SITUATION UPDATE

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# The Authorized Trade in Small Arms: Latin America from a Global Perspective

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Based on United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade) data, reported global small arms and light weapons (hereafter 'small arms') exports rose sharply from USD 5 billion in 2019 to USD 9.2 billion in 2024.

- In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, European imports increased by 141% between 2019 and 2024, making up 40% of all reported global imports in 2024. This surge is primarily driven by Eastern European imports, the value of which multiplied by more than ten between 2019 and 2024, accounting for 21% of global imports in 2024.

- Latin America is a comparatively small player in this trade, accounting for 2.8% of global small arms imports and 6.3% of exports over the period 2019–24. Data discrepancies suggest that some countries in the region do not report comprehensively to UN Comtrade, however, so these figures are likely to be under-estimated.

- Small arms imports by Latin American countries increased by a factor of 2.5 between 2019 and 2022, but then fell by 27% between 2022 and 2024—largely following the trend seen in Brazil.

- Brazil is by far Latin America's main actor in the global trade in small arms, ranking as the world's fifth-largest exporter, and 15th-largest importer, between 2019 and 2024.

- Weapons categorized in UN Comtrade as military firearms represented about 10% of all Latin American small arms imports during this period, which is well above the global average of 5.6%.

## Context

This Situation Update, prepared as part of the project 'Mapping the Transnational Circulation and Control of Small Arms in Latin America' supported by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS), examines the global authorized trade in small arms, with a focus on Latin America, over the period 2019–24.

Several countries in Latin America possess small arms manufacturing capabilities, including many of the region's most populated nations such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.[1] Yet, with the exception of Brazil, few Latin American countries typically feature among the world's top exporters and importers of small arms (Florquin, Hainard, and Jongleux, 2020, pp. 24, 31). On the other hand, Latin America exhibits both the world's highest regional homicide rates and one of the highest proportions of homicides perpetrated with firearms (Boo and Hideg, 2024, p. 12). The risk of diversion of legally produced and traded small arms into the illicit and criminal spheres is therefore a subject of particular concern, as it may contribute to further violence (Mack and Mieszkowska, 2025; Solmirano, 2023).

Drawing from UN Comtrade data, the Situation Update also seeks to assess more specifically the weight of military-style small arms—such as machine guns, sub-machine guns, and military-style rifles (such as AR- and AK-pattern rifles)—in the authorized trade, as the SNIS project is particularly focused on this weapon category. The proliferation and potential misuse of military-style small arms is especially worrying given that they can contribute to increasing the scale and lethality of violence (Braga and Cook, 2018; Fleegler et al., 2024; Libby and Wright, 2009). Open-source reports reveal that while handguns still dominate regional firearm seizures, military-style small arms also circulate illicitly in Latin America, with significant seizure rates of rifles in Mexico, as well as increasing proliferation of a range of military-style small arms in Brazil, for instance.[2] Documenting the authorized trade in military-style small arms therefore contributes to a better understanding of the scale and origins of the flows, as well as the potential for diversion.

After providing an overview of data sources and caveats, including issues surrounding inconsistencies between the reported importer and exporter data, the study examines global trends in authorized small arms transfers. The next section focuses on the regional trade in small arms in Latin America, followed by a special focus on the regional trade in weapons categorized as 'military firearms'. The conclusion reviews the implications of the findings for our understanding of the trade in military-style small arms in Latin America, highlighting gaps and avenues for further research.

## Data sources and caveats

The international trade figures used in this Situation Update are based on import and export data reported by states to UN Comtrade, which is the largest source of international customs statistics (Jenzen-Jones and Schroeder, 2018, p. 297).[3] Overall, 156 countries reported more than 77,500 small arms transfers to or from a total of 230 jurisdictions over the period 2019–24.[4]

Due to the voluntary and often incomplete nature of state reporting, these sources do not capture the totality of the international trade, and therefore better reflect commerce involving at least one transparent state. Indeed, if neither the exporter nor the importer reports the details of a transfer to UN Comtrade, the transaction will not be reflected in the data. Moreover, transfers of some light weapons,

1 See Jenzen-Jones and Pérez (2020); Langeani and Pollachi (2025); Marchessin (2025); Quevedo (2023); Solmirano (2023); Turan (2025); and UNDESA Population Division (2024).

2 Coss, Mendez, and Cano (forthcoming); Langeani (2025); Langeani and Pollachi (2025, p. 72); and UNODC (2020; p. 66).

3 When referring to total small arms transfers based on UN Comtrade data, the study includes the following Harmonized System (HS) codes, which encompass both small arms and light weapons categories: 930120, 930190, 930200, 930320, 930330, 930510, 930520, 930521, 930529, 930621, and 930630.

4 Each of these transfer records provides the aggregate USD value of imports or exports in a specific weapon category between two countries for an entire year. This means that each record may in fact sum up the value of multiple similar individual transfers occurring in a given year.

light weapons ammunition, and accessories are reported in categories that also include other types of equipment not considered to be small arms or light weapons and are therefore excluded from this analysis. Finally, as UN Comtrade uses data on commercial shipments, it may not capture small arms transferred directly by armed forces, such as some shipments of military aid or transfers to troops deployed on exercises abroad.

Isolating military-style small arms from other weapon categories used in UN Comtrade is also challenging, since such weapons can be lumped together with different categories of small arms. This paper uses Harmonized System (HS) category 930190 'military weapons; other than revolvers, pistols, and arms of heading 9307, n.e.c. in heading 9301' as a proxy for military-style small arms in the UN Comtrade data. It is worth noting, however, that even this category may sometimes include errors, such as items being included that are not considered to be small arms and light weapons (Jenzen-Jones and Schroeder, 2018, p. 298; Small Arms Survey, 2009, p. 30).

The visualizations included in this Situation Update show both the data on transfers as reported by the concerned states or regions ('reporter data') and the data on those transfers as reported by their trading partners ('partner data'). This makes it possible to identify discrepancies between reporter and partner data, and whether the overall trends hold in both data subsets. In the text, unless specified otherwise, import data is data reported by the importers, and export data is data reported by the exporters. When significant variations in trends exist between the 'reporter data' and the 'partner data'—that is, the data on these same trade flows reported by the trading partners around the world—these are noted in the text. Partner data is used to highlight the discrepancy and provide a more comprehensive picture.

Discrepancies between reporter and partner data in international trade statistics are not limited to the small arms trade. They can be explained by several factors, including differences in valuation methods across countries; the inclusion, or not, of trans-shipments and re-exports; and trade fraud (Kee, 2024). Arms researchers have also noted that many states do not report small arms transfers to UN Comtrade, or do so only partially, often reflecting a lack of transparency, which can also affect the consistency of reports (Florquin, Hainard, and Jongleux, 2020, p. 14).

As a result, this Situation Update is skewed towards documenting more transparent countries and particular categories of items, and most certainly under-estimates the total value and extent of the global authorized trade in small arms, and of military-style small arms in particular. Figures should therefore be considered as conservative, but nevertheless informative.

The analysis presented in this Situation Update reflects data entered in UN Comtrade as of 1 August 2025. This means that trade data for recent years, and especially 2024, may not be complete or definitive as some states may still submit data or revise their respective UN Comtrade submissions months after the end of the relevant calendar year (Florquin, Hainard, and Jongleux, 2020, p. 14). While acknowledging this caveat, it was deemed important to include the available data from recent years in light of the broader shifts in the global conventional arms trade that have been documented elsewhere, notably in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (George et al., 2025).

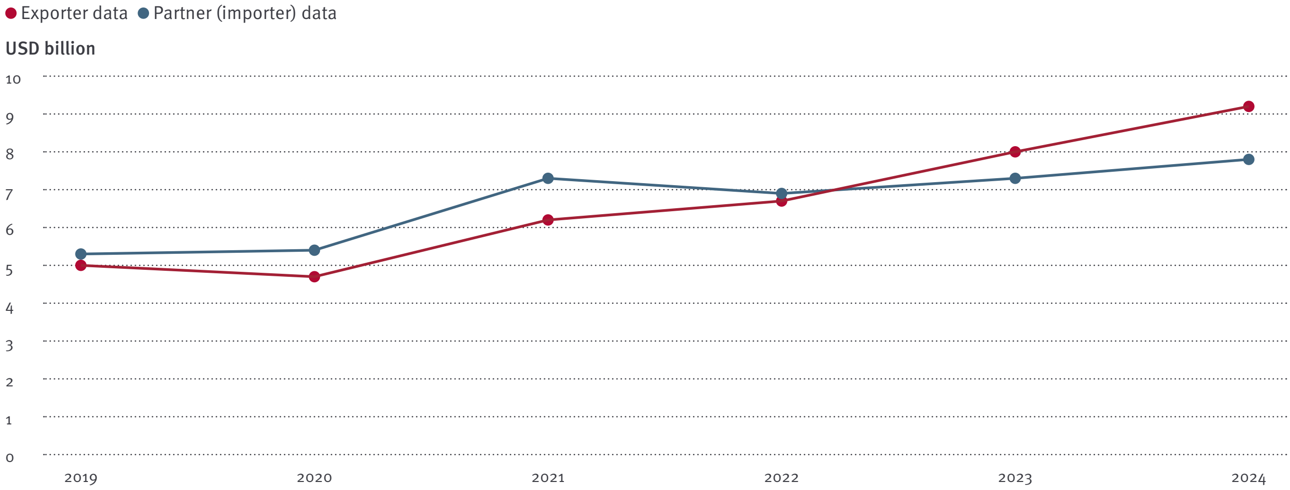
The data presented is as reported to UN Comtrade and not adjusted for inflation. This is due to the relatively short (six-year) period of this study as well as the project's interest in documenting the extent of discrepancies between importer and exporter data, including in Latin America. Applying inflation rates to this data would, in effect, change the values of what states originally reported, making such comparative analysis more difficult. The Survey uses the United Nations Statistics Division's regional groupings (UNSD, n.d.). In this paper, Latin America comprises Central and South America but excludes the Caribbean.

## Global update

The global small arms trade measured in reported exports was worth USD 9.2 billion in 2024. This total reflects the continuation of the overall pattern of growth in this trade that has been observed over the past 20 years (Florquin, Hainard, and Jongleux, 2020). During the six years under review, the financial value of global small arms exports averaged about USD 6.6 billion per year, and rose sharply from USD 5 billion in 2019 to USD 9.2 billion in 2024—an 86% increase (see Figure 1). Even taking into consideration the 12.5% inflation rate over the same period (US BEA, 2025), these figures suggest a significant surge in the global value of the authorized trade between 2019 and 2024. Reported imports also rose by 46% during the study period to reach USD 7.8 billion in 2024, but with a more modest increase compared with global exports, particularly between 2021 and 2024 (see Figure 1). The cause for the discrepancy between global import and export data for recent years is unclear, although certain states taking a year or more to submit their data to UN Comtrade may be a factor (see 'data sources and caveats' above).

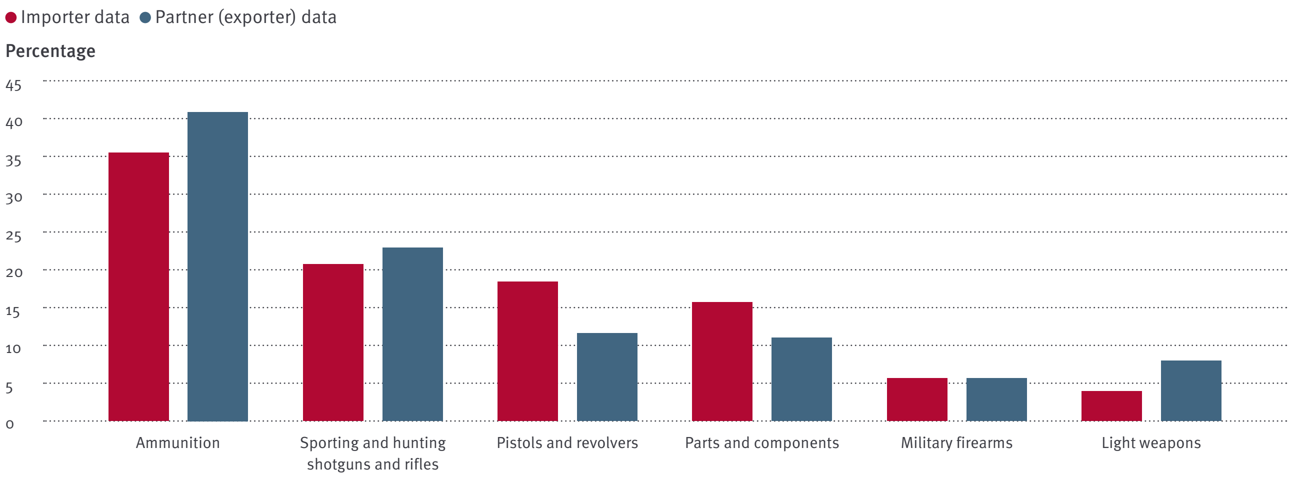
Ammunition was the most traded weapon category, accounting for 35% of the value of reported global imports for the period 2019–24, followed by sporting and hunting shotguns and rifles (21%), pistols and revolvers (18%), parts and components (16%), military firearms (6%), and light weapons (4%). Export data provides a similar picture, with the top category also being ammunition, accounting for 41% of global imports. Military firearms was the least imported category, however, at just under 6% (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1** Total reported global small arms exports (USD billion), 2019–24



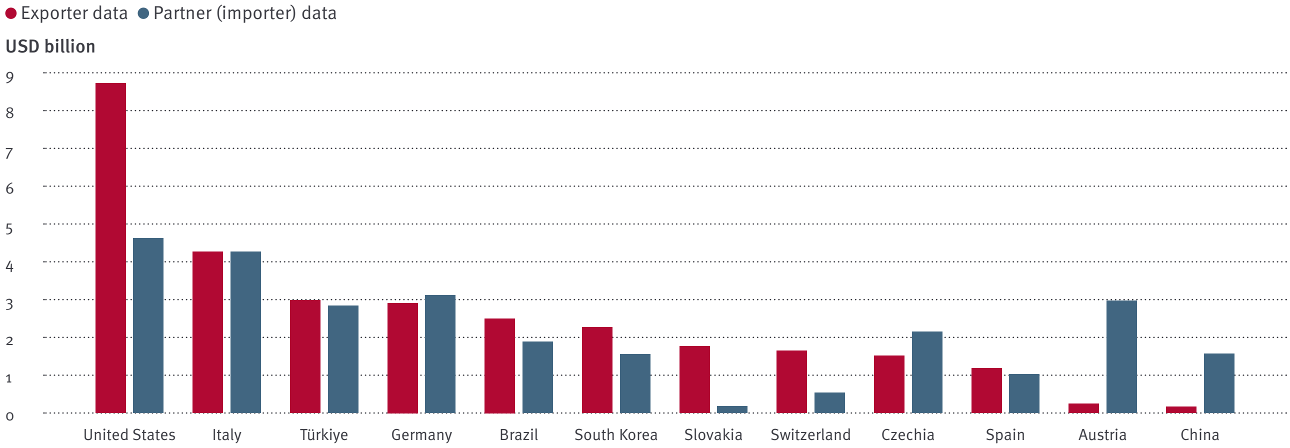

Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

**Figure 2** Global small arms imports, by category, 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

**Figure 3** Main small arms exporters (USD billion), 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

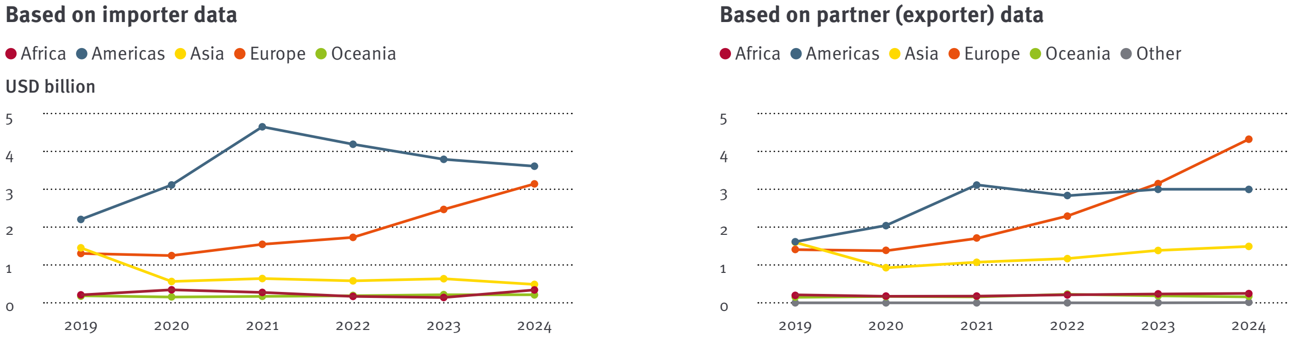
At the regional level, European countries accounted for more than half (51%) of reported global small arms exports between 2019 and 2024, followed by the Americas (31%) and Asia (17%). Africa and Oceania each accounted for less than 0.5% of the world's exports.

From 2019 to 2024, the United States (USD 8.7 billion), Italy (USD 4.3 billion), Türkiye (USD 3 billion), Germany (USD 2.9 billion), and Brazil (USD 2.5 billion) were the top five small arms exporters (based on exporter data, see Figure 3). During this period, these five countries accounted for a combined 54% of all reported global exports of small arms. Exports significantly increased in several of the main exporting states, including Slovakia, whose reported exports measured in USD multiplied by 22 between 2019 and 2024, South Korea (by a factor of 5), Türkiye (by a factor of 2.3), Spain (by a factor of 2.2), and Brazil and Italy (by a factor of 1.4). Partner data (based on reports by importing countries) shows a slightly different picture, with China and Austria joining the world's list of top ten exporters, and Slovakia and Switzerland being excluded (see Figure 3).

The United States (USD 18.5 billion), Canada (USD 1.9 billion), Poland (USD 1.7 billion), Germany (USD 1.4 billion), and Slovakia (USD 1.1 billion) were the five main importers of small arms globally over the period 2019–24. The United States is the only country that imported more than USD 1 billion worth of small arms annually, reaching as high as USD 4.1 billion in 2021. The United States accounted for 46% of all reported global small arms imports in the period under review.

Regionally, however, Europe's small arms imports are catching up with the Americas. European countries reported a significant increase in their imports—141% between 2019 and 2024—and accounted for

**Figure 4** Global small arms imports (USD billion), by region, 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

40% of all reported global imports in 2024. Based on partner (exporter) data, Europe even appears to have overtaken the Americas as the world's leading regional importer of small arms in 2024 (see Figure 4).

This trend is consistent with that observed in European imports of all conventional arms. The latter increased by 155% between 2015–19 and 2020–24, due notably to Ukraine becoming the world's largest importer of conventional weapons in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion, which began in 2022 (George et al., 2025).

In fact, the substantial increase in European imports of small arms is primarily attributable to a significant rise in imports by Eastern European countries, the annual value of which multiplied by more than ten between 2019 and 2024. Based on data reported by the importers, Eastern European imports of small arms accounted for 52% of all European imports and 21% of global imports of small arms in 2024. These proportions are even more significant when analysing the partner (exporter) data, with Eastern European imports accounting for 55% of all European imports and 26% of global imports in 2024. Given UN Comtrade's focus on commercial transactions, these figures should be considered conservative as they may not account for all small arms donated to Ukraine and Russia by their allies, which could be significant (Forum on the Arms Trade, 2025; *Korea Times*, 2025).

Based on data submitted by Eastern European countries, the region imported small arms primarily from other European countries (61% of the total value), Asia (22%), and the Americas (17%). Data reported by the trading partners shows a different distribution: 39% of small arms exports to Eastern Europe were reported by countries in the Americas, followed by Europe (36%), and Asia (19%). Ammunition accounted for 55% of the reported Eastern European imports, followed by light weapons (20%), and parts and components (11%). This is broadly consistent with data reported by countries that exported to the region: according to the latter, ammunition accounted for 58% of these transfers, followed by light weapons (18%), and sporting and hunting shotguns and rifles (9%).

According to the Eastern European states' import data, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia were the subregion's main importers, accounting for a combined 91% of Eastern Europe's imports during the period under review. Partner data suggests a more diverse set of importers, however, with Poland, Ukraine, and Czechia accounting for 83% of the subregion's imports as reported by exporters around the world. The other 17% comprise reported exports primarily to Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Russia, Romania, Moldova, and Belarus (see Figure 5).

In spite of these inconsistencies, taken together, the importer and partner data clearly show a significant rise in European small arms imports observed since 2019, due to a surge of imports by Eastern European importers in particular. This reflects broader regional arms supply and rearmament patterns triggered by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**Figure 5** Eastern European imports of small arms (USD million), by country and year, 2019–24

**Based on importer data**

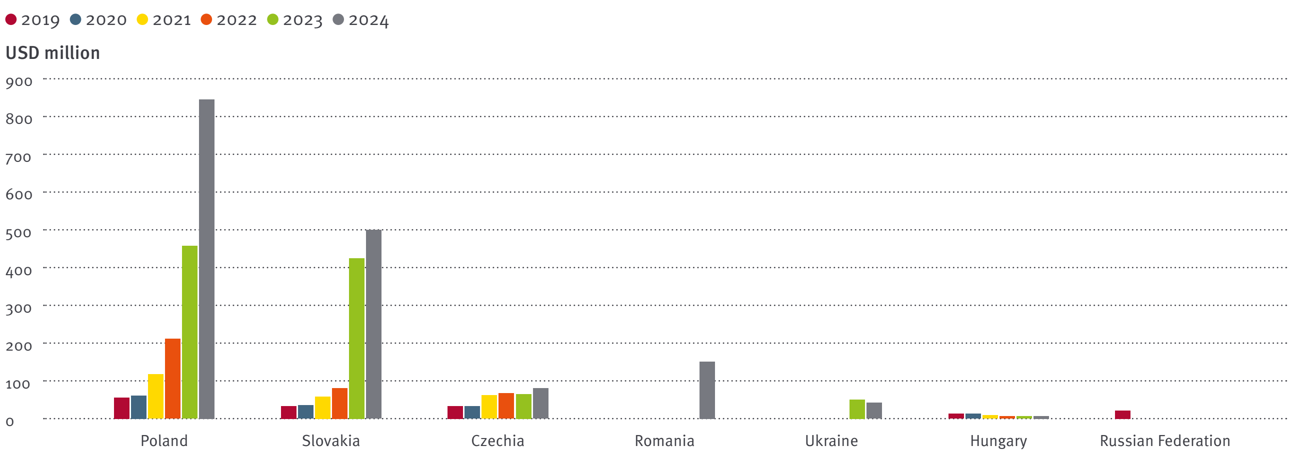
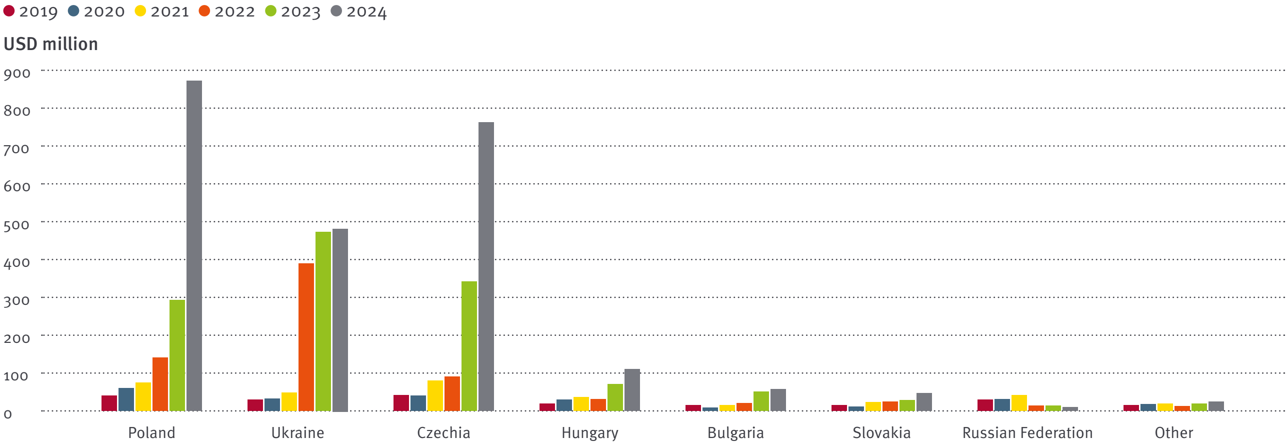


**Figure 5** Continued

**Based on partner (exporter) data**



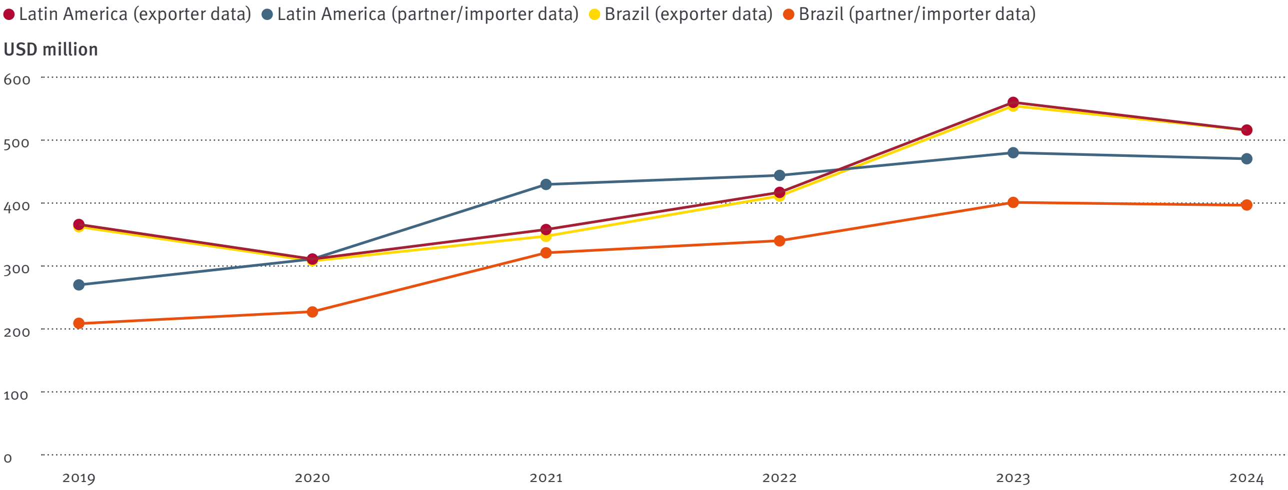

Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

## The small arms trade in Latin America

Latin America is a more discreet actor in the reported global trade in small arms. The region accounted for 6.3% of global small arms exports during 2019–24. While this proportion illustrates the region's limited weight in global small arms exports, the annual value of reported exports from the region increased by 41% between 2019 and 2024 (see Figure 6).

This increase is due almost exclusively to a 42% increase in exports reported by Brazil, which is the world's fifth-largest small arms exporter and accounted for almost 99% of all small arms exports reported by Latin American countries during the period under review. Brazil reported exports worth USD 2.5 billion to a total of 118 countries between 2019 and 2024, with the top five importers of Brazilian products comprising the United States (USD 1.4 billion), the United Arab Emirates (USD 145 million), Saudi Arabia (USD 107 million), the Philippines (USD 81 million),[5] and the Netherlands (USD 79 million).

**Figure 6** Small arms exports by Latin America and the region's top exporter (Brazil) (USD million), 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

5 These imports were also reported in media reports. See, for instance, Padhila (2024).

While Brazil also accounts for the vast majority (79%) of Latin American exports reported by importing countries around the world, the partner data shows that other Latin American countries also export small arms, most notably Mexico (18%) and to a lesser extent Argentina (2%). These discrepancies, while not affecting overall longitudinal trends due to Brazil's dominance of the regional trade, suggest partially incomplete reporting to UN Comtrade in the region.

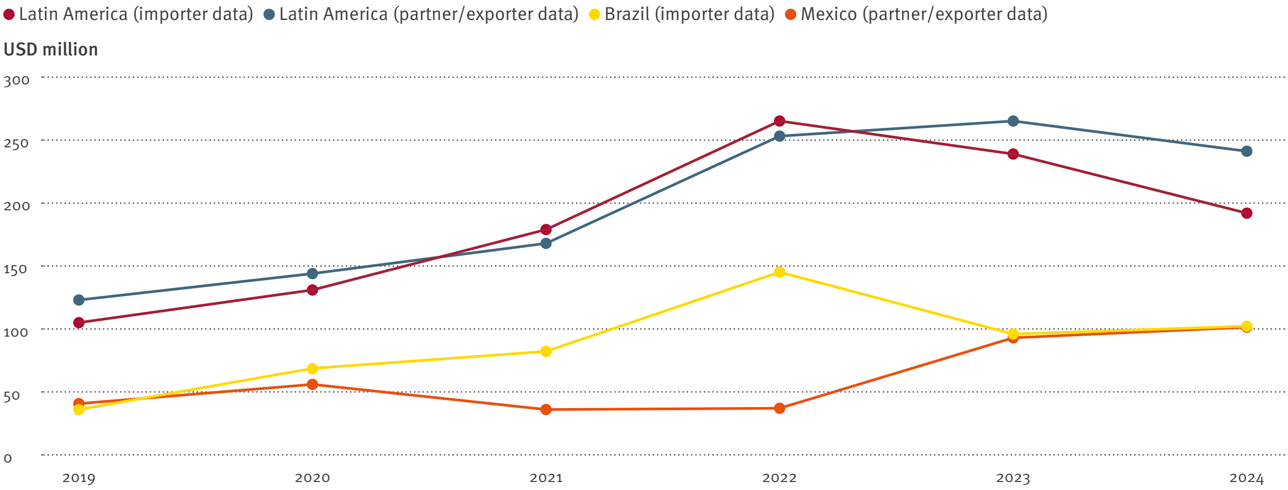
Latin America accounted for 2.8% of reported global small arms imports during the period 2019–24. While this figure suggests limited small arms imports by the region from a global perspective, these imports more than doubled (times 2.5) between 2019 and 2022, when they reached a total of almost USD 270 million (see Figure 7). The region's imports subsequently decreased by 27% between 2022 and 2024, suggesting a certain volatility from year to year.

Indeed, annual imports by the region's main importing countries, and notably Brazil, fluctuated markedly during this period, probably reflecting major acquisitions or contracts, or regulatory changes, during peak years. The value of Brazil's reported imports increased by a ratio of 1 to 4 (times 4.1) from 2020 to 2022, likely influenced by new government policies that deregulated firearms possession by civilians and facilitated imports from foreign companies (for instance, through the removal of protections for the national industry).[6] Imports reported by Brazil subsequently decreased by 31% between 2022 and 2024.

Based on import data, Brazil was the region's largest importer of small arms between 2019 and 2024, accounting for 47% of all imports documented by Latin American states. Brazil's imports during this period totalled USD 527 million, followed by Guatemala (USD 144 million), Argentina (USD 71 million), Colombia (USD 65 million), and Mexico (USD 55 million). For a country with a limited population (18 million), Guatemala's imports stand out as regionally significant and may be a factor of the country's relatively permissive civilian firearms legislation (C4ADS, 2024; Mack and Mieszkowska, 2025, p. 3; UNDESA Population Division, 2024).

Data submitted by the region's trading partners (countries that reported exports to Latin American countries), however, suggests that Mexico was the region's main importer of small arms (see Figures 7 and 8). Indeed, countries around the world reported USD 363 million worth of small arms exports to Mexico from 2019 to 2024, compared with USD 295 million to Brazil (see Figure 8). Official data released by Mexican authorities for the SNIS project for the years 2022 and 2023 (Coss, Mendez, and Cano, forthcoming) is relatively consistent with the UN Comtrade partner data, suggesting that Mexico has reported only a fraction of its actual small arms imports to UN Comtrade.

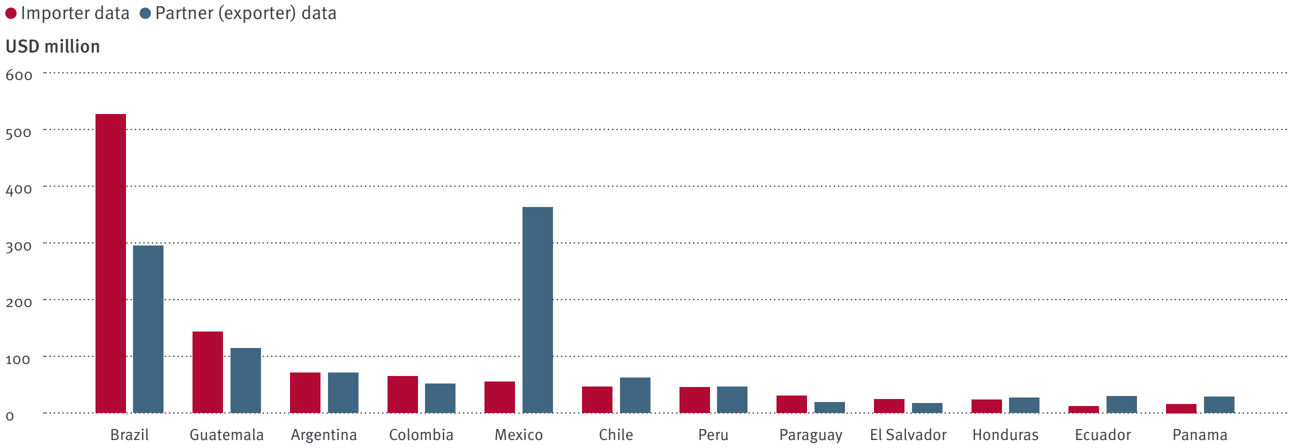
**Figure 7** Small arms imports by Latin America and its top importers (Brazil and Mexico) (USD million), 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

6 Langeani and Pollachi (2025); Oliveira (2019); Paraguassu (2019); Sant'Ana (2020).

**Figure 8** Main Latin American small arms importers (USD million), 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

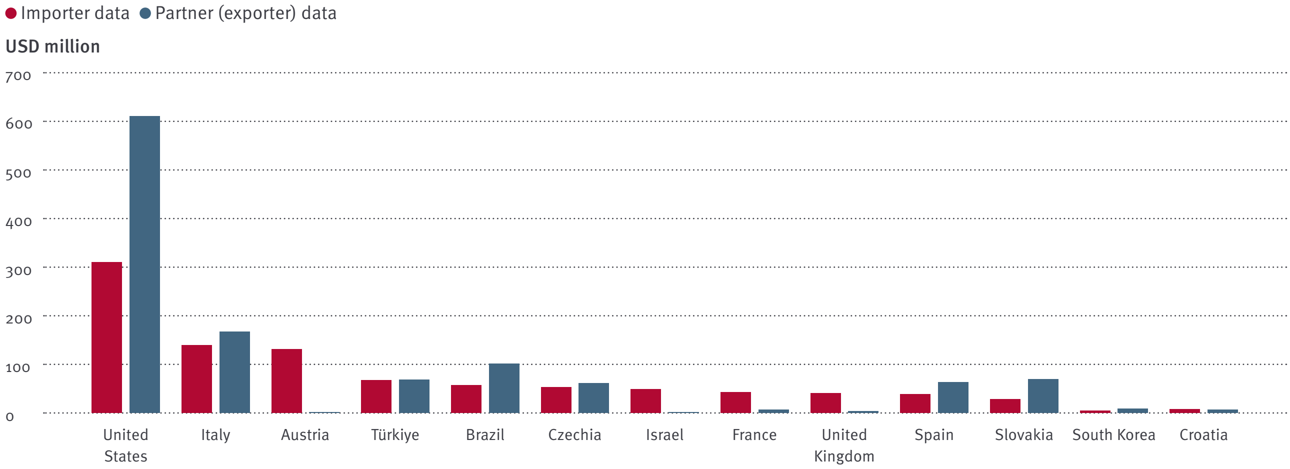
The United States, Italy, Austria, and Brazil are the only countries to have exported more than USD 100 million of small arms to Latin America between 2019 and 2024, based on either importer or partner data (see Figure 9). Brazil is therefore a significant exporter of small arms to the region itself, in addition to being the world's fifth-largest arms exporter (see above).

## An eye on military firearms in Latin America

Looking at the main UN Comtrade weapon categories, countries in Latin America almost exclusively reported exports of ammunition (52% of all reported regional exports) and sporting and hunting shotguns and rifles (47%). Data from the region's trading partners provides a different picture, however, with pistols and revolvers and ammunition each accounting for about 38% of all imports reported to originate from Latin American countries (see Figure 10). It is unclear whether these discrepancies are due to certain transfers being under-reported, miscategorized, or categorized differently by Latin American states and their partners.

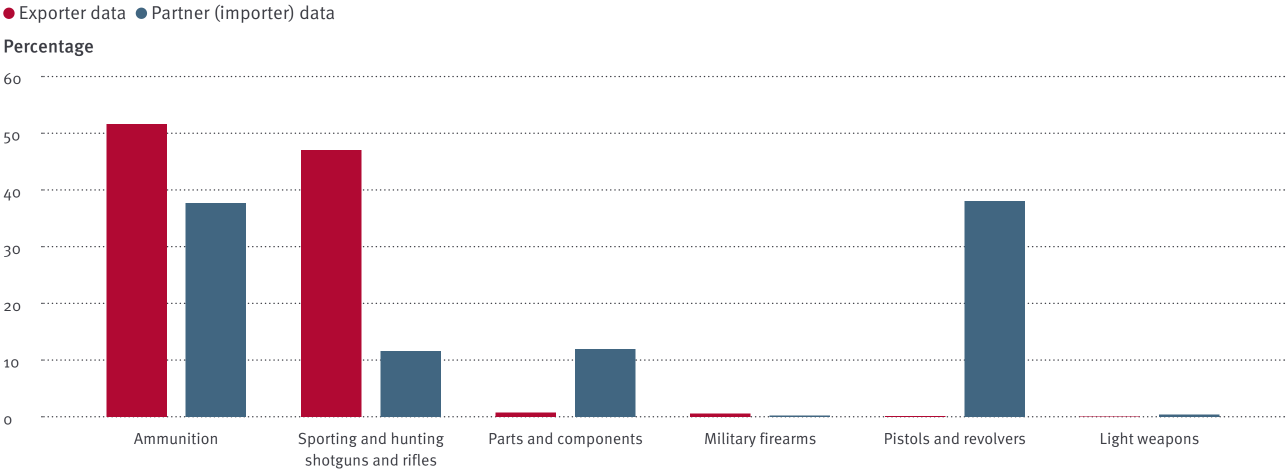
Military firearms represented less than 1% (0.5%) of the region's small arms exports during the period under review. Only Colombia (USD 11 million), Guyana (USD 2.2 million), and Chile (USD 520,000) reported significant exports of military firearms, while Suriname (USD 2.9 million), Brazil (USD 2.1 million), and

**Figure 9** Main source countries of Latin American small arms imports (USD million), 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

**Figure 10** Latin American small arms exports, by category, 2019–24



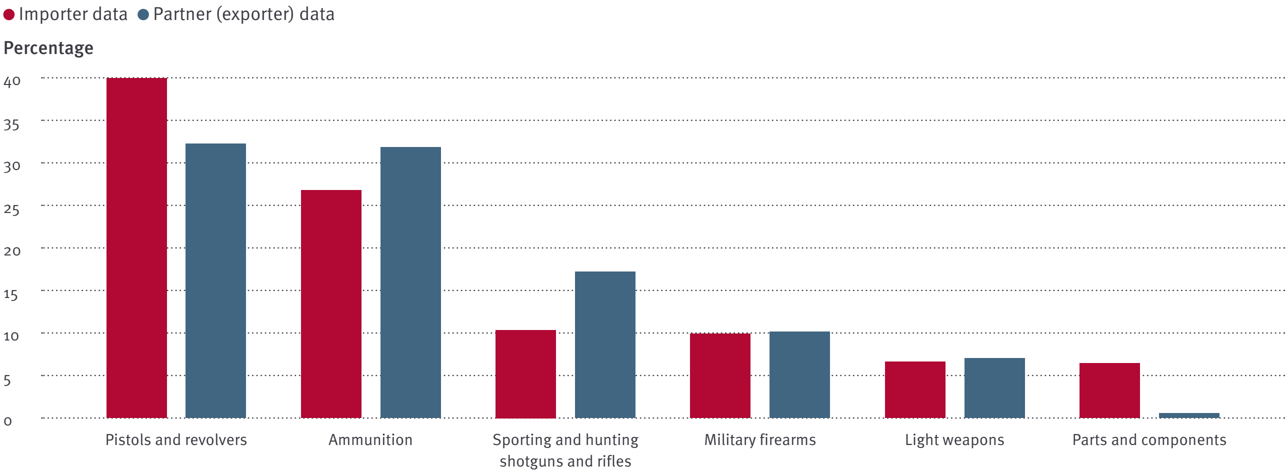

Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

Colombia (USD 940,000) also stood out as exporters of these weapons based on the data submitted by their trading partners.

On the other hand, military firearms represented about 10% of the small arms imports reported by Latin American countries—which is consistent with the partner data, and substantially higher than the global figure of 5.6%. This places military firearms as the fourth most imported small arms category to the region after pistols and revolvers (40%), ammunition (27%), and sporting and hunting shotguns and rifles (just above 10%) (see Figure 11). These figures suggest that military firearms are imported in relatively significant proportions by the region when compared with the trends observed in the rest of the world, keeping in mind that the region's overall imports are relatively small in scale from a global perspective, as noted above.

Among the 15 Latin American states that reported imports of military firearms during the period 2019–24, the top five were Brazil (USD 68 million), Colombia (USD 18 million), Mexico (USD 11 million), El Salvador (USD 5.4 million), and Honduras (USD 3.3 million). Brazil's imports may increase further in coming years in light of the government's 2024 announcement that it intends to acquire 33,910 new 5.56 mm rifles worth BRL 401 million (USD 79 million) for national security agencies (Viana, 2024). Partner data suggests a different picture, however, with Mexico (USD 75 million), Brazil (USD 24 million),

**Figure 11** Latin American small arms imports, by category, 2019–24




Source: UN Comtrade (n.d.)

Colombia (USD 5.3 million), Ecuador (USD 5.1 million), and Argentina (USD 4.5 million) emerging as the top five among the region's 16 countries to which military firearms were exported during the study period.

## Conclusion

This Situation Update shows that the reported global authorized trade in small arms has increased markedly since 2019, as the reported value of exports reached USD 9.2 billion in 2024. In the context of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, a significant increase in European, and in particular Eastern European, imports during this period seems to have fuelled this growing trade. Importantly, this surge is not limited to imports by Ukraine itself, but also concerns several Eastern European countries—reflecting a broader subregional pattern of arms supplies and rearmament triggered by the 2022 Russian invasion.

While Latin America as a whole represents a small proportion of the global trade (6.3% of the world's exports and 2.8% of imports), at the country level, Brazil stands out as a major player. Brazilian small arms exports are ranked fifth globally, and the country is both Latin America's largest importer and exporter of small arms—based on the data reported by Latin American countries. Data reported by exporters around the world suggests a slightly different picture, with Mexico standing out as the region's largest importer of small arms ahead of Brazil.

Data discrepancies raise questions about the comprehensiveness of reporting on small arms transfers by countries in the region, and suggest the real value of the small arms trade in Latin America is probably more significant. Moreover, UN Comtrade data lacks the coverage and granularity needed for a comprehensive assessment of transfers of military-style small arms in Latin America. Data regarding the specific categories of firearms concerned and countries' main trading partners, as well as for certain years, is often incomplete.

The available data, nevertheless, points to certain patterns. Weapons categorized as military firearms represented 10% of Latin America's total imports of small arms between 2019 and 2024—which is higher than the global proportion of 5.6%. The region's imports of these weapons does therefore represent a significant percentage of its trade in small arms, even if figures can vary greatly from year to year and between countries. Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia—also the region's three most populated countries—stand out as the region's largest importers of military firearms in recent years.

In light of the impact that the diversion and misuse of military-style small arms can have on regional crime and violence, more consistent and detailed reporting is crucial to improve the regional intelligence picture. Case study analysis on the presence of these weapons in seizure data—including information on the makes and models of seized firearms, as is being undertaken as part of the SNIS-funded project in Brazil, for instance[7]—will be particularly crucial for shedding further light on the typology of illicit weapons misused in the region, which may in turn underscore possible patterns of diversion and trafficking of military-style firearms.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **BRL** | Brazilian real |
| **HS** | Harmonized System |
| **SNIS** | Swiss Network for International Studies |
| **UN Comtrade** | United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database |
| **USD** | United States dollar |

7 See Langeani and Pollachi (2025).

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