs agencies remains central, as these insti-

tutions are on the front line of detecting, interdicting, and tracing illicit weapons. Ukrainian authorities have shown a strong commitment to addressing this issue, but additional training, equipment, and technical resources are required to sustain and expand their ability to disrupt trafficking networks. At the same time, the development and use of robust data and analysis are vital; without accurate and timely information on the scale, patterns, and drivers of illicit flows, policy responses risk being slow, fragmented, or poorly targeted.

A comprehensive review of firearms legislation is also needed. Current discussions increasingly focus on aligning Ukrainian law with international standards while considering the future security implications of the country's growing population of veterans. Regional cooperation is equally important, however, as trafficking networks operate across borders. Deeper intelligence sharing and coordinated operations with neighbouring states will be essential for reducing illicit flows.

Efforts to control weapons must also extend beyond state institutions. Strengthening local governance and supporting community-based initiatives can help address the drivers of armed violence, reinforce resilience in conflict-affected areas, and ensure that social and mental health needs—often intensified by prolonged conflict—are met. Finally, all these measures require consistent, long-term funding. The challenge of arms proliferation will continue even after the end of active hostilities, and sustained investment will be necessary to maintain not only Ukraine's infrastructure to mitigate the threats posed by conventional weapons, but also regional cooperation mechanisms.

The analysis that follows rests on a central premise: securing Ukraine's future requires both prevailing in the current conflict and preventing the spread of weapons that could endanger peace long after the fighting ends. This Report supports that effort.

Mark Downes
Director
Small Arms Survey

Vadym Chernysh
Head of the Governing Council
Center for Security Studies 'CENSS'

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the assistance and support of numerous individuals and institutions. The authors are indebted to:

- members of the project's international advisory committee who kindly provided guidance and feedback to the project and the Report in their personal capacities: Gediminas Bronius, Ievgen Chernikov, Nils Duquet, Olena Kryzhanivska, Matthew Light, Oleksandr Panchenko, Ivaylo Stefanov, Adriana Toston Diez, and Yuliya Zabyelina;
- members of the Ukrainian Networking Group of experts, established under this project, whose research activities, engagement during workshops, and feedback fed directly into the Report: Viktoriia Bass, Mykola Bednarchuck, Bohdan Bondarenko, Oleksandr Bukhanevych, Oleksandr Dolozhevsky, Ivan Doronin, Serhiy Gordienko, Yuriy Khatnyuk, Roman Kirey, Anna Kolokhina, Oleksandr Kolomiytsev, Maksym Kryvonos, Olga Merdova, Oleksandr Moskalyuk, Natalia Nestor, Oleksandr Samoilenko, Mykhailo Savliuk, Nadiya Stefaniv, Timur Tsapko, Georgy Uchaykin, Mariana Verkhoturova, Dmytro Vyhovsky, Andriy Zakharchenko, and Serhiy Zlakoman;
- officials of the Ukrainian government, other states, and regional and international institutions who shared their data, perspectives, and feedback on our analysis at various stages of the project—we are particularly grateful to Oleksiy Melnyk, Amael Kotlarski, Damien Spleeters, Vitalii Kasap, and Iryna Reformator for their reviews of different chapters of the Report; and
- Ipsos Ukraine for their professional and timely implementation of the general population surveys administered for this project.

The Center for Security Studies 'CENSS' is grateful to Dariia Polovnikova, Myroslava Chykaliuk, Nataliia Antonova, and Serhii Zlakoman.

The Small Arms Survey would like to thank Marco Baccini, Gianluca Boo, Luc Chounet-Cambas, Luigi De Martino, Olivia Denonville, Mark Downes, Anne-Severine Fabre, Nathalie Fauvarque, Alizée Henry, Julien Joly, Lionel Kosirnik, Katie Lazaro, Marion Maadoune, Ximena Puentes, and Callum Watson for their support at various stages of the project.

This study was made possible thanks to the financial support of the German Federal Foreign Office. The Report also benefited from insights gained through additional research activities supported by Norwegian People's Aid and the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

Contents

List of boxes, figures, maps, and tables

Boxes

Figures

Maps

Tables

List of abbreviations and acronyms

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
APS	Active protection system
ATGM	Anti-tank guided missile
CAR	Conflict Armament Research
CENSS	Center for Security Studies
CS	Confidential source
DSPU	Department of the State Protection of Ukraine
EU	European Union
EUAM	European Union Advisory Mission
Europol	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
GBV	Gender-based violence
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
LSGB	Local self-government body
MANPADS	Man-portable air defence system(s)
NLAW	Next-generation light anti-tank weapon
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade
SSU	Security Service of Ukraine
UAH	Ukrainian hryvnia
URW	Unified Register of Weapons of Ukraine
USD	United States dollar
VFTC	Voluntary formation of territorial community

Executive summary

Since February 2022, the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion has killed and wounded thousands of Ukrainians, displaced millions more, and destroyed critical infrastructure throughout the country. Both sides have deployed vast quantities of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition (hereafter 'arms and ammunition') to the front lines, some of which have been lost and abandoned by combatants and subsequently found and stockpiled by civilians over the course of the war. These weapons include military-grade firearms, grenades, and recent-generation portable missiles and rockets that could pose an acute threat to national and regional security should they be diverted or trafficked to criminals or violent extremists. Faced with the daunting challenge of fending off a much larger aggressor state while also protecting its people from the deadly detritus of the war, the Ukrainian government and its partners in the region require timely and reliable analysis in order to develop effective measures to anticipate and address the illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition.

This Report provides an analysis of trends in the proliferation of arms and ammunition in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, as well as efforts to control this proliferation. Prepared in the framework of a joint project of the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS', it relies on a range of data sources and research methods, including official seizure and crime data, quantitative population surveys, and field-based interviews with combatants. Insights from this data were converted into policy observations relevant to the Ukrainian government, international partners, and other key stakeholders.

The Report begins by assessing the extent to which the war of aggression has affected the proliferation of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine, in terms of the quantities and types of weapons seized, as well as the sources of these items. It examines the management and control of 'trophy weapons' that troops capture or recover in (post-)battle zones, and the extent to which such armaments represent a source of diversion to illicit markets. The Report also analyses how Ukrainian civilians perceive the availability of firearms and the associated regulatory framework, along with the broader implications for crime, security, and safety. The Report concludes by reviewing the main elements of Ukraine's existing national regulatory framework on arms and ammunition and possible improvements needed to tackle the multiplicity of proliferation challenges arising from the war.

Key findings

- Ukrainian government data reveals significant changes in arms and ammunition seizures since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Seizures of light weapons (such as grenades, rocket launchers, and mines) have more than doubled and occurred across all regions of Ukraine, while seizures of civilian weapons (such as shotguns and gas and pneumatic weapons) have declined since 2022.
- The Russian security apparatus contributes both directly to illicit flows in Ukraine through the pre-positioning of arms caches for use in covert operations, the arming of proxy forces in the east, and the direct transfer of weapons to Ukrainian civilians, and indirectly through the loss and abandonment of Russian weapons on the battlefield and in adjacent areas.
- There is little evidence to support claims by the Russian government and pro-Russian media that a large percentage of Western weapons imported by Ukraine are being diverted to armed groups and criminals. Western hand grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, and portable missiles comprise only a small percentage of all seized weapons, and allegations of international trafficking from Ukraine analysed by the Survey were found to be erroneous, unsubstantiated, or exaggerated.
- There is also limited evidence that trophy weapons recovered by Ukrainian forces on the battlefield have been redirected to illicit markets. Despite some legally confirmed cases of diversion and trafficking, the circulation of unregistered trophy weapons remains mainly limited to the front line. A change in the overall course of the war may, however, increase the risk of diversion of unaccounted-for weapons.
- The war of aggression has not resulted in a significant surge in civilian firearm possession in Ukraine. In fact, self-reported household firearm possession has remained stable compared with pre-invasion levels.
- Veterans and combatants are generally far more likely to own and carry firearms and to support more permissive firearms laws than other Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians, however, and in particular women and non-combatants, continue to favour tight firearms regulations and prefer a return to the pre-war restrictive regime once the war ends.
- Ukraine currently regulates different categories of firearms—such as civilian-owned weapons, trophy firearms, and those possessed by voluntary formations of territorial communities—through various legal acts. These regulations are fragmented, however, and do not cover all requirements set under the European Union (EU) Firearms Directive.
- While the newly established Unified Register of Weapons (URW) represents a step forward in accounting for legally owned firearms, and efforts to centralize the record-keeping of state stockpiles are emerging, there is no unified weapons seizure database to enable a comprehensive analysis of the illicit arms landscape.

Policy observations

The following policy observations draw on the Report's research findings as well as inputs provided by experts from diverse backgrounds who participated in the project's International Advisory Committee and Ukrainian Networking Group. These observations are organized by tier:

- tier 1 highlights immediate priorities in the current war context;
- tier 2 comprises medium-term actions that support and maximize the impact of the priorities identified in tier 1; and
- tier 3 focuses on longer-term structural reforms.

Unless stated otherwise, these recommendations are addressed to the Ukrainian government, with support from its international partners when appropriate.

Tier 1: Urgent priorities in the war context	**Tier 2: Medium-term actions supporting tier 1 priorities**	**Tier 3: Structural and other long-term measures**
• Address all major sources of illicit weapons, not just Ukrainian government stocks • Secure hidden and abandoned caches in de-occupied areas and near the line of contact • Ensure trophy weapons are registered and accounted for • Adopt a comprehensive legal framework on civilian firearm possession and small arms control • Maximize the use of the Unified Register of Weapons • Invest in comprehensive public awareness and risk prevention efforts	• Tailor controls on trophy weapons to the type of armament, with a particular focus on ammunition • Mitigate the risk of armed violence linked to mental health problems • Ensure legislative and regulatory coherence on firearm possession and violent crime, including gender-based violence (GBV) • Increase the capacity of NGOs and the media to counter misinformation about arms trafficking • Increase the amount of data on, and imagery of, illicit arms and ammunition • Raise the evidentiary bar for media outlets and prominent social media reporting on claims about arms trafficking and diversion	• Embed arms control within a broader and more inclusive public safety policy • Intensify national dialogue and awareness campaigns on firearm risks, safety, and control • Clarify institutional mandates and strengthen coordination mechanisms • Strengthen central monitoring and risk assessment systems for illicit arms flows • Enable oversight with disaggregated data • Anticipate challenges for demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of veterans • Recognize that illicit weapons in Ukraine pose the greatest risk to Ukrainian civilians, soldiers, and police officers

Tier 1: Urgent priorities in the war context

- **Address all major sources of illicit weapons, not just Ukrainian government stocks** (Chapter 1): While it is important to further safeguard government stocks, this should be done in tandem with—not in lieu of—programmes to address other sources of illicit weapons in Ukraine, including caches of lost, abandoned, and pre-positioned weapons.
- **Identify and dispose of hidden and abandoned caches in de-occupied areas and near the line of contact** (Chapter 1): Seventy per cent of seizures from individuals or groups engaged in illegal arms sales, and at least eight out of ten of the largest seizures from traffickers, involved arms or ammunition that were scavenged or found in these areas. Securing these items would remove a major source of illicit weapons, and particularly light weapons, in Ukraine.
- **Ensure trophy weapons are registered and accounted for** (Chapter 2): The Government of Ukraine and Ukraine's defence forces should incentivize the official registration and control of trophy weapons to reduce diversion and trafficking risks—including by reducing red tape for trophy registration without weakening controls; making it easier to keep records of weapons stocks, for instance through digital tools; and offering rewards and recognition for troops registering trophies. These efforts should also address the root causes of informal possession of trophy weapons by troops—for instance by ensuring regular and reliable supplies of arms and ammunition, and reforming rules concerning accountability for state-issued weapons.
- **Adopt a comprehensive legal framework on civilian firearm possession and small arms control** (Chapter 4): The Ukrainian government should regulate the key aspects of small arms circulation—including licensing, possession, transfer, and the legal status of trophy and award weapons, along with weapons held by voluntary formations of territorial communities (VFTCs)—while ensuring that related criminal liability and penalties are addressed through corresponding amendments to the Criminal Code and other applicable legal acts. The legal framework and relevant terminology should be harmonized with EU and UN standards.
- **Maximize the use of the URW** (Chapters 3 and 4): Several hundreds of thousands of firearms have already been registered in the URW, which can serve as a powerful tool for prevention if fully utilized by police, prosecutors, and courts. Real-time updates and mandatory use across agencies would help to ensure consistent data for both law enforcement and policymaking.
- **Invest in comprehensive public awareness and risk prevention efforts** (Chapter 3): Firearm safety efforts cannot rely solely on regulation and training for a limited number. Ukraine should launch broad-based public information campaigns that highlight the risks to other family members of keeping firearms in the household,

and instil a stronger safety culture in the handling and storing of weapons by civilian firearm holders. In order to support implementation and oversight of these efforts, tailored training on firearm safety should be made available to all affected groups, including women, youth, civil society organizations, and social workers. For firearm owners, the URW could potentially serve as a valuable touchpoint for disseminating this information, especially if registration or periodic renewal involves regular contact between owners and government authorities.

Tier 2: Medium-term actions supporting tier 1 priorities

- **Set up a working group to better tailor controls on trophy weapons to the type of armament, with a particular focus on ammunition** (Chapter 2): The Government of Ukraine (the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Defence) should set up a multi-stakeholder working group on trophy weapons, including key stakeholders such as service people from across the ranks of the military and law enforcement, as well as civil society actors and researchers. The working group could support Ukraine's defence forces by identifying ways to tailor controls to the specific uses and exchange patterns of different types of captured arms and ammunition. Special attention should be paid to improving documentation of 'bulk' items such as ammunition, explosives, landmine components, and unmarked weapon parts, which are inherently harder to track.
- **Mitigate the risk of armed violence linked to mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder** (Chapter 3): Authorized users with no history of armed violence may be at risk of using their weapons to harm themselves and others as a result of a decline in mental health, which can also be linked to conflict experiences. Providing tools to enable mental health practitioners to identify at-risk firearm owners and recommend the rapid suspension of firearms licences can help mitigate this risk.
- **Ensure legislative and regulatory coherence on firearms possession and violent crime, including GBV** (Chapter 3): Harmonizing legislation on violent crime (including gender-based violence, GBV) and firearms regulations is important when it comes to preventing and responding to violence committed with arms and ammunition. One approach is to ensure that previous warnings, convictions, or accusations against applicants for firearms licences are considered in decisions related to previously approved civilian firearms licences. Ensuring the suspension of weapons licences when there is deemed to be a risk of GBV would align with Ukraine's obligations under the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011, art. 51.2).
- **Increase the capacity of NGOs and the media to counter misinformation about arms trafficking in Ukraine** (Chapter 1). Countering misinformation is significantly more time-consuming than generating it, which puts the Ukrainian government at

a disadvantage vis-à-vis their Russian counterparts and their proxies. Eliminating that advantage requires greater investment in the capacity of independent experts and the media to conduct robust, data-driven research and analysis of the illicit flows of arms and ammunition in and from Ukraine, and to disseminate the findings of this research widely.

- **Increase the amount of detailed data on, and imagery of, illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine** (Chapter 1): The Ukrainian government is already a global leader in the collection and public dissemination of data, information, and imagery of seized and trafficked weapons, and should be lauded for this accomplishment. At the same time, Ukrainian authorities should consider making key details about seized items available more consistently, namely their make, model, calibre, date of manufacture, and serial/lot numbers. Posting more unredacted photos of the seized items and their markings online would be a relatively easy way to convey these details.
- **Raise the evidentiary bar among media outlets and prominent social media accounts reporting on claims about arms trafficking and diversion** (Chapter 1): Claims of large-scale, systematic trafficking of arms and ammunition by Ukrainian authorities have spread widely despite a lack of externally verifiable evidence. These claims are part of a broader effort to discredit the Ukrainian government and undermine support for military aid for Ukraine, which succeed, in part, because of a willingness of some Western media outlets and influential social media accounts to repeat these claims despite the absence of evidence. Media and social media accounts should refrain from publishing and reposting such claims, and their readership should hold them accountable when they do.

Tier 3: Structural and other long-term measures

- **Embed arms control within a broader and more inclusive public safety policy** (Chapters 3 and 4): The design of a long-term small arms control policy should be based on an inclusive, evidence-based multi-stakeholder process in which diverse groups all have a stake—both groups that support responsible firearm ownership, including hunters and the veteran population, and those that support strict regulation, including women's rights organizations. The policy should also recognize small arms control as a cross-cutting issue affecting not only law enforcement, but also broader concerns around public security, veteran reintegration, youth education, cultural programming, and local governance. The policy should finally address underlying social and psychological dimensions of firearm ownership.
- **Intensify national dialogue and awareness campaigns on firearm risks, safety, and control** (Chapter 4). The participation of civil society, think tanks, and aca-

demic institutions should be encouraged in policy development and evaluation processes. Comparative research, sociological studies, and international learning (for example, from Kosovo, Australia, and EU countries) should guide long-term policy development.

- **Clarify institutional mandates and strengthen coordination mechanisms on small arms control** (Chapter 4). Clear responsibilities should be defined across ministries, law enforcement, local self-government bodies (LSGBs), and civilian agencies. The Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition should be given legal authority and resources, and a formal structure should be designated to serve as the national focal point on arms control.
- **Strengthen central monitoring and risk assessment systems for illicit arms flows** (Chapter 4): A centralized mechanism should be designed for the continuous monitoring of illicit weapons. Indicators should be developed and applied consistently to evaluate trafficking risks, track weapons flows, and assess the effectiveness of regulatory measures over time.
- **Enable oversight of small arms control efforts with disaggregated data** (Chapter 3): Effective small arms control requires not just strong laws and policies, but also the ability of stakeholders, such as ministries, parliamentarians, civil society, research institutions, and the media, to independently analyse illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition, assess the applicability of current and proposed policies for reducing this proliferation, and oversee the implementation of these policies. Disaggregating national statistics on violent crime by weapon type and legal status would help to assess whether policies are having their desired effect. When this data is also disaggregated by age, gender, and other characteristics relevant in the Ukrainian context, it can assist in the development of tailored prevention strategies for at-risk groups. Furthermore, population surveys such as those undertaken for this Report can help track shifts in possession of, demand for, and attitudes about firearms over time. Consequently, additional population surveys should be commissioned on a regular basis.
- **Anticipate challenges for demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of veterans** (Chapter 3): Although Ukraine has thus far succeeded in avoiding mass proliferation of firearms among civilians, ensuring this in the future will involve taking pre-emptive measures to prevent the diversion of weapons from military and other armed groups on both sides of the border, once the war subsides. Future disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts should focus not only on systematically collecting issued and captured weapons from demobilized personnel, but also on addressing the factors driving demand for firearms, particularly for illicit purposes. These efforts should include tackling legitimate security concerns—such as the rising criminal use of firearms—to help strengthen trust in law enforcement and reduce the perceived need for personal or community-based self-defence.

- **Recognize that illicit weapons in Ukraine pose the greatest risk to Ukrainian civilians, soldiers, and police officers** (Chapter 1): Most international media coverage of illicit weapons in Ukraine focuses on potential international trafficking and the harm it would cause, but the data is unequivocal on who is most at risk from these weapons, which have proliferated in large quantities to every oblast of Ukraine. Minimizing international trafficking from Ukraine is important, but not more important than reducing the risk these weapons pose to Ukrainians. Fortunately, there is significant overlap in control measures to address domestic and international trafficking. These measures should be prioritized by the donor community.

> “This Report provides an empirical analysis of weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion.”

Introduction

Nicolas Florquin and Aline Shaban

Since February 2022, the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion has killed and wounded thousands of Ukrainians, displaced millions more, and destroyed critical infrastructure throughout the country (UNHCR, 2025). The war of aggression also laid bare the limitations of existing arms and ammunition norms and agreements, which provide little practical guidance on securing weapons in conflict zones. When the war ends, Ukraine will have to not only care for its wounded, rebuild its infrastructure, and resettle millions of displaced people, but also collect and dispose of the vast quantities of arms and ammunition lost and abandoned by combatants and stockpiled by civilians over the course of the war. These weapons include a range of small arms and light weapons, including automatic rifles, grenades, and rocket launchers, as well as latest-generation portable missiles and rockets that, if acquired by terrorist or criminal groups, would pose an acute threat to national and international security.

Faced with these daunting challenges, Ukraine and its partners in the region require timely and reliable analysis in order to develop effective measures and assess their effectiveness. In this vein, the Small Arms Survey and CENSS, with support from the German Federal Foreign Office, partnered in 2023 to implement the project 'Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risks of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation from the Russian War of Aggression'. This initiative aimed to strengthen capacities among Ukrainian experts and to generate policy-relevant knowledge in order to support Ukraine in anticipating and tackling illicit weapons flows—thereby contributing to the longer-term objectives of peace and security in Ukraine and Europe.[1]

This Report provides an empirical analysis of weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion. It relies on a mixed-methods approach, in which a team of Ukrainian and international researchers compiled and analysed a range of data sources—including government data on seized weapons, quantitative population surveys, and field-based interviews with combatants and their relatives—allowing for the triangulation of results (see below). The Report seeks to address the following research questions:

- Has the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion influenced the proliferation of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine, in terms of both quantities and types?
- What are the main sources of illicit weapons in Ukraine?
- How are arms and ammunition—including so-called 'trophy weapons' recovered by armed forces on the battlefield—managed and controlled on the front line, and to what extent are they acquired by unauthorized end users?
- How do Ukrainian civilians view the availability of firearms, the country's regulatory framework on firearms, and the relationship between illicit firearms and crime, security, and safety?

- What are the main elements of Ukraine's regulatory framework on arms and ammunition, and what improvements are needed to tackle the various proliferation challenges arising from the war?

The Report consists of four chapters. The first chapter analyses the illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition in Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on certain types of weapons of Western origin, weapons deployed with Russian troops, and particularly sensitive weapons, namely portable missile systems. The second chapter examines the capture of weapons on the battlefield, the management and use of these weapons by Ukrainian troops, and the diversion risks associated with trophy weapons. The third chapter focuses on the Ukrainian population's perceptions of firearm proliferation and its implications for security and safety. The final chapter reviews the laws and regulations governing weapons possession and their evolution since the full-scale invasion, and discusses the need for a coordinated response involving all actors in society.

Data collection and methodology

This study is the product of close collaboration between the Small Arms Survey, CENSS, and a diverse network of Ukrainian and international experts and institutions. This partnership yielded a range of complementary data sources, including:

- data and imagery of arms and ammunition seized by Ukrainian authorities since 2022, including 2,587 seizures that took place in 2023 and 2024;
- court documents generated during the prosecution of arms seizure cases in Ukraine;
- national statistics on weapons seizures and firearm-related crime;
- semi-structured interviews with 48 Ukrainian combatants and ex-combatants, conducted in person between September 2023 and May 2024;
- six general population surveys in Ukraine carried out between 2019 and 2025, with a total of more than 11,000 respondents;
- key informant interviews with, or detailed written correspondence received from, the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as consultations with representatives of the Office of the General Prosecutor, the Coordination Centre, the National Police, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service, and the Security Service of Ukraine;
- key informant interviews with, or detailed written correspondence received from, a range of regional and international actors (including the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Firearms, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), the OSCE, and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL); and

- research undertaken by members of the Ukrainian Networking Group—a group of Ukrainian experts coordinated by CENSS—through the project's micro-grant programme.

While data on illicit arms flows is notoriously difficult to gather and analyse (Jenzen-Jones and Schroeder, 2018, pp. 322–37), this Report uses mixed methods and sources to compare and triangulate the conclusions that can be drawn from official seizure data with those generated though the analysis of court documents, key informant interviews, and population surveys, among others. While these methods have their own specific advantages and limitations, when taken together they help improve understanding of weapons proliferation dynamics in Ukraine by examining the issue through diverse yet complementary perspectives.

In parallel, the Small Arms Survey and CENSS regularly solicited feedback on research design and analytical techniques from the project's International Advisory Committee of Experts. The committee comprises nine experts specializing in criminology, population surveys, organized crime, law enforcement, and weapons proliferation and control measures. Members of the Ukrainian Networking Group also provided feedback on the main findings and policy implications of the Report. The Ukrainian Networking Group consists of 23 Ukrainian scientists, journalists, judicial experts, and representatives of NGOs who specialize in issues relating to weapons research and community security.

Key terms

The scope of the Report is limited to small arms, light weapons, their parts, accessories, and ammunition. 'Small arms' include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, automatic rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns. 'Light weapons' include heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank missile and rocket launchers, portable anti-aircraft missile launchers, and mortars of less than 100 mm calibre (Jenzen-Jones and Schroeder, 2018, pp. 27–29).

The terms 'arms and ammunition' and 'weapons' are used interchangeably and refer to small arms, light weapons, their parts, accessories, and ammunition, unless stated otherwise. The terms 'small arms', 'light weapons', and 'ammunition' refer specifically to those items.

The term 'firearms' refers to weapons belonging to the following categories only: revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; shotguns; sub-machine guns; and light and heavy machine guns.

The term 'illicit' refers to arms and ammunition that are held, modified, produced, transferred, or used in violation of national or international law. The Survey uses the

term 'illicit' rather than 'illegal' to account for cases of unclear or contested legality (Schroeder, 2014, p. 246). The terms 'trafficking' and 'smuggling' are also used interchangeably and refer to the illicit transfer of weapons within or across national borders, usually involving a change in ownership.

In this Report, the following terms are used to further describe the nature or origins of arms and ammunition in the Ukrainian context.

- 'Legacy models' are illicit arms and ammunition seized or otherwise documented in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion of 2022.
- 'Western weapons' are models of arms and ammunition produced in NATO or EU member states, Switzerland, or Sweden and not previously identified in illicit stockpiles in Ukraine prior to February 2022.
- 'Trophy weapons' are weapons recovered by military forces from the opponent, either from abandoned sites or directly during or after combat.
- 'Battlefield capture' are weapons taken directly from the opponent, either during or after combat. As such, they are a subset of trophy weapons.
- 'Scavenged weapons' are those found or collected by civilians in post-battle zones.
- 'Award weapons' are those donated by Ukrainian security institutions to personnel as rewards for their achievements, in accordance with the regulations of these institutions.[2]
- 'Traumatic firearms' are kinetic energy weapons designed to deliver a blunt or traumatic impact to a target by firing a rubber or plastic projectile, or using no projectiles at all (such as a gas pistol) (Gobinet, 2011, pp. 74, 81).

The terms 'war of aggression' and 'full-scale invasion' are used interchangeably to refer to the Russian Federation's full-scale attack in February 2022 and the subsequent high intensity fighting. The 'conflict in the east' refers to the conflict initiated by Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine that took place between 2014 and 2022.


BELARUS
POLAND
SLOVAKIA
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
SERBIA
BULGARIA
MOLDOVA
VOLYN
RIVNE
Lutsk
Rivne
ZHYTOMYR
Zhytomyr
Chernihiv
Kyiv
KYIV
Lviv
LVIV
Ternopil
TERNOPIL
Khmelnytskyi
KHMELNYTSKYI
Ivano-Frankivsk
IVANO-FRANKIVSK
Uzhhorod
ZAKARPATTIA
Vinnytsia
VINNYTSIA
CHERKASY
Chernivtsi
CHERNIVTSI
ODESA
Odesa
Black Sea
Areas under Russian occupation
Capital
Administrative centre
Administrative boundary*
*Ukraine is divided into 27 main administrative divisions, consisting of 24 oblasts (regions), one autonomous republic (Crimea), and two cities with special status (Kyiv and Sevastopol).
Sources: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project; the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Esri; Michael Bauer Research GmbH 2022; State Statistics Service of Ukraine; Eurostat.


Map 0.1
Ukraine, with areas under Russian occupation, as of 30 June 2025
CHERNIHIV
SUMY
Sumy
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
UKRAINE
Kharkiv
POLTAVA
Cherkasy
Poltava
KHARKIV
LUHANSK
Luhansk
Kropyvnytskyi
Dnipro
KIROVOHRAD
DNIPROPETROVSK
DONETSK
Donetsk
Zaporizhzhia
MYKOLAIV
ZAPORIZHZHIA
Mykolaiv
Kherson
KHERSON
Sea of Azov
AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF CRIMEA
Simferopol
Sevastopol
200 km
N

Introduction endnotes

1 The initiative also built upon the partnerships and research developed during previous Small Arms Survey projects in Ukraine implemented before 2022. See, for instance, Martyniuk (2017) and Schroeder and Shumska (2021).

2 See, for instance, Ukrainian MoD (2020) and Ukrainian MIA (2022a).

> “The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 has led to a diversification of illicit arms inventories, although the pace of change has been much slower than is sometimes claimed.”

1. The illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition since the full-scale invasion

Matt Schroeder

Chapter findings

- Ukrainian government data reveals significant changes in seizures of arms and ammunition since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. Seizures of light weapons and related ammunition (grenades, grenade and rocket launchers, and mines) have more than doubled since Russia's full-scale invasion, while seizures of civilian weapons (shotguns and gas and pneumatic weapons) have declined.
- Recently imported Western weapons have proliferated widely in Ukraine but only in comparatively small numbers. The Survey identified one or more seizures of Western hand grenades in every oblast[1] of Ukraine for which government data is available. Most of the seizures were small, however, and Western grenades accounted for just 11% of the more than 4,000 identifiable grenades in imagery of seizures from 2023 and 2024.
- The Russian security apparatus is both a direct and indirect source of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine. It contributes both directly to illicit flows in Ukraine through the pre-positioning of arms caches for use in covert operations, the arming of proxy forces in the east, and the direct transfer of weapons to Ukrainian civilians—including collaborators—and indirectly through the loss and abandonment of Russian weapons on the battlefield and in adjacent areas.
- There is little evidence to support claims by the Russian government and pro-Russian media that a large percentage of Western weapons imported by Ukraine are being diverted to armed groups and criminals. Western hand grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, and portable missiles comprise only a small percentage of all seized weapons, and nearly all of the largest arms seizures reviewed by the Survey were of models that were frequently encountered prior to the full-scale invasion ('legacy models').
- Grenades and other explosive munitions have proliferated across Ukraine, including to oblasts far from the front lines. Many of these weapons are sourced from large caches of abandoned weapons littering de-occupied areas and areas near the line of contact, and from smaller quantities of unsecured weapons scattered throughout the country. These weapons pose an immediate threat to civilians, including children.
- The full-scale invasion is both the largest contributor to illicit arms flows in Ukraine and the biggest impediment to the recovery of illicit weapons.

Overview

The following chapter analyses illicit flows of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition in Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on Western weapons[2] (hand grenades and shoulder-fired rockets),[3] weapons deployed with Russian troops (selected AK-pattern rifles), and weapons of particular concern (portable missile systems). The analysis is based on data and imagery of arms and ammunition seized by Ukrainian authorities since 2022, focusing in particular on 2023–2024.

The Survey and CENSS collected the data through daily manual searches and monthly automated downloads of imagery and text from dozens of official Ukrainian government websites and social media accounts. The resulting data set contains summaries of 2,587 seizures reported in 2023 and 2024,[4] all of which include one or more photos of the seized weapons.[5]

This data is supplemented with information collected from documents from numerous court cases[6] involving the illicit possession, transport, or sale of arms and ammunition, along with aggregated data on seizures compiled by the Office of the General Prosecutor, and a written correspondence with the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Types of illicit weapons in Ukraine

While the types of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition circulating in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion are largely the same, the relative quantities of these items have changed, as illustrated by aggregated data on seizures of arms and ammunition compiled by the Office of the General Prosecutor (see Table 1.1). The data shows a sharp increase in seizures of grenades, which increased by 155% from 2019–21 to 2022–24; grenade launchers and rocket launchers, which increased by 137%; and mines, which increased by 112%. Seizures of rifles also increased but less dramatically.

The data reflects not only the changing nature of illicit inventories in Ukraine but also a concerted effort by Ukrainian authorities to remove these items from circulation. The total number of small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition seized has more than doubled since the full-scale invasion, a notable accomplishment given the barriers to seizing and recovering illicit weapons in the current environment. Given the large quantities of unsecured arms and ammunition already dispersed throughout Ukraine and the constant deployment of additional weapons to the front lines, continued allocation of resources for weapons recovery operations and explosive ordnance disposal is critical.

Table 1.1 Illicit small arms and ammunition seized by Ukrainian authorities, 2019–24

Item type	Quantity								
	Pre-full-scale invasion				Post-full-scale invasion				% change from 2019–21 to 2022–24
	2019	2020	2021	Total	2022	2023	2024	Total	
Smooth-bore weapons	60	40	64	**164**	60	58	41	**159**	**-3%**
Rifled weapons	854	941	895	**2,690**	1,291	1,292	1,334	**3,917**	**+46%**
Other firearms	920	643	613	**2,176**	588	3,018	529	**4,135**	**+90%**
Gas and pneumatic weapons	34	27	24	**85**	28	30	17	**75**	**-12%**
Total firearms and gas and pneumatic weapons	**1,868**	**1,651**	**1,596**	**5,115**	**1,967**	**4,398**	**1,921**	**8,286**	**+62%**
Grenade launchers and rocket launchers	64	53	18	**135**	25	118	177	**320**	**+137%**
Grenades	1,889	1,228	926	**4,043**	1,110	4,417	4,784	**10,311**	**+155%**
Mines	84	24	7	**115**	9	148	87	**244**	**+112%**
Total grenade and rocket launchers, grenades, and mines	**2,037**	**1,305**	**951**	**4,293**	**1,144**	**4,683**	**5,048**	**10,875**	**+153%**
Cartridges	204,899	179,186	134,166	**518,251**	199,850	720,183	602,799	**1,522,832**	**+194%**

Sources: OGP (2019; 2020; 2021b; 2022; 2023b; 2024c)

Illicit proliferation of Western weapons

Prior to the full-scale invasion, nearly all of the seized weapons reviewed by the Small Arms Survey were Warsaw Pact models first fielded decades earlier. A Survey study of firearms ammunition tins, hand grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, and anti-personnel landmines seized by Ukrainian authorities from 2014 to mid-2020 found that nearly all of the items were manufactured in Russia/USSR or Eastern Europe, and the vast majority were produced in the 1970s and 1980s (Schroeder and Shumska, 2021). This level of homogeneity in weapons reflects the large stocks of similar weapons available to both the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and the geographically circumscribed nature of the war.

The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 has led to a diversification of illicit arms inventories, although the pace of change has been much slower than is sometimes claimed. In response to the invasion, NATO and European Union (EU) members, along with other like-minded states, launched a large military aid campaign aimed at strengthening and sustaining the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Arms and ammunition delivered through this effort include tens of thousands of small arms and light weapons, and millions of rounds of ammunition.[7] These weapons include models not previously seen in illicit circulation in Ukraine.

The Russian government has repeatedly claimed that much of the Western military aid provided to Ukraine has ended up on the black market. In October 2023, the Russian Federation's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN estimated that 20% of arms and ammunition exported to Ukraine were being diverted (TASS, 2023). If true, this would mean that Ukrainian authorities were overtly stealing, or tacitly allowing the theft of, tens of thousands of weapons and millions of rounds of ammunition. The rapid influx of so many weapons would transform illicit inventories, with newly introduced Western weapons supplanting many of the Soviet-designed makes and models of weapons that comprised nearly all of these inventories prior to 2022.

To assess this and other claims about the illicit proliferation of Western weapons, the Survey systematically collected data on seizures in 2023–24 of recently imported Western hand grenades and shoulder-fired rockets and compared it to data on seizures of models of grenades and shoulder-fired rockets identified in illicit flows prior to the full-scale invasion ('legacy models').[8] Hand grenades and shoulder-fired rockets were chosen as proxy categories because they were among the most frequently seized weapons, and because the Survey already had a detailed baseline of the models of these two categories of weapons from before the full-scale invasion.

The data reveals that Western weapons have proliferated throughout Ukraine, but there is no evidence of large-scale, systematic diversion. The Survey identified seizures of Western hand grenades or shoulder-fired rockets in all but one oblast[9] in Ukraine in 2023 and 2024. Most of those seizures were small, however, and Western

models made up only a fraction of the seized items. Of the 4,129 seized grenades identified by model,[10] just 437—or 11%—were Western models, and the average number of Western grenades seized per incident was just 2, as opposed to 3.5 per seizure for legacy models (Small Arms Survey and CENSS, 2025).

Another possible indicator of large-scale or systematic diversion is repeated seizures of large numbers of the same model of grenades, particularly in their original crates or with the same lot numbers. Here again, such seizures of Western grenades appear to be rare. Of the 1,177 seizures in which the models of the seized grenades were identifiable, 46 had 10 or more grenades of the same model and, of those seizures, only 2 had 10 or more Western grenades of the same model (see Images 1–5; Small Arms Survey and CENSS, 2025).

The data on seized shoulder-fired rockets reveals a similar pattern of proliferation, showing widespread geographic diffusion of rockets, including Western models, but in limited numbers. In the cases studied, the Survey identified a total of 263 rocket launchers seized in at least 20 oblasts. Of these launchers, 232, or roughly 88% of all rockets, were identifiable by model. Of the rockets identifiable by model, 78% were

Images 1–5 Examples of seizures of large quantities of the same models of grenades, 2023–24

Notes: 1) Crates of legacy RGO and F1-pattern grenades seized in Luhansk in 2023. 2) 350 legacy F1-pattern grenades seized at a checkpoint in Donetsk in 2024. 3) A crate of legacy F1 grenades and fuzes found in a private residence in Kirovohrad in 2023. 4) A mix of Western M67 and GHO grenades, along with legacy RGD-5 and F1-pattern grenades, seized from arms traffickers in Zaporizhzhia in 2024. 5) F1-pattern and RGD-5 grenades found in a garage in Dnipropetrovsk in 2024.

Sources: Luhansk Oblast Police (2023); Main Directorate of the National Police in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (2024); Main Directorate of the National Police in Kirovohrad Oblast (2023); Military Law Enforcement Service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (2024); NPU (2024)

Images 6–8 Legacy (Soviet-designed) and Western shoulder-fired rockets seized by Ukrainian authorities, 2023–24

Notes: 6) Legacy RPG series rocket launchers seized from an organized criminal group in Dnipropetrovsk oblast in 2023. 7) Six Czech RPG-75 rocket launchers found during raids in Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts. 8) Five legacy RPG-22 rockets found in a garage in Sumy oblast in May 2024.

Sources: Main Directorate of the National Police in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (2023); Main Directorate of the National Police in Ternopil Oblast (2023); Main Directorate of the National Police in Sumy Oblast (2024)

legacy models, with the top two systems—Soviet-designed RPG-22s and RPG-26s—accounting for half of all identifiable rockets (Small Arms Survey and CENSS, 2025).

The remaining rockets consisted of 50 Western models, which were seized in at least 15 different oblasts. The average quantity of Western rockets per seizure was low (less than two rockets), as was the number of large seizures. Of the five incidents in which five or more rockets of the same model were seized in the cases reviewed, only one involved Western rockets. Images 6–8 show rockets seized in three of the five seizures.

In summary, Western weapons have proliferated across Ukraine, but only in relatively small numbers. Western models comprised just 11% of the seized grenades studied, and the majority of seizures consisted of two or fewer grenades of these models. Western rockets were seized at a slightly higher rate but still only accounted for a fraction of all of the seized rockets studied, and were also usually seized in small quantities. These seizures are more indicative of the low-level loss and leakage usually seen in war zones (which occurs in all armed forces, including those that prioritize stockpile security) than the corruption-fuelled, systemic diversion claimed by the Russian government.

Illicit proliferation of weapons deployed with Russian troops

Weapons deployed with Russian forces have also proliferated widely in Ukraine. To assess the nature and extent of this proliferation, the Survey compared seizure rates

Images 9–11 Russian AK-12-pattern rifles seized from arms traffickers in Ukraine, 2023–24

Notes: AK-12-pattern rifles seized from arms traffickers in Odesa (9), Lviv (10), and Vinnytsia (11) oblasts in 2023 and 2024.

Sources: Main Directorate of the National Police in Lviv Oblast (2024); Main Directorate of the National Police in Odesa Oblast (2023); OGP (2023a)

of modern Russian AK-12-pattern rifles to those of AK-74-pattern rifles, which were among the most commonly seized models of rifles prior to the full-scale invasion.

AK-12-pattern rifles were chosen because existing evidence indicates that this model was not in Ukrainian military inventories prior to the full-scale invasion, while other common AK-pattern rifles were in both the Russian Federation's and Ukraine's inventories, rendering them less useful for tracking changes in illicit flows since 2022. Furthermore, a search of documents in Ukraine's Unified State Register of Court Decisions yielded no hits for 'AK-12' prior to the full-scale invasion, suggesting that few, if any, AK-12-pattern rifles were in illicit inventories before early 2022.

The data reveals that, like Western weapons, AK-12-pattern rifles have proliferated widely in Ukraine but in comparatively small numbers (see Images 9–11). In court documents from 2023 and 2024, the Survey identified incidents of illicit possession, sale, or transport of AK-12s in 14 of the 23 oblasts for which data is available, including the western oblasts of Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi, and Lviv.[11] The seizure summaries include examples of illicit AK-12-pattern rifles in five additional oblasts.[12]

At the same time, the data suggests that AK-12s remain a small percentage of all illicit AK-pattern rifles in Ukraine. Of the 314 AK-74- and AK-12-pattern rifles referenced in the court documents reviewed by the Survey, only 9% were AK-12s. This figure is consistent with statements by Ukrainian authorities regarding firearms declared to authorities by civilians. In a statement to CENSS and the Small Arms Survey dated 25 April 2025, the Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed that '[. . .] the vast majority of automatic firearms declared by the civilian population are Soviet-made Kalashnikov assault rifles, model AK-74. New models of this manufacturer, produced in the Russian Federation, are declared in isolated cases.'[13]

In addition, the Survey examined the proliferation of Russian RPG-30 anti-tank rockets, which also appear to have been largely absent from illicit inventories in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion. First fielded in 2008, the RPG-30 is a recent-generation anti-tank weapon developed specifically to defeat the modern active protection systems (APSs) used to protect armoured vehicles. APS attempt to destroy incoming munitions by hitting them with a projectile before they reach the target. Unlike the older Soviet-designed rockets circulating in Ukraine, the RPG-30 has a precursor round that is specifically designed to neutralize this projectile and defeat the APS.

The Survey's previous research on illicit proliferation of shoulder-fired rockets in Ukraine found no evidence of illicit circulation of RPG-30s prior to the full-scale invasion,[14] and a search of Ukraine's Unified State Register of Court Decisions yielded no cases of criminal activity involving RPG-30s before 2022. Since then, however, they have been seized on multiple occasions in at least seven oblasts (see Images 12–13),[15] including from arms traffickers based in Mykolaiv.[16] Not surprisingly, most of the RPG-30s documented by Ukrainian authorities were either recovered from abandoned or pre-positioned Russian stockpiles in de-occupied areas or seized from citizens who found them in Russian stockpiles.

Images 12–13 Russian RPG-30 anti-tank rockets seized by Ukrainian authorities, 2024

Notes: 12) An RPG-30 rocket launcher and other weapons and ammunition found in the garage of a 52-year-old resident of Kherson in March 2024. 13) An RPG-30 and other rocket launchers found in an abandoned building in Kyiv in February 2024. In both cases, the RPG-30s and other weapons were abandoned by Russian troops in de-occupied regions. The cache found in Kyiv was reportedly intended for future use by Russian saboteurs.

Sources: Main Directorate of the National Police in Kherson Oblast (2024a); SSU (2024a)

Box 1.1 Iranian weapons in Ukraine

Given the large amount of military assistance provided by Iran to the Russian Federation, it stands to reason that seizures of weapons originally deployed by Russian troops would eventually include large numbers of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition produced in Iran. To date, however, there is little evidence of the anticipated seizures. The Survey has identified no Iranian models of hand grenades or shoulder-fired rockets in the seizures studied, and determining the proximate source of the small number of Iranian weapons that have been spotted is complicated by US transfers of Iranian arms and ammunition seized in the Middle East and transferred to the Ukrainian government.[17]

One of the few clearly identifiable Iranian items[18] catalogued in the seizures studied is a 'battle bag' of Iranian-made 7.62 × 54 mm rifle ammunition, which was seized with other arms and ammunition from an arms trafficker in Zhytomyr oblast.[19] The trafficker reportedly obtained the weapons from associates located near the line of contact in the east, and then sold the weapons to clients throughout Ukraine. The report on the seizure describes the trafficked items as 'Russian weapons', which would suggest that the battle bag was indeed deployed with Russian troops (Main Directorate of the National Police in Ternopil Oblast, 2024). Photos of Iranian arms and ammunition captured by US forces in the Arabian Sea and later sent to Ukraine for use by their armed forces show battle bags with similar markings (see Images 14–16), however, raising the possibility that the seized bag came from a US shipment instead. This ambiguity highlights one of the key changes in illicit weapons in Ukraine since the start of the war, namely its transformation from a homogenous collection of Soviet- and Russian-designed weapons largely sourced from legacy Russian and Ukrainian stocks to a mix of weapons originating in various regions and supplied by multiple governments.

Images 14–16 'Battle bag' of Iranian-made firearms ammunition seized in the Zhytomyr oblast, October 2024

Notes: Iranian-made 7.62 × 54 mm ammunition seized in Zhytomyr oblast (14–15) compared to a bag of the same calibre of Iranian ammunition found in an Iranian shipment of arms and ammunition interdicted by US forces in the Arabian Sea in December 2022 (16).

Sources: Main Directorate of the National Police in Ternopil Oblast (2024); USDC District of Columbia (2023)

Illicit proliferation of portable missile systems

Portable missiles (man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs)) are among the most sensitive illicit weapons identified in Ukraine. These systems attract greater attention and are subject to more rigorous controls than other small arms and light weapons because of the combination of their long range, accuracy, lethality against high-value targets (aircraft and armoured vehicles), portability, and concealability. Of particular concern is the terrorist threat to commercial airliners posed by MANPADS.

These weapons are also the subject of many of the claims regarding alleged international trafficking of Ukrainian government weapons, including imported Western weapons.[20] To assess these claims, the Survey analysed data and imagery of seizures of portable missiles in 2023 and 2024, along with dozens of documents from court cases concerning suspected or confirmed cases of illicit activities involving portable missiles that occurred during this period.

The quantity of MANPADS and ATGMs in the imagery of the seizures studied was relatively small, and nearly all of them were legacy models (see Table 1.2).

The only Western portable missile documented in the seizures was a single British next-generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW) ATGM that was confiscated in July 2024 from arms traffickers in Dnipropetrovsk oblast (see Image 17). No Western MANPADS were identified in images of seized weapons from 2023 and 2024, and the only seized Western MANPADS identified by the Survey was a single Polish Piorun recovered by Ukrainian authorities before the time period under review (see Image 18).[21]

Images 17–19 Examples of Western and Russian portable missiles seized in Ukraine, 2022–24

Notes: 17) A British NLAW ATGM seized from arms traffickers based in Dnipropetrovsk in 2024. 18) A Polish Piorun MANPADS missile and battery unit found in an apartment located in a de-occupied area of Donetsk in 2022. 19) Three complete Verba MANPADS captured from or abandoned by Russian soldiers near Kyiv in 2022.

Sources: Makariv Village Council (2022); OGP (2024b); UNIAN (2022)

Table 1.2 Seizures of portable missiles by Ukrainian authorities, 2023–24

Report date	Type	Items/model	Quantity	Oblast	Incident type/description
February 2023	ATGM	Konkurs-pattern missiles	2	Kherson	Seized from a local who reportedly collaborated with Russian troops.
July 2023	ATGM	Fagot-pattern missiles	3	Kharkiv	Scavenged from the front lines and stored in a garage.
July 2023	ATGM	Unclear	1	Kherson	Found in a garage with numerous other weapons.
September 2023	ATGM	Konkurs-pattern missile	1	Kyiv	Found in a cache of illegally held weapons at the residence of a military serviceman.
September 2023	MANPADS	Igla-pattern missiles and battery units	2	Kherson	Seized from a priest after he attempted to sell the missiles and PG-7-pattern components for 115,000 hryvnia (UAH) (around USD 2,600).
September 2023	ATGM	Konkurs- and Fagot-pattern missiles	6	Kyiv	Seized from a resident of Kyiv who kept large quantities of arms and ammunition in his apartment and garage.
November 2023	MANPADS	Igla-pattern missiles	2	Kharkiv	Found with other weapons in the house of a 40-year-old resident.*
March 2024	ATGM	Metis-pattern missile	3	Chernihiv	Found with other weapons in an unspecified 'non-residential building'.
May 2024	ATGM	Metis-pattern missiles	2[22]	Kharkiv	Found in the home of a Kharkiv resident who repaired and sold weapons on the Darknet.
July 2024	ATGM	Next-generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW)	1	Dnipro-petrovsk	Seized along with other weapons and munitions from arms traffickers in the Dnipropetrovsk oblast.

Notes: * The seizure summary indicates that two 'Strila-2' MANPADS, presumably a reference to Strela-2-pattern systems, had been seized, but images of the seized items show two Igla launch tubes.

Sources: Small Arms Survey and CENSS (2025)

The Survey also found no images of—or references to—the Russian Federation's latest generation of MANPADS (9K333 Verba) in the seizure summaries or court documents. Social media imagery from the early days of the invasion, however, indicates that at least some Verba missiles were abandoned by Russian troops, raising concerns about illicit acquisition and use. Particularly worrisome is imagery of three complete Verba systems—missiles in launch tubes, gripstocks, and battery-coolant units—captured from, or abandoned by, Russian troops in March 2022 (see Image 19). These systems were recovered by the Ukrainian military, but the numerous, well-documented instances of Ukrainian civilians collecting abandoned Russian materiel raises the possibility that other Verba MANPADS are still outside of government control (either in undiscovered arms caches or in the possession of civilians) and could be diverted to criminal groups.

A review of documentation from court cases concerning portable missiles reveals similar proliferation patterns. Like the seizures listed above, most of the cases outlined in the court documents involve a small number of components for legacy MANPADS or ATGMs.[23] The Survey identified 21 court cases involving portable missiles in 2023 and 2024, of which 20 entailed alleged illicit possession or sale of hardware (complete systems or components). Of those 20 cases, 18 involved 5 or fewer MANPADS or ATGM components and at least 13 involved components identified as older Soviet-designed systems that have been circulating in Ukraine for many years. Western portable missile systems or components were listed in documents from just five cases, four of which involved a single NLAW (three cases) or Javelin ATGM (one case).[24] The defendants in these cases were accused of international arms trafficking in only two of the 20 cases, and none of the portable missiles seized in either of these cases were Western.

Finally, the court cases reveal the breadth of Ukrainian efforts to prevent trafficking of portable missiles, and the rigour with which these efforts are pursued. A *New York Times* article from 12 May 2023 briefly hints at these efforts and the commitment to securing imported weapons. The article quotes Ukrainian parliamentarian Oleksandra Ustinova, who vividly illustrates the lengths soldiers will go to prevent the loss of imported weapons: '[w]e've literally had people die because stuff was left behind, and they came back to get it, and were killed' (Jakes, 2023; see Chapter 2).

The court documents contain numerous examples of this commitment in action, ranging from undercover sting operations against soldiers suspected of selling weapons to the filing of criminal charges and imposition of fines for a wide array of offences, including failing to properly document usage of Javelin missiles[25] and storing sensitive missile-related data on an insecure device.[26] In December 2024, a dentist who had allowed a Ukrainian military unit to store arms and ammunition in his personal garage in Mykolaiv was given a year of probation for failing to arrange for the removal

of the weapons just two months after the unit's members had indicated that they no longer needed the storage space but apparently failed to retrieve the weapons themselves.[27] Similarly, in July 2024, Ukrainian authorities discovered a large cache of arms and ammunition, including an NLAW ATGM, in the home of a volunteer who had been training Ukrainian troops on the proper use of weapons since the beginning of the war. The volunteer argued that he needed a large number of different weapons for the training sessions and had no other place to store them. Nonetheless, Ukrainian authorities brought criminal charges against him for illegal acquisition and storage of explosive devices and substances, an offence that is punishable by three to seven years in prison.[28]

Allegations of international trafficking

The examples above call into question many of the claims about lax security at Ukrainian depots and diversion of Western weapons, most of which involve alleged international trafficking. A comprehensive assessment of international arms trafficking from Ukraine is beyond the scope of this Report, but a review of available data and recent allegations yielded little hard evidence of systemic or widespread international trafficking of Ukrainian portable missiles or other weapons. As noted above, the Survey identified only one potentially significant case of attempted international trafficking of Western portable missiles from Ukraine, and too little is currently known about the intent of the defendants. The other alleged incidents of international trafficking from Ukraine reviewed by the Survey have either been debunked or the source of the allegations fails to provide externally verifiable evidence to support their claims.

For example, in May 2023, a Mexican media outlet published a story featuring a photo of a 'Javelin missile' supposedly trafficked from Ukraine to Mexico (Hernández, 2023). The 'Javelin' turned out to be an AT-4-pattern recoilless gun—a weapon that has been circulating illicitly in Latin America for many years. Other media and social media reports have variously claimed that large quantities of Ukrainian weapons have been trafficked to the Middle East, Central Africa, South-east Asia, and several countries in Europe.[29] Some of these reports offer no evidence to support their claims, while others cite (and often misinterpret) statements made by European law enforcement agencies or anonymous sources.

An example of the many reports that cite anonymous sources is a British media article published in June 2024, which claimed that gangsters in the Spanish city of Sanlúcar had acquired 'weapons intended for Ukraine'. Citing anonymous 'veteran agents', the article states that 'many of the weapons now found in the hands of criminals seem to have made a "round trip" to Ukraine' (Sarret and Ortega, 2024). No evidence

is provided beyond the quotes from anonymous sources, along with vague references to seizures of NATO-calibre ammunition and 'Italian-made NATO rifles'. The article goes on to mention statements by Europol and the Spanish National Police regarding the possible risk of future trafficking from Ukraine, and reports of trafficking of Ukrainian weapons to other countries in Europe. Officials interviewed by the Survey indicated that many such claims are either false or exaggerated. An official from INTERPOL indicated that his organization has 'looked into some of the reports of seizures of Ukrainian weapons in EU member states, including Finland and Spain, and those reports have been debunked. There have been some cross-border seizures, but nothing significant.'[30]

The INTERPOL official's comment is consistent with statements issued by other government officials and independent researchers. In February 2025, a European law enforcement official told the Survey that Spanish authorities have found 'no link' between the ammunition seized in Sanlúcar and Ukraine. 'So far, Spanish law enforcement has not been able to link any specific case to Ukraine', noted the official. While she was aware of some minor trafficking from Ukraine, most of it is 'happening within Ukraine's borders'.[31] Officials from NATO, the EU, and the US Defense Department have issued similar statements, and research conducted by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime supports these claims.[32]

If Ukrainian missiles are eventually seized abroad, they are just as likely—or more likely—to have come from Russia as from Ukraine. Russian forces have captured an unknown number of portable missiles from Ukrainian forces, and the Kremlin has a history of trafficking captured missiles. In 2014, Ukrainian forces seized a Polish Grom

Images 20–21 Polish Grom MANPADS seized from a Russian-backed armed group in Donetsk, May 2014

Source: Ukrainian MoD (2014)

MANPADS from a Russian-backed armed group in the Donetsk oblast that the UK-based Conflict Armament Research (CAR) later traced to a batch exported to Georgia in 2007 and used by Georgian forces against invading Russian troops the next year (see Images 20–21).[33] Several systems were lost in battle and 'taken over by Russian forces', according to CAR (2021, p. 189). There is little reason to think that the Russian government would not engage in similar trafficking of missiles seized in Ukraine if Russian officials believed it would further their goals, either militarily or diplomatically.

For these reasons, it is essential that future allegations of international trafficking from Ukraine be supported by detailed, externally substantiable evidence. Examples of externally substantiable evidence include, but are not limited to, imagery of the trafficked weapons and their markings; shipping documents or GPS data that show the origin and transit points of arms shipments; images of the markings on crates containing trafficked weapons; and shipping and storage documents that reveal the chain of custody of the weapons. Policymakers and other stakeholders should view with scepticism any reports of trafficking that do not include at least some externally substantiable evidence, which should be a prerequisite for the publication of reports on the topic going forward.

Sources of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine

While publicly available information on the sources of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine is less complete than information on the types, models, and quantities of the weapons themselves, data from court documents and seizure summaries does provide some insight into where and how Ukrainian civilians acquire illicit arms and ammunition. Based on a review of this data, the Survey identified five broad categories of sources of illicit weapons in Ukraine:

- weapons found or scavenged in de-occupied areas or near the line of contact;
- weapons found outside of de-occupied areas and areas near the line of contact;
- weapons illegally transferred by Russian forces;
- weapons illegally sold (or otherwise transferred) by civilians; and
- weapons illegally sourced and sold (or otherwise transferred) from Ukrainian government stocks.

While this list is not necessarily comprehensive, and there is overlap between the different categories, it does highlight the decentralized nature of illicit arms flows in Ukraine, along with the need to focus on all potential sources of illicit arms and ammunition—not just Ukrainian government stocks, which, to date, have received the most scrutiny and attention.

Images 22–24 Arms and ammunition scavenged from de-occupied regions or near the line of contact, 2023–24

Notes: 22) Arms and ammunition seized from traffickers in Kyiv, Mykolaiv, and Lviv who collected abandoned weapons in areas formally occupied by Russian forces, June 2024. 23) Examples of nearly 40 types of weapons smuggled out of the 'war zone' and offered for sale by a 49-year-old resident of Vinnytsa oblast. 24) Some of the dozens of weapons seized from traffickers in Donetsk and Kharkiv who intended to sell them to local criminals. The trafficker in Kharkiv reportedly had an illegal workshop for repairing weapons in his apartment and looked for clients on the dark web.

Sources: SSU (2023b; 2024d; 2024c)

Data on seized grenades and shoulder-fired rockets suggests that lost and abandoned weapons are among the largest sources of these weapons in Ukraine, but data limitations preclude a more precise estimate.

In 30% of the seizures studied in which the source of the seized items is identified, the weapons were scavenged or found near the line of contact or in de-occupied areas.[34] These incidents include 70%[35] of seizures from individuals or groups engaged in illegal arms sales, and at least eight out of ten of the largest seizures from traffickers in which the source was identified. Many of the weapons found in these areas were subsequently transported to and sold in other regions, including the westernmost oblasts. Descriptions of three of these cases are included in the caption for Images 22–24.

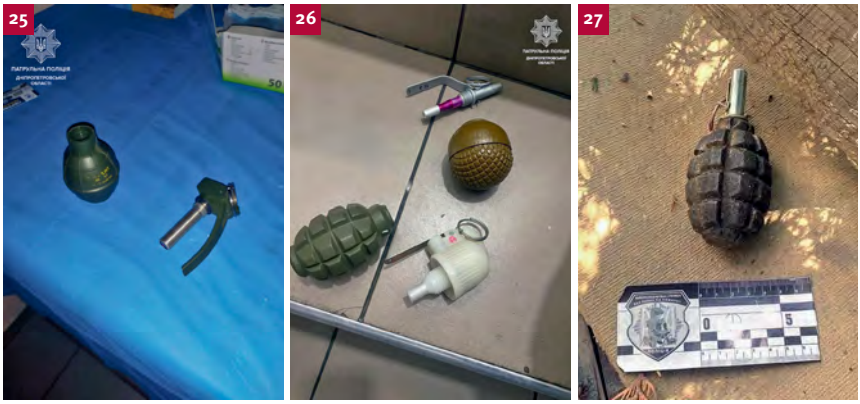
The data on seized AK-74- and AK-12-pattern rifles also points to de-occupied areas and areas near the line of contact as major sources of illicit weapons. Of the 155 court cases reviewed by the Survey that identify the source of the rifles, nearly 70% involve rifles that were scavenged or found by civilians, volunteers, or members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in these areas. Some of the rifles were subsequently seized during or after illicit sales in at least seven different oblasts throughout Ukraine (Small Arms Survey and CENSS, 2025).

This data is consistent with the Ukrainian government's analysis of the main sources of illicit weapons. In their April 2025 statement to CENSS and the Survey, the Ministry of Internal Affairs identified three main sources of small arms for civilians: 'places where combat operations have been or are being conducted; weapons caches left behind by Russian troops during their retreat or created by them for sabotage and reconnaissance activities; territories of Ukraine that were under temporary occupation or from which the civilian population was urgently evacuated'.[36]

Large quantities of arms and ammunition are also lost or abandoned in oblasts far from the line of contact and de-occupied regions. These items—the origins of which are often unclear—have been found by Ukrainian authorities and civilians in nearly every conceivable location: in cemeteries, yards, playgrounds, forests, abandoned buildings, and humanitarian aid; near dumpsters and trash cans; and on the sides of roads and riverbanks. In 2024, a patient in a hospital in Dnipropetrovsk oblast found a grenade when he opened a drawer in his room. Three months later, a woman in the same oblast found F1- and RGO-pattern grenades in the bathroom of a cafe (see Images 25–27).

Just as the full-scale war with Russia is the largest source of illicit weapons, it is also the biggest hinderance to preventing their illicit circulation. In the above-mentioned statement, the Ministry of Internal Affairs identified three main barriers to preventing illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition:

Images 25–27 Hand grenades found by civilians in different regions of Ukraine, 2024



Notes: 25) A DM-61 grenade found in a drawer by a patient in a hospital in Dnipropetrovsk oblast. 26) RGO and F1-pattern grenades and fuzes found in a toilet in a cafe in Dnipropetrovsk oblast. 27) 1n F1-pattern grenade found by children in a pile of garbage in Rivne oblast.

Sources: Patrol Police of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (2024a; 2024b); Rivne Oblast Police (2024)

- ‘the complex security situation in the frontline regions, which complicates operational and investigative measures to detect illegal trafficking of weapons, as well as the organization of preventive work with the population to prevent their involvement in illegal trafficking of weapons;
- the high level of mining of territories where hostilities took place, which limits unhindered access to them for a full inspection and detection of abandoned firearms; [and]
- the high level of involvement of police personnel in tasks under the legal regime of martial law, including direct participation of police units in combat operations, rapid demining of liberated territories, evacuation of the population to safe areas, participation in the elimination of the consequences of Russian missile and artillery strikes, investigation of war crimes, protection of critical infrastructure, participation in the fight against enemy sabotage and reconnaissance groups, etc.’[37]

In other words, the full-scale invasion not only resulted in an exponential increase in the number of weapons vulnerable to illicit proliferation, but also made it much more difficult—both physically and operationally—to recover and secure these weapons.

The Russian security apparatus is both an indirect and direct source of illicit arms and ammunition in Ukraine. It contributes indirectly to illicit arms flows through the loss and abandonment of Russian weapons on the battlefield and directly through the pre-positioning of arms caches for use in covert operations and the direct transfer of weapons to Ukrainian civilians, including collaborators. The most notable direct transfer reviewed by the Survey was part of a thwarted plot organized by the Russian Federal Security Service to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other top Ukrainian officials. The plan was for Ukrainian accomplices—high-ranking officials with the Department of the State Protection of Ukraine (DSPU)—to monitor the movement of the targeted officials and provide the coordinates of a location where the officials would be at a predetermined date and time. The Russian conspirators and their Ukrainian counterparts would then attack that location at the specified time with missiles, drones, and other weapons supplied by the Russians and transported to the attack site by a DSPU official. Images of the seized weapons show a drone equipped with a mortar round, an RPG-7-pattern projectile, and a MON-90 anti-personnel mine (see Images 28–30). Ukrainian authorities learned of the plot beforehand and were able to arrest the conspirators before the attack took place (SSU, 2024b).

Other recent examples of Russian-supplied weapons seized by Ukrainian authorities include a pre-positioned cache of grenade launchers and hand grenades found under the floor of an abandoned building located in a village near Kyiv (SSU, 2024a); a large cache of anti-tank mines, ATGMs, grenades, and other weapons seized from a collaborator in Kherson oblast (SSU, 2023a); and 18 shoulder-fired rockets buried in a forest in Kharkiv by retreating Russian forces (Ukrainian State Bureau of Investigation, 2023).

Images 28–30 Arms and ammunition allegedly intended for use in a Russian assassination plot against Ukrainian President Zelenskyy

Notes: 28) A MON-90 anti-personnel mine. 29) A PG-7L warhead. 30) A drone with a mortar round.

Sources: OGP (2024a); SSU (2024b)

Data limitations preclude even a rough estimate of the total quantity of illicit weapons sourced from Russian forces, but reports of large caches of abandoned and pre-positioned Russian arms caches scavenged by some Ukrainian civilians and seized by Ukrainian forces suggest it is sizeable. More complete data on seized weapons—including more consistent and complete reporting on their markings, and more detailed data on the serial numbers and lot numbers of Ukrainian stocks (to differentiate seized Russian weapons from Ukrainian weapons of the same model)—would help to improve understanding of illicit Russian arms and ammunition in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian armed forces are also a source of illicit weapons, but there is little evidence to support claims of widespread, systematic diversion from Ukrainian stocks. As noted above, models of Western grenades and shoulder-fired rockets recently imported by the Ukrainian military comprise only a small percentage of all seized weapons of these types, and only one or two are usually seized at a time. Similarly, most of the portable missiles seized in 2023 and 2024 were older Soviet models that have been circulating in Ukraine since 2014, rather than the Western systems that are now deployed by the Ukrainian armed forces.

Conclusion

Data on seized arms and ammunition in Ukraine reveals both continuity and change in illicit arms flows since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The majority of the seized weapons are the same decades-old, Soviet-designed models that have been circulating in Ukraine since at least 2014. These legacy models comprised

88% of seized (identifiable) hand grenades, and 78% of shoulder-fired rockets. The nationwide proliferation of these weapons is another similarity between the pre- and post-full-scale invasion periods. In 2023 and 2024, grenades and shoulder-fired rockets were seized from civilians in nearly every oblast of Ukraine, including the westernmost oblasts.

At the same time, the data reveals several significant changes in illicit flows. Seizures of weapons of war (grenades, rocket launchers, and mines) have more than doubled since Russia's full-scale invasion, which is not surprising given the deployment of massive quantities of arms and ammunition to troops stationed along lengthy, shifting, and kinetically active contact lines.

In addition, the data highlights a gradual diversification of illicit weapons in Ukraine. Prior to the full-scale invasion, nearly all of the seized weapons studied were models produced in Russia/USSR or Eastern Europe, and most were manufactured in the 1970s and 1980s. This is slowly changing as arms and ammunition supplied by Western governments are acquired by unauthorized end users.

The same is true of portable missiles seized during this time period. Of the ten seizures of missiles listed in seizure summaries in 2023 and 2024, only one involved a Western system: a single NLAW ATGM. The 22 missiles seized in the other nine cases were for legacy systems. The models of portable missiles referenced in court cases from 2023 and 2024 were a bit more varied, but most were also for legacy MANPADS and ATGMs. Furthermore, in the sole case involving international trafficking (or attempted trafficking), all of the missiles were for legacy systems.

The data does not support claims by the Russian government of significant diversion of Western weapons from the Ukrainian government. There is no evidence of large-scale, systematic diversion of Western grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, or portable missiles in Ukraine, and many of the reports of alleged international trafficking are either erroneous or provide no externally substantiable supporting evidence. European law enforcement agencies have seized weapons trafficked from Ukraine, but infrequently and only in small quantities.[38] Instead, the data and documents reviewed by the Survey reveal a broad array of government efforts aimed at collecting loose arms and ammunition; identifying and dismantling trafficking schemes; and enforcing rules regarding the storage, handling, and transport of weapons and related data. A full accounting of these efforts and the staffing, equipment, expertise, and funding required to sustain them during the war and to expand them afterwards would help donor states to ensure that Ukrainian authorities have the resources required to minimize arms trafficking in Ukraine—both now and in the future.

Chapter endnotes

1 When oblasts and cities share the same name, the chapter refers to the oblast, unless otherwise stated.
2 For the purposes of this chapter, 'Western weapons' are defined as models of arms and ammunition produced in NATO and European Union (EU) member states (along with Switzerland and Sweden) and not previously identified in Ukraine prior to February 2022.
3 Data collection and analysis was limited to lethal hand grenades (blast, fragmentation, and anti-tank) and shoulder-fired rockets in disposable launch tubes (RPG-7-pattern launchers and their ammunition were therefore not included in the data).
4 Since funding for the project was not received until 2023, Ukrainian government seizure summaries were not systematically collected in real time in 2022. Most analysis of data compiled from seizure summaries is therefore limited to 2023 and 2024.
5 This data was compared with the Survey's baseline database on seized hand grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, and anti-personnel mines, which contains data and imagery collected from 2,895 seizure summaries published from 2014 to August 2020. It should be noted that the markings on most of the weapons are redacted (pixelated) in the photos and videos of the seizures.
6 Documents from the court cases studied were downloaded from the Unified State Register of Court Decisions.
7 For a partial list of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition transferred to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, see Antezza et al. (2025).
8 The 2,587 seizure summaries from 2023 and 2024 collected by the Survey and CENSS contain imagery of 4,515 grenades and rockets. Note that it is possible that some of the weapons exported by Western states to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion were hand grenades or rockets categorized as 'legacy models', although the Survey has no knowledge of such transfers.
9 The exception is Luhansk, for which detailed data on seizures is extremely limited.
10 This figure does not include 123 unidentified grenades.
11 The full list of oblasts is Chernihiv, Chernivtsi, Dnipropetrovsk, Ivano–Frankivsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, Kyiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Poltava, Zaporizhzhia, and Zhytomyr.
12 The additional oblasts are Donetsk, Kirovohrad, Rivne, Vinnytsia, and Volyn.
13 Written statement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to CENSS and the Small Arms Survey, in Ukrainian, 25 April 2025.
14 See Schroeder and Shumska (2021).
15 These oblasts are Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, and Poltava (Ukraine USRCD, 2024b; 2024c; 2025).
16 See Ukraine USRCD (2024c).
17 See USDC District of Columbia (2023) and US DOJ (2023).
18 Ukrainian authorities also seized what appear to be multiple blocks of Iranian explosives at a checkpoint in Kharkiv in September 2024 (NGU, 2024).
19 A search of documents in the Unified State Register of Court Decisions database on 26 February 2025 yielded no references to seized Iranian small arms, light weapons, or ammunition.
20 See, for example, Priya (2022) and Phan (2023).
21 The Piorun was found in August 2022 by Ukrainian authorities in an abandoned house that was previously occupied by Russian forces. No launcher is visible in images of the seized missile.

22 The summary lists two Metis missiles but four launch tubes are visible in photos of the seized items. The photos are not clear enough to confirm that the other two tubes are indeed for Metis ATGMs.
23 See, for example, Ukraine USRCD (2023; 2024f).
24 Only one case involved the seizure of more than one Western portable missile system, and too little is currently known about it to assess its significance. The case began in October 2024 when Ukrainian authorities stopped a vehicle with a military licence plate at a checkpoint at an undisclosed location in Donetsk oblast. An inspection of the vehicle led to the discovery of 27 missiles for British Starstreak MANPADS (1GM HE K130A4 portable anti-aircraft complexes) and 18 missiles for US Javelin ATGMs, for which the driver reportedly 'lacked supporting documents' (Ukraine USRCD, 2024g). The absence of required documentation is not, in itself, evidence of criminal intent, and, as of February 2025, publicly available documents provide no additional clues as to the driver's plans for the missiles or whether his actions were part of a broader criminal conspiracy.
25 See Ukraine USRCD (2024a).
26 See Ukraine USRCD 2024e).
27 See Ukraine USRCD (2024h).
28 See Ukraine USRCD (2024d).
29 See, for example, TASS (2022; 2023).
30 Phone interview with INTERPOL official, February 2025. The official noted that the weapons were seized from a 'small number of Ukrainian refugees attempting to cross the border with a personal weapon'.
31 The official also noted that she was unaware of any credible reports of international trafficking of portable missiles from Ukraine, pointing out that 'portable missiles are items that [Ukrainian soldiers] really need'. Phone interview with a senior European law enforcement official, 18 February 2025.
32 See EUAM Ukraine (2024); European Parliament (2024); Europol (2025, p. 62); Jakes (2023); US GAO (2024, pp. 34–35).
33 The seizure was unusual because Grom MANPADS had not been documented outside of government control prior to the seizure and had not been imported by the Ukrainian military.
34 In total, the source of the seized items is available for 203 summaries of seizures of hand grenades and shoulder-fired rockets.
35 In 26 of the 37 trafficking cases in which the source of the weapons is identified, they were sourced from de-occupied areas or areas near the line of contact.
36 Written correspondence with the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 25 April 2025.
37 Written correspondence with the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 25 April 2025.
38 Correspondence with European law enforcement official, 10 May 2025.

> “The logic of [transactions involving trophy weapons] at present is provisioning rather than profit, and transactions appear to be limited to the battlefield.”

2. The informal economy of trophy weapons

Maryna Maleoniuk and Taras Fedirko

Chapter findings

- Ukrainian forces routinely recover abandoned or lost Russian arms when gaining territory. The first units to enter and control (former) Russian positions have the greatest access to trophy weapons. Unregistered trophy weapons usually remain with the unit or person who captured them. Recovered weapons—and in particular ammunition—can also be pooled and redistributed among different units or bartered for other critical resources.
- Interviewed Ukrainian troops demonstrated awareness of official regulations and procedures for controlling state-issued, officially registered weapons—including the requirement to register trophy weapons as assets of military units—and the serious legal consequences of not doing so. The Ukrainian military has made efforts to inspect the use and presence of captured weapons, and to seize them from units' front-line positions. Nevertheless, some respondents reported only partial compliance.
- Evidence suggests that some units and individual troops avoid registering trophy weapons with the authorities. Instead, they rely on these as substitutes for state-issued arms to avoid red tape and potential penalties for losing or damaging registered arms, and to help mitigate shortages in official weapons supplies. This practice is a pragmatic adaptation to the time constraints and bureaucratic pressures that formal military regulations and supply shortages impose on already overburdened forces. Some commanding officers appear to tolerate this practice, recognizing its practical benefits.
- The research found little evidence of trophy weapons being redirected to illicit markets. Troops interviewed claimed that the circulation of trophy weapons was mainly limited to the front line. This aligns with the project's findings, although there are some legally confirmed cases of diversion and trafficking. A change in the overall course of the war or in official supplies of weapons could increase the likelihood of diversion and use of captured and unaccounted-for weapons, ammunition, and explosives for personal reasons, including trafficking.

Overview

Ukrainian troops routinely capture weapons, weapon parts, and ammunition on the battlefield. Footage from Ukrainian troops' assaults on Russian lines, circulated online, illustrates the process of arms and ammunition capture. One video, posted in 2023 by the K2 battalion of the 54th Separate Mechanized Brigade,[1] shows a small group of dismounted infantry moving through a nearly destroyed tree-line between agricultural fields and taking assault rifles from the dead bodies of Russian troops (Combat Group K-2, 2023).[2] 'Give it away, brother,' whispers the man filming the video as he tries to free a Kalashnikov from the grasp of a dead soldier. The short video shows the Ukrainian troops collect at least five rifles and numerous magazines.[3]

This chapter draws on extensive qualitative fieldwork in Ukraine (see Box 2.1) to examine patterns of battlefield capture of arms and ammunition by Ukrainian troops. It finds that, as illustrated in the footage above, most of the weapons gained on the battlefield are neither rare nor distinctive; they are standard Russian state-issued weapons, often identical to those supplied in abundance to the Ukrainian troops. The chapter explores how and why Ukrainian troops capture these weapons; how they use, manage, and barter them with other troops; and the risks of proliferation and trafficking that arise from this. To these ends, battlefield capture and use of trophies is considered in the context of weapons management practices across the Ukrainian defence forces. In so doing, this chapter contributes to understanding current and future risks of illicit weapons proliferation and lays the foundation for weapons control policies that can rise to this challenge.

Patterns of capture

Battlefield dynamics create opportunities for obtaining weapons. Weapons are lost or abandoned on the battlefield during operations and manoeuvres, and left in trenches and warehouses during hasty retreats. Access to new positions—captured from Russian troops or taken up after other Ukrainian troops have left—leads to access to the weapons and ammunition left there. In the words of one infantryman:

> "I found two grenade launchers, [one of which was] American, probably abandoned by men from a neighbouring unit after their [earlier] retreat. I was walking one day and—surprise!—felt something under my feet: a bag containing a grenade launcher and a full set of grenades for the launcher! It was amazing. I used it later. Or take Bakhmut. . . there are lots of [Russian] 'trophies' just lying around. I must have collected more than 20 magazines for an AK-12. [. . .] Someone else [from my unit] found an AK-12; another guy got a different Kalashnikov rifle; yet another one, a

Box 2.1 Methods of data collection and analysis

This chapter is based on a thematic analysis of 48 transcripts of interviews with Ukrainian combatants or ex-combatants, drawn from a larger sample of 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person across Ukraine between September 2023 and May 2024. Of the overall sample, 32 interviews were carried out with Ukrainian active-duty service people and veterans (mostly below officer rank); the remaining 28 were conducted with military activists, service people's family members, and civilians in front-line areas. The interviews were carried out with 60 individuals—there were no repeat interviews—and focused on their knowledge of and participation in battlefield capture and the circulation of trophy weapons. In total, 51 respondents mentioned weapons and ammunition (in any context, not just captured). Of these 51 interviews, 48 were included in a thematic analysis focusing on battlefield trophies (interviews indicating direct experience of capture or barter of weapons, ammunition, or gear; mentions of specific models; or general reflections on capture). With a few exceptions, all of the respondents that mention trophy weapons and ammunition are male soldiers under the age of 35 serving across different units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and in other parts of the defence forces with military specializations that directly involved them in or exposed them to front-line hostilities.

The participants were identified through snowball sampling: ten initial participants recommended further contacts—some of whom then recommended someone else. Prospective respondents were invited to share their experience with military service, military activism, or, more broadly, the informal economy of war. Given the sensitive character of the topic of weapons management, the interviewer only brought up questions about weapons, specifically trophies, after having established a rapport with the interviewee. Respondents were invited to signal whether they knew anything about the topic and were willing to discuss it.

Interviewee self-censorship likely affected response rates and the kinds of responses obtained. Several military interviewees denied any knowledge of trophies on the record and stated that the practice was illegal, while simultaneously signalling non-verbally that this was untrue and they in fact simply chose not to reveal their knowledge because of its perceived sensitivity. The interviewees who discussed captured weapons did so cautiously, for instance, by avoiding discussing their own or their units' direct involvement and instead referring to other soldiers or troops more generally, or by only speaking off the record. Those who directly discussed capturing arms and ammunition themselves presented this practice as 'accepted', 'widespread', or 'normal'. More than half of the interviewees that mentioned weapons discussed battlefield capture of weapons, often in great detail. No notable patterns could be observed among those who did not address this point.

The snowball sampling recruitment method means that the sample of interviewees is not representative of the AFU. Most military interviewees were rank-and-file soldiers below officer rank without commanding positions. While their accounts may lack the breadth afforded by higher-ranking military, their experiences with direct combat mean that they are more likely to have been involved in the battlefield capture of weapons. The interviews show a diversity of practices and understandings of the capture, use, and circulation of trophy weapons on Ukraine's front lines that can help inform policymakers' efforts to reduce the risks of arms and ammunition proliferation.

grenade launcher. There's lots of stuff there; the problem is you have to get it out of there [from the 'grey zone'], [. . .] which weighs you down and makes you an easier target" (CS45).[4]

Similar to the AK-12 rifle singled out by this respondent, other interviewees recalled a variety of other Russian weapons models not in official use in the Ukrainian defence forces being captured following offensive operations (see Table 2.1). One trooper said:

> [We found a Shmel flamethrower] and I really wanted to try it out. We also found many different RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] launchers and grenade charges. [. . .] They [the Russian troops] had left behind lots of 'Karandash' charges for RPG-7 [the OG7V fragmentation warheads introduced around 1999]—the kind of ammunition we don't

Table 2.1 Russian small arms, light weapons, and ammunition models, as well as other items, found or captured on the battlefield, mentioned by interviewees

Model/item	Number of interviewees mentioning the item
'AK' (unspecified mentions of Kalashnikov assault rifles)	18
Ammunition (unspecified)	18
Mortars (unspecified)	7
RPGs (unspecified)	6
120 mm mortar (model not specified)	6
Pistols (unspecified)	6
Hand grenades (unspecified)	5
AK-12	5
AK-74	4
Automatic grenade launcher system	3
82 mm mortar (model not specified)	2
PKM ('Pokemon') machine gun	2
Items mentioned by only one interviewee: VSSK Vykhlop rifle, VSS Vintorez rifle, DShK ('Dashka') machine gun, PKP Pecheneg machine gun, NSV Utyos machine gun, machine guns (model unspecified), RPO Shmel (rocket flamethrower), RMG Zanos (RPG flamethrower), disposable grenade launcher, underbarrel grenade launcher, PM-38 mortar (120 mm), machine gun ammunition (not specified), gas grenades (not specified), knives.	

A Ukrainian soldier carries Russian weapons captured during a battle between Ukrainian and Russian forces outside Kharkiv, Ukraine, March 2022. Source: Thomas Peter/Reuters

> have in Ukraine, so we got lots of them [. . .] as well as other charges for RPG-7. Grenade launchers themselves, as far as I know, had been taken too. Afterwards, when active assaults began, after I'd been wounded and evacuated, the boys captured 'Pokemons'—if I'm correct, that's how we got four PKM [machine guns]" (CS2).

As weapons were predominantly captured during assaults and offensive operations, access to them was unequal: 'When you don't have active assaults, [. . .] you simply don't have many opportunities to collect trophies' (CS7). The first units to enter and control positions held by Russian troops or abandoned by Ukrainian troops have greater opportunities to capture a variety of weapons and ammunition (see Table 2.1), as do those who engage in close combat with Russian troops—for instance, during Russian infantry assaults on Ukrainian positions. As some respondents remarked, those who found the weapons first were recognized to have 'priority' over them according to 'military etiquette' (CS3). But even those respondents who had no direct contact with Russian troops and were not involved in assault operations were aware of trophy weapons being collected.

Accounting for trophies and state-issued weapons

The informal practices of battlefield capture and front-line use of arms and ammunition by Ukrainian troops are best understood within the framework of formal weapons control procedures established by the Ukrainian armed forces (see Box 2.2). The interviews indicate that official regulations on weapons and ammunition management significantly shaped how military personnel perceived the legitimacy of battlefield capture, as well as how they collected, used, and handled trophy weapons. Navigating and interpreting the formal rules governing both state-issued and trophy small arms and ammunition was a key topic in the interviews. Virtually all military interviewees

Box 2.2 A summary of official rules on the handling of trophy weapons in Ukraine

In Ukraine, the handling of trophy weapons (*trofeina zbroia*) is governed by secondary legislation, within a framework set out in several distinct regulatory documents that define trophy weapons and establish how they should be handled as military assets.[5]

Trophy assets are defined by the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 721 as 'weapons, military equipment, and other property of the enemy captured (obtained) during the repulsion and containment of the aggression of the aggressor state' (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022a). A similar definition already appeared in Order No. 164 issued by the Ministry of Defence in 2017 (Ukrainian MoD, 2017a). This classification applies exclusively to property captured by military personnel during combat or in the context of warfare more broadly. The regulations define trophies as state property that must be registered as part of the official assets of the military unit reporting them.

The handling of trophies within units is regulated by procedures set out in two orders issued by the Ministry of Defence (Ukrainian MoD, 2005; 2017b) governing the accounting, storage, and technical assessment of all captured arms. Like any other form of military property, trophy weapons must pass through a complex, multi-stage registration and verification process before they are formally accepted into military inventories.

Troops are required to hand over captured weapons and ammunition to their unit. Following a series of checks, the unit can then register them as assets under its control, thereby assuming formal responsibility for them. According to a procedural memo from one of the AFU branches, the handover and registration process involves at least 34 separate bureaucratic steps undertaken by three different offices within the unit (AFU, 2023).

Weapons found by civilians, and defined as 'found' or 'scavenged' weapons (*znaidena zbroia*), are not covered in this chapter. The status of such weapons is defined in primary legislation by the Law of Ukraine No. 3899-IX (Parliament of Ukraine, 2022; see also Chapter 4).

demonstrated awareness of personal legal responsibility for state-issued arms and the increasing bureaucratic oversight of official armaments over time. Many also acknowledged the formal requirement to register trophy weapons as their unit's assets, recognizing that improper handling of trophies could carry heavy legal penalties.

Formal weapons management procedures

The soldiers interviewed were generally well aware of their responsibility for state-issued weapons. One drone pilot said:

> "Every soldier has a weapon [issued to them]. Whether they are an infantryman or sit in headquarters, they always have a weapon that they have to protect, to know where it is. [. . .] It's entered in your military record, with your number. [. . .] If you lose it, you are criminally liable" (CS42).

Others spoke at length of the 'red tape' around weapons control, and the fact that military controls over weapons had become stricter since 2022. One interviewee said that in his brigade, during the period March–October 2023, formal control over state-issued weapons became 'exemplary', with dedicated safes, specialized personnel, and strict accounting logs. Daily procedures, he explained, ensured that weapons were securely stored, regularly inspected for cleanliness and functionality, and properly documented. Another remarked that 'given the problems that result from losing one's weapon', it is 'accounted for and controlled' well (CS14). Many service people interviewed complained about the strict bureaucratic procedures in the event of weapon loss or destruction on the battlefield: 'Returning from operations, everyone worries about their weapons being in place, and so I worried too, because, heck, it's issued in your name' (CS8).

One soldier described having to write a report about losing his weapon on the battlefield near Bakhmut: 'I had to write a report on the events that caused the loss. And taking into consideration Ukraine's military bureaucracy, a rifle cannot be considered destroyed unless you bring back at least a part of it from the battlefield' (CS16). Others spoke of comrades who had returned to the battlefield in the 'grey zone' to search for their lost rifles and pistols in order to avoid fines or legal procedures. As one interviewee summarized, 'a weapon registered to your name and recorded in your military ID is sacred. You can go to prison for losing it. You won't go to prison for losing a trophy weapon' (CS18).

Against the backdrop of strict storage and accountability practices, most interview respondents were also aware of the official requirement to register captured weapons as their unit's property:

> This is monitored and accounted for—maybe not immediately, but sooner or later it is accounted for. We have more trophy weapons now, after [deployment to eastern Ukraine]. This includes the AK-12s—which we [the Ukrainian military] don't have in service at all, but which the Russians have in service—and some other weapons. There are even more trophy weapons, and, yes, they are registered too. There are requirements for this" (CS16).

> I know that now trophy vehicles, trophy weapons [. . .] everything is being registered, preferably. It's very serious [. . .] At the beginning, there was chaos—there were other issues. War used to be above all else, but now bureaucracy is above the war" (CS1).

These and other interviews demonstrate that Ukrainian troops in the war recognize that adherence to regulations on weapons is increasingly prioritized, that failing to register trophy weapons could lead to penalties and even prosecution, and that moving unregistered trophy weapons away from the front line is likely to result in being charged with arms trafficking. When discussing the sources of such knowledge, some pointed to regular mandatory instructions about legal responsibility for weapons trafficking (CS48), while others drew on examples of people they knew, or knew of, who had forgotten to leave their trophy weapons at their front-line positions, and had been caught with them at a checkpoint further back in the rear and faced legal consequences. They spoke of regular checks carried out by 'counter-intelligence',[6] military police, and officials from within their military units, aimed at controlling official weapons storage and the presence of unregistered firearms. Respondents described periodic inspections in which investigators checked weapons' serial numbers and sought to account for weapons stocks.

Informal management of trophy weapons

At the same time, the interviews suggest some variation in how trophy weapons are managed in practice. Formal procedures are not adhered to universally, or in full, and, according to the interviewees, at least some captured weapons and ammunition are handled informally. Some interviewees said their unit gradually began enforcing the registration of trophy weapons, apparently reducing informal management of unregistered captured weapons. Others made it clear that they did not register all trophies or only registered some when they were forced to do so. For example, one respondent who had experience with counter-intelligence interrogations said a captured RPG had to be officially registered because it was 'erroneously' mentioned during an interview with counter-intelligence officers (CS14). Similarly, a commander of an elite reconnaissance company reflected on his unit's partial compliance with the requirements to hand in unregistered trophies:

> “We are legally obliged to hand [what we capture] over to counter-intelligence. In fact, we do hand over some things [. . .]. The most notorious case was before the liberation of Kherson [. . .]. We destroyed a group [of elite Wagnerites] [. . .]. They had modern assault Kalashnikovs, with an integrated silencer [. . .]. We don’t even have them in Ukraine. [. . .] Naturally, we took these automatic rifles, took all the documents, phones, . . .” (CS44).

This interviewee recalled handing over everything except for the weapons to counter-intelligence—because the rifles were rare—and informing counter-intelligence officers that the Russian group had no weapons on them.

While some respondents sought to keep information about battlefield capture from their superiors and those authorized to enforce weapons regulations, the interviews suggest that, within squads and platoons, the capture and use of these weapons was common knowledge. Weapons were informally managed within these groups. One infantryman described how:

> “[The captured weapon] was usually stored next to the person who found it. I had two grenade launchers under my cot. [. . .] Usually, it was okay to organize some kind of a stockpile with your own [trophy] weapons. We had a pretty big one” (CS46).

Other interviews suggest that some commanders of units in the tactical echelons of military hierarchy were willing to tolerate the presence of unregistered trophy weapons within their units. These informal practices varied between units and individuals, and were clearly based on the mutual understanding among the troops that these weapons would be used in combat.

The uses of captured weapons

All captured weapons contribute to replenishing the arsenals of Ukrainian units and therefore have clear practical value, particularly concerning the timeliness and adequacy of official supplies. The non-registration of trophy weapons, however, offers an additional, distinct utility. The interviews suggest that avoiding registration serves primarily to sidestep the administrative burden associated with formal procedures, while also reducing the level of bureaucratic oversight applied to state-issued weapons.

Interviewees indicated that registering a trophy weapon—thus making it the official property of the military unit—can diminish its operational usefulness to troops. This is because unregistered weapons may serve as less-regulated substitutes for standard-

issue arms, allowing soldiers to lose, abandon, or destroy them in combat without fear of formal consequences. These factors appear to influence whether troops choose to register captured items.

Such practices should not be interpreted as legal nihilism on the part of Ukrainian personnel. Rather, they reflect pragmatic adaptations to the time constraints and bureaucratic pressures that formal military regulations impose on already overburdened forces. Nevertheless, the avoidance of registration can lead to significant proliferation risks over time.

The uses of unregistered trophy weapons

As highlighted above, some trophy weapons are not officially registered. These unregistered weapons can, however, be managed collectively to supports units' overall operation and purposes. Some interviewees mentioned that captured arms and ammunition were stored in informal weapons caches that remained within the theatre of war, ready for immediate use in combat. This practice allowed interviewees in units experiencing delays in official weapons supplies to maintain rapid access to arms, thus mitigating the risk of running out of weapons and ammunition. For other units, such as the few existing volunteer units not officially integrated into the defence forces, this enabled access to weapons and ammunition that they would not have received otherwise.

> "Sometimes regular units that capture something, sometimes they give it to us [a volunteer unit allied with the AFU], just because this way they don't need to report it [. . .]. They know that it will really go to us, and not given to someone else, and taken by their superiors—and then who the hell knows who will handle it further. Whereas we are here, and they know that it will really be used well" (CS6).

Virtually all interviewees who spoke of such informal management of captured weapons made a clear distinction between keeping unregistered trophy weapons in the theatre of war for use in combat and transferring them to the rear. Many saw the latter as very risky both for individuals committing such acts and in terms of the social consequences of arms proliferation. As one respondent explained:

> "In general, [when weapons are captured] the SSU is called in, and so on and so forth. . . Troops hand it all over, of course, but not always. [Not handing over captured weapons] doesn't mean that it goes somewhere for [illicit] sale—it is just dragged over to soldiers' positions and used against the enemy. It doesn't leave the territory [the front line].

> That's the funny thing. Nobody's taking a machine gun or a piece of tank home, it's all just moved over to one's positions [. . .] to continue the 'rendezvous' [that is, to be used in battle]" (CS15).

This quote represents a common attitude to unregistered trophy weapons among respondents and underscores that the avoidance of formal registration is not for personal benefit, but rather a deliberate decision aimed at ensuring the unit's capacity to carry out combat operations—or at least at reducing perceived hurdles to doing so. Another respondent provided further insight into this informal system. He explained that, even during lulls in active engagements, soldiers accumulate extra weapons and ammunition in shared informal caches that supplement official supplies:

> "The troops in the house where I lived [at the front line] had a whole shed of trophies. I mean, in the end, they might not receive [officially] something that they need. They might not get enough ammo, so they had [trophy] ammunition, incendiary ammunition, a couple of boxes of grenades [. . .]. In the end, everyone tries to help themselves somehow, to protect themselves, to have extra spare, you know, a couple of grenades [. . .] that he picked up somewhere" (CS7).

Front-line units use informal weapons caches to bypass bureaucratic burdens and shortfalls in supplies, and to maintain immediate access to arms, ensuring that both individual soldiers and the unit as a whole remain combat ready. As the interviews with troops suggest, this non-registration of trophy weapons should be seen as an example of units' autonomous provisioning of resources for war-making.

Moreover, many soldiers seem to use unregistered trophy weapons as substitutes for state-issued arms to avoid penalties and the lengthy, burdensome procedures associated with losing state-issued weapons on the battlefield. As highlighted above, one interviewee pointed out that 'you won't go to prison for losing a trophy weapon' (CS18). Another explained that 'you shouldn't keep [unregistered] weapons. It is illegal. You must register all weapons that come into your possession. They are simply not registered because then you have to take responsibility for them' (CS19). Fighting with unregistered trophy weapons thus minimizes the risk of personal legal responsibility for losing or damaging one's assigned weapon. This practice indicates that the interviewees perceive the risks associated with being discovered with non-registered trophy weapons as less severe than the burden of dealing with lost or damaged registered weapons.

One interviewee explained how his unit reported the capture of a relatively rare Russian rifle and informally negotiated with the commanding officer to use the unregistered trophy temporarily, suggesting a degree of tolerance of the practice among some commanders:

> We took the AK-12 as a trophy, but in the end we told our commander truthfully: 'Here we are, we've killed [a Russian soldier] and taken [a rifle]—can we now [use it] so that we don't lose our own?' And the commander said: 'Okay, if you want it that way, have it. But then you will hand it back when we leave here'" (CS18).

Officially issued collective weapons such as heavy machine guns can also be replaced with unregistered trophies to allow the trophy weapon to remain in place (such as a forward trench) and be used by rotating troops. This may eliminate the need for rotating machine-gun crews to carry their assigned weapons to and from the position, enabling them to move faster and potentially increasing their survivability in a context where the battlefield is saturated by Russian surveillance and attack drones.[7]

In sum, unregistered trophy weapons, whether employed and managed by individuals or by units, are regarded as a resource whose value derives not merely from their availability, but also from their exclusion from formal oversight.

Unregistered trophies as barter items

Another reason that unregistered captured weapons and gear are valued by Ukrainian troops is that they can be exchanged with trusted troops for required items, sometimes also captured on the battlefield. Captured weapons are thus exchanged in an informal front-line barter economy, enabling units to trade surplus items for those that are scarce, such as munitions of specific calibres or medical supplies.

One respondent described how units engage in barter using surplus Russian rockets:

> For example, you can collect a lot of rockets [RPG grenades]—Russian ones, the ones they left behind at their [former] positions. Each rocket costs between 10,000 and 25,000 dollars [USD],[8] and we have a whole pick-up truck full of them [. . .] We start bartering [with another unit] [. . .] We can say: 'Five rockets for a drone', even though they are not of equal worth [in monetary terms]" (CS4).

Mortars shells—subject to occasional, local shortages—are another prized barter item. An interviewee explained the logic and practice of exchanging them:

> There were times when we were in the woods at a position, also used by other [Ukrainian] mortarmen who had better ammunition supplies and used a foreign mortar [that is, a different system from the one used by the respondent's unit]. They had to leave abruptly, so they just left 15 shells in their tubes [. . .] [We took them and] I found a posting

> [online] [from another Ukrainian service person]: 'I'm looking for these shells, I'll exchange them for Soviet-calibre rounds.' So, I got in touch and we made the exchange" (CS6).

This example illustrates how exchanges are dictated by battlefield needs rather than monetary worth—as would typically be the case in illicit arms trafficking. Even high-value weapons and ammunition may be traded for seemingly lower-value but tactically crucial equipment, reflecting a practical approach to provisioning rather than pecuniary logic in front-line barter. Weapons, and trophy weapons in particular, are not treated as fungible commodities. When they circulate—for example through barter—this circulation is not based on the logic of exchange mediated by monetary calculation or guided by considerations of profit. Troops seem to accept the legitimacy of exchanging unregistered trophies so long as this is undertaken to provision combat supplies.

Such exchanges show that units seek to adapt to and mitigate material shortages. They rely on a shared understanding of trophy weapons as a resource that can and should be used 'well'. While these exchanges are driven by practical necessity, they also reflect a broader culture of self-reliance in resource management—one in which battlefield acquisitions are not merely spoils of war, but functional assets in a front-line economy that sustains combat capacity together with official supplies. Informal exchanges of unregistered trophies do, however, in principle, increase the risks of arms and ammunition proliferation and trafficking. As Chapter 1 illustrates based on seizure data, Russian-origin weapons and ammunition have proliferated to most parts of Ukraine, and there is some, albeit limited, evidence of small-scale trafficking.[9]

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that battlefield capture of weapons and ammunition is not rare and is part of a broader set of provisioning practices that also include supplies of crowdfunded materiel; drones; and self-funded purchases of gear, petrol, and equipment from individual or collective funds.

Some trophy weapons are formally appropriated by the capturing units as items on the units' balance sheet, according to official regulations. In this process, units assume formal responsibility for managing these assets. Arms and ammunition, however, are not always (or not fully) appropriated in this manner, and enter informal stock used alongside, or instead of, officially issued items—thereby remaining in use on the battlefield.

Trophy weapons are often informally regulated within units and used as a collective resource, although a limited individual right to handle the trophy is recognized. In a

context where troops face unstable supplies and fear punishment for losing state-issued weapons in combat, trophies are not registered because they are useful to Ukrainian troops as provisions with flexible availability; as less regulated stand-ins for heavily regulated state-issued weapons; or as items to exchange with those who can use them to cover shortfalls or as stand-ins. Some trophy weapons are also valuable as prestige items. While trophy items may be transferred between front-line units, the logic of these transactions at present is provisioning rather than profit, and transactions appear to be limited to the battlefield. The persistence of informal weapons reflects the balance between military necessity and bureaucratic control.

To the extent that this 'restricted' form of front-line circulation is fuelled by military needs, it is ultimately functionally connected to Ukraine's official war economy and military logistics. Among the limited number of examples of barter discussed in the interviews, those mentioning bartered munitions—such as mortar shells—prevail. Need thus correlates with shortages of official supplies. Availability and efficiency of official supplies is therefore an important factor determining incentives to capture and exchange trophy weapons and ammunition. The informal handling of unregistered trophy weapons and ammunition discussed in this chapter is motivated by efforts to secure provisions for ready use in combat. International partners play an indirect but pivotal role in shaping Ukraine's weapons management practices. By failing to ensure consistent supplies, they leave front-line units little choice but to rely on enemy-captured stocks and informal handling. Conversely, stabilizing the flow of official provisions would strengthen the Ukrainian military's capacity and incentive to formalize trophy weapons, allowing for better accountability of these weapons and their integration into military logistics systems.

In the event of a prolonged ceasefire or a significant reduction in hostilities, the underlying motivations for keeping unregistered weapons near the front may shift. Without the immediate pressures of combat, these informal stocks could become more vulnerable to diversion or misuse. This raises a broader question about sustainability and risks arising from the informal front-line economy of trophy weapons. The apparent functionality of the informal system under wartime stress may not hold if the war becomes frozen or stalls without resolution. In such a scenario, what currently operates as a pragmatic solution could begin to generate increased risks of proliferation, especially if troops perceive informal weapons as tradable assets rather than urgently needed tools for survival. The challenge for Ukrainian defence institutions and their partners, then, is to build in gradual oversight mechanisms that preserve the operational flexibility required by front-line units, while slowly integrating unregistered trophy weapons into formal accountability systems. Such efforts could be phased in as part of long-term planning for demobilization, post-conflict disarmament, or transition to peacetime logistics.

Chapter endnotes

1 The battalion is now the '20th Separate Regiment of Unmanned Systems K-2' (Combat Group K-2, n.d.).

2 The commentary of the video's participants and the uniforms of the dead troops suggest they are Russian troops.

3 The state of the cadavers and the fact the Ukrainian troops are away from their own positions and do not seem to come under direct fire in this video suggest that the troops could be engaging in what several young, video game-savvy respondents referred to as *lutynh*, from the English 'to loot': the deliberate collection of abandoned weapons or gear during a foray into the 'grey zone' between the lines.

4 Respondents' answers have been translated from Ukrainian or Russian to English and have been slightly edited for concision, without altering their meaning. 'CS' stands for 'confidential source'.

5 The regulations in question are not concerned with trophy weapons per se, but with addressing the handling of weapons found on prisoners of war, and defining the rules for the management of different kinds of military property, including trophy weapons.

6 Interviewees did not specify the agencies involved, which seem to be numerous, but such investigations generally fall under the jurisdiction of the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU).

7 This is because, in the context of armoured vehicle shortages and intense drone warfare, troops often have to reach forward positions on foot, in small groups, while being hunted by Russian small drones. Not being weighed down by a heavy machine gun improves their ability to move fast and undetected.

8 This emphatically unrealistic figure only underscores that the respondent does not know the monetary costs of these weapons.

9 See Huliichuk (2025) for a rare but illustrative case of troops' involvement in trafficking of trophies. Note that the SSU and the National Police are known to have used the phrase 'trophy weapons' for what appears to be 'found weapons' in their press releases on attempted or disrupted weapons trafficking operations; see, for instance, SSU (2024d) and Zdorovylo (2024).

> When Ukraine transitions towards post-war reconciliation, managing the reintegration of potentially armed veterans, regulating civilian-held weapons, and establishing confidence in law enforcement will be key challenges."

3. Surveying public attitudes towards firearms and security

Gergely Hideg

Chapter findings

- Despite the risks of an all-out war, Ukraine has avoided a mass surge in civilian firearm possession. Self-reported household firearm possession stood at 6.4% in January 2025—nearly matching pre-invasion levels (6.0% in 2019). Adjusted estimates suggest that the true figure may have been closer to 10%, reflecting under-reporting, particularly among women.
- Meanwhile, reported crime victimization rates have more than doubled compared to 2011, and 7.3% of crimes encountered by respondents as of January 2025 involved firearms. Public trust in police has declined sharply, with 31% believing law enforcement cannot cope with crime. In response, 20% of adults carry some sort of self-defence instrument—a fivefold increase from pre-invasion levels.
- Firearm carrying for self-defence, while still uncommon overall (3.5%), is significantly more frequent among men (6.9%), and especially among veterans (54%). The potential negative consequences of this trend include a higher risk of interpersonal, including domestic, disputes involving firearms.
- While veterans' experiences in the war fundamentally reshape their attitudes, making them far more likely to own and carry firearms and to support more permissive firearms laws, most Ukrainians, in particular women and non-combatants, continue to favour tight firearms regulations. Overall, a clear majority prefer a return to the pre-war restrictive regime once the war ends, reflecting a long-standing norm of strict civilian arms control.
- Knowledge of firearm safety principles in Ukraine remains uneven, with a third of the population having received training—mainly men through military or security forces. Informal learners (for example, those gaining information via books or the internet) showed better recall of safety rules. While most firearm-owning households keep their weapons in locked storage, many store them with ammunition, revealing ongoing storage safety gaps.
- Public awareness campaigns about firearm-related risks remain very limited, with only 14% of adults recalling exposure to them. This percentage is highest in Kyiv and the western regions and lowest in the north. Social media is the primary channel of exposure for younger groups, while older adults are more often reached through television, radio, or printed materials.

Overview

The Small Arms Survey conducted several waves of public opinion polling to assess the Ukrainian population's perceptions of firearm proliferation and its implications, both before and during the full-scale invasion (see Box 3.1). This chapter summarizes key findings from these surveys, focusing on the extent of firearm proliferation, its perceived impact on security, evolving public attitudes towards firearms, and potential strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of future proliferation.

Box 3.1 Methodology

The Survey commissioned six general population surveys in Ukraine carried out in 2019–25, with a total of more than 11,000 respondents (see Table 3.1).

While the population surveys were based on random sampling and are nationally representative, there are some important limitations to keep in mind. The surveys did not include areas under Russian occupation at the time of data collection. There may also be some bias due to the absence of refugees who were living outside Ukraine during the survey periods. In addition, data collection was affected in some areas by damaged

Table 3.1 Overview of the surveys

Survey wave	Dates	Sample size	Method[1]	Fieldwork agency
June 2019	24 May–7 June 2019	2,021	Face-to-face omnibus	Kyiv International Institute of Sociology
January 2023	9 December 2022–21 January 2023	2,000	Telephone, random digit dialling (RDD)[2]	Ipsos
September 2023	2 August–7 September 2023	1,750	Telephone, RDD	Ipsos
December 2023	14 November–16 December 2023	1,750	Telephone, RDD	Ipsos
July 2024	6 June–30 July 2024	1,750	Telephone, RDD	Ipsos
January 2025	4 December 2024–25 January 2025	1,750	Telephone, RDD	Ipsos

infrastructure—such as power outages or loss of phone service—and, over time, the number of non-responses increased. Finally, some caution is needed when interpreting answers about firearms. People may have felt uneasy sharing information about gun ownership or safety practices, which could lead to under-reporting. On the other hand, some may have overstated their use of safety measures or firearm registration due to social pressure to give the 'right' answer. It is also worth noting that while the surveys' main focus was on firearms, some questions also referred to other types of small arms and light weapons, such as grenades, explosives, and munitions.

To allow for better comparison over time, the survey samples were adjusted to match the population structure of Ukraine before the full-scale invasion—based on gender, age, region, and urban or rural status. This approach helps limit the impact of migration and other population changes caused by the war and ensures better comparability across different time points. During data collection, broad quotas were also used to help keep the sample balanced across these key characteristics. Nevertheless, longitudinal comparability caveats apply owing to a gradually decreasing proportion of accessible territory due to Russian occupation.

With certain findings, the granularity of interpretation can be constrained by the limitations in scope and depth of the questions and responses.[3]

Contained proliferation

On 24 February 2022—one day after the Russian Federation launched its full-scale invasion and troops advanced rapidly towards Kyiv—President Zelenskyy posted the following tweet: 'We will give weapons to anyone who wants to defend the country. Be ready to support Ukraine in the squares of our cities' (Zelenskyy, 2022).

At the onset of the invasion, the Ukrainian government distributed tens of thousands of firearms to civilians—reportedly up to 25,000 automatic rifles (Khurshudyan, O'Grady, and Morris, 2022) and 10,000 assault rifles in Kyiv alone (Gutowsky, 2022)—to support territorial defence efforts. This rapid arming of the population built on the already significant proliferation of weapons during the initial phase of the war in 2014 (Martyniuk, 2017), when makeshift defence efforts led to large quantities of arms leaking into civilian circulation amid the conflict in eastern regions of Ukraine (UN, 2022). Together, these waves of distribution have substantially increased the number of firearms in civilian hands across Ukraine.

Civilian firearm possession during wartime

The Ukrainian authorities made significant progress in trying to prevent the uncontrolled flow of firearms as early as 2015 (Schroeder et al., 2019). With the onset of

Table 3.2 Firearm possession rate, 2019–25 (among all respondents)

	June 2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024	January 2025
Possession of fire-arms, self-reported, all households	6.0%	5.3%	6.7%	5.6%	5.1%	6.4%

Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2019; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024; 2025)

the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion and the further distribution of firearms under the Law on Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine (see Chapter 4), however, there is a risk that this progress could be reversed if weapons are not properly accounted for.

Yet, population surveys conducted by the Survey have not substantiated these fears. Self-reported household firearm possession in Ukraine has remained broadly stable between June 2019 and January 2025, fluctuating only modestly between 5.1% and 6.7%, with no indication of a sharp increase despite the war of aggression (see Table 3.2). The rate recorded in January 2025 (6.4%) is nearly identical to the pre-invasion level in 2019 (6.0%). While these figures likely reflect a degree of under-reporting, the lack of significant change suggests that no mass civilian proliferation has occurred, despite the extraordinary pressures of full-scale war.

There has, however, been some fluctuation in the rate of firearm possession in civilian households: while some weapons were taken out of homes, possibly to support the war effort, some households acquired new firearms after February 2022. Looking at all respondents in January 2025, the aggregated number of currently held firearms reported is 23% lower than the number the same households claimed having before the full-scale invasion. Meanwhile, 43% of the weapons held at the time of the survey were said to have been acquired since the onset of the all-out war.

After adjusting for gender—generalizing male responses to all households with adult men to account for markedly lower reporting rates among women[4]—estimated firearm possession rises to 8.4% of households as of January 2025. Network-based estimates[5] reinforce this picture, with respondents indicating that firearms are present in 11% of their social circles.[6] Together, these adjustments suggest that the actual household-level possession rate may be closer to 10%. Firearm acquisition is perceived as 'much more difficult' than before the 2022 invasion and increasingly difficult since September 2023 (see Table 3.3). While the initial spike in difficulty may be attributed to surging front-line demand for weapons not met with adequate supply (Hideg, 2024), current access problems may also be linked to reduced supply due to more effective small arms and light weapons control by authorities.

Table 3.3 Firearm accessibility, 2019–25 (among all respondents)

	June 2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024	January 2025
Very difficult or impossible to acquire firearm	5%	33%	21%	26%	28%	33%

Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2019; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024; 2025)

The use of firearms in crime and for self-defence

In the aftermath of conflict, societies are markedly susceptible to a surge in criminal violence (Gartner and Kennedy, 2018). This encompasses both interpersonal violence and organized criminal activities, where former combatants and military leaders seek to use their former roles to exercise economic or political power, often resorting to illegal and violent methods (Hideg, 2024). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the increased availability of military-grade weaponry that finds its way into civilian circulation as these weapons 'leak' from the battlefield. Ukraine had already experienced an uptick in criminal violence during and after the initial phase of the war (between 2014 and 2017),[7] raising concerns about the potential resurgence of such violence. Increased civilian access to firearms—even when legal—often leads to higher levels of violence and insecurity, negatively affecting human rights across the board, according to a comprehensive analysis of recent conflicts (OHCHR, 2019), as well as several other sources analysing security in post-conflict settings (Berdal, 2009; Vorrath, 2018). One of the possible effects is more acute intimate partner and family violence, disproportionally affecting women (Hrytsenko and Shmatko, 2025).

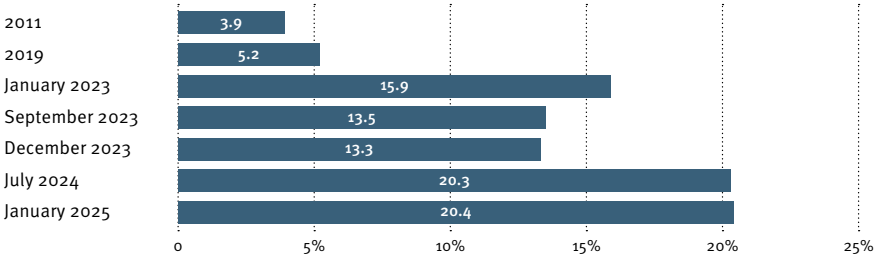
The sense of security has indeed declined in Ukraine, not just because of the Russian attacks but also due to increased criminality. Despite government reports that crime

Table 3.4 12-month household-level crime victimization rates in Ukraine, 2011–25 (among all respondents)

	2011	June 2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024	January 2025
Family or respondent victimized over the past year (any crime)	7.1%	6.7%	6.8%	8.2%	7.8%	8.8%	8.4%

Sources: Inglehart et al. (2014); Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024; 2025)

Figure 3.1 Percentage of respondents carrying weapons for self-defence, 2011–25 (among all respondents)



Sources: Inglehart et al. (2014); Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024; 2025)

in Ukraine has decreased since the start of the full-scale war (Harmash, 2023) and that security has been 'maintained at the proper level' (Ukrainian MIA, 2023), population surveys indicate that victimization levels began to increase from 2023. The 12-month self-reported household victimization rate increased from pre-invasion levels (from 7.1% in 2011 to 8.4% in January 2025) and has continued to rise throughout the war (see Table 3.4). As of 2025, 7.3% of the crimes that respondents and their family fell victim to involved firearms.[8] The belief that police cannot cope with criminality increased from 11% in January 2023 to 31% two years later—reinforcing declining perceptions of safety.

The proportion of respondents feeling safe or very safe from crime dropped from three-quarters (75%) in January 2023 to two-thirds (67%) by January 2025. War-related insecurities also rose, with 41% reporting frequent shelling or bombardment, up from 26% in January 2023.[9]

Coinciding with an increased crime threat and a decrease in confidence in the police, the share of those carrying some sort of self-defence instrument has risen five times compared to the pre-invasion era, hitting a record 20% by January 2025 (see Figure 3.1). While one in five Ukrainians are equipped for self-defence,[10] 'only' 3.5% say they carry a firearm for this purpose. The rate is notably higher among all men (7%), especially those aged 30–59 (9%).

Militarization of society

Since 2014, Ukraine has experienced ongoing conflict linked to the Russian Federation's military actions. Over time, this has shaped many aspects of Ukrainian society, with a growing share of the population gaining direct experience of armed service and conflict—and thus familiarity with firearms.

During the initial phase of the conflict in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, from 2014 to 2021, approximately 400,000 Ukrainians served in military operations (Friedrich and Lütkefend, 2021). The escalation into full-scale war in 2022 led to a dramatic increase in mobilization. According to recent estimates, there are currently around 800,000 active soldiers, 1 million reservists, and 1.2 million veterans in Ukraine (Dobrohorska, 2025; REACH, 2025).[11] This substantial demographic underscores the extensive combat experience embedded within Ukrainian society.

Among those interviewed in January 2025, nearly one-third of the respondents (30%) reported living in households where other members were currently or formerly engaged in hostilities. Nearly 7% of those surveyed reported being involved in either the so-called Joint Forces Operation or Anti-Terrorist Operation before 2022, or the ongoing full-scale war—or both. Of the respondents who had personally participated in the war, 12% were women. In both the July 2024 and the January 2025 surveys, about 3% of respondents stated that they were currently serving.

Perceptions of firearms among veterans and non-veterans

The surveys reveal a clear divide in firearm-related attitudes and behaviours based on whether individuals or members of their household have participated in combat (see Table 3.5). Those who personally fought in the war are the most likely to view firearms as necessary (54%), compared to just 30% of those with no combatants in the household.

Personal firearm ownership follows a similar pattern, with 20% of combat veterans[12] reporting that they own a firearm, compared to only 3% of those without a combatant in the household. Likewise, the desire to own a firearm is significantly higher among veterans (37%) than among those with no direct participation in the war (23%). Perceptions of accessibility also differ, with 23% of veterans believing that obtaining ammunition is easy, while only 10% of non-combatant households share this view.

When examining motivations for firearm ownership, hunting is the primary reason for possessing a firearm for firearm owners without direct combat experience (47% in households with a non-respondent combatant, 42% in non-combatant households). In contrast, veterans are more likely to cite protection (40%) and, to a lesser extent, preparation for potential conflict (38%) as reasons for owning a firearm.

A striking contrast emerges in the respondents that reported carrying weapons for personal safety in crime-related contexts. Over half (54%) of veterans have carried a weapon for protection, while only 16% of those in non-combatant households have done so. This pattern is especially pronounced for firearms—24% of veterans have carried a firearm for personal safety, compared to just 1% of those without combat exposure.

Table 3.5 Firearm possession and firearm-related attitudes according to participation in the war, January 2025

Statement	Respondent is a former or current combatant (n=121)	Respondent lives with a former or current combatant (n=521)	No former or current combatant in the household (n=1,108)
	Percentage in agreement with the statement		
Firearms are necessary.	54%	33%	30%
Access to firearms is easy.	17%	11%	12%
They have a firearm at home.	27%	7%	4%
They have, or would like to have, a firearm.	56%	28%	26%
They personally have a firearm.	20%	3%	3%
They would like to have a firearm.	37%	24%	23%
Having a firearm makes/would make them safer.	49%	33%	30%
They have carried a weapon for personal safety in a crime-related context, specifically:	54%	21%	16%
a firearm	24%	4%	1%
a traumatic weapon[13]	15%	6%	2%
some other weapon (such as a knife or pepper spray).	35%	18%	14%
Veterans will bring back firearms ('likely' or 'very likely').	49%	54%	52%
Ukraine will be less safe with armed veterans returning ('likely' or 'very likely').	34%	50%	47%

Note: Totals may not add up due to rounding.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2025)

Despite these differences, expectations about the consequences of veterans returning with firearms remain relatively consistent. Around half of all respondents (47%), regardless of their household's combat history, believe that returning veterans will likely bring back weapons. In the general population, slightly more women (49%) than men (43%) sense such a risk. Similarly, concerns over reduced public safety with armed veterans returning are widely shared, with 50% of households with a non-respondent combatant and 47% of non-combatant households viewing this as a likely threat.

These results track very closely with the findings of previous survey waves (Hideg, 2024). Overall, these findings confirm that personal experience of war strongly influences attitudes towards firearms, shaping both perceptions of necessity and patterns of ownership. Considering that Ukraine's military now comprises more than 800,000 soldiers (Dobrohorska, 2025; Khomenko, 2025) and that a significant proportion of them could become potential firearm owners when they reintegrate into civilian life once the war ends or significantly subsides, it will be critically important for Ukraine to develop appropriate demobilization plans when that time comes. These must go beyond weapons collection—which might not realistically be comprehensive in the short term—and include a broader arms control and management framework supplemented by robust labour market and psychosocial support schemes.[14] Crucially, effective firearms regulation and enforcement will need to be a central component of this process, forming a cornerstone of post-war security and instilling public confidence in the rule of law.

Ukraine's regulatory gap

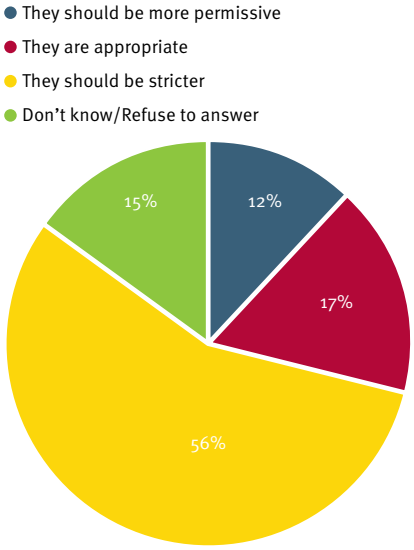
In the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework, Ukraine's current legal status regarding civilian firearm possession is characterized by a reliance on regulatory orders and temporary measures enacted during martial law while legislative efforts are ongoing (Tsarvulanova, Macculi, and Sheik, 2024; see Chapter 4). Rather than attempting to clarify this evolving legal status—which remains complex and contested—this chapter focuses on how the public perceives firearm access and the kind of regulation they would prefer.

When asked how firearm access should be regulated, a majority of respondents (56%) expressed support for stricter rules. Just 12% supported more permissive laws, while 17% believed that current regulations are appropriate (see Figure 3.2).[15] These results indicate that support for tightening regulation remains dominant, even as firearm visibility and informal access have increased.

Other sources point to more permissive attitudes among certain segments of the public. A large-scale, self-selected online poll conducted through Ukraine's Diia e-government platform in 2022 found that, of more than 1.7 million respondents,

Figure 3.2 Opinions about the regulation of civilian firearm possession in Ukraine, January 2025 (among all respondents)

What is your opinion on the current regulations around firearms in Ukraine?



Source: Small Arms Survey (2025)

59% supported legal civilian ownership and even the carrying of pistols in public (Odessa Journal, 2022). As the Diia poll was voluntary and not representative, however, its results clearly overstate support for firearm liberalization compared to representative polling, which shows only minority support for the loosening of restrictions.

Mitigation strategies

Survey results also reveal a nuanced landscape of Ukrainian attitudes towards firearms regulation, reflecting the realities of a nation at war while mirroring the long-standing norms of a restrictive regulatory approach towards civilian firearms in Ukraine. Comparing the opinions of respondent groups based on firearm ownership, participation in the war, and gender to the national average paints a picture of somewhat diverging preferences and attitudes when it comes to determining the future regulation of civilian firearms in Ukraine (see Figure 3.3). There is no clear consensus on a path forward: people wish to go back to the strict, prohibitive pre-war firearms regulations, but they also acknowledge that this may not be possible, in which case, at least the registration of the firearms must be accomplished. Overall, contrary to the results of the cited Diia online poll, Ukrainians seem to favour restricting the firearm types permitted for civilian ownership and ensuring that firearm possession is only permitted following rigorous background checks. Ukrainians are worried about the adverse effects of more permissive regulations: more accidents and increased criminal use of firearms are anticipated if civilian access becomes easier on a permanent basis.

Remarkably, the general population, and especially women, expressed little agreement with the proposition that adult Ukrainians should be allowed to possess firearms. Women express the most caution regarding civilian firearm access, showing the least support (29 points) for allowing adult citizens to possess firearms and the highest level of agreement with statements about potential risks such as accidental shootings (88 points) and criminal misuse (87 points). This reflects a long-standing trend

Figure 3.3 Attitudes towards firearms regulations, January 2025

I am going to read a few statements. Please let me know how much you agree with each of them—5 means you completely agree and 1 means you completely disagree.

Mean scores projected to a 100-point scale, by respondent group

Source: Small Arms Survey (2025)

already established in the 2019 survey: almost half (48%) of the male respondents of that survey agreed that 'law-abiding citizens of Ukraine should be able to legally own firearms', in contrast to less than one in five of women (18%), suggesting that women perceive weapons as a risk factor rather than a means of protection in their household (Dungel and Fabre, 2022). This gender disparity in attitudes towards firearms has been observed in other conflict zones and may reflect differing security priorities and experiences (Hideg and Watson, 2023).

Groups with more direct ties to firearms—such as firearm owners and war veterans—tend to express stronger support for more permissive laws. For instance, veterans and firearm owners are much more likely to agree with statements favouring civilian access to firearms (Statements A and B) and to consider that permissive regulations enhance public safety or help deter foreign aggression (Statements D and E).

Despite this, support for safeguards remains strong across all groups: nearly all respondents, regardless of background, favour background checks (Statement C), and most agree that restrictions should remain in place for certain weapon types (Statement G). Women consistently express lower support for permissive regulation and greater concern about the risks—particularly regarding accidental shootings and criminal misuse (Statements H and I).

All groups adopt a pragmatic approach to existing firearms, strongly agreeing (74–86 points) that confiscation of existing firearms may be impossible or impractical and that registration represents a more viable solution. This suggests a recognition of on-the-ground realities despite preferences towards a highly restrictive regulatory framework inherited from the Soviet-era.

These patterns underscore how attitudes diverge sharply along lines of gender, ownership, and war experience—highlighting the complex, and at times contradictory, public sentiment in a society simultaneously shaped by war and long-standing traditions of restrictive firearm control. Overall, 55% of the respondents (and 59% of women) agreed 'completely' that previous strict restrictions should be reinstated after the war is over, dismissing a more permissive future of civilian firearms, while 14% (12% of women) disagreed completely.

The Unified Register of Weapons

The Unified Register of Weapons of Ukraine (URW) is a centralized digital database created by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in June 2023 to manage and regulate civilian firearms in Ukraine (see Chapter 4). The register is a key part of the government's efforts to formalize, monitor, and control legal firearm ownership—especially important in the context of a country at war and with increasing numbers of weapons in circulation.

As of April 2024, Ukraine's URW has processed more than 306,000 firearm permit applications, approving more than 285,000 (Ukrainian National News, 2024). For context, the Survey estimated that in 2017 Ukrainian civilians possessed approximately 800,000 registered and 3.6 million unregistered firearms (Small Arms Survey, n.d.). This suggests that less than one-tenth of the previously existing stock of unregistered civilian weapons may have been legally registered, despite recent efforts.

This initiative nevertheless streamlines the acquisition and registration process of weapons, thus enhancing oversight of civilian-held firearms. In March 2025, Ukraine introduced a digital firearm permit service through the Diia e-government platform, aiming to support the application and issuance of firearm permits (Dubenko, 2025). This development may influence registration figures, but its exact impact remains to be seen.

Awareness of the URW and registration have steadily increased since its launch, especially among firearm owners. By January 2025, nearly half of the general public was aware of the URW (see Figure 3.4), and 63% of firearm-owning households reported

Figure 3.4 Awareness of the URW, 2023–25 (among all respondents)

Have you heard about the Unified Register of Weapons?

Percentage among all respondents

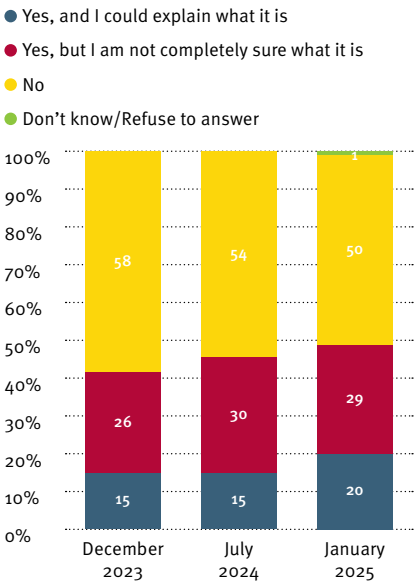


Figure 3.5 Firearm registration in the URW, 2023–25 (among firearm-owning households)

Are any of the firearms in this household recorded in the Unified Register of Weapons?

Percentage among respondents with one or more firearms in the household

Note: Totals in both figures may not add up due to rounding.

Sources: Small Arms Survey (2023c; 2024; 2025)

having registered their weapons (see Figure 3.5). The URW, however, remains largely unknown to many, and more than one-third of firearm-owning households did not confirm having recorded their firearms. While awareness of the URW among veterans is considerably higher (69%), the rate of registration is similar. Like the broader group of firearm-owning households, 61% of veterans reported having registered all their firearms. These figures show encouraging momentum, but also underscore the need for stronger outreach, enforcement, and policy follow-up to ensure the URW's effectiveness and public safety impact.

Among those who interacted with the URW, most found it easy to use: 42% rated the process as easy, while only 18% found it hard. Nevertheless, 40% of respondents did not provide an evaluation, suggesting many have little or no direct experience with the system—possibly because someone else handled the registration. This suggests that the main obstacle to wider use is limited familiarity rather than operational difficulties, and therefore underscores a need for additional efforts to raise awareness of the URW.

Knowledge of firearm-related risks

Firearm safety knowledge in Ukraine remains inconsistent. As of December 2024, a third of Ukrainians reported having received some form of firearm safety training—whether formal or informal (33%). Such training took place primarily through military service or other armed services, for example law enforcement. A gender gap persists, with 44% of men but only 8% of women having undergone formal training. Interestingly, those who learned from books or the internet displayed better recall of firearm safety measures (79%) than those trained through the military or law enforcement (64%), which may be connected to the relatively younger age in this group; the role of military training increases heavily with age among men (Hideg, 2024).

Households with firearms exhibited higher safety awareness—at least one adult had received formal or informal firearm training in the majority of these households (90%). Nearly a third of respondents living in firearm-owning households could not, however, name a specific safe handling rule, and storage practices vary. While all firearm-owning households lock away their weapons, most store firearms together with ammunition (Hideg, 2024), which is generally advised against but may be practical given limited secure storage options.

Though 84% of veterans reported having received formal firearm training, their ability to identify at least one firearm handling rule is similar to other gun-owning households (71%, compared to 69% among the general gun-owning population). Among the 20 firearm-owning veterans who answered this question, all but one said they lock up their weapons. But only one declared storing firearms and ammunition separately.

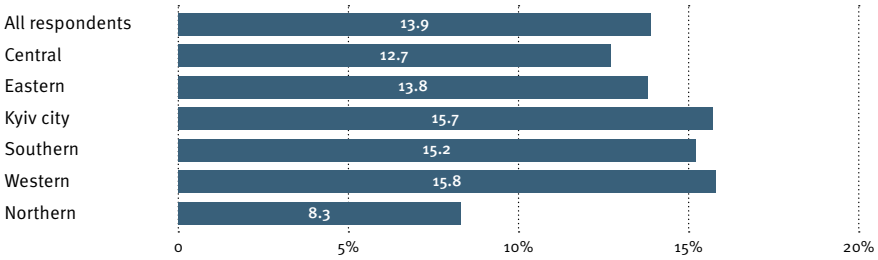
When the war winds down, the likelihood of increased civilian firearm possession will grow. Ensuring that both firearm users and those who have traditionally not had access to firearms, such as women and youth, have access to training in safe weapons handling and storage will be key to fostering responsible firearm ownership and preventing accidents in a post-war Ukraine where weapons may play a larger role in civilian life.

Public awareness campaigns

Only a small share of Ukrainians—14% on average—recall encountering a public awareness campaign about the risks related to firearms, with little variation across regions. Reported exposure is slightly higher in Kyiv city and the western regions (both 16%), and notably lower in the north (8%) (see Figure 3.6). Similar patterns also hold across the various socio-demographic groups, with awareness rates remaining very close to the average. Surprisingly, more people in Ukraine seemed to have taken part in some form of firearm-related training than recalled seeing any official information campaign about firearm risks, suggesting that wider public education efforts on safety have been limited or lacked visibility.

Social media is the most common channel for encountering information about firearm-related risks, especially among younger and middle-aged adults, while television (or YouTube) adverts dominate among older Ukrainians (see Table 3.6). The reach of printed materials is consistent across all age groups, but radio and podcasts seem to be more effective among older adults. Dedicated websites have the highest reach among younger adults, whereas educational programmes and community events have a more limited but age-dependent reach, with middle-aged adults engaging more in educational settings and younger adults attending workshops more than older or middle-aged groups.

Figure 3.6 Awareness of the information campaigns about firearms risks by region, January 2025 (among all respondents)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2025)

Table 3.6 Channels where people encountered information campaigns about firearm-related risks, by age, January 2025

Channel	All respondents	Age		
		18–29	30–59	60+
Social media feeds (such as Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram)	57%	60%	66%	39%
Adverts or advertising spots (on television or YouTube)	54%	45%	44%	75%
Printed brochures or posters	40%	41%	40%	41%
Radio or podcasts	28%	18%	26%	36%
Dedicated websites	27%	43%	27%	21%
Schools or educational programmes	25%	22%	32%	14%
Dedicated community events or workshops	17%	24%	21%	7%

Source: Small Arms Survey (2025)

Conclusion

Despite large-scale distribution of firearms following the February 2022 invasion, Ukraine has avoided a mass surge in civilian firearm possession. Self-reported household firearm ownership has remained stable at around 6%, consistent with pre-invasion levels, though adjusted estimates suggest actual possession may be closer to 10%. These figures indicate a degree of control by authorities and restraint among the population, even amid full-scale war and the competing demands of ongoing defence against relentless Russian assault. At the same time, rising crime victimization, increased use of firearms in criminal acts, and declining trust in police have contributed to a fivefold increase in weapon carrying for self-defence—particularly prevalent among men and veterans.

The data reveals sharp divergences in attitudes and behaviours between veterans and the general population. Veterans are significantly more likely to own and carry firearms, as well as to support permissive firearms laws, while most civilians—especially women and those without combat exposure—express clear support for restoring strict pre-war regulatory controls as soon as peace returns. These differences reflect a broader societal tension between lived war experiences—shifting certain population groups' relationships to weapons—and the enduring norms of civilian arms control in Ukraine.

When Ukraine transitions towards post-war reconciliation, managing the reintegration of potentially armed veterans, regulating civilian-held weapons, and establishing confidence in law enforcement will be key challenges. The findings underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach encompassing controlled demobilization and disarmament to prevent firearms from leaking uncontrollably from the front lines; legal clarity on the status of civilian firearms; risk prevention through improved registration and control mechanisms; and public outreach on firearm safety and security, particularly regarding weapons that may still end up in civilian households.

Chapter endnotes

1 It is important to note that both face-to-face and telephone survey methods are more prone to response bias related to social desirability and satisficing, compared to self-administered modes (such as online questionnaires). Such bias is sometimes found to be stronger in in-person, face-to-face surveys, where the social distance between the respondent and the interviewer is smaller. Some argue that the stronger rapport built up during in-person interviewing results in somewhat higher rates of disclosure of opinions, experiences, or behaviours that may be illegal, socially stigmatized, or personally considered as shameful (Holbrook, Green, and Krosnick, 2003). Other studies suggest that disclosure of non-normative behaviours may be consistently lower over the telephone (Berzelak and Vehovar, 2018). Overall, while some variation in reporting between the modes exists, the survey results showed no clear evidence that one mode systematically leads to greater non-disclosure of non-normative behaviours—such as firearm possession—than the other.

2 The surveys were carried out by telephone through random digit dialling of mobile telephones of the three Ukrainian phone providers. Interviews were conducted for those residing in Ukraine.

3 For more information, see Hideg (2023).

4 As seen in various other studies, men discuss firearm-related issues more openly than women and are generally more likely to report the presence of a firearm (Dönges and Karp, 2014)—with male respondents in the Ukraine surveys twice as likely as women to do so. Women, in turn, are more reluctant to give a response (using the 'don't know' or 'no answer' responses provided) or to simply deny the presence of firearms at home. The gender-adjusted rate is therefore estimated by extrapolating male-provided answers to all households where an adult male resident was present. For households without adult male household members, the gender-adjusted estimation retained the response provided by the female respondent.

5 These estimates are based on the network scale-up method (NSUM), in which survey respondents report whether they believe, or are certain, that their neighbours (up to five households) possess a firearm. The reported rate reflects only those whom respondents knew for certain possessed a firearm(s).

6 The questionnaire requested respondents to 'think about five households close to yours (same district, village, or town) that you know well and with which you have a close relationship. By this, I mean that you regularly exchange points of view about everyday life, but they are not your relatives.' Then the respondent was asked whether they believed, and whether they knew for certain, that these households had firearms. The latter was used for the purposes of this analysis.

7 See Hideg (2023).

8 This is down from 10.6% in December 2023 but higher compared to the rates measured at the beginning of the full-scale war: 5.9% in January 2023; 5.8% in September 2023.

9 At the same time, the attacks on energy infrastructure became less intense or less effective: in January 2025 27% experienced frequent or very frequent power outages, down from 80% in July 2024.

10 The survey offered the following responses: carried a traumatic weapon; carried some sort of firearm; or carried some other weapon (knife, pepper spray, and gas spray, etc.).

11 ‘Projections suggest that, as the war continues, the combined number of veterans, their family members, individuals with disability resulting from war, and the families of fallen soldiers could reach between four and five million’ (IOM Ukraine, 2025, p. 2).
12 Gender disaggregation within this group was not possible due to the small sample size and the low proportion of women.
13 A definition of the term ‘traumatic weapon’ can be found in the section on ‘key terms’ in the Introduction to this Report. See also Box 4.1 for an overview of the regulatory framework for traumatic weapons.
14 Firearm access is also correlated with more lethal forms of interpersonal violence and increased suicide risk.
15 The majority of respondents in January 2025 thought that firearm possession for civilians was illegal in Ukraine (53%).

> “[Weapons] proliferation can only be tackled [. . .] through a strategic and multidimensional policy, including robust data systems, clear institutional roles, and the integration of arms policy into other important areas.”

4. Measures to prevent the diversion and misuse of civilian-held firearms

Viktoriia Voronina and Vadym Chernysh

Chapter findings

- Civilian firearm possession in Ukraine is regulated primarily through Order No. 622 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine—a piece of secondary legislation adopted in 1998. While a new primary Law on the Right to Civilian Firearms has been drafted, its adoption by parliament has been delayed. As a result, the current regulatory framework does not fulfil all the requirements set under the EU Firearms Directive, nor does certain key weapons terminology conform to international standards.
- In the absence of a comprehensive legislative framework, fragmented regulatory regimes are in place to govern specific categories of weapons, including weapons owned by voluntary formations of territorial communities (VFTCs), firearms found or scavenged by civilians, trophy weapons captured by combatants (see Chapter 2), award weapons, and traumatic weapons.
- Official estimates of the number of illicit weapons circulating in Ukraine since 2022 vary widely from 1 million to 5 million and therefore do not provide a reliable benchmark for addressing proliferation. A more robust system for assessing the scale of illegal arms possession requires a transparent, consistently applied methodology integrating multiple and complementary data sources—including some of the metrics presented in Chapters 1 and 3—to generate more measurable indicators of success in the fight against illicit proliferation.
- The Unified Register of Weapons (URW), launched in 2023, represents a step forward in accounting for legally held weapons—with more than 750,000 civilian firearms registered as of October 2024 out of 1.4 million legally held firearms—and may in turn help prevent diversion through losses and theft. This type of unified database is lacking, however, for seized and found firearms, which constrains law enforcement agencies' ability to access this data.
- While still in its infancy, the Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition (hereafter 'Coordination Centre') was established in 2024 under the auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to facilitate inter-agency cooperation and develop strategic-level policies. Moving forward, these efforts should involve a broad range of policy domains—including public security, education, culture, veteran reintegration, and public health—to develop the comprehensive and multisectoral policies needed to tackle all aspects of illicit weapons proliferation.
- Civil society organizations and local self-government bodies are not currently involved in the development or implementation of a comprehensive national arms control policy, although they have an important role to play, notably by contributing to community-level prevention.

Overview

This chapter examines Ukraine's fragmented but evolving approach to small arms and light weapons control, highlighting significant legal, institutional, and operational vulnerabilities and opportunities. While initial steps have been taken to foster a more coordinated approach,[1] the research findings emphasize the need to develop a comprehensive and inclusive small arms policy that identifies strategic priorities, addresses legislative gaps, and clarifies enforcement responsibilities and accountability frameworks.

The chapter begins by examining the legal landscape governing small arms possession before and during the full-scale invasion of 2022. It goes on to identify significant initiatives and reforms established following the invasion, such as the URW and the Coordination Centre, along with new legislation to facilitate the declaration of found or scavenged firearms and ammunition (Ukrainian Parliament, 2022; 2024). The chapter highlights the need for a coordinated response involving all actors—including national and local authorities as well as civil society—and examines the roles these different actors can play in preventing arms trafficking and misuse.

The legal landscape governing civilian small arms in Ukraine

As of October 2025, the primary regulation governing firearms is the Order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs No. 622, issued in 1998 (Ukrainian MIA, 1998); however, while the order specifies requirements for civilian firearm possession, the regulations and firearm categories do not fully align with key frameworks such as the EU Firearms Directive. The draft Law on the Right to Civilian Firearms was introduced to address these gaps but remains under parliamentary review (Ukrainian Parliament, 2021b). More recently, in November 2024, the Ukrainian president signed amendments to the Law on Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament, 2022). The amended law formalizes the conditions under which civilians can obtain, possess, and use firearms for national defence—including firearms found in the context of the ongoing war—and establishes oversight, accountability, and procedures for post-conflict disarmament. The Criminal Code of Ukraine also forms a key component of the national legal framework regulating weapons, firearms, and ammunition (Ukrainian Parliament, 2001).

Meanwhile, the rapid evolution of Ukraine's security environment since 2014 has led to the emergence of volunteer battalions, whose ambiguous legal status further complicates the national arms control framework.

Civilian weapons ownership regulations prior to 2014

Order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine No. 622

Order No. 622 is currently the main regulation governing firearms in Ukraine and establishes procedures for the manufacture, acquisition, registration, storage, possession, transportation, and use of weapons in Ukraine by both individuals and legal entities (Ukrainian MIA, 1998). The order not only governs civilian access to weapons for hunting and sports shooting purposes, but also outlines the conditions under which ministries, state agencies, enterprises, and organizations may acquire weapons for their employees, along with the necessary procedures (see also Box 4.1). The order specifies licensing requirements; defines regulated weapon categories; and establishes regulations for permits, storage, and safety compliance.

The order stipulates that only companies with a licence from the Ministry of Internal Affairs are entitled to manufacture firearms and other weapons—such as pneumatic, cold,[2] and deactivated weapons, as well as less-lethal devices that fire rubber or similar projectiles—their cartridges, ammunition, essential weapon parts, and explosive materials. These weapons are sold through specialized, authorized retail outlets. The order establishes procedures for transporting firearms; ammunition; main parts; pneumatic, cold, or deactivated weapons; and related devices across Ukraine's borders—a permit is also required, granted by the police, and recorded in the URW. Postal shipments of weapons, ammunition, parts, devices, and gunpowder are prohibited.

Under the order, civilians can only own weapons for hunting or sporting purposes[3] and must obtain a weapons permit—a procedure that involves passing a medical examination, completing training in weapons safety, submitting several documents to the National Police, and registering the weapon, if purchased, through the Permit System Units. Paragraph 12 of the order states that weapons must be stored in specially equipped safes or metal boxes to ensure safety and prevent unauthorized persons, especially children, from accessing them. All weapons and devices must be stored unloaded.

Civilians are generally not permitted to own handguns. The main types of weapons available to civilians include the following:

- smooth-bore hunting weapons (from the age of 21);
- hunting rifles (from the age of 25, subject to three years' experience of handling smooth-bore weapons);
- pneumatic weapons (from the age of 18); and
- hunting knives (from the age of 18, subject to a permit).

Criminal Code of Ukraine

Articles 262 to 264 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine outline criminal liability for offences such as the unlawful acquisition, manufacture, or negligent storage of weapons (Ukrainian Parliament, 2001; see Table 4.1). The Code does not, however, address liability for trafficking in parts and components of weapons, nor does it specify penalties for possessing or trafficking different amounts of ammunition.

Box 4.1 Groups allowed to possess traumatic weapons for self-defence

Certain groups whose activities pose a risk to their life and health are allowed to own or use (including temporarily) a particular type of weapon for the purpose of active self-defence—referred to in Ukraine as a 'traumatic weapon'.[4] A traumatic weapon is defined officially in the Ministry of Internal Affairs Order 379 of 2000 as 'a device domestically manufactured [that is, in Ukraine] to fire cartridges loaded with rubber or similar non-lethal projectiles and technically incapable of firing industrially manufactured cartridges loaded with lethal projectiles/ammunition (bullets, buckshot)' (Ukrainian MIA, 2000).

Order 379 also outlines the procedures for acquiring, storing, accounting for, and using traumatic weapons, and states that the following persons are eligible: court employees, law enforcement officers and their close relatives, people involved in criminal proceedings, members of the Ukrainian Parliament, civil servants, journalists, members of public organizations for the protection of public order and the state border, and military personnel, apart from those performing military service (Ukrainian MIA, 2000). Such persons may obtain a permit to purchase traumatic weapons at their own expense and, within ten days of the date of purchase, apply to the police for a permit to store and carry the weapon in accordance with the procedures set out in Order No. 622 (Ukrainian MIA, 1998).

At the same time, the Ukrainian laws on State Protection of Court and Law Enforcement Employees (Ukrainian Parliament, 1993a) and on Ensuring the Safety of Persons Participating in Criminal Proceedings (Ukrainian Parliament, 1993b) allow for the issuance of weapons, including traumatic weapons, to court and law enforcement employees and persons participating in criminal proceedings, depending on the level of threat posed to life and health. The professions listed in the Law on State Protection of Court and Law Enforcement Employees, for example, include the following: the National Police, the Security Service of Ukraine, the Military Law Enforcement Service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, state border protection bodies, judges and employees of the Office of the General Prosecutor, the Bureau of Economic Security, penitentiary bodies and institutions, pre-trial detention centres, state financial control bodies, fisheries protection, state forest protection, and other bodies that perform law enforcement functions (Ukrainian Parliament, 1993a).

It is important to note that this mechanism operates both separately and in parallel with the mechanism for providing service or departmental weapons to individual bodies within the security and defence sector.

Table 4.1 Key provisions of the Criminal Code of Ukraine related to firearms and ammunition

Article	Scope	Penalty
262	Stealing, appropriation, extortion, or fraudulent acquisition of firearms (except smooth-bore hunting guns), ammunition, explosives, explosive devices, or radioactive materials	• Imprisonment: 3–7 years • Aggravated (repeat, group, or abuse of office): 5–10 years • Organized group, brigandism, or extortion with violence: 10–15 years and forfeiture of property
263	Unlawful carrying, storage, acquisition, transfer, or sale of firearms (other than smooth-bore hunting guns), ammunition, explosives, or explosive devices without the required permit	• Imprisonment: 3–7 years
263-1	Unlawful manufacture, processing, or repair of firearms; falsification, illegal removal, or alteration of markings; or illegal manufacture of ammunition, explosives, or explosive devices	• Imprisonment: 3–7 years • Aggravated (repeat or group): 5–10 years • Organized group: 8–12 years
264	Negligent storage of firearms or ammunition causing death or other grave consequences	• Restriction of liberty: up to 3 years • Imprisonment: up to 3 years

Source: Ukrainian Parliament (2001)

Regulation of Ukraine's volunteer battalions and grassroots defence

Volunteer battalions (2014–20)

The beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was characterized by spontaneous armed confrontations and the seizure of weapons from law enforcement agencies' administrative buildings by separatist supporters of the Russian Federation (Doronin, 2024). Volunteer battalions began to emerge after the outbreak of hostilities in the country's eastern region in 2014. Some battalions were formed on a regional basis (for example, Aidar, Dnipro, Sich, and Kharkiv), while others united people on an ideological basis (such as the Pravy Sector/Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, Azov, and battalions organized by foreign fighters). The majority of these were affiliated with, and received weapons through, the Ministry of Interior (the National Guard or the National Police) and the armed forces. The legal status of certain battalions, however,

was unclear at the time (such as the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps and the Dzhokhar Dudayev Chechen Peacekeeping Battalion).

From 2015, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defence—aiming to enhance control over, and coordination within, the battalions and defence structures—gave members of volunteer battalions the opportunity to formalize their status and incorporate their units into the armed forces or the National Guard, while also restructuring the battalion and sometimes retaining its original name. These activities were carried out within the framework of Presidential Decree No. 341/2015, which strengthened Ukraine's response to organized crime and illegal armed groups by mandating stricter control over firearms, cracked down on arms smuggling, created a national firearm registry, and enhanced coordination to dismantle illegal weapons networks (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2015).

VFTCs (2021–present)

A year before the full-scale invasion, significant changes were made affecting civilian participation in the defence of state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and leading to the emergence of VFTCs. The 2018 Law on the National Security of Ukraine had already defined the foundations and principles of national security and defence, and mentioned the 'citizens and public associations that voluntarily participate in ensuring national security' (Ukrainian Parliament, 2018, art. 12.1). The Law on the Fundamentals of National Resistance, however, established VFTCs as a component of Ukraine's security and defence sector, granting civilians the right 'to use personal hunting weapons, small arms, other types of weapons and ammunition for them in the manner determined by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine when performing territorial defence tasks' (Ukrainian Parliament, 2021a, art. 22.3).

Civilian use and declaration of weapons in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion

When the full-scale invasion began, parliament rapidly adopted the Law on Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine, which built upon previous measures to further elaborate the rules governing civilian participation in defence efforts (Ukrainian Parliament, 2022). The law came into force on 7 March 2022—11 days after the start of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion (Mamchenko, 2024)—and granted civilians the right to use their own 'award,[5] or sporting weapons (pistols, revolvers, rifles, smooth-bore shotguns), hunting rifles, smooth-bore or combined weapons' for national defence purposes (Ukrainian Parliament, 2022, art. 4). Additional by-laws detailing the use of weapons for the purpose of national resistance and defence include the following:

- Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Decree No. 1448, which allowed members of the VFTC to use personal hunting and small arms to carry out defence tasks (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2021a);
- Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Decree No. 448, which detailed the procedure for the use of firearms by civilians (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022b); and
- Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine Order No. 170, which simplified the procedure for obtaining weapons permits under martial law (Ukrainian MIA, 2022b).

Order No. 768 of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs (2024d) formalized an important initiative to legalize unregistered weapons by outlining the procedure for civilians to declare weapons in accordance with the provisions of the amended Law of Ukraine on Ensuring Civilian Participation in the Defence of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament, 2024). The weapon declaration process is an official procedure that allows individuals to inform the police about the possession of firearms and ammunition that they have found or obtained without proper authorization, such as weapons scavenged in the context of the ongoing war.

Order No. 768 also establishes a process for Ukrainian citizens, foreigners, and stateless persons legally residing in Ukraine to declare firearms with rifled barrels of up to 12.7 mm calibre, smooth-bore weapons of up to 23 mm calibre, and ammunition to the territorial units of the National Police, if they wish to legally possess firearms and ammunition found during the war. The declaration of weapons must be made—and is only valid—during the period of martial law in Ukraine. Citizens can therefore legalize found or unregistered weapons without being prosecuted during this period. A person has 90 days following the termination or cancellation of martial law in Ukraine to either hand over the weapon to the authorities or convert it for civilian use—that is, to a type of firearm that they are allowed to own or to a deactivated firearm in accordance with the procedure established by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The campaign to declare weapons in Ukraine began on 25 November 2024 and has shown promising initial results, even if the numbers registered are just a fraction of estimated illicit holdings. By 11 August 2025, 11,209 firearms and 5,049 million rounds of ammunition had been declared by citizens to the National Police (Ukrainian MIA, 2025a).

Addressing legal and regulatory gaps

The national discussion on firearms legislation tends to focus on the absence of a comprehensive legal framework on civilian firearm possession. Ukraine's first draft law on civilian firearm possession—On the Right to Civilian Firearms—was passed in its first reading by the Ukrainian Parliament on 23 February 2022; however, as of October 2025, it has yet to be fully adopted (Ukrainian Parliament, 2021b).

This draft law is expected to regulate the rights of individuals and legal entities in Ukraine regarding the ownership of civilian firearms, ammunition, and similar items. It defines the legal ownership framework; sets out the primary rights and obligations related to the manufacture, acquisition, possession, transfer, carrying, transportation, repair, and use of civilian firearms and ammunition; and governs related legislation, including that pertaining to Ukraine's international obligations.

After the initial reading of the draft law, 363 proposed amendments were incorporated into the text. The Parliamentary Law Enforcement Committee highlighted both the draft law's progress and the remaining gaps (Ukrainian Parliament, 2023). The revised version introduces standardized terminology, aligns weapon categories with EU and UN standards, and establishes key control mechanisms such as the URW. Several issues persist, however, including vague definitions for key categories of arms, a lack of institutional clarity concerning oversight and implementation, and gaps in the integration of the law into broader public safety and reintegration frameworks. While the committee recommended technical and legal revisions, it acknowledged that implementation structures remain underdeveloped. It also identified shortcomings regarding the alignment of the law with international commitments, as well as the need for clearer operational procedures.

Experts noted that the draft law does not specify limits on the capacity of loading devices and magazines for handguns and long-barrel firearms, and therefore fails to conform to EU Firearms Directive 2021/555 on the control of the acquisition and possession of weapons (EU, 2021).[6] An international arms control official also stated that one of the main points of contention between the approach proposed in the law and the position of some members of parliament concerns the right to possess and carry short-barrelled firearms (that is, handguns).[7]

Key measures taken since 2022

Since 2022, Ukraine has put in place several new measures to strengthen arms control, conform to EU standards, and address the challenges posed by the proliferation of firearms and ammunition in the context of war. These measures reflect both the urgent security needs arising from the Russian invasion and the country's long-term objective of harmonizing its practices with European and other international norms. Efforts include aligning Ukraine's small arms control framework with the EU's firearms policy, establishing the URW as a centralized registry for civilian owned firearms, and developing new coordination mechanisms to combat illicit arms trafficking. Collectively, these initiatives aim to improve transparency, enhance inter-agency cooperation, and reduce the risks posed by diverted and illegal weapons—both within Ukraine and beyond its borders.

Alignment with EU firearms policy

Ukraine's recent changes to its arms control legislation and procedures are largely driven by the country's pursuit of EU integration (EU Commission, n.d.). These changes have been guided by recommendations developed by the European Commission and joint action plans between Ukraine and the EU.

Since 2014, through the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, the EU and Ukraine have established a framework for political and economic integration aimed at aligning Ukraine's regulations with EU standards across various sectors.[8] The agreement stipulates that:

- 'the parties shall develop further cooperation on disarmament, including in the reduction of excess stockpiles of small arms and light weapons'; and
- 'cooperation on disarmament shall also include arms control, arms export controls and the fight against illicit trafficking of arms including small arms and light weapons' (EU, 2014, art. 12).

The agreement also states that the parties shall cooperate in addressing problems such as the smuggling of migrants across the state border and trafficking in human beings, firearms, and illicit drugs (art. 22).

Ukraine formally applied for EU membership at the end of February 2022—a few days after the Russian invasion. The EU and its member states are currently providing Ukraine with significant funding for post-war and crisis recovery, while emphasizing the need for Ukraine to continue implementing the Association Agreement as a condition for such support (Voronina, 2023).

According to the latest report on the implementation of the Association Agreement, the Ministry of Internal Affairs approved the Plan for the Implementation of Joint Measures Proposed by the European Union in the Field of Controlling the Circulation of Weapons and Preventing Their Leakage Outside Ukraine in September 2023 (Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, 2024). As part of this plan—the implementation of which began shortly after—the Ministry of Internal Affairs ensures that information on lost and stolen weapons is submitted regularly to Europol, and that analytical information on seized weapons is provided on a quarterly basis.

On 9 February 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved an additional action plan for the implementation of the European Commission's recommendations—which is outlined in the Ukraine Progress Report under the EU Enlargement Package 2023 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024a). The action plan calls, in particular, for improving the legal framework for firearms and other small arms and

light weapons; strengthening cooperation between national law enforcement agencies and the military to prevent the illegal possession and trafficking of these weapons; and undertaking a threat assessment of the illegal possession and trafficking of these weapons.

While an earlier action plan for the implementation of the Association Agreement lacked specific measures on arms control and illicit trafficking (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2017), the government has recently announced its intention to develop such measures through a Roadmap for Combating Illicit Trafficking in Arms, Ammunition and Explosives (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025a). The process was still ongoing at the time of writing. Moreover, the Ministry of Internal Affairs Work Plan for 2025 mentions plans to modernize systems for recording and sharing information on arms trafficking, as well as to approve the roadmap by the end of the year (Ukrainian MIA, 2024d).

Launch of the Unified Register of Weapons

The URW—a functional subsystem of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' unified information system—was launched in June 2023, although its development began several years before the full-scale invasion (Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, 2024). The objectives of the register were threefold: (1) to ensure effective control over the circulation of weapons; (2) to introduce modern technologies for the licensing and registration of firearms; and (3) to increase the transparency of processes related to the possession and use of weapons. The register collects data on key components: the weapons, their owners, storage facilities, and the relevant permits. All data is processed through an automated information system that provides personal accounts for citizens, employees of the licensing (permit) system, and business entities (Ukrainian MIA, n.d.).

The URW aims to increase the traceability and accountability of weapons throughout their entire life cycle, including the production, acquisition, accounting, storage, use, repair, modernization, transfer, gifting, or inheritance of weapons, as well as their destruction or export from the Ukrainian territory. The register also allows permits to be issued electronically, which not only simplifies the interaction between citizens and government agencies, but also makes the aforementioned processes faster and more transparent. Similarly, the introduction of the register enables relevant business entities to add and check data in the URW (Ukrainian MIA, n.d.).

The creation of the URW is an important step towards the digitalization of public services in Ukraine, and is intended to facilitate the control and management of data related to legally owned civilian firearms and ammunition. According to the latest figures communicated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as of the end of October

2024, more than 750,000 civilian firearms had been registered in the URW, out of the more than 1.4 million legally held weapons (Ukrinform, 2024).

At the time of writing, however, other categories of weapons that civilians may legally access under the martial law regime—such as scavenged or found weapons and military-grade weapons—were being registered separately. Weapons seized by the authorities—such as those used in crimes—are also recorded in separate databases. As a result, consolidating and accessing this information is challenging for law enforcement agencies.[9] There is therefore an ongoing need to develop a database of such illicit weapons, including stolen, lost, unregistered, and seized firearms—which also pose a potential threat if diverted into the illicit market. Establishing such a database would significantly enhance the strategic and operational capacity of Ukraine's law enforcement agencies.

Establishment of the Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms

The establishment of the Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition is another important component in the country's efforts to strengthen arms control. Ukraine's international partners, including the EU, emphasized the need for such a coordination body and shared lessons learned while establishing similar structures, known as national firearms focal points in the EU. The Coordination Centre was formally agreed to by the government in July 2024, and began its activities in February 2025 (Ukrainian MIA, 2025b). Established as a temporary consultative and advisory body of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the centre is responsible for coordinating the actions of state bodies, institutions, and organizations in the field of combating the illicit trafficking of firearms, their parts and components, and ammunition (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024b).

The minister of internal affairs serves as the head of the Coordination Centre, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs provides organizational, informational, and logistical support for its activities. Members of the Coordination Centre include representatives of the security and defence sectors, such as the State Customs Service, the Office of the General Prosecutor, and the National Security and Defence Council. According to Article 3 of the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the Establishment of the Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition, the main objectives of the centre are to:

- facilitate the coordination of actions of state agencies and other stakeholders on combating illicit trafficking in firearms, their parts and components, and ammunition, and prevent these items from being imported or transferred outside Ukraine;

- organize information exchange between all the stakeholders and prepare relevant proposals;
- identify mechanisms and ways to address challenges in this area; and
- improve the regulatory framework in this area (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024b).

Meetings are held at least once a quarter, during which the Coordination Centre is tasked with developing proposals and recommendations on issues within its competence. In order to implement these recommendations, members of the centre must then submit a draft governmental decision (based on the proposals and recommendations) to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine for its adoption and subsequent implementation (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024b).

Although the Coordination Centre cannot directly delegate activities to members, it may establish a permanent working group—the Contact Point—to fulfil its tasks and ensure information exchange between central executive authorities and other permanent or temporary working groups (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024b). This inter-agency Contact Point is operational 24/7.[10] While representatives of law enforcement and security agencies participate in the group's activities, it operates as a coordination mechanism composed of officers seconded from various subdivisions of the National Police and other institutions. These officers remain formally subordinated to the leadership of their respective agencies. As a result, tasks related to the work of the Coordination Centre may not always be prioritized, and assigned officers may have to manage a dual workload.[11] Overall, given that the Coordination Centre was launched as a temporary political advisory body, it is not yet empowered to make decisions and control their implementation.

Future priorities for combating the illicit proliferation of weapons and ammunition

While the implementation of the above measures represents significant progress, Ukraine still lacks a comprehensive firearms law fit to contend with the increasing circulation of illicit weapons due to the full-scale invasion. In this context, collecting rigorous data on legal weapon holdings and effectively monitoring illicit flows are critical to managing the situation. Moreover, a comprehensive policy framework that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of all actors and stakeholders is needed to effectively guide the ongoing small arms control efforts, including the proposed new legislation. Ideally, such a comprehensive framework should involve actors from relevant segments of society beyond the law enforcement sphere.

Strengthened data foundations for effective policymaking

Even before the full-scale invasion, officials and experts noted the significant volume of unauthorized small arms trafficking in Ukraine. In 2021, the General Prosecutor of Ukraine stressed the need to counter 'illegal arms trafficking, which, according to various sources, amounts to 3 to 5 million units in Ukraine, while the legal number is more than a million' (OGP, 2021a). Previous estimates by the Survey suggest that there were some 3,596,000 unregistered firearms in Ukraine as of 2017 (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

While the number of illicit small arms in circulation might be expected to have increased since February 2022, official estimates since the invasion do not differ significantly from pre-invasion estimates—and even provide a lower minimum range of 1 million to 5 million firearms (see Table 4.2). These estimates often fail to specify the methods used for calculations, however. Moreover, state representatives tend to use inconsistent terminology (sometimes using the terms weapons, unregistered weapons, firearms, or trophy weapons interchangeably) when communicating estimates, which further complicates the picture. As a result, it is not possible to compare

Table 4.2 Estimates from the Ministry of Internal Affairs on illicit weapons in circulation in Ukraine

Date	Source	Number of illicit weapons	Types of weapons included (as described in source)	Reference
20 September 2022	Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine	2–3 million	Unregistered weapons	Ukrainian MIA (2022c)
2 June 2023	Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine	Up to 3 million (after the war)	Weapons	Chernysh (2023)
13 April 2024	Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine	1–5 million	Trophy weapons	Ukrainian MIA (2024c)
26 April 2024	Deputy minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine	3 million	Weapons in civilian hands	Ukrainian MIA (2024b)
30 August 2024	Deputy minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine	2–5 million	Unregistered weapons	Romanenko (2024)

quantitative estimates over time, even those based on official statements. This dearth in reliable, official data on the number of illegally owned firearms in Ukraine poses challenges for monitoring the number of illicit weapons in circulation in the country.

In the absence of more systematic and reliable official data, the survey-based indicators of weapons proliferation presented in Chapter 3 represent a useful proxy for monitoring civilian firearm possession (both licit and illicit) over time, even if underreporting likely still affects the comprehensiveness of survey data.

The case for a comprehensive arms control policy framework

It is impossible to counter arms trafficking effectively without first creating the legal grounds for doing so, as state authorities must act in the manner and within the limits established by the constitution and laws of Ukraine (Chernysh and Voronina, 2025). While the draft firearms legislation is under discussion, a cohesive arms control policy should also clarify the distribution of responsibilities across government bodies. At present, responsibilities are primarily concentrated within law enforcement agencies. The mandates of other agencies and local authorities, as well as the role of civil society, remain unclear, however, despite their potential contributions to community-level prevention efforts and future disarmament and reintegration. While national-level initiatives require more specific standard operating procedures to ensure their effective implementation and enforcement, regulations also appear to be lacking at the operational level.

Although a number of steps have been taken to develop a more structured approach to arms control in Ukraine, these efforts remain in their infancy. The Ministry of Internal Affair's 2025 Work Plan includes measures, as part of efforts to implement the EU–Ukraine Joint Action Plan, to prevent the spread of firearms in the context of war—such as the launch of the Coordination Centre and increased inter-agency cooperation with military personnel to prevent illegal possession and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. The current development of a roadmap, or national strategy, provides an opportunity to define and steer a more comprehensive approach—although the roadmap currently appears to focus mostly on illicit weapons and the activities of law enforcement agencies (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025b). These efforts signal a growing institutional awareness of the problem, but fall short of a holistic national policy that also integrates intertwined challenges, including violence prevention, civilian oversight, and veteran reintegration strategies.

The importance of multi-stakeholder engagement

While the Ministry of Internal Affairs, on behalf of the government, has been mandated to develop and coordinate a national roadmap for combating illicit arms trafficking,[12]

in practice law enforcement bodies, such as the National Police, the State Border Guard Service, the State Bureau of Investigation, and the Security Service of Ukraine, play an important role in countering illicit arms trafficking. The Ministry of Internal Affairs lacks the institutional authority to impose decisions on other relevant institutions, particularly the Security Service of Ukraine and the State Bureau of Investigation, which will pose challenges for implementing the strategy. Moreover, while the regulations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs mandate it to ensure 'the formation of state policy in the field of protection of human rights and freedoms, interests of society and the state, combating crime, maintaining public security and order', they do not explicitly mention the development and implementation of a state policy on combating illicit arms trafficking (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2015; Voronina and Chernysh, 2024). In parallel, the General Prosecutor and the field prosecutor's offices may also coordinate certain activities of law enforcement agencies related to combating crime and data collection and analysis (Ukrainian Parliament, 2015). These institutional challenges highlight the need to clarify institutional mandates through the development of a structured and comprehensive national policy.

Moreover, the problem of firearms trafficking should be considered in a broader context. Sociologists have highlighted the need to incorporate public health, social justice, and political culture perspectives when developing approaches to address firearm-related crime and violence (Carlson and James, 2021). Incorporating a cultural perspective is particularly relevant, especially when a culture of firearm ownership may affect people's perceptions and tolerance of the associated risks (US NSF, n.d.). Efforts to change cultural norms to enhance safety should be undertaken in a holistic fashion, with the engagement of all relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications.

Additionally, the future reintegration of veterans within a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration framework will be a crucial issue for the country. According to the Ukrainian president, approximately 880,000 people were in the armed forces as of January 2025—all of whom have been trained in using small arms (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2025). A significant number of personnel in the Ukrainian armed forces have been carrying weapons for several years. As result, they not only perceive firearms as a normal part of life, but also view them more positively than the rest of the population (see Chapter 3). Future arms control policy must therefore be coordinated with veteran reintegration and mental health support to address this normalization of carrying firearms. The government, including through the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs, will need to develop a policy to be able to tackle these challenges in a timely manner and manage demobilization (whether complete or partial) when it occurs. Ministries such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications, and the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs should be involved in developing and implementing arms control policy.

Local authorities, especially local self-government bodies (LSGBs), also have an important role to play in this area.[13] They form part of the national resistance and have authority in matters of security, particularly in relation to the creation of VFTCs (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2021b); the promotion of law and order; and cooperation with the National Police, the Security Service of Ukraine, and the Office of the General Prosecutor (CENSS, 2025). LSGBs often lack the knowledge and skills necessary, however, to engage more directly and effectively in arms control and combating arms trafficking.

Finally, civil society actors, including researchers, journalists, and NGO representatives, can help to produce independent specialized weapons research to support the accountability of arms control measures, to strengthen the capacities of relevant government bodies, including at the local level, and to facilitate the exchange of lessons learned within various settings—thereby contributing to broader public security. Combating arms trafficking touches on several spheres of the public and political life of the state and requires a comprehensive, multidimensional approach.

Conclusion

This chapter has documented the trajectory of civilian firearms regulations in Ukraine before and during the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation, including new measures adopted since 2022 concerning both legal and illicit weapons in the context of enhanced cooperation with the EU. Despite this progress, critical regulatory gaps remain in Ukraine's arms control framework, particularly due to delays in adopting primary legislation, the absence of a comprehensive and long-term strategy, and an ongoing need to better define institutional responsibilities. Addressing these issues will also be essential for Ukraine to fulfil its international commitments.

At present, civilian firearms are regulated primarily through outdated secondary law—most notably the Ministry of Internal Affairs Order No. 622 from 1998. Efforts are underway to strengthen legislation and align it more closely with the EU Firearms Directive, but the proposed primary law has yet to be passed by the Ukrainian Parliament. In the context of the full-scale invasion, the government has launched a new centralized firearm registry (the URW) and passed new legislation to address certain specific war-related proliferation challenges. Obstacles remain, however, including the need to enhance the record-keeping and management of trophy weapons captured by soldiers at the front line (see Chapter 2) and held by VFTCs, as well as to improve coordination between military and civilian structures.

Ukraine recently established a national Coordination Centre to facilitate inter-agency cooperation in this area and align with the good practices of national firearms focal points in the EU. Institutional and coordination challenges persist, however, which

currently limits the Coordination Centre's ability to coordinate the actions of all relevant government agencies and to develop a coherent, multisectoral national policy on small arms control. Although current estimates of illicit weapons in circulation vary too widely to serve as a reliable benchmark, the Report suggests an increase in the proliferation of illicit weapons since 2022 (see Chapters 1 and 3). This proliferation can only be tackled effectively through a strategic and multidimensional policy, including robust data systems, clear institutional roles, and the integration of arms policy into other important areas—such as public safety, the reintegration of veterans, and community resilience.

These findings highlight the urgent need for Ukraine to develop a comprehensive national arms policy—one that is built on sound legislation and implemented through enforceable procedures, with the participation of civil society and local authorities. As Ukraine advances on its path towards European integration and post-war recovery, the success of arms control will be pivotal, not only to ensuring state security, but also to building lasting trust, legitimacy, and peace.

Chapter endnotes

1 Notably, the Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 475-r tasks the Ministry of Internal Affairs and law enforcement bodies with developing a strategic roadmap on countering illicit arms circulation (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025b). This marks an important milestone in efforts to define roles, responsibilities, and operational mechanisms in line with EU accession priorities and international standards.

2 Cold weapons include 'items and devices that are structurally designed and suitable by their properties for repeatedly inflicting severe (life-threatening at the moment of infliction) and fatal bodily injuries [. . .], the action of which is based on the use of human muscle strength' (Ukrainian MIA and MoJ, 1999, art. 1.1).

3 Certain groups of people may also receive weapons as awards, but the order does not properly define the legal status and use of these weapons.

4 The term 'traumatic weapon' is widely used in Ukraine and these devices are considered to be a special means of active defence. A definition can be found in the section on 'key terms' in the Introduction to this Report.

5 'Award weapons' are those donated by Ukrainian security institutions to personnel as rewards for their achievements, in accordance with these institutions' internal regulations. See, for instance, Ukrainian MoD (2020) and Ukrainian MIA (2022a).

6 Exchange with an European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) Ukraine representative, 18 July 2025.

7 Exchange with an international arms control official, August 2025.

8 Areas covered in the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement include respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law; political dialogue and reform; justice, freedom, and security; economic cooperation and cooperation in sectors such as environment, transport, and agriculture; and financial cooperation (EU, 2014).

9 Exchange with an EUAM Ukraine representative, 5 May 2025.

10 Exchange with an OSCE small arms and light weapons project coordinator, 27 July 2025.

11 Exchange with an OSCE small arms and light weapons project coordinator, 27 July 2025.

12 In particular, the Cabinet of Ministers Decree No. 790 of 5 July 2024 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024b) appointed the minister of internal affairs as the chairperson of the Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition. Furthermore, the Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 300-r and Order No. 475-r, both adopted in 2025, designate the Ministry of Internal Affairs as the lead body responsible for developing a national roadmap on combating and preventing illicit arms trafficking in the context of Ukraine's EU accession efforts (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025a; 2025b).

13 Under Ukrainian legislation, LSGBs—elected councils and heads of territorial communities—are entrusted with managing local resources, providing essential services, and contributing to public safety efforts. Their formal responsibilities include collaborating with law enforcement agencies, developing and approving local crime prevention programmes, and conducting awareness campaigns on risks, including those posed by illicit weapons. This paragraph draws on results of focus group discussions conducted by CENSS in local communities in five regions of Ukraine (CENSS, 2025).

> “Securing Ukraine’s future requires both ending the current war and preventing weapons proliferation that could threaten peace long after the fighting stops.”

Conclusion

Nicolas Florquin and Aline Shaban

This Report analysed weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion in February 2022. It found that military-grade weapons, including grenades and other explosive munitions, have proliferated across Ukraine, including to oblasts far from the front lines. In addition to their potential misuse by criminals, these weapons pose an immediate safety threat to civilians, including children. Many of these weapons are sourced from large caches of abandoned weapons in de-occupied areas and areas near the line of contact, as well as from smaller quantities of unsecured weapons scattered throughout the country. The research found little evidence to support pro-Russian claims that a large percentage of Western weapons imported by Ukraine are being diverted to armed groups and criminals, however. Indeed, the Western models under review comprised only a small percentage of all weapons seized by Ukrainian authorities, and were usually seized only in small quantities. The Russian security apparatus contributes to illicit flows in Ukraine through the arming of proxy forces in the east, the direct transfer of weapons to Ukrainian civilians, and the loss and abandonment of its weapons on the battlefield. The full-scale invasion is therefore the largest contributor to illicit arms flows in Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces routinely recover Russian arms when gaining territory, especially when taking over former Russian positions. Ukrainian troops interviewed for this study reported awareness of official regulations and procedures for registering trophy weapons as assets of military units—as well as the serious legal consequences of not doing so. Nonetheless, some individuals, and even certain units, avoid registering trophy weapons in order to use them as substitutes for state-issued arms to avoid red tape and potential penalties for losing officially issued arms, as well as to mitigate shortages in official supplies. Trophy weapons usually stay with the unit or person who captured them, however, and there have only been a few confirmed cases of diversion involving these weapons. Controls on trophy weapons should be improved, since a reduction in the intensity of the war could lead to an increased risk of diversion. It is important to note that the diversion of trophy weapons captured by Russian forces is also a significant concern, but there is a dearth of information on this matter (Verstka, 2025).

Population surveys suggest that, to date, Ukraine has avoided a mass surge in civilian firearm possession. Self-reported household firearm possession rates have remained stable, suggesting a degree of control by authorities and restraint among the population, even amid full-scale war and the competing demands of ongoing defence against the Russian assault. At the same time, surveys show that crime victimization and the use of firearms in criminal acts have begun to increase. This is consistent with official statistics, which show a 30% increase in the number of recorded criminal offences since 2022.[1] The proportion of crimes committed with weapons and ammunition also increased from 0.22% to 3.97% of all cases (OGP, 2025). The research

also found that veterans are significantly more likely to own and carry firearms, as well as to support permissive firearms laws, than most civilians. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to regulating civilian firearms in Ukraine, as well as for public outreach on firearm safety and security given the risk that more guns may end up in civilian households.

Ukrainian laws and regulations on firearms cover a wide variety of weapon types and end users, but they are fragmented and do not fully comply with the EU Firearms Directive. Ukrainian policymakers have initiated several important reforms since 2022, including establishing a national Coordination Centre, developing procedures for declaring found (scavenged) weapons, and launching the URW. But these efforts to control weapons must reach beyond state institutions, strengthen local governance, and support community-based initiatives to ensure that proliferation is tackled throughout the country. Long-term funding will also be crucial to meet the security, social, and mental healthcare needs of the population and its most vulnerable groups. Overall, securing Ukraine's future requires both ending the current war and preventing weapons proliferation that could threaten peace long after the fighting stops.

Conclusion endnotes

1 The Office of the General Prosecutor recorded a total of 341,033 criminal offences on average per year in 2020–21, compared to 443,570 offences per year in 2022–24 (OGP, 2025).

References

AFU (Armed Forces of Ukraine). 2023. 'Reception of Trophy Weapons and Ammunition' [in Ukrainian]. Training Directorate (G7) of the Headquarters of the Command of the Territorial Defence Forces. April.

Antezza, A. et al. 2025. Ukraine Support Tracker Data. June. Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

Berdal, Mats. 2009. *Building Peace after War*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Berzelak, Nejc and Vasja Vehovar. 2018. 'Mode Effects on Socially Desirable Responding in Web Surveys Compared to Face-to-face and Telephone Surveys.' *Advances in Methodology and Statistics*, Vol. 15, No. 2. July.

Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 2015. On Approval of the Regulation on the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 878 of 28 October.

—. 2017. On the Implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine, on the One Hand, and the European Union, the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, on the Other Hand [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 1106 of 25 October.

—. 2021a. On Approval of the Procedure for the Use by Members of Volunteer Formations of Territorial Communities of Personal Hunting Weapons, Small Arms, Other Types of Weapons and Ammunition During the Performance of Territorial Defence Tasks [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 1448 of 29 December.

—. 2021b. On Approval of the Regulations on Volunteer Formations of Territorial Communities [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 1449 of 29 December.

—. 2022a. On Approval of the Procedure for Implementing Measures Regarding the Treatment of Prisoners of War During a Special Period. As Amended and Supplemented by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Dated 28 April 2023, No. 416 [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 721 of 17 June.

—. 2022b. On Approval of the Procedure for the Use of Firearms by Civilians during Participation in Repelling and Deterring Armed Aggression by the Russian Federation and/or Other States against Ukraine during the Period of Martial Law [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 448 of 15 April.

—. 2024a. On Approval of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Recommendations of the European Commission Presented in the Progress Report of Ukraine within the Framework of the European Union Enlargement Package [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 133-r of 9 February.

—. 2024b. On the Establishment of the Coordination Centre for Combating the Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, as well as Their Ammunition [in Ukrainian]. Decree No. 790 of 5 July.
—. 2025a. On Approval of the Action Plan for Implementing the Recommendations of the European Commission Presented in the Report on Ukraine's Progress within the Framework of the European Union's 2024 Enlargement Package [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 300-r of 28 March.
—. 2025b. Some Issues Concerning the Negotiation Process on Ukraine's Accession to the European Union under Cluster 1 'Fundamentals of the EU Accession Process' [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 475-r of 14 May.
CAR (Conflict Armament Research). 2021. *Weapons of the War in Ukraine: A Three-year Investigation of Weapon Supplies into Donetsk and Luhansk*. London: CAR. November.
Carlson, Jennifer, and Rina James. 2021. 'Conspicuously Concealed: Federal Funding, Knowledge Production, and the Criminalization of Gun Research.' *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 65, No. 1, pp. 196–215.
CENSS (Center for Security Studies). 2025. 'Arms Trafficking in the Territorial Communities of Ukraine: Insights from Local Actors.' Unpublished background paper. June.
Chernysh, Oleg. 2023. 'Ihor Klymenko: "I Hope the War Will End Soon Enough, This Year"' [in Ukrainian]. BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). 2 June.
Chernysh, Vadym Olehovych and Viktoriia Viktorovna Voronina. 2025. 'The Role of Baseline Indicators in Shaping and Evaluating State Policy on Arms Trafficking' [in Ukrainian]. *Public Administration and National Security*, No. 1. January, pp. 46–53.
Combat Group K-2 (20th Separate Regiment of Unmanned Systems K-2). 2023. 'For Trophies and to Review the Location. Exit After the Fight for "Zero". Battalion K-2.' YouTube. Posted on 11 October.
—. n.d. Homepage.
Council of Europe. 2011. Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Istanbul, 11.V.2011.
Dobrohorska, Iryna. 2025. *Reintegrating Ukraine's Veterans: Challenges and Policy Responses*. Report. Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States. April.
Dönges, Hannah and Aaron Karp. 2014. *Women and Gun Ownership*. Research Note No. 45. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. September.
Doronin, I. 2024. *Legal Regulation of the Use of Weapons in the Course of National Resistance to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine: A Scientific and Practical Review of Legislation* [in Ukrainian]. Kyiv: Phoenix.
Dubenko, Lesia. 2025. 'Ukraine Launches Digital Gun Permit.' Euromaidan Press. 5 March.
Dungel, Emilia and Anne-Séverine Fabre. 2022. *Missing or Unseen? Exploring Women's Roles in Arms Trafficking*. Report. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. June.
EU (European Union). 2014. Association Agreement between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part. 21 March.
—. 2021. Directive (EU) 2021/555 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 March 2021 on Control of the Acquisition and Possession of Weapons (Codification). 24 March.
EUAM Ukraine (European Union Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine). 2024. 'How Ukraine Tackles Illicit Firearms Trafficking: Some Highlights from the Conference in Kyiv.' 16 December.
European Commission. n.d. 'Ukraine's Path towards EU Accession.'

European Parliament. 2024. 'Answer Given by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell i Fontelles on Behalf of the European Commission.' Response to Parliamentary Question E-001527/2024 (ASW). 21 October.

Europol (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation). 2025. *The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime: 2025 European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU.

Friedrich, Julia and Theresa Lütkefend. 2021. *The Long Shadow of Donbas: Reintegrating Veterans and Fostering Social Cohesion in Ukraine*. Study. Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute. 10 May.

Gartner, Rosemary and Liam Kennedy. 2018. 'War and Postwar Violence.' *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 47.

Gobinet, Pierre. 2011. 'Procurement and Policy: Police Use of Emerging Weapons Technologies.' In Small Arms Survey. *Small Arms Survey 2011: States of Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 68–99.

Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. 2024. *Report on Implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union for 2023*.

Gutowsky, Stephen. 2022. 'Ukraine Distributes 10,000 Automatic Rifles to Civilians as Capitol City Fights Russian Invasion.' Reload. 24 February.

Harmash, Olena. 2023. 'Crime Has Fallen in Ukraine since War Began: Interior Minister.' Reuters. 31 March.

Hernández, Ángel. 2023. 'Cárteles mexicanos se preparan para una guerra; tienen LANZACOHETES de grado military.' *Milenio.* 31 May.

Hideg, Gergely. 2023. *From Conflict to Consequence: Nearly Half of Ukrainian Men Would Like to Own a Firearm, Or Already Have One*. Situation Update. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. December.

—. 2024. *Locked but Loaded: Firearms Possession Dynamics in Ukraine*. Situation Update. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. September.

— and Callum Watson. 2023. 'Russia's War: Weighing the Human Cost in Ukraine.' Small Arms Survey Blog. 15 May.

Holbrook, Allyson L., Melanie C. Green, and Jon A. Krosnick. 2003. 'Telephone Versus Face-to-face Interviewing of National Probability Samples with Long Questionnaires: Comparisons of Respondent Satisficing and Social Desirability Response Bias.' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 79–125.

Hrytsenko, Hanna and Ivan Shmatko**.** 2025. *Unsteady Ground: Gender-responsive Small Arms Control in Ukraine.* Research Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey and Institute of Gender Programs. April.

Huliichuk, Dmutro. 2025. 'Captured Weapons from the Front Were Reaching the Rear: Police "Covered" the Canals in Three Regions (Photo)' [in Ukrainian]. TSN. 23 January.

Inglehart, Ronald, et al., eds. 2014. *World Values Survey: Round Six—Country-Pooled Datafile Version*. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

IOM (International Organization for Migration) Ukraine. 2025. *Veteran Profiles and Reintegration Challenges in Ukraine*. Thematic Brief. Kyiv: IOM Ukraine. March.

Jakes, Lara. 2023. 'Ukrainian Soldiers Risk Their Lives to Keep Weapons from the Black Market.' *New York Times*. 12 May.

Jenzen-Jones, N. R. and Matt Schroeder, eds. 2018. *An Introductory Guide to the Identification of Small Arms, Light Weapons, and Associated Ammunition*. Handbook. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. November.

Khomenko, Ivan. 2025. 'Ukraine's Armed Forces Are the Largest in Europe with 980,000 Personnel, Zelenskyy Announces.' UNITED24 Media. 6 January.

Khurshudyan, Isabelle, Siobhán O'Grady, and Loveday Morris. 2022. '"Weapons to Anyone": Across Ukraine, Militias Form as Russian Forces Near.' *Washington Post*. 26 February.

Luhansk Oblast Police. 2023. 'Law Enforcement Officers Discovered a Cache of Weapons and Ammunition in Luhansk Region' [in Ukrainian]. Telegram. 12 April.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. 2023. 'A Cache of Weapons and Almost $6 Million in Cash: An Organized Crime Group Was Detained in Dnipro' [in Ukrainian]. 6 December.

—. 2024. 'Two Caches of Ammunition Were Discovered by the Police in Dnipro: Two Men Were Arrested for Illegal Storage of Weapons' [in Ukrainian]. 14 February.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Kherson Oblast. 2024a. 'Vysokopilska Police Seize Grenade Launcher and Ammunition from Local Resident' [in Ukrainian]. 15 March.

—. 2024b. 'Kherson Region Police Seized an Arsenal of Weapons and Ammunition from a Group of Persons Who Sold Them' [in Ukrainian]. 3 July.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Kirovohrad Oblast. 2023. 'In Kirovohrad Region, Police Seized an Arsenal of Weapons and Ammunition from a Local Resident' [in Ukrainian]. 26 July.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Lviv Oblast. 2024. 'Traded Weapons and Ammunition from a Penal Colony: The Perpetrator Will Be Tried in Lviv' [in Ukrainian]. 13 March.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Odesa Oblast. 2023. 'Kalashnikovs, Pistols and Ammunition in Stock for Sale: Odesa Police Arrest Underground "Armed Businessmen"' [in Ukrainian]. 30 October.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Sum Oblast. 2024. 'In Sumy, Police Discovered a Large Arsenal of Weapons and Ammunition, Which Was Illegally Stored on the Territory of a Garage Cooperative' [in Ukrainian]. 9 May.

Main Directorate of the National Police in Ternopil Oblast. 2023. 'Ternopil Law Enforcement Officers Exposed a Criminal Channel Through Which Weapons from the Areas of Hostilities Were Brought to Western Ukraine' [in Ukrainian]. 7 September.

—. 2024. 'Ternopil Region Police Eliminate Channel of Captured Russian Weapons and Ammunition to Western Regions of Ukraine' [in Ukrainian]. 9 October.

Makariv Village Council. 2022. 'Explosive Objects Discovered in Makarivska Community' [in Ukrainian]. 26 August.

Mamchenko, Natalia. 2024. 'The Law on Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine Does Not Establish the Legality of Illegal Handling of Ammunition: Supreme Court' [in Ukrainian]. Sud.ua. 24 March.

Martyniuk, Anton. 2017. *Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Ukraine*. Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. April.

Military Law Enforcement Service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. 2024. 'Joint Measures Were Taken to Prevent (Detect) Illegal Handling of Weapons, as Well as Substances and Objects that Pose an Increased Danger' [in Ukrainian]. Facebook. 3 June.

NGU (National Guard of Ukraine). 2024. 'In September 2024, Furry Slobozhansk Guards Found 96 Grenades and 9 kg of Explosives in Cars' [in Ukrainian]. Facebook. 11 October.

NPU (National Police of Ukraine). 2024. 'Police Expose Criminal Group of Arms Dealers, from Whom an Arsenal of Dangerous "Goods" Was Seized' [in Ukrainian]. 12 March.
Odessa Journal. 2022. 'Poll in Diia: More Than Half of Ukrainians Supported the Legalization of Weapons.' 1 June.
Office of the President of Ukraine. 2015. On the Decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Dated 6 May 2015, 'On Measures to Strengthen the Fight Against Crime in Ukraine' [in Ukrainian]. Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 341/2015.
—. 2025. 'Meeting between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Donald Tusk with Media Representatives 15 January 2025' [in Ukrainian]. YouTube. Posted on 15 January.
OGP (Office of the General Prosecutor). 2019. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2019 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2020. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2020 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2021a. 'Iryna Venediktova at a Joint Meeting: "There Are 3 to 5 Million Illegal Weapons in Ukraine: Our Task Is to Counteract Their Circulation"' [in Ukrainian]. 26 October.
—. 2021b. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2021 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2022. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2022 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2023a. 'An Arsenal of Captured Russian Weapons Was Seized from a Man in Vinnytsia Oblast' [in Ukrainian]. 26 October.
—. 2023b. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2023 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2024a. 'Two Colonels of the State Security Department Were Found Guilty of High Treason and Aiding and Abetting a Terrorist Attack to Eliminate a High-ranking Ukrainian Official' [in Ukrainian]. 7 May.
—. 2024b. 'In Dnipro, Law Enforcement Officers Blocked a Channel for the Illegal Sale of Weapons and Ammunition' [in Ukrainian]. 25 July.
—. 2024c. Report on Criminal Offences, January–December 2024 [in Ukrainian].
—. 2025. 'About Registered Criminal Offenses and the Results of Their Pre-trial Investigation.'
OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2019. *Impact of Civilian Acquisition, Possession and Use of Firearms on Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. A/HRC/42/21 of 3 July.
Patrol Police of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. 2024a. 'Patrols Detect Explosive Objects' [in Ukrainian]. Facebook. 12 September.
—. 2024b. 'We Are Grateful to Citizens Who Report the Discovery of Explosive Objects' [in Ukrainian]. Facebook. 10 December.
Phan, Karena. 2023. 'Mistranslated News Report Sparks Baseless Claim About Mexican Cartel Getting Weapon from Ukraine.' Associated Press. 3 June.
Priya, Annie. 2022. 'False: Ukrainian Nationals Were Arrested for Selling Stinger Missiles in Bremen, Germany.' Logically Facts. 28 September.
REACH. 2025. *Veteran's Reintegration in Frontline Areas: What's next? Findings from the Post-assessment Workshop*. March.
Rivne Oblast Police. 2024. 'Children Found a Grenade Casing in Rivne: Correct Action Saves Lives' [in Ukrainian]. Facebook. 5 June.
Romanenko, Valentina. 2024. 'Ukrainians May Possess 2 to 5 Million Pieces of Undeclared Weapons: Interior Ministry.' Ukrainska Pravda. 30 August.
Sarret, Lucy and Maria Ortega. 2024. 'Weapons Meant for Ukraine War Ending Up in Hands of Gangsters in Spanish Seaside City.' *Daily Express*. 6 June.

Schroeder, Matt. 2014. 'On the Record: Illicit Weapons in the United States.' In Small Arms Survey. *Small Arms Survey 2014: Women and Guns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 241–73.
—, et al. 2019. *Small Arms Trafficking: Perceptions of Security and Radicalization in Ukraine: Assessment for the Ukrainian Ministry for Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons*. Unpublished background paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. August.
— and Olena Shumska. 2021. *Making the Rounds: Illicit Ammunition in Ukraine*. Report. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. January.
Small Arms Survey. 2018. 'Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017.' Annexe. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.
—. 2019. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, 2019. Unpublished database. September.
—. 2023a. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, December 2022–January 2023. Unpublished database. January.
—. 2023b. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, July–August 2023. Unpublished database. August.
—. 2023c. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, November–December 2023. Unpublished database. December.
—. 2024. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, June–July 2024. Unpublished database. July.
—. 2025. Ukraine General Population Survey Data Set, December 2024–January 2025. Unpublished database. January.
—. n.d. Global Firearms Holdings Database. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. Accessed June 2025.
— and CENSS (Center for Security Studies). 2025. Database of Seized, Declared, and Recovered Arms and Ammunition in Ukraine. Unpublished database.
SSU (Security Service of Ukraine). 2023a. 'Kherson Region: SSU Detains Traitor Who Gave Up Ukrainian Patriots to Ruscists and Kept Arsenal of Russian Weapons' [in Ukrainian]. 21 February.
—. 2023b. 'SSU Detained Three More "Black Gun Dealers" Who Wanted to Sell Sniper Weapons and Grenade Launchers from the Russian Federation to Criminals' [in Ukrainian]. Telegram. 30 October.
—. 2024a. 'SSU Discovers 3 Caches of Russian Weapons and Explosives: Among the Seized Items Are Grenade Launchers of Enemy DRGs Near Kyiv' [in Ukrainian]. 8 February.
—. 2024b. 'The SSU Exposed a Network of Agents of the 5th FSB Service of the Russian Federation Who Were Preparing the Assassination of the President of Ukraine: Two UDO Colonels Were Detained (Video)' [in Ukrainian]. 7 May.
—. 2024c. 'SSU and National Police Detain "Black Gun Dealers" Who Sold Captured Sniper Weapons and Explosives to Criminals' [in Ukrainian]. 14 May.
—. 2024d. 'SSU Exposed a Network of Dealers Who Sold Trophy Weapons to Criminals' [in Ukrainian]. Press release. Facebook. 26 June.
TASS. 2022. 'More than $1 Billion Worth of NATO Weapons for Kiev Ends Up on Black Market—Russia's MFA.' 20 October.
—. 2023. 'About 20% of Weapons Sent to Kiev End Up on Black Market: Russia's UN Mission.' 28 October.
Tsarvulanova, Alexandra, Alessandro Macculi, and Arslan Sheik. 2024. 'The Spread of Weapons among Civilians in Ukraine: Context, Impact, and Future Outlook.' International Team for the Study of Security Verona. 17 June.
Ukraine USRCD (Unified State Register of Court Decisions). 2023. Court Case Number 1-кс/619/1142/23. 21 November.

—. 2024a. Court Case Number 1-кс/175/807/24. 5 March.
—. 2024b. Court Case Number 1-кс/932/861/23. 9 May.
—. 2024c. Court Case Number 1-кс/487/3851/24. 9 July.
—. 2024d. Court Case Number 1-кс/205/910/24. 22 July.
—. 2024e. Court Case Number 3/705/1742/24. 30 July.
—. 2024f. Court Case Number 1-кс/766/2232/23. 22 September.
—. 2024g. Court Case Number 3/933/420/24. 18 October.
—. 2024h. Court Case Number 1-кп/489/584/24. 25 December.
—. 2025. Court Case Number 1-кс/742/175/25. 28 January.
Ukrainian MIA (Ministry of Internal Affairs). 1998. On Approval of the Instruction on the Procedure for Manufacturing, Acquisition, Storage, Accounting, Transportation and Use of Firearms, Pneumatic, Cold and Chilled Weapons, Domestic Devices for Firing Ammunition Equipped with Rubber or Similar Non-Lethal Projectiles and Ammunition for Them, as well as Ammunition for Weapons, Main Parts of Weapons [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 622 of 21 August.
—. 2000. On Approval of the Temporary Instructions on the Procedure for the Acquisition, Storage, Accounting, Use and Application of Domestically Manufactured Devices for Firing Cartridges Equipped with Rubber or Similar Non-Lethal Projectiles, and the Specified Cartridges by Employees of the Court, Law Enforcement Agencies and their Close Relatives, as Well as Persons Involved in Criminal Proceedings, Members of the Ukrainian Parliament, Members of Public Formations for the Protection of Public Order and State Borders, Military Personnel, Except Those Undergoing Compulsory Military Service, Civil Servants and Journalists [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 379 of 13 June.
—.2022a. On the Departmental Incentive Awards of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine 'Firearms' and 'Cold Weapons' [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 306 of 19 May.
—. 2022b. On the Specifics of Issuing Permits to Ukrainian Citizens for the Purchase, Storage and Carrying of Hunting Weapons and Ammunition During Martial Law [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 170 of 1 March.
—. 2022c. 'Yevheniy Yenin: Legislative Regulation of the Circulation of Weapons Will Contribute to the Reduction of Offenses Related to Their Use.' 20 September.
—. 2023. 'Unified Register of Weapons: Getting Started' [in Ukrainian]. Press release. July.
—. 2024a. 'Igor Klymenko: Despite the War, the Security Situation in the State Is Maintained at the Proper Level.' 8 February.
—. 2024b. '"The State Should Take into Account and Know Which of the Citizens Have Weapons and Their Number": Bohdan Drapyaty on the Draft Law on the Declaration of Firearms.' 26 April.
—. 2024c. 'Ukrainians May Have from One Million to Five Million Trophy Weapons in Their Hands: Ihor Klymenko.' 13 April.
—. 2024d. 'Work Plan of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine for 2025' [in Ukrainian]. Approved on 20 December.
—. 2025a. '11,209 Firearms and more than 5 Million Round of Ammunition Declared in Ukraine' [in Ukrainian]. 12 August.
—. 2025b. 'Combating Illicit Arms Trafficking' [in Ukrainian]. 27 February.
—. n.d. 'Presentation from the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the Unified Register of Weapons' [in Ukrainian].
— and MoJ (Ministry of Justice). 1999. Methodology of Forensic Examination of Edged Weapons and Structurally Similar Products. Adopted 15 January.

Ukrainian MoD (Ministry of Defence). 2005. On the Approval of the Instructions on the Organization of Equipment, Conservation and Distribution of Small Arms and Ammunition in the Armed Forces of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 359 of 29 June.
—. 2014. 'Special Operation Kramatorsk 18.05.2014' [in Ukrainian]. YouTube. Posted on 19 May.
—. 2017a. On Approval of the Instruction on the Procedure for Implementing the Norms of International Humanitarian Law in the Armed Forces of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 164 of 23 March.
—. 2017b. On Approval of the Instructions on Accounting for Military Property in the Armed Forces of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 440 of 17 August.
—. 2020. On Approval of the Regulations on Departmental Incentive Awards of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 'Firearms' and 'Cold Weapons' [in Ukrainian]. Order No. 146 of 25 November.
Ukrainian National News. 2024. 'Over 285 Thousand Weapons Permits Issued through the Unified Register of Weapons of Ukraine.' 19 April.
Ukrainian Parliament. 1993a. On State Protection of Court and Law Enforcement Employees [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 3781-XII, as amended by Law No. 767-VII of 2 February 2014. 23 December.
—. 1993b. On Ensuring the Safety of Persons Participating in Criminal Proceedings [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 3782-XII of 23 December.
—. 2001. The Criminal Code of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine 2341-III.
—. 2015. About the Prosecutor's Office [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 1697-VII.
—. 2018. On the National Security of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 2469-VIII of 21 June.
—. 2021a. On the Fundamentals of National Resistance [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 1702-IX of 16 July.
—. 2021b. Draft Law on the Right to Civilian Firearms [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 5708 of 25 June.
—. 2022. On Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine [in Ukrainian]. Law of Ukraine No. 2114-IX of 3 March.
—. 2023. Conclusion on the Draft Law of Ukraine 'On the Right to Civilian Firearms' (Reg. No. 5708), Prepared for the Second Reading [in Ukrainian]. Committee on Law Enforcement. 17 November.
—. 2024. On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine 'On Ensuring the Participation of Civilians in the Defence of Ukraine' Regarding the Improvement of the Procedure for Obtaining, Declaring and Handling Firearms [in Ukrainian]. Document 3899-IX of 20 August.
Ukrainian State Bureau of Investigation. 2023. 'SBI Finds a Hidden Cache of Russian Ammunition in Kharkiv Region (Video).' 25 May.
Ukrinform. 2024. 'Ukraine Currently Has over 1.4 Million Weapons Registered: Ministry of Internal Affairs' [in Ukrainian]. 30 October.
UN (United Nations). 2022. 'Effective Arms-control Measures Needed to Block Diversion of Ukraine Weapons, Senior United Nations Disarmament Official Tells Security Council.' Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. SC/15136. 9 December.
UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees). 2025. 'After Three Years of War, Ukrainians Need Peace and Aid.' 18 February.
UNIAN. 2022. 'The "Casualty List" Has Grown! The Ukrainian Military Defeated a Kadyrov Unit in Gostomel' [in Ukrainian]. Telegram. 4 March.

USDC (United States District Court) District of Columbia. 2023. United States of America, Plaintiff, v. 1.063 Million Rounds of 7.62X54 mm Ammunition; 24,000 Rounds of 12.7 mm x99 mm Ammunition; 6,960 Proximity Fuses for Rocket-propelled Grenades; and 2,000 kg of Propellant for Rock-propelled Grenades. United States' Verified Complaint for Forfeiture in Rem. Civil Action No. 1:23-cv-880. 31 March.

US DOJ (Department of Justice). 2023. 'Over One Million Rounds of Ammunition Seized En Route from Iran to Yemen Transferred to Ukrainian Armed Forces.' Press release. 5 October.

US GAO (Government Accountability Office). 2024. *Ukraine: DOD Should Improve Data for Both Defense Article Delivery and End-use Monitoring.* GAO-24-106289. March.

US NSF (United States National Science Foundation). n.d. 'The Cultural Cognition of Risk: Psychological and Social Mechanisms.'

Verstka. 2025. '"Written Off in Advance": How the Russian Military Is Removing and Selling Weapons from the Front' [in Russian]. 5 September.

Voronina, Viktoriia Viktorovna. 2023. 'Illicit Arms Trafficking as an Obstacle to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' [in Ukrainian]. In Olena A. Akimova et al., eds. *Modern Problems of Governance: The Path to Sustainable Peace after the War: State, Business, Innovation* [in Ukrainian]. Proceedings of the 13th International Scientific and Practical Conference, Kyiv, 24 November. Kyiv: Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, Polytechnic Publishing House, pp. 22–25.

— and Vadym Olehovych Chernysh. 2024. 'Does Ukraine Need a Weapons Policy?' [in Ukrainian]. *Public Management*, Vol. 1, No. 38. May, pp. 14–24.

Vorrath, Judith. 2018. 'What Drives Post-war Crime? Evidence from Illicit Economies in Liberia and Sierra Leone.' *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 28–45.

Zdorovylo, Taras. 2024. '"Arms Dealers" Exposed in Three Regions: They Sold "Trophy" Russian Weapons and Explosives to Criminals, Photos' [in Ukrainian]. Ukraiina Moloda. 14 March.

Zelenskyy, Volodymyr. 2022. 'We Will Give Weapons to Anyone Who Wants to Defend the Country. Be Ready to Support Ukraine in the Squares of Our Cities.' X. 24 February.

Small Arms Survey
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777
e info@smallarmssurvey.org

About the **Ukraine project**

The project 'Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risks of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation from the Russian War of Aggression' is a joint initiative implemented by the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS', in partnership with other experts working on arms monitoring and control. It seeks to provide policymakers, practitioners, and the public with timely, relevant, and high-quality research on various aspects of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Ukraine. It does so by maintaining a baseline data set of arms seizures and producing regular publications on illicit arms, public perceptions of arms proliferation and security, and weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine. It also promotes information exchange and learning on small arms proliferation matters among a growing and inclusive network of Ukrainian practitioners, academics, and NGOs working on security issues.

For more information, please visit:
www.smallarmssurvey.org/project/supporting-ukraine-addressing-salw-proliferation-risks

A joint report by the Small Arms Survey and the Center for Security Studies 'CENSS',
with financial support from the German Federal Foreign Office