



Locked but Loaded: Firearms Possession Dynamics in Ukraine

Gergely Hideg

KEY FINDINGS

- The household firearms possession rate in Ukraine has been stable since the 2022 Russian invasion. At that time, 6 per cent of households reported possessing firearms, which is similar to the 5.6 per cent that did so in a more recent survey carried out at the end of 2023. In fact, in the sampled households the aggregate number of firearms kept at home decreased by 15 per cent during the same period.
- During this period, crime victimization levels were only slightly above pre-2022 levels; however, when crimes occur, firearms are increasingly more likely to be used. In late 2023, 11 per cent of all victims said they encountered a firearm during the crime incidents they experienced during the previous 12 months, up from 6 per cent a year earlier.
- Findings from the latest survey reveal that at the end of 2023, nearly four out of ten firearm-owning households were unaware of the Unified Register of Weapons (39 per cent), which was launched in June 2023.
- About three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents whose households owned firearms and knew about the register said all their weapons were registered. Among all survey respondents who reported firearms possession at home, however, only 45 per cent indicated that their firearms were registered.
- The war is resulting in an increase in the population of soldiers and veterans, who as a whole tend to adopt distinct attitudes towards firearm ownership. For instance, 31 per cent of respondents with combat experience (pre- or post-2022) reported a firearm at their home and 18 per cent declared owning a firearm personally—compared with only about 6 and 3 per cent, respectively, for the general population.

Introduction

The Small Arms Survey is undertaking several waves of public opinion surveys to gauge the Ukrainian population's perceptions of the proliferation of firearms in the country and its impact on security. The resulting understanding of the scope and mechanisms of small arms proliferation among civilians aims to contribute to the long-term objectives of promoting peace and security in Ukraine and more broadly in Europe. Undertaking rigorous quantitative research in a conflict-affected region during a period of active conflict presents a unique opportunity to systematically observe firearms proliferation and public perceptions of the ownership and use of firearms in areas behind the front line.

This paper is the second of the Survey's Situation Update series on firearms possession and proliferation in Ukraine. It builds on the work undertaken by various survey organizations in Ukraine carried out as far back as 2011, including the data and analysis published in Schroeder et al. (2019), Hideg and Watson (2023), and Hideg (2023). A new survey administered in November–December 2023 (hereafter 'December 2023') for the Small Arms Survey forms the basis for this new Situation Update (see 'Methodology', below). At least two more waves of surveying are scheduled for summer 2024 and early 2025 in order to monitor developments over time.

This Situation Update focuses on civilian possession of firearms and is divided into two main sections. The first provides contextual background on perceptions of insecurity, the role of weapons, and the specific situation of combatants and veterans. The second section examines civilian firearms possession, including public perceptions of these weapons, civilians' access to them, and public awareness and use of the new Unified Register of Weapons.

Context

This section provides relevant contextual background to the issue of civilian firearms possession in Ukraine. It begins by considering indicators of insecurity in Ukraine, before highlighting the perceived role of weapons in addressing such insecurity and the specific perspectives and needs of the veteran and combatant population in Ukraine.

(In)security away from the front line

Security is precarious in the regions of Ukraine affected by the Russian Federation's ongoing military attacks. In the context of a front line spanning 1,200 km, large parts of the Ukrainian population are exposed to significant physical danger, prompting a mass exodus from the front-line areas to safer regions of the country or abroad.¹ Even far from the front line, aerial attacks undermine many residents' sense of security. According to our December 2023 survey, about one in five Ukrainians (21 per cent of survey respondents) indicated that shelling, aerial bombing, or drone attacks happened quite frequently or very frequently in their area.

Following the outbreak of the conflict in the eastern part of the country from 2014, Ukraine experienced a substantial increase in criminal violence until 2017,² raising concerns that a similar spike in violence could occur after the 2022 invasion. The likelihood of history repeating itself remains a significant concern. Indeed, after the 2022 Russian invasion leaders of criminal groups reportedly relocated and moved assets abroad, but more recent reports suggest a resurgence in organized criminal activity in Ukraine. In addition to drug and weapons trafficking, these criminal organizations also appear to be facilitating draft dodging (Global Initiative, 2023).

Our latest research reveals that, as of December 2023, survey-based crime victimization levels are

1 As of April 2024, of the pre-2022 population of about 44 million, the International Organization for Migration estimates there are about 3.5 million internally displaced persons and 4.7 million returnees (who previously were refugees or internally displaced individuals) in Ukraine (IOM, 2024). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees tracks about 6.8 million Ukrainian refugees outside of the country (UNHCR, 2024). Overall, internal or external displacement affected about one-third of the population.

2 See Hideg (2023).

Table 1 Twelve-month household-level crime victimization rates in Ukraine, 2011–December 2023 (per cent of national adults)

	2011	2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023
Family member or respondent victimized over the past year (any crime)	3.4%	6.7%	6.8%	8.2%	7.8%

Note: Comparability caveats apply owing to a gradually decreasing proportion of accessible territory due to Russian occupation.

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

Table 2 Firearms use in crime in the preceding 12 months, 2011–December 2023 (per cent of victims)

	2011	2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023
Firearm used while committing the crime	N/A	N/A	5.9%	5.8%	10.6%

Sources: Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c)

only slightly elevated when compared to previous periods. The annual victimization rate, which stood at 3.4 per cent during peacetime in 2011, increased to nearly 7 per cent in 2019 and reached approximately 8 per cent in 2023 (see Table 1).

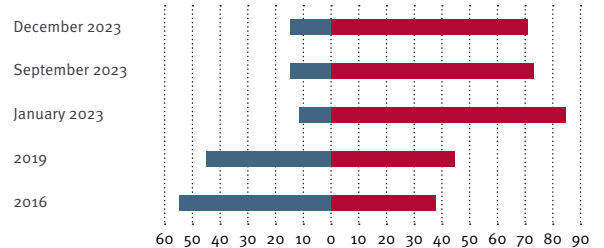
The proportion of victims who reported that a firearm was used in at least one of the crimes they experienced over the previous 12 months has substantially increased, however (see Table 2). The proportion of those reporting firearms use (which can include the mere presence of a firearm during the commission of a crime without the weapon being fired) almost doubled from less than 6 per cent of victims at the outset of the full-scale war to nearly 11 per cent in December 2023.³

Survey responses also suggest that Ukrainian adults were less concerned about crime in December 2023 than they were prior to the full-scale Russian invasion. This sentiment is reinforced by the general population’s continued high regard for policing: the vast majority of respondents believe that law enforcement agencies are able to protect citizens against conventional, non-war-related crimes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Perceived ability of Ukraine’s law enforcement agencies to protect citizens and their property against crime, 2016–December 2023 (per cent)

In your opinion, can law enforcement agencies protect citizens and their property against crime (not counting enemy actions in the war*)?

- They can fully or partly protect citizens/their property against crime
- They cannot or partly cannot protect citizens/their property against crime



Note: * From 2022 onwards.

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

³ Considering that many of the crimes people encounter as victims do not involve any contact (burglary, vandalism, theft, etc.), this seems to be a fairly high proportion. Unfortunately, the Small Arms Survey does not have directly comparable data from other countries.

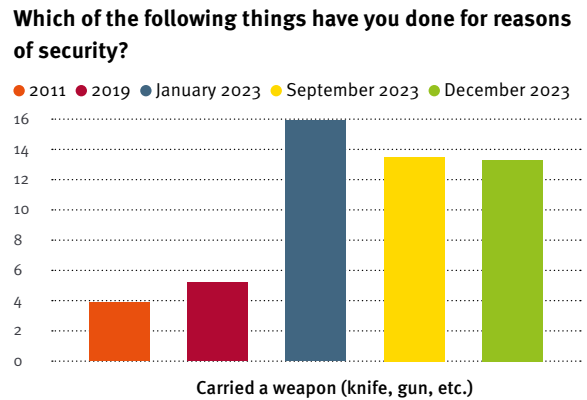
Private means of protection

Ukrainians have changed the ways in which they are seeking to protect themselves from threats to their security. The proportion of respondents arming themselves for self-defence—with various types of weapons, including traumatic weapons, firearms, knives, and pepper and gas sprays—tripled between 2011 (3.9 per cent) and December 2023 (13.3 per cent) (see Figure 2). Based on the available data, reliance on these weapons for protection surged after the Russian invasion of 2022 and remained high and relatively steady until December 2023. Despite reports of growing popular support for liberalizing civilian firearm ownership in Ukraine,⁴ our latest survey did not find a significant increase since 2022 in the number of people carrying a firearm to protect themselves. In fact, the proportion of respondents that reported carrying a firearm for protection remained stable and low—at about 2 per cent—between January 2023 and December 2023.

As of December 2023, 18.3 per cent of the surveyed adult males indicated that they at least sometimes carried some form of weapon for security purposes, and nearly 5 per cent reported carrying firearms for self-defence. While, overall, firearms represent a small proportion of the weapons being carried for protection, they are particularly popular among certain population subgroups. Among men in households with at least one veteran from the previous Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) or current war, 33 per cent carry a weapon for protection and 14 per cent carry a firearm. Moreover, more than 4 per cent of Ukrainian men aged 18 or more indicated that they acquired a firearm during the previous 12 months ‘for reasons of security’—compared with about 2 per cent of all respondents.

In the December 2023 survey not a single responding woman stated that she carried a firearm to protect herself (compared to 0.5 per cent in the previous

Figure 2 Ukrainians carrying weapons for protection, 2011–December 2023 (per cent)



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

survey). Many women, however, especially young women, carry some other form of weapon for protection (9 per cent on average, with this figure rising to 22 per cent among women below the age of 30).

Specific perceptions and needs of veterans

Similar to what occurred after the 2014–15 phase of the war, the current phase is creating a growing population of young and not-so-young⁵ men with combat experience (Snodgrass, 2023)—many of whom may lack stable employment or a home to return to at the end of their period of service. Some of these men are expected to struggle to reintegrate into civilian life,⁶ and there is a risk that many may bring their military firearms with them when they return to their communities. Data from the December 2023 survey indicates that 38 per cent of all respondents believe it is likely that Ukrainian soldiers will retain some of their firearms instead of handing them in to the authorities.

⁴ The 2019 survey found that only 23 per cent of respondents supported the legalization of firearms for citizens (Schroeder et al., 2019), whereas surveys now find majority support for liberalization. Additionally, legislative actions are anticipated to address the issue in the near future (ALI, 2023).

⁵ In the sample of the December 2023 wave of our survey series, 77 per cent of those who have been fighting in either the previous or the current stage of the war are between 30 and 59 years old.

⁶ See research about the problems affecting the reintegration of Joint Forces Operation/Anti-Terrorist Operation veterans (Guest et al., 2022). This is not specific to Ukraine, and reintegration difficulties have also been observed in other post-conflict settings, including elevated levels of violence among former conflict participants (Bradley, 2018).

Many of the demobilized personnel will probably also be dealing with recent trauma, including psychological and physical, which could further complicate their reintegration into civilian life and potentially making them more susceptible to engaging in criminal activity or other forms of violence, including political and domestic violence (Guest et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that trauma afflicting former combatants correlates with mental problems and substance abuse, which in turn increase the likelihood and severity of violent behaviour, including intimate partner violence.⁷

Focus on civilian firearms possession

This section focuses on civilian firearms possession. It first examines shifts in public perceptions of firearms since 2022, before delving into an analysis of civilians' accessibility to and possession of firearms. The section then analyses the general population's knowledge and use of the new Unified Register of Weapons, which the government launched in June 2023.

Public perceptions of firearms

Attitudes towards civilian firearms possession in Ukraine have shifted significantly in recent years. Prior to 2022 most Ukrainians did not support the liberalization of civilian firearm ownership (ALI, 2023). In 2019 only 23 per cent of respondents supported the legalization of civilian firearms possession (Schroeder et al., 2019), a figure that was even lower in 2015 (11 per cent), according to the Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (ALI, 2023). Support for civilian firearms possession has increased since 2022, however.

In response to the full-scale invasion in February 2022, an unspecified but relatively large number of

small arms⁸ were distributed to civilians to support territorial defence, and Ukrainians have not been eager to return these weapons (Maznychenko, 2023). As the nation mobilized for war, attitudes towards civilian weapons seem to have shifted, and it appears probable that this will lead to the greater circulation of firearms among civilians.

Surveys administered by other organizations have found that a majority of the population support the adoption of regulations allowing the civilian possession of firearms.⁹ In the aftermath of the 2022 invasion and the initial Ukrainian successes—such as the defeat of Russian troops in the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022—public opinion shifted dramatically. A survey by the Rating Group conducted in May 2022 revealed that 58 per cent of citizens supported civilians' right to own firearms, compared to only 39 per cent who opposed it (Light et al., 2023). Based on our surveys, however, the perception that firearm ownership is a necessity for Ukrainian civilians has somewhat diminished since the initial shock of the invasion. While 40 per cent of respondents supported civilian firearm ownership in January 2023, this figure declined to 30 per cent in December 2023. At that time, 41 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women agreed that it is necessary to possess firearms 'in their area'.

Firearms accessibility and possession

Somewhat counterintuitively, the full-scale invasion complicated Ukrainian civilians' ability to access firearms. In 2019 only 5 per cent of surveyed Ukrainians thought that acquiring a firearm was very difficult or even impossible. This proportion jumped to 33 per cent by January 2023, reflecting a surging demand not met by existing supply. In December 2023, 26 per cent of surveyed people held this view, and only 10 per cent of all respondents (13 per cent among men) considered it 'easy' to obtain a firearm

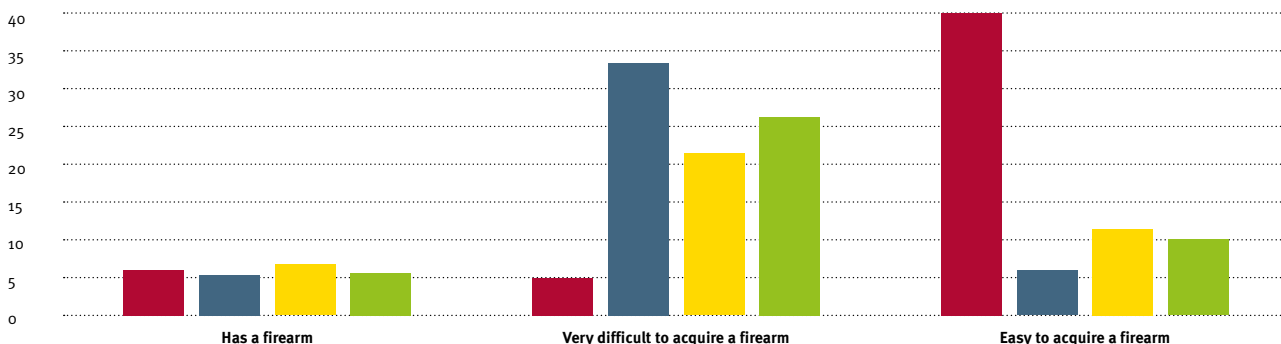
⁷ For example, OSCE (2020, pp. 59–62).

⁸ According to one source, 10,000 automatic rifles were handed out in Kyiv alone (Gutowski, 2022), and similar arming of civilian territorial defence has taken place in the country's northern and eastern oblasts. Other sources report that 25,000 automatic rifles and 10 million rounds of ammunition were handed out in Kyiv (Khurshudyan, O'Grady, and Morris, 2022).

⁹ See, for example, ALI (2023).

Figure 3 Firearms possession and accessibility in Ukraine, 2019–December 2023 (per cent)**Do you or anybody in your household have any firearms? How easy do you think it is for civilians to acquire a firearm in your area?**

● 2019 ● January 2023 ● September 2023 ● December 2023



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

(see Figure 3). Perceptions of access to ammunition are similar, with only 10 per cent of respondents finding it easy and 27 per cent perceiving it as very difficult to nearly impossible to acquire ammunition. As of December 2023 respondents living in households with veterans (from the ATO or full-scale war) or combatants were almost as sceptical as the general population with respect to their access to firearms: only 12 per cent of households with veterans or combatants reported such access to be easy, compared to 10 per cent of the full sample. These findings suggest that weapons remain in high demand at the front but that leakages to the rest of Ukraine are fairly well controlled.

The surveys provide an opportunity to observe both the prevalence and distribution of firearms in Ukrainian households. While several other indicators tend to fluctuate over time, the proportion of households that report possessing a firearm has remained remarkably stable compared to the pre-invasion era.

The survey findings indicate only a marginal change in household firearm ownership as of December 2023. In comparison to 2019, when it stood at 6 per cent, the self-reported rate of household firearms possession remained strikingly consistent at 5.6 per cent in late 2023. This small variation falls well within the sampling error margin, suggesting that the changes recorded up to that date may be attributed

to fluctuations inherent in survey methodology. The household firearms possession rates in the previous waves of surveys were 5.3 per cent in January 2023 and 6.7 per cent in September 2023.

Moreover, the total number of firearms that the sampled households reported they owned decreased by 15 per cent in December 2023 when compared to pre-invasion levels. In a previous survey the 1,750 respondents reported possessing a total of 143 firearms just before the February 2022 invasion. In contrast, the 1,750 respondents surveyed in December 2023 reported owning only 122 firearms. Not all households that possessed firearms specified the number they possessed,¹⁰ so these numbers should not be considered as comprehensive. The majority (70 per cent) of those who specified the number of firearms they owned said they possessed only one firearm, about a fifth (22 per cent) reported having two, with the remainder (8 per cent) owning more than two firearms.

Consistent with previous studies (see, for instance, Hideg and Watson, 2023), men and women can give sharply different accounts of firearm ownership at both the personal and household levels.¹¹ In the December 2023 survey, male respondents were nearly three times as likely to report the presence of a firearm in their home (8.9 per cent) than women (2.8 per cent). This is partly related to the fact that

¹⁰ Approximately 16 per cent of firearm owners did not specify the number of guns they owned in December 2023, compared to only 9 per cent during the pre-invasion period.

¹¹ For example, in Nigeria; see Small Arms Survey and PRESCOM (2021, pp. 45–48).

some of the female respondents live in households without men (who tend to be the main firearm owners), so these households are less likely to own firearms. But even when including only households that have an adult male member, male respondents were twice as likely to report firearms at home (8.7 per cent) than female respondents (4.3 per cent). Overall, these results align with previous research that suggested that men are more forthcoming than women in responding to firearm-related questions (Dönges and Karp, 2014). In other words, when it comes to households that have adult male members, the responses of men may more accurately capture levels of firearm ownership than those of women.

Researchers acknowledge that self-reported firearms possession data can generally suffer from latency. Survey-based estimates often face criticism for potentially underestimating firearms possession due to the discomfort or fear of self-incrimination that can be associated with disclosing such information to an unknown interviewer. In our previous Situation Update (Hideg, 2023), we used the experimental Network Scale-Up Method for estimating firearms possession, which draws on respondents reporting the presence of firearms in their close private networks. This approach generated higher proportions of firearm-owning households (nearly 11 per cent) in the summer of 2023 than when using the traditional self-reporting method (6.7 per cent). Further experimenting of these different approaches to measuring household firearm ownership has the potential to improve the reliability of estimates.

Firearms registration: the Unified Register of Weapons

In June 2023, the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs launched the Unified Register of Weapons (Savin, 2023; LeBrun and Shaban, 2023; MVS, n.d.). This initiative introduced digital registration procedures to ensure effective controls over the full life cycle of civilian-held firearms, as well as aimed to enhance the monitoring of firearms distributed or acquired since the full-scale invasion.¹²

Our December 2023 survey reveals that, five months after the launch of the registry, 41 per cent of Ukrainians were aware of the new system, including 15 per cent who claimed to know what it entailed. The majority of respondents (59 per cent), however, were unaware of the existence of the registry. Among those who reported owning a firearm at home, 61 per cent were aware of the registry, including the 40 per cent who reported having knowledge of its details. On the other hand, a significant minority of respondents in firearm-owning households (39 per cent) declared being unaware of the Unified Register of Weapons. This lack of awareness was quite consistent across genders, with 40 per cent of men and 36 per cent of women in firearm-owning households reporting no prior knowledge of the registry.

The survey also asked respondents from firearm-owning households whether they recorded their firearms in the Unified Register of Weapons. Across all firearm-owning households, less than half (45 per cent) indicated that their weapons were entered into the registry. Among respondents whose households own firearms and know about the registry, almost three-quarters (74 per cent) stated that all their firearms were registered. Approximately 10 per cent of respondents in this group reported owning firearms that were not recorded in the registry, while 16 per cent were uncertain or declined to respond. The small number of respondents with unregistered firearms typically cited a lack of time as the reason for not registering their weapons.

Conclusion

While levels of firearms possession remain stable among Ukrainian households, this Situation Update underscores the need for continued monitoring of public perceptions of firearms to inform emerging arms control policies in Ukraine. Insufficient awareness of the Unified Register of Weapons highlights the critical need for enhanced outreach initiatives surrounding this initiative. An effective registration regime not only enhances domestic security, but also serves as a preventive measure

¹² Over the four months between June and September 2023 about 50,000 new military firearms licences were issued and 87 per cent of applications were approved (Savin, 2023).

against the potential illicit diversion of firearms both domestically and internationally. Moreover, policies need to recognize the different perspectives of veterans and civilians, and men and women, towards firearms, particularly in the context of post-conflict societal reintegration. When the conflict eventually ends, or when a substantial number of former combatants return from service, a comprehensive strategy will be imperative to support individuals transitioning to peaceful civilian life. This strategy should acknowledge the evolving societal norms concerning firearm ownership and regulation. ●

Methodology

For this Situation Update, Ipsos Ukraine surveyed 1,750 randomly selected Ukrainian adults residing in the unoccupied territory of Ukraine between 14 November and 16 December 2023 over the telephone, using random digit dialling methodology. The survey did not cover territories under Russian occupation at the time of data collection, including Crimea and parts of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, thus excluding areas where nearly 20 per cent of the pre-war population lived. While the estimates based on this sample facilitate a deeper understanding of the war's effects on the Ukrainian people, the Small Arms Survey acknowledges the risk of bias, which, apart from the inability to cover Russian-controlled territories where Ukrainian phone numbers do not work, is also due to the temporary absence of a large part of the population who are currently refugees outside of Ukraine. Ipsos Ukraine also carried out our previous surveys in December 2022–January 2023 (referred to as 'January 2023' in this Update) and August–September 2023 (referred to as 'September 2023' in this Update), and used a similar methodology. These surveys included 2,000 and 1,750 respondents, respectively.¹³

The 2019 survey data was obtained through the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology's nationally representative telephone omnibus survey, with 2,021 respondents—at that time, only Crimea and the occupied parts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts were not covered (Small Arms Survey, 2019). The detailed methodology for the World Values Survey can be accessed in Inglehart et al. (2014)—this survey interviewed a representative sample of 1,500 Ukrainians in 2011 and was able to cover the whole country within its internationally recognized borders.

It is important to maintain a degree of caution regarding the credibility of survey respondents' reporting, particularly concerning firearms possession. This is true even in the Ukrainian context, where civilian firearms possession has become fairly normalized. Despite this, some people might still feel uncomfortable discussing these issues openly, leading to a risk of under-reporting and, consequently, latency.

¹³ See 'Notes on the study' in Hideg and Watson (2023).

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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.

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About the Ukraine project

The project 'Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risk of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation from the Russian War of Aggression' is a joint initiative implemented with the Center for Security Studies (CENSS) and 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 produces 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 CENSS and a growing and inclusive network of Ukrainian practitioners, academics, and NGOs working on security issues.

Credits

Author: Gergely Hideg

Project coordinator: Aline Shaban

Production and communication coordinators:

Olivia Denonville, Lionel Kosirnik, and Katie Lazaro

Editor: Mira Fey

Copy-editor: Alex Potter

Layout: Rick Jones

Proofreader: Stephanie Huitson

Contact details

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

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

www.smallarmssurvey.org

