

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT MARKETS AND THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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Summary highlights



Monitoring illicit arms flows from the conflict in Ukraine.

The huge influx of weapons into Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion in February 2022 has raised fears of potential arms trafficking. As yet, there is little sign of such activity, with many reported instances either the result of Russian disinformation or a lack of verification. To bring more insight into this significant risk, which has the potential to reshape the dynamics of organized crime in Europe and possibly beyond, the GI-TOC has established an Illicit Arms Monitor to 'take the temperature' of arms trafficking across Europe using price-based data and qualitative research.



Increased supply of weapons to Ukraine since invasion adds to pre-existing stockpiles.

Guns are readily available in Ukraine, from both licit and illicit sources. The phase of conflict following the Russian invasion in February 2022 has greatly increased these stocks, but it has also brought steep barriers for would-be arms traffickers, not least heightened checks on roads and in urban areas and the relatively small profit margins in selling small quantities of guns. One exception to this

appears to be flows into Russia, either of captured Ukrainian or siphoned Russian army weapons, which seem to have increased judging from the steep uptick in gun crime in neighbouring regions.



Market conditions for arms trafficking in Eastern Europe.

Weapons illegally leaving Ukraine may pass overland through one of the Western European countries on its western border: Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Moldova. But according to GI-TOC fieldwork, there is little appetite among organized crime in most of these countries to become involved in arms trafficking, either for their own use or facilitating their onward sale. In most countries, organized crime has assumed a quieter role since the 1990s and 2000s, and use of traditional guns has fallen (although use of converted guns, such as gas guns, has greatly increased). Greater Western law enforcement attention on Moldova since the Russian invasion may also be serving as a deterrent.





Gang wars in Sweden indicate a demand driver.

As the other stories in this Risk Bulletin highlight, there are significant barriers to trafficking weapons from the conflict in Ukraine both within Ukraine itself and through several neighbouring countries. Yet there is one part of Europe where the demand for weapons has remained strong in recent years: Sweden. Fuelled by drug

revenues, internal tensions in the underworld and a ready supply of weapons, lethal violence has become a common modus operandi among organized crime groups in Sweden. Whether this demand for weapons will in future be satisfied by guns from Ukraine or from other sources is something that the GI-TOC Arms Monitoring Project will follow closely.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This Risk Bulletin is the first issue to be released by the Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine. The format is intended to provide concise articles of research and analysis on evolving topics that may become the focus of more in-depth coverage in the shape of the GI-TOC's research reports or policy briefs. Risk Bulletins may also highlight time-sensitive issues that need to be placed in the public domain to raise awareness of emerging risks.

This first issue hones in on the key findings of the Observatory's Illicit Arms Monitor, which was set up in

early 2023 to track trends in arms trafficking from the conflict in Ukraine.

Here, we explain the guiding purpose and methodology of the Monitor and spotlight market conditions in Ukraine, neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe and Sweden. Together, the stories provide a snapshot of one potential 'supply chain' of illegal arms – from Ukraine to bordering transit countries and into Western European end markets that are witnessing violent contests in the criminal underworld, particularly for control of lucrative illicit commodities such as drugs.

Monitoring illicit arms flows from the conflict in Ukraine.

Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, weapons started pouring into the country at an unprecedented rate. Alongside the Ukrainian and Russian arsenals, Kyiv's Western backers sent materiel of an unprecedented volume and sophistication. Fears that this flow of weapons would be susceptible to illicit diversion were quickly raised and, to the casual observer, apparently confirmed.¹ Attention-grabbing reports claimed that weapons from the conflict were finding their way to Finnish gangsters, French rioters, Nigerian fighters and the Mexican cartels. On the dark web, Javelin anti-tank missiles supplied to Kyiv by the United States were available for sale.

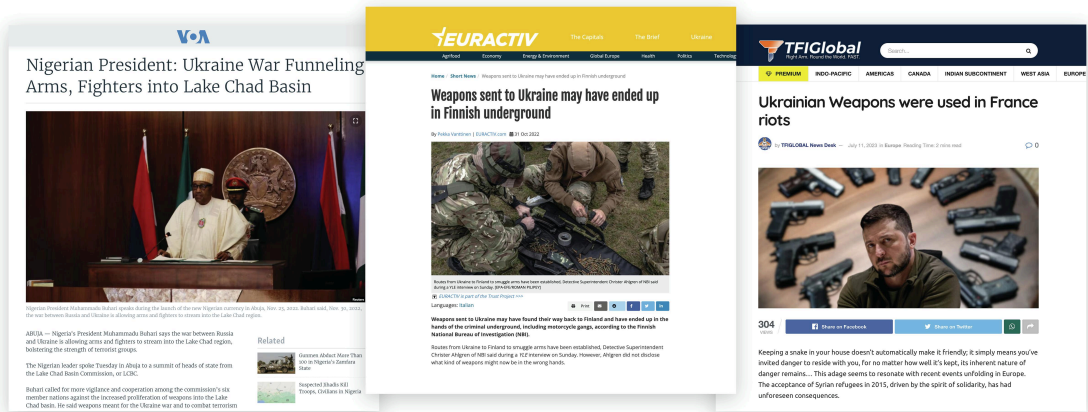
Except none of it was true.² Russia's hand was probably behind some instances of active disinformation,³ but in others the claims appeared to be the result of an eagerness to see a phenomenon that was long-anticipated, but which on closer inspection lacked hard evidence.

Thus far, there appears to have been no large-scale illicit diversion of weapons from the conflict, for several reasons.⁴ The first is that the very active nature of the conflict is acting as a 'sponge' – in other words, the conflict in Ukraine is absorbing weapons,

not releasing them. The intensity of the fighting in the east and south has resulted in materiel being used as soon as it arrives, inhibiting the ambit for diversion. In July 2023, a US Defense Department report said that there had been attempts by criminal gangs to steal Western weapons provided to Ukraine in the period to September 2022 – including one attempt involving 60 rifles, and another involving a grenade launcher and machine gun – but that these schemes had been disrupted by Ukraine's security service.⁵

But history suggests that this will not be a permanent state of affairs. At the time of writing – September 2023 – the Ukrainian counter-offensive was reaching a peak of activity, but past experience suggests that when the intensity of the conflict diminishes, the dynamic will change. With the country saturated with arms, the demand for weapons – and their price – will fall, creating incentives for traffickers to sell their stocks outside of the country on the black market.

Faced with this situation, the key question regarding the future of arms trafficking from the conflict in Ukraine is not 'if' but 'when'. And it is this question that the GI-TOC's Illicit Arms Monitor has been set up to address.



Selection of media reports alleging the global trafficking of Ukrainian weapons.

Photos: Euractiv; Voice of America; TFI Global

Methodology of the Monitor

Monitoring any kind of illicit flow is inherently challenging. Unlike the licit market, available evidence is often fragmentary and highly context specific, making comparisons and trends difficult to ascertain.

The illicit market for weapons also presents its own subset of challenges. Unlike, say, 'hard' drugs such as cocaine and heroin, legislation surrounding weapons can vary from country to country in Europe – some have very strict gun controls, others have established processes to acquire them. This patchwork of legislation shapes the nature of both licit and illicit demand and supply, as do cultural norms and the *modi operandi* of organized crime groups. The profile of the buyer is also important, as is the history of the gun and its condition, together with the type and availability of ammunition.

In order to monitor potential flows of illicit guns stemming from the conflict in Ukraine, the GI-TOC has created a hybrid methodology that combines quantitative data and qualitative analysis. Over time, this project will build a longitudinal evidence base that can serve as an 'early warning system' of emerging trends, routes, hubs and *modi operandi*. As a consequence, policymakers and other stakeholders will be better prepared to respond to the real and destabilizing prospect of heightened arms trafficking in Europe as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

Price

At the heart of the Monitor is the regular collection of data on prices and availability of a variety of weapons across three key geographical areas (see below). Price is a complicated metric, reflecting the relationship between supply and demand for a commodity. In its simplest permutation, when supply is high and demand is low, the price will generally be low, all other things being equal; conversely, when demand is high and supply is low, the price will increase.

The Monitor will set out to test several hypotheses related to the role price may play in both driving and reflecting the nature of illicit arms flows connected to the conflict. For example, if prices for weapons are higher outside Ukraine than within it, then this may provide an incentive for traffickers to move weapons out of the country. Alternatively, a sudden fall in prices in a country (compared to pre-2022 levels) may indicate a sharp increase in supply due to a new flow of weapons arriving in the country, which may be connected to the

war in Ukraine. While prices are usually easy to collect for standardized goods, this is not typically the case for weapons, as there are a large number of unobserved variables that make straightforward comparisons highly challenging (such as the age and condition of the weapon, or whether it has been used to commit a murder). Because of these difficulties in collecting prices along with detailed characteristics, it is not the intention of the Monitor to create a proper database of prices for weapons. Rather, the prices will serve as a means of 'taking the temperature' of the illicit arms market in specific countries.

Price data is being collected on small arms and light weapons, including Western-made weapons. Types of weapons include hand guns and long guns; ammunition; explosives; and portable anti-tank and air-defence weapons.

Geography, provenance and qualitative information

The Monitor will assess dynamics in three thematic geographical areas – within Ukraine itself (the source country); bordering countries in Eastern Europe (Poland, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania) and the Western Balkans, which are likely to serve as transit hubs; and end-user hotspots (Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium and France), although other countries may be added as research develops.

The size of the potential illegal arms market in Europe is relatively small compared to, say, the US, South Africa or Brazil, and is well served by organized crime groups, for whom arms trafficking often serves as a secondary activity utilizing routes and networks used for other illicit business.⁶ As such, the Monitor will not scrutinize the much larger legal movement of weapons that is carried out by logistics companies to purchasing states, often of dubious global standing. To illustrate this mode of business using the context of Ukraine, an investigation by C4ADS in 2013 highlighted how a network of logistics contractors, based in Odesa, was legally transporting weapons out of Ukraine and Russia on behalf of government sellers to end users including Iran, Myanmar, the DRC and South Sudan.⁷

Of course, illicit weapons flows in European countries will not consist solely, or even predominately at present, of weapons associated with the war in Ukraine. The Western Balkans remains a significant source of weapons almost three decades after the end of the conflict in the Balkans, while Turkey was regularly cited

by official sources in the course of our fieldwork as an increasingly important locale for weapons, both authentic and counterfeit (of varying quality) that have reached Europe, with our fieldwork team hearing of a counterfeit M16 made in Turkey that was seized in Western Europe.

One of the most challenging aspects of the Monitor will therefore be ascertaining the provenance of weapons on the European black market. Some types of weapon (and their changing price) may have a clearer link to the conflict than others – such as portable anti-tank and air-defence weapons – but for the majority the link must be scrutinized through means other than price. Here, seizure data and interviews with those associated with black market arms flows will help build a qualitative picture that can be used to test and triangulate quantitative findings. To achieve this, GI-TOC researchers are conducting regular fieldwork in the areas under consideration, meeting with organized crime informants, NGOs, investigative journalists, law enforcement and civil society organizations, alongside monitoring developments on the surface and dark webs.

These qualitative investigations may also shed light on other interesting aspects of arms trafficking in Europe, such as what buyers want and why. During the course of fieldwork in 2023, for example, it became clear that a weapon's ability to kill was only part of the package. Gangsters were reported to want high-grade weapons such as the AR-15 platform, modernized AK or Vz58, along with tactical gear – not necessarily for their greater firepower, but because they evoked the kind of weaponry seen in video games and action movies, and had a more intimidating effect. Soviet-style weapons from the 1990s, by contrast, were seen as old-fashioned and belonging to the previous generation.

The surface and dark webs are also being assessed as 'geographies' in their own right. The rise of online platforms such as Telegram and the maturation of the dark web have transformed the modus operandi of arms trafficking: connections between buyers and sellers that in the 1990s may have taken weeks or months to

establish can now be made instantly, creating new routes, hubs and flows that may lie outside the traditional avenues. In this, technology may not merely be an accelerant of arms trafficking, but also a transformational tool.

That said, the extreme prevalence of disinformation and outright scams on the dark web may also mean that this more a platform for cybercrime than arms trafficking. Further research is required to ascertain who the serious buyers and sellers are and what is disinformation, propaganda and scams. Our initial research, carried out by Ukrainian and British investigators of dark-web activity, has found that the overwhelming majority of activity is fake. (This trend will be discussed in greater depth in the Monitor's first annual report in early 2024.)

The same vigilance is required in the physical world, given that Russia is likely to continue to be extremely active in the misinformation space.⁸ It is conceivable, for example, that Russia or Russian-affiliated actors could plant captured Ukrainian weapons in Western Europe in order to create the impression of illegal arms trafficking. As such, verification of evidence is of paramount importance.

An 'alarm' system

This information is being used to construct an alarm system that assesses the risk of arms being trafficked out of Ukraine, and the prevailing risk in the country under question. A significant increase in risk will trigger an 'alarm'.

While the Monitor is continuously collecting and assessing information, it will release its findings in discrete outputs consisting of quarterly trend reports and one annual report (the first of which is due in early 2024), plus one limited circulation report. Over time, these will create an unprecedented body of analysis regarding the movement and drivers of illicit arms out of Ukraine.

The following three stories highlight the work of the Monitor in its first phase of operation, offering an insight into both the status quo of arms trafficking in certain contexts, and potential future developments.

Notes

1 Kim Willsher, Arms sent to Ukraine will end up in criminal hands, says Interpol chief, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/02/ukraine-weapons-end-up-criminal-hands-says-interpol-chief-jurgen-stock>; Henry Foy, Sam Fleming and Roman Olearchyk, Countries call for

greater tracking of arms to stop sales to Europe's black market, *Financial Times*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/bce78c78-b899-4dd2-b3a0-69d789b8aee8>.

2 On Finnish gangsters, see GI-TOC, New front lines: Organized criminal economies in Ukraine in 2022, February 2023,

<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/organized-criminal-economies-ukraine-2022/>; on Mexican cartels, see All Source News, 'That video is legit but this notion it comes from Ukraine is blatantly false. This isn't the first time we've seen this. Below is an example', Tweet, Twitter/X, 1 June 2023, https://twitter.com/All_Source_News/status/1664072502165774338?s=20; on dark web Javelins, see Undercover with Russia's fake arms dealers, BBC, 24 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-62983444>.

- 3 See for example the instances of supposedly Western-made Ukrainian weapons on the dark web, where listings would appear on pro-Russian Telegram channels soon after publication on the dark web. Bill Toulas, Dark web sites selling alleged Western weapons sent to Ukraine, Bleeping Computer, 9 June 2022, <https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/dark-web-sites-selling-alleged-western-weapons-sent-to-ukraine/>.
- 4 Max Hunder, EU says it has not seen high levels of weapons smuggling from Ukraine, Reuters, 11 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-says-it-has-not-seen-high-levels-weapons-smuggling-ukraine-2023-05-11/>.
- 5 Konstantin Toropin and Jared Keller, Russian fronts, criminal gangs: US couldn't account for weapons sent to Ukraine last year, Military.com, 20 July 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/07/20/weapons-sent-ukraine-were-danger-of-falling-criminal-hands-watchdog-warned.html>. Other instances of diversion have been more inadvertent: a British couple were apprehended in Calais after declaring they were carrying two decommissioned rocket launchers they had been given in Ukraine as presents; Peter Allen, 'Anything to declare?' British couple arrested trying to smuggle Ukraine war rocket launchers into UK, *Evening Standard*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/ukraine-war-rocket-launchers-couple-arrested-uk-calais-france-b1095611.html>.
- 6 See Europol, Illicit firearms trafficking, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/crime-areas/illicit-firearms-trafficking>.
- 7 Tom Wallace and Farley Mesko, The Odessa Network, C4ADS, September 2013, <https://c4ads.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/TheOdessaNetwork.pdf>.
- 8 Lara Jakes, Ukrainian soldiers risk their lives to keep weapons from the black market, *The New York Times*, 12 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/12/world/europe/ukraine-weapons-tracking-corruption.html>.

Increased supply of weapons to Ukraine since invasion adds to pre-existing stockpiles.

In July 2023, law enforcement raided the yard of a resident in Sumy Oblast, where a rickety-looking structure had caught their attention. Removing the tarpaulin, they discovered a Russian T-80 tank, a 'trophy' weapon from the front line that had lain hidden for almost a year.¹

Since the Second World War at least, there has been a tradition of Ukrainians hiding guns, either to use against future aggressors, or in some instances, to sell on the black market. Indeed, the practice has given rise to an idiom: 'in Ukraine, we water our flowers with oil' (in other words, to stop the guns buried underground from rusting).

The war will have afforded many such opportunities to those looking to hide weapons smaller than a tank. Some of these may be active military personnel, with the International Legion a perceived vulnerability. In August 2022, the *Kyiv Independent* revealed that Piotr Kapuscinski, a Polish commander in the International Legion, was under investigation by the Ukrainian security services (SBU) after allegations of arms theft.² According to the *Kyiv Independent*, Kapuscinski was a former Polish gangster who had been imprisoned in Poland on numerous criminal charges. He had also been charged in Ukraine with robbery and illegal arms possession, but these charges were suspended when he joined the International Legion.

There is also the issue of demobilized soldiers or soldiers on leave coming back home with weapons. According to one activist, 'volunteers don't come back empty handed'.³ In December 2022, an anti-tank round from the Mykolaiv region that had been transported to Odesa in the boot of a car by a volunteer exploded in Odesa, injuring several police officers. The volunteer claimed that the round and other ammunition he had brought were 'souvenirs'.⁴ This phenomenon has even reached Western Europe: in July 2023, two British people were arrested in France attempting to transport a pair of decommissioned rocket launchers they had been given while on a humanitarian mission in Ukraine.⁵ Some soldiers, for example snipers, also buy their own preferred weapons, often relying on donations or crowdfunding. This means that some

soldiers have two sets of weapons, those officially issued and those bought for themselves. After demobilization, these soldiers will return the issued weapons and keep their own set – a phenomenon seen since hostilities began in 2014.

A vast pre-existing stockpile and fertile trafficking market

This influx will only add to Ukraine's already vast number of registered and unregistered weapons. In June 2023, Ihor Klymenko, the Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs, estimated that there were 1.2 million registered weapons in the country, but that there would be up to 3 million unregistered weapons after the war.⁶ Such estimates may indeed be on the low side, given that Small Arms Survey estimated that there were almost 3.6 million unregistered weapons in 2017 – and it is unlikely that the war will have led to a decrease in this figure.⁷

In part, these high numbers are the result of the ease and low cost of acquiring weapons in Ukraine. Ukraine has no formal law on gun ownership (only an order by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to restrict licensing that leaves considerable leeway in practice), although a new unified gun registry, launched in June 2023, will putatively bring more order to this situation.⁸ Still, it is possible to walk into a gun store in many places across the country and buy a 'sports weapon' – which in reality can include guns that are fully automatic. Prices on the black market are low too, compared to neighbouring countries. In Kyiv, an AKSU with two magazines and 60 cartridges sells for UAH56 800 (US\$1 550), a CZ 75 for US\$1 500 and an F1 grenade sells for US\$30; while in Odesa, a Glock 17 sells for US\$1 000.⁹

Before the war, it was possible to obtain most types of gun by legal means, with the exception of high-end pistols, which are more difficult to source (only law enforcement is legally able to buy them) and more desirable in the black market, being easier to conceal. One loophole in the acquisition of pistols is through 'award weapons' – guns (often pistols) presented by the state to officials – since 1991, some 50 000 weapons have been awarded to officials through this channel.¹⁰



Ukrainian law enforcement reveal a Russian T-80 tank that had been concealed in a yard, July 2023.

Photo: We Ukraine, <https://weukraine.tv/na-sumshhyni-cholovik-ponad-rik-zberigav-u-sebe-na-podvir-yi-trofejnyj-rosijskij-tank>



Although officials are in theory limited to owning only one 'award' weapon, in practice some have up to 20 each, and some of the weapons even include submachine guns.¹¹

There was an important development in the monitoring of weapons in Ukraine at the end of August 2023, when four employees were killed after an explosive device detonated at the State Scientific and Research Expert Forensic Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kyiv.¹² The centre was responsible for, among other

things, ballistic research of firearms, ammunition and gunshot marks (including weapons involved in serious crimes), and the study of weapons of war (explosives, grenade launchers, artillery and missiles).¹³ According to the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the explosion started a fire at the centre. According to our sources, data on awarded weapons and some Western-made weapons that have entered Ukraine was also stored at the facility and that data may have been lost in the subsequent fire.

Given that the overwhelming majority of Ukraine's data on firearms was held at the facility (with only some data held at the regional level), this represents a significant blow to efforts to track and monitor the ownership and use of guns in Ukraine.

Steep barriers to outflows – for now

This large stockpile, ready availability and low price made Ukraine an attractive source for arms traffickers before the war. According to the GI-TOC's 2021 Organized Crime Index, arms trafficking was judged as the country's most pervasive criminal market before the February 2022 Russian invasion. Given this vulnerability, many raised the alarm in the early days of the conflict over the risk of weapons trafficking.

At the time of writing (September 2023), however, GI-TOC fieldwork found no evidence of any successful large-scale arms trafficking out of the country. Although the full-scale Russian invasion has increased the stocks of weapons in the country, including many weapons that would ordinarily be attractive to traffickers for the Western EU markets, it has also created several barriers to large-scale trafficking.

Increased security throughout Ukraine, in the shape of checkpoints and stops, has made moving weapons more problematic, although given the isolated cases of weapons trafficking within Ukraine reported in 2022 and 2023, not impossible.¹⁴ (In Odesa in September 2023, for instance, a man was searched and found to have grenades, mines and TNT in his car.)¹⁵ The naval blockade of the port of Odesa has also deprived arms traffickers of their main conduit for selling arms at scale; without containers, it is difficult to move a sizeable quantity of guns. There is also a heavy military presence on the border with Transnistria due to fears of Russian incursions and a substantial presence elsewhere along Ukraine's other borders. It is notable that flows of other smuggled goods in trucks through Romania and Moldova have been increasing in 2023, which may indicate a potential future path of travel, although as discussed below, local traffickers in several bordering countries appear to have few incentives at present to get involved.¹⁶ The relative ease of detecting guns (as opposed to, say, cocaine or illicit tobacco) travelling by such routes – and the high risk of heavy punishment – may also deter would-be traffickers. These barriers, combined with the relatively low profit margin on small

batches of weapons, led one underworld source in Odesa to assess that, 'the fear of [another] invasion is greater than money ... and the logistics of getting it over the border aren't worth it ... the price is too low'.¹⁷

Military vigilance over weapons is also generally high, with close monitoring and frequent seizures. According to one Ukrainian monitor of weapons transfers to Ukraine, soldiers have died attempting to reclaim weapons that have been left behind on the battlefield to prevent them from being stolen or lost.¹⁸ Other efforts have focused on tightening the administrative framework surrounding civilian gun ownership. According to a police source in Odesa, the rules on legal weapons had changed after the invasion – such weapons now had to be registered every four weeks instead of every three months as before, a situation that had led many people to return their guns.¹⁹ (That said, the launch of the Unified Register in June 2023 streamlined the process of obtaining a gun permit, which could now be acquired without leaving the house – a situation that could enable a greater uptake of legal weapons among the population, which could in turn present opportunities for illegal sales of guns that have been falsely declared lost or stolen.)²⁰

One important caveat to this is weapons flows into and through Russia from 'trophy' weapons captured or collected from the battlefield. This may be one of the factors behind the 30% rise in gun crime witnessed in Russia through 2022, with particular spikes in the Russian districts neighbouring the occupied areas of Ukraine – Kursk, for instance, saw an increase of 675% and Belgorod 213.3%.²¹ The dynamics of this market are distinct from those in non-occupied Ukraine, although it is worth reflecting that these weapons too may also ultimately end up in Europe overland via Belarus or in cargo ships from Russia. A Western European law enforcement source also mentioned in mid-2023 that some weapons had been detected passing from occupied Luhansk to Russia, then to Georgia and Turkey.²² Given that weapons from Turkey are known to reach Europe, this route via Russia could in time form a 'back channel' for weapons from the conflict to reach the EU.

As such, the ambit for large-scale arms trafficking for Ukraine is limited at present – but all the preconditions for its resurgence are there.

Notes

- 1 На Сумщині чоловік понад рік зберігав у себе на подвір'ї трофейний російський танк, *We Ukraine*, 30 July 2023, <https://weukraine.tv/na-sumshyni-cholovik-ponad-rik-zberigav-u-sebe-na-podvir-yi-trofejnyj-rosijskyj-tank/>.
- 2 Anna Myroniuk and Alexander Khrebet, Investigation: International Legion soldiers allege light weapons misappropriation, abuse by commanders, *Kyiv Independent*, 30 November 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/investigations/investigation-international-legion-mis-appropriation>.
- 3 Interview with an activist, *Odesa*, May 2023.
- 4 Elena Rudenko, Стало известно о состоянии пострадавших от взрыва в Одессе, *MYC news*, 4 December 2022, https://myc.news/proishestvie/stalo_izvestno_o_sostoyanii_postradavshih_ot_vzryva_v_odesse.
- 5 Peter Allen, 'Anything to declare?' British couple arrested trying to smuggle Ukraine war rocket launchers into UK, *Evening Standard*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/ukraine-war-rocket-launchers-couple-arrested-uk-calais-france-b1095611.html>.
- 6 Oleg Chernysh, Ігор Клименко: 'Я надіюсь, війна завершиться достатньо скоро, цього року', *BBC News*, 2 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c8vrd3n8jmno>.
- 7 See Small Arms Survey, *Civilian Firearms Holdings*, 2017, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf>.
- 8 Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan, Peace and proliferation: The Russo-Ukrainian war and the illegal arms trade, *GI-TOC*, March 2023, p 6, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-ukraine-war-illegal-arms-trade/>; Iryna Balachuk, Unified Register of Weapons comes into operation in Ukraine, *Ukrainian Pravda*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/23/7408127/>.
- 9 Interview with sources in law enforcement, *Kyiv*, September 2023.
- 10 Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan, Peace and proliferation: The Russo-Ukrainian war and the illegal arms trade, *GI-TOC*, March 2023, p 6, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-ukraine-war-illegal-arms-trade/>.
- 11 Interviews with Ukrainian crime journalists, *Kyiv*, 2023.
- 12 Natalia Balyukh, ДБР розслідує вибух в експертно-криміналістичному центрі МВС під Києвом, *Suspilne*, 21 August 2023, <https://suspilne.media/555537-dbr-rozslidue-vibuh-v-ekspertno-kriminalistichnomu-centri-mvs-pid-kievom-3/>.
- 13 Державний Науково-Дослідний Експертно-Криміналістичний Центр Мвс України, Дослідження, ослідження, <https://dndekc.mvs.gov.ua>.
- 14 See, for example, The SBU detained an arms dealer and discovered a stash of weapons in Zaporizhzhia, *Odesa Journal*, 30 July 2022, <https://odessa-journal.com/public/the-sbu-detained-an-arms-dealer-and-discovered-a-stash-of-weapons-in-zaporizhzhia>; Поліція Київщини показала відео затримання підпільного торговця зброєю з Переяслава, *Pereiaslav City*, 28 October 2022, <https://pereiaslav.city/articles/246432/u-pereiaslavi-zatrimali-torgovcu-zbroeyu-ta-vibuhonebezpechnimi-predmetami-video>
- 15 Olga Shukova, В Одесі затримали чоловіка, який зберігав в авто вибухонебезпечні предмети, *Suspilne*, 14 September 2023, <https://suspilne.media/572309-v-odesi-zatrimali-colovika-akij-zberigav-v-avto-vibuhonebezpechni-predmeti/>.
- 16 See GI-TOC, *Port in a storm: Organized crime dynamics in Odesa in 2022*, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/odesa-bessarabia-organized-crime/>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Lara Jakes, Ukrainian soldiers risk their lives to keep weapons from the black market, *The New York Times*, 12 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/12/world/europe/ukraine-weapons-tracking-corruption.html>.
- 19 Written interview with police source, *Odesa*, May 2023.
- 20 Iryna Balachuk, Unified register of weapons comes into operation in Ukraine, *Ukrainian Pravda*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/23/7408127/>.
- 21 Mark Galeotti, *Crime of troubles: The Russian underworld since the Ukraine invasion*, *GI-TOC*, forthcoming.
- 22 Interview with Western European law enforcement, *May 2023*.

Market conditions for arms trafficking in Eastern Europe.

In February 2023, a joint operation led by Romanian and Bulgarian law enforcement saw 22 firearms traffickers arrested across Europe and the seizure of 129 firearms and almost 1 500 unconverted and converted alarm and signal weapons.¹

The operation shone a spotlight on the countries bordering Ukraine that risk seeing an increase of arms trafficked from the conflict in the future. Overland arms trafficking from Ukraine to Europe will most likely involve the countries on Ukraine's western borders – namely Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland – although some weapons from the conflict may enter Europe via Russia or Belarus.

These countries may either serve as transit routes for arms trafficking or as domestic markets in their own right. Regarding the latter, it appears that for the most part, demand for military equipment, including high-end assault rifles and handguns, is currently low and prices are high. In 2023, the GI-TOC conducted exploratory fieldwork for the Monitoring Project in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova and Romania to assess the current market conditions. In all countries, sources reported that organized crime prefers to do business quietly, with as little lethal force as possible – a stance that is reflected by the relatively low levels of gun crime and gun ownership in those countries.²

Arms trafficking also carries heavy sentences in Romania and Poland, which sources said was a deterrent.³ As one source in Romania said, 'arms are so sensitive [an area], organized crime will avoid it.'⁴ Sources in Hungary reported that organized crime (which has decreased since its 1990s heyday) also prefers to maintain a low profile, and stressed that no large-scale trafficking of weapons would be possible without the prior approval of members of law enforcement.⁵

This reluctance to utilize heavy firepower also speaks to the relative stability of the criminal underworld in Romania. Even the reported arrival of Polish criminals into Romania did not catalyze a gang war, but the contrary: according to a journalist, Polish criminals attempted to resolve problems between the local bosses, speaking to an underworld where the priority appears to be keeping everyone in line.⁶

That said, since approximately 2021, the increased presence of Western Balkan organized crime groups in the country, and their interest in the cocaine trade, may disrupt the balance in the near future.⁷

It is a similar story in Poland, where shootings have decreased since the first decade of the 2000s. More effective law enforcement has broken up many of the organized crime groups that were dominant in the 1990s, including the two most notorious: the Pruszków and Wołomin mafias. Now organized crime groups conduct operations differently and avoid using guns for fear of raising attention, although the possibility of drug-trafficking fascist groups (who often use football hooligans as foot soldiers), becoming involved in arms trafficking was mentioned to the GI-TOC.⁸

The declining role played by guns in Poland is evidenced by the steep drop in homicides committed with firearms over the last two decades (Figure 2). But as firearms have declined in popularity, pneumatic guns appear to have become more popular. According to official police statistics, in 2002, firearms were involved in 3.5 times the number of offences compared to gas guns; by 2021, this ratio had dropped to 1.5, indicating that gas guns were more than twice as prevalent in criminal offences compared to two decades before (Figure 3).⁹ This highlights that gas and pneumatic guns may possess advantages over traditional firearms, such as ease of acquisition and conversion into firearms, and less legal risk (gas guns that have been converted into lethal guns can also be converted back to non-lethal guns). For criminals seeking a show of force rather than lethal violence, gas and pneumatic guns may serve as well as real guns, and are often very similar in look. Robberies in Poland, for example, very often involve the use of gas and pneumatic guns.

As such, there seems little in the way of a large-scale market for weapons in Poland, given the general disinclination to use traditional weapons before 2022, the significant risks involved in trafficking and acquiring such weapons and the relative stability of the underworlds in Romania and Poland. Violent competition between gangs could serve as a catalyst in this regard, however, making it essential to monitor these dynamics; rising prices of real

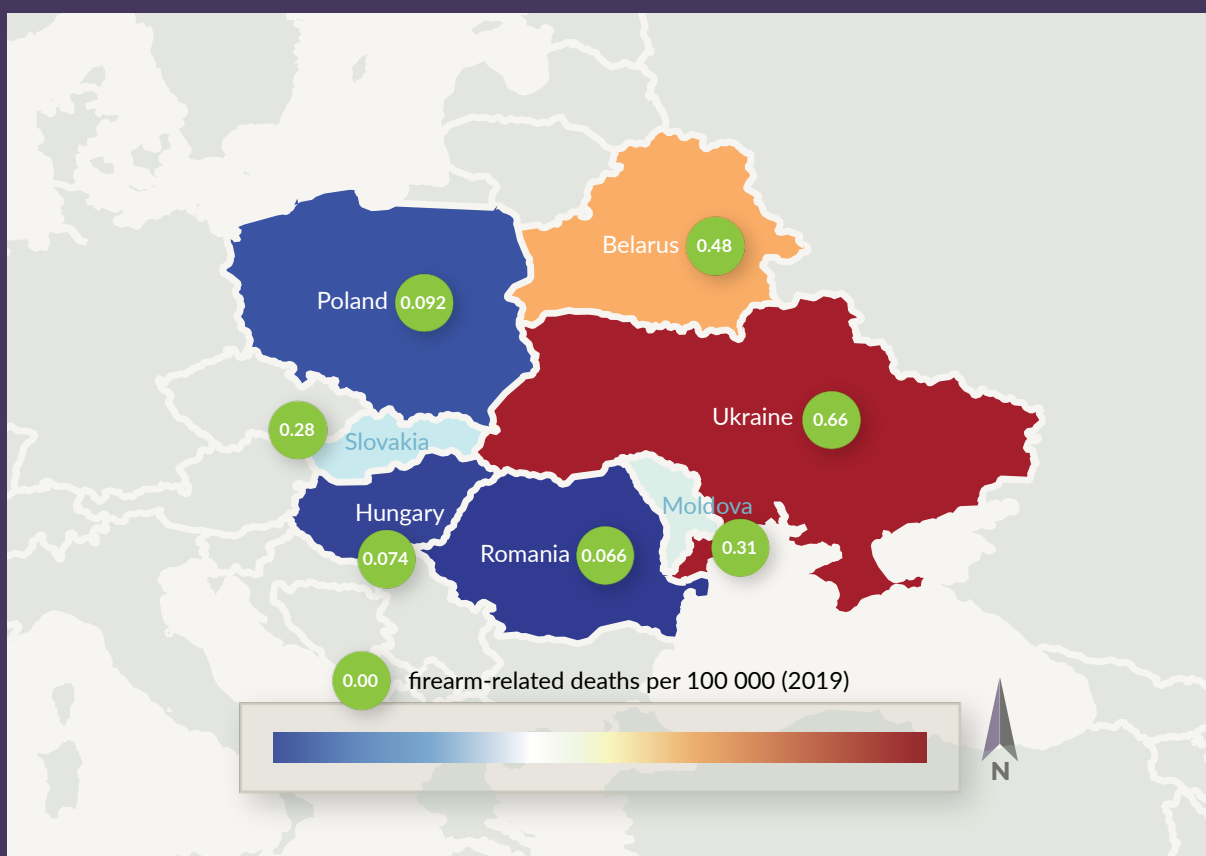


FIGURE 1 Firearm-related deaths in Eastern Europe per 100 000 inhabitants, 2019.

Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data, 2019, <http://ihmeuw.org/64sg>

guns in such countries might not only signify rising demand for weapons, but also that the underworld is experiencing greater tension and internal competition.

Indeed, the early warning signs may already be there. The slight uptick in homicides using firearms since 2019 was notable, although the absolute number of homicides remained low. More troubling was an April 2023 report by the Polish police that they had seized 571 firearms in three separate operations over the previous two years, including 328 long weapons, 232 handguns, 11 machine guns, two grenades and more than 8 800 rounds of ammunition.¹⁰

There may be another area of increasing domestic demand for firearms in Poland, and that is among civilians. Poland has a low level of gun ownership – 2.5 civilian firearms per 100 000 of the population – but demand for permits has increased since the Russian

invasion of Ukraine, perhaps due to fears that Russia would also threaten Poland.¹¹ There was an 85% increase in new gun permits issued in 2022 – with 37 000 issued compared to almost 20 000 in 2021.¹² Although an individual can have several permits for different weapons, the rise is still pronounced. While this rise in permits speaks to those going through legal channels, there may be others who, perhaps influenced by widespread lack of trust in the government,¹³ resort to the black market to avoid formal registration.

Slovakia offered an interesting outlier to the general trend in Eastern Europe. The border between Slovakia and Ukraine has long been porous (smugglers once even operated a tunnel underneath it, equipped with a small train, mainly used to smuggle cigarettes).¹⁴ Security has tightened in recent years but some of the border terrain is mountainous, making surveillance and interdiction

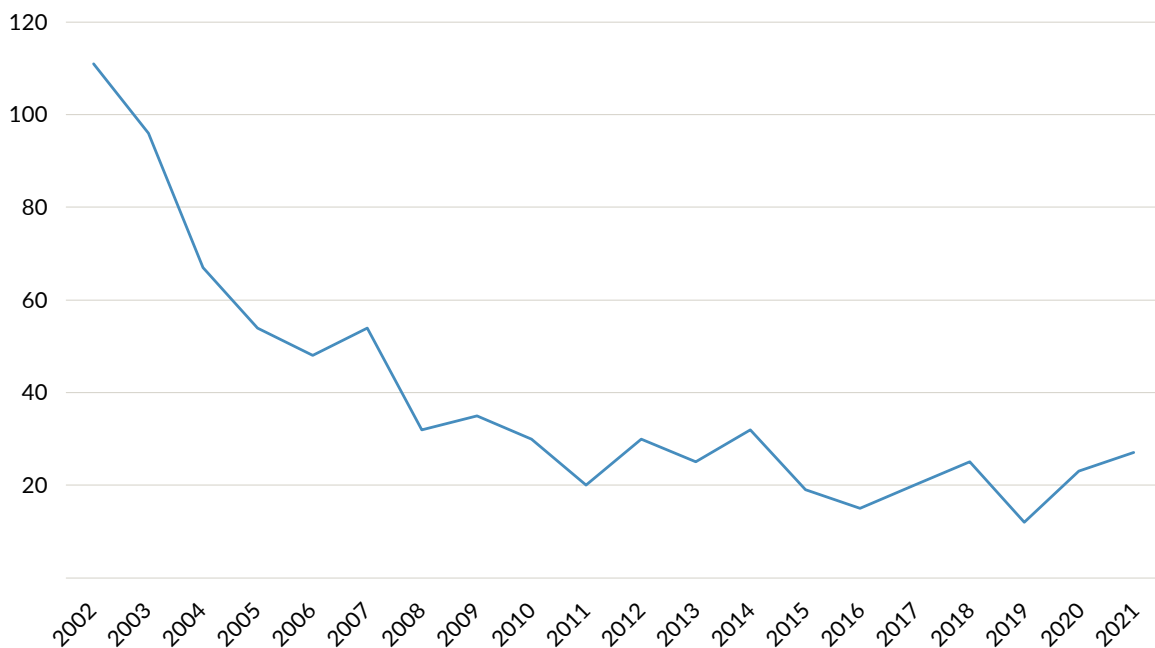


FIGURE 2 Homicides committed using a firearm in Poland, 2002–2021.

Statystyka Policja, Przepęstwa przy użyciu broni, <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/wybrane-statystyki/bron/186393,Przepęstwa-przy-uzyciu-broni.html>

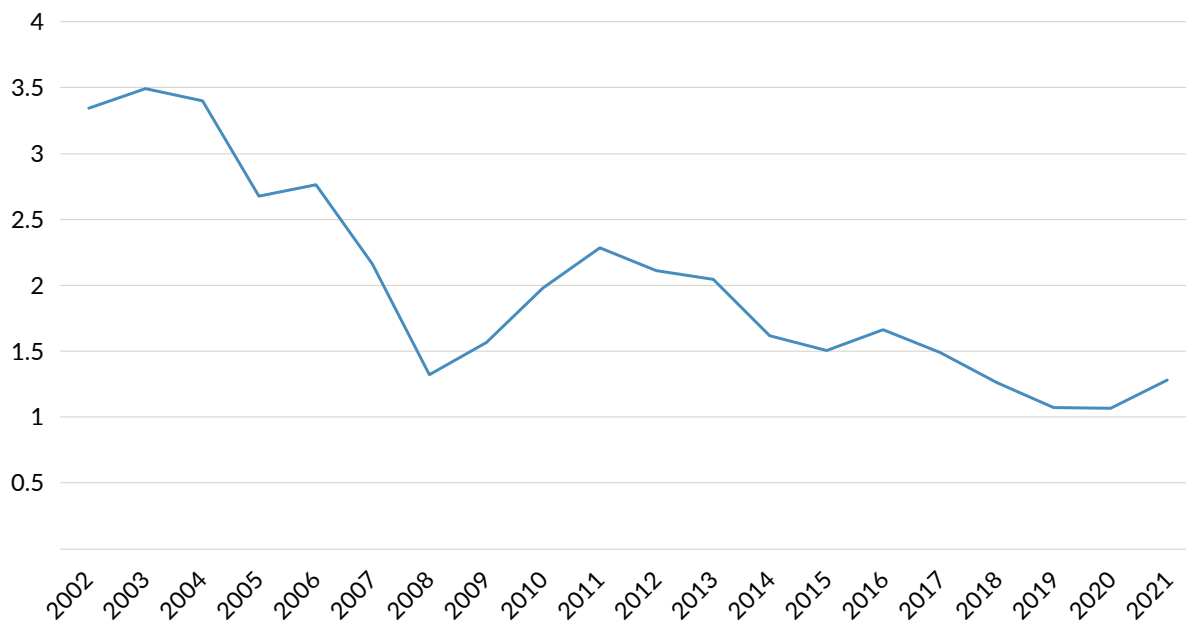


FIGURE 3 Ratio of firearms to gas guns used in criminal offences in Poland, 2002–2021.

GI-TOC analysis of police statistics; Statystyka Policja, Przepęstwa przy użyciu broni, <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/wybrane-statystyki/bron/186393,Przepęstwa-przy-uzyciu-broni.html>

challenging, and human and cigarette smuggling is still taking place. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the black market price of an AK-47 reportedly increased by

a third, but more research is required to determine the factors underpinning this rise.

Transit corridors?

But if local demand for weapons from Ukraine is not high at present, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland may still act as transit routes.¹⁵ Before the Russian invasion, weapons were recorded entering Romania from Bulgaria and Western Europe, although weapons smuggled from Ukraine were apparently rare.¹⁶ The Flemish Peace Institute, which maintains an arms seizure register, said it had 'not found an actual case of firearms being smuggled from Ukraine, where an active war [was] in progress, in the period 2010–2016'.¹⁷

It was a similar story with arms flows involving Poland, which saw weapons pass from west to east. In April 2022, Europol broke a Polish arms trafficking ring, in which a Polish family based in the Netherlands would acquire weapons from across Europe, and send them deactivated to family members in Poland, who would

then reactivate them in illegal workshops and sell them in Poland.¹⁸ Another Polish trafficking network, broken up in 2021, smuggled revolvers, pistols, automatic rifles and hand machine guns from Slovakia to Poland, Russia and Ukraine.¹⁹

But although cases of weapons smuggled from Ukraine may be scarce, it is worth remembering that the enabling infrastructure is present. Weapons use the same routes as other illicit commodities, and in this regard Romania in particular offers well-established options, being part of the Eastern European border route for smuggling migrants, drugs and other commodities. The Black Sea port of Constanța has also long been a hub for smuggling, especially of drugs.²⁰ The series of upgrades to the area intended to improve connectivity with Ukraine (by road, rail or barge on the Danube)²¹ could in the future be exploited by smugglers, including those of weapons.

BLACK AMMO

The conflict in Ukraine has led to serious shortages of many of the most common calibres of ammunition at the global level, including a reported shortage of 9 mm ammunition in Ukraine in early 2023. Yet our fieldwork in Eastern Europe found that it was possible to circumvent such shortages in the shape of 'black'

ammunition from an ammunition factory. Such ammunition is made using factory equipment outside normal operating hours; large quantities can be produced in short order, along with official documentation, if required.

Moldova has also historically been an arms hub.²² Increased international attention since the start of Russia's invasion will make weapons trafficking through the country more problematic than in the past, but still possible. Moldova has become a hotspot of US efforts to prevent trafficking and tackle corruption, to the extent that one source interviewed by the GI-TOC described it as 'the new star on the American flag'.²³ INTERPOL also ran an initiative between October 2022 and July 2023, funded by the German foreign ministry, aimed at combatting firearms trafficking, among other priorities.²⁴ Only a few months after the invasion, the EU launched a hub in Moldova to support cooperation on internal security and border management, including addressing the trafficking of firearms.²⁵

One exception to this may be the self-declared republic of Transnistria, a pro-Russian pseudo-state. Yet even in this case the ambit for arms trafficking will likely be restricted to Transnistria's large stockpiles of Russian Army weapons (mainly held in the Kolbasna depot), and not those currently being used on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, Ukraine has maintained a heavy military presence along the border with Transnistria out of concern that it could be used as a staging post for a Russian incursion into western Ukraine. This tight security means that cross-border arms trafficking from Ukraine will be very difficult. Smuggling weapons already in Transnistria will also be challenging, given the heightened attention on arms trafficking in Moldova.

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Gang wars in Sweden indicate a demand driver.

In September 2023, Sweden was rocked by a spate of shootings that left a 60-year-old woman and a 25-year-old man dead in Uppsala.¹ According to police, these incidents had their roots in a conflict between two gangs, Foxnävtrevet (The Fox Fist), led by a Swedish-Turkish boss known as 'The Kurdish Fox', and a rival gang led by a man known as Greken (the Greek), over drug territories in Sweden. The incidents in Sweden were reportedly the latest developments in a cycle of revenge that began in Turkey, and sought to attack not only rival gangsters, but also family members – the 60-year-old woman was reportedly the mother of a man closely connected to the Fox. In a separate incident, a 13-year-old boy was also shot dead in Stockholm, with police believing his death was possibly linked to organized crime.²

These shootings capture several trends that have been observed in the Swedish organized crime landscape. In recent years, Sweden has seen a dramatic and well-documented escalation in gang-related gun violence. According to statistics compiled by the National Council

for Crime Prevention (Brå), lethal violence involving the use of firearms has risen steadily since 2013 (see Figure 1). Although not high in absolute terms, the rising trend is in marked contrast to other countries, including in Scandinavia, where homicide with firearms has been steadily decreasing,³ and is particularly stark in view of Sweden's relatively small population compared to other European countries (approximately 10.5 million as of June 2023).⁴ In the UK, for instance, the number of homicides with non-air weapons declined from 80 in 2002/2003 to an average of 28.5 in the period between 2012/2013 and 2021/2022, in a significantly higher population (roughly 67 million).

This rise has been driven by escalating gang activity in Sweden: in 2021, Brå reported that eight out of 10 shootings took place in criminal environments.⁵ According to Swedish police, the flow of illegal guns mainly comes from the Western Balkans, enabling criminals to circumvent Sweden's restrictive gun laws.⁶ The link between Sweden and the Western Balkans was first established in the 1990s, when the Yugoslav mafia

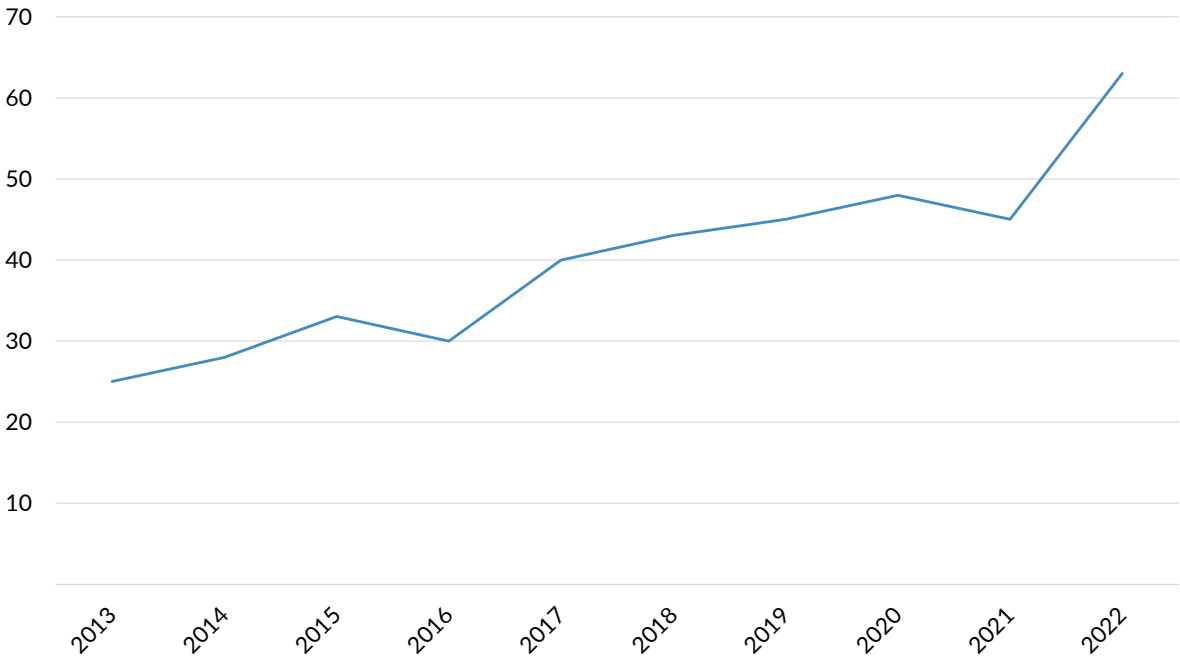


FIGURE 1 Cases of lethal violence with firearms in Sweden, 2013–2022.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), *Konstaterade fall av dödligt våld: En granskning av anmäلت dödligt våld 2022*, <https://bra.se/statistik/kriminalstatistik/konstaterade-fall-av-dodligt-vald.html>

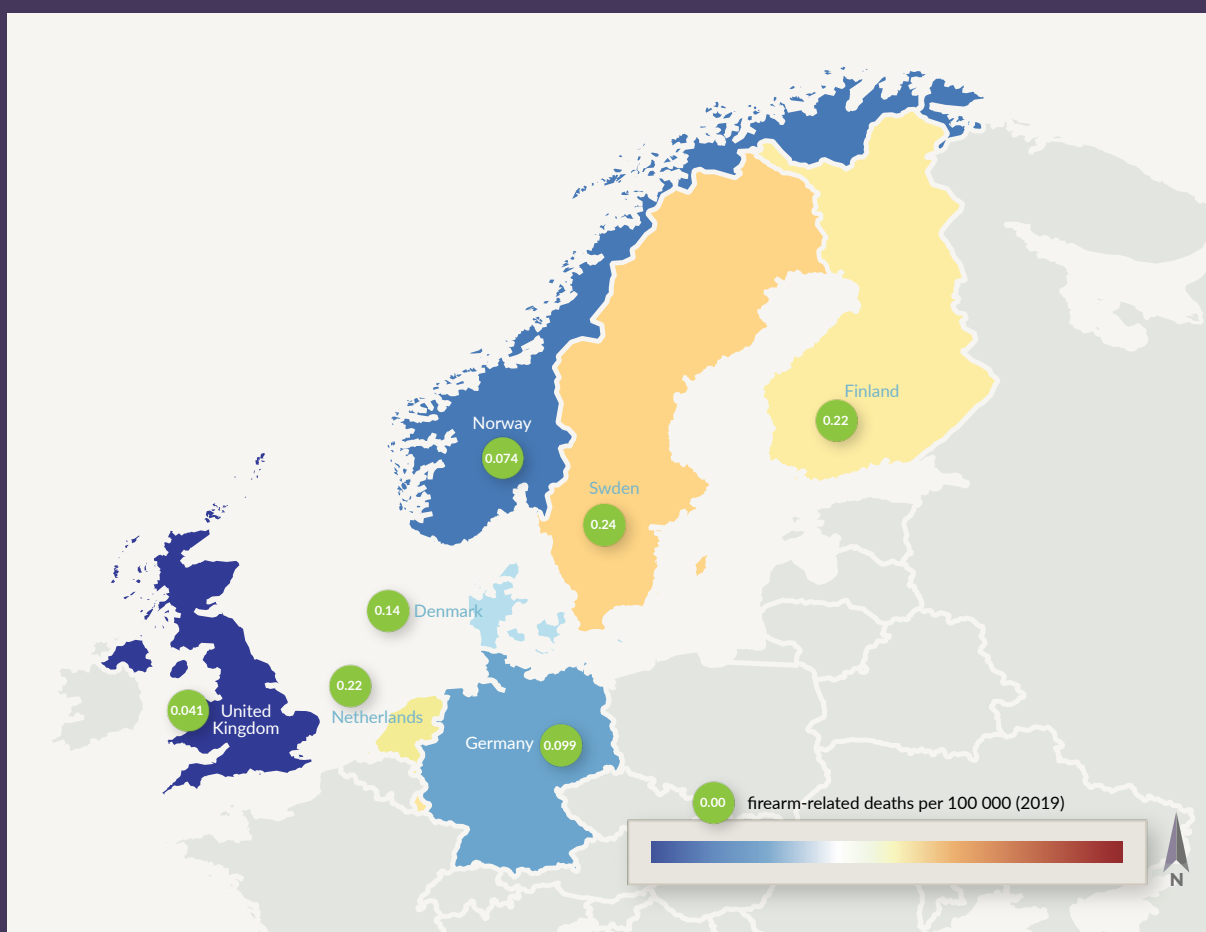


FIGURE 2 Firearm-related deaths in Western Europe per 100 000 inhabitants, 2019.

Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data, 2019, <http://ihmeuw.org/67cm>

took control of the Stockholm underworld, but now it is mostly driven by Serbian gangs who set up proxies in Sweden to receive guns and drugs.⁷

The high level of violence has been variously assessed as having its roots in competition over lucrative drug-trafficking revenues and the emergence of smaller, less organized neighbourhood-based gangs and their propensity to use lethal violence to resolve disputes and make a name for themselves.⁸ Shootings take place in the middle of the street, and since 2022 the families of criminals (including children) have also been targeted in lethal attacks, including arson. According to local law enforcement, it is possible to hire a Somali or Eritrean hitman (generally a minor who therefore faces a shorter prison sentence if caught) for 100 000 krona

(approximately €8 400).⁹ Criminals have also been using grenades more and more, often thrown at the doorstep of their competitors. The price for shooting at doors – as seen in a January 2023 Twitter video that went viral, using an AK-47¹⁰ – was given by an official source as between €840 and €1 250.

Due to the arrest of many criminal figures, the underworld has entered a state of violent flux, with emerging actors pushing to establish themselves and gangs actively recruiting. The need for weapons has been very high; according to a source in the underworld in Finland, Swedish gangsters had begun asking for weapons from Finland – a reversal of the pre-2022 trend.¹¹ The police seized dozens of handguns (Glocks) in one week in



Still from video showing an AK-47 assault on an apartment in Stockholm.

Photo: Expressen, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/film-sprids-pastas-visa-skott-i-trapphus-i-fruangen/>

early 2023, along with five grenades and one improvised explosive device made using a Thermos flask.¹²

According to GI-TOC interviews, criminals desire high-end weaponry, such as Glocks or AR-15s with scopes and tactical gear, and do not want old-fashioned Soviet-style weapons such as AK-47s or Makarovs (although modernized AKs with a tactical look were the exception to this). Converted gas guns are also popular in Sweden, as are firearms made using 3D printed components ('ghost guns', which are untraceable). With these weapons, it is typically the lower or upper part of the gun that is 3D printed, although it is also possible to print almost the whole gun.¹³ Numbers are small in absolute terms at present but are increasing, according to Swedish police.¹⁴

Prices obtained by the GI-TOC for weaponry offer a revealing insight into the prevailing market conditions. According to a source in the law enforcement intelligence department, M85 and M75 grenades originating in the Western Balkans were the most common type used, but were expensive, with prices ranging between 1 500 and 3 000 krona (€130–€260), although were also given out for free if a pistol or other weapon was purchased.¹⁵ AK-47s sold for between 40 000 and 60 000 krona (€3 450–€5 190) in times of gang conflict. Pistols were priced between 20 000 and

40 000 krona (€1 730–€3 450).¹⁶ Ammunition was said to be sourced locally.¹⁷

While there is no indication that weapons from Ukraine are reaching Sweden, there appears to be a small but steady flow of weapons into the country. In February 2023, Swedish customs estimated that three weapons were smuggled into Sweden every day. According to a media interview with a weapons smuggler, many weapons originating from the Balkans conflict are smuggled on buses crossing into Sweden using the Öresund bridge from Denmark – and some small pistols have even been hidden in loaves of bread.¹⁸ In December 2022, a Belgian couple were stopped on the bridge and found to be smuggling 15 weapons, most of which appeared to be handguns, including six hidden in the woman's underwear.¹⁹

It should also be noted that, beyond the headlines, the range of actors in Sweden who make use of lethal violence is diverse. Analysis by *Vice* of data from the EncroChat investigation revealed that many of the assassinations in Malmö were not ordered by teenage criminals from immigrant backgrounds, as many had assumed, but more sophisticated drug-traffickers in their 30s from Swedish as well as immigrant backgrounds.²⁰ The increasing reach of these kinds of high-value, highly organized operations was highlighted on Christmas Eve in 2019, when a Swedish–Albanian kingpin of an international criminal group was assassinated by a Swedish hitman on his doorstep in London.²¹ Some organizations that deploy professional violence have also relocated abroad to be closer to drug trafficking flows entering Europe, the most notorious of which was arguably a group from Malmö, known locally as *Los Suecos*, or 'the Swedes', who were arrested in the Costa del Sol in 2018.²²

It is a long way to Sweden from Ukraine, yet as illustrated by the ongoing supply of weapons originating in the Western Balkan conflicts of the 1990s via the countries of Central Europe, guns have a long shelf-life and are capable of travelling large distances to reach a lucrative market. And where there are valuable illicit commodities to protect, or disputes to resolve, there will always be demand for guns.

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