

ЗБРОЙНІ СИЛИ УКРАЇНИ



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

TOMORROW'S FIRE

FUTURE TRENDS IN ARMS
TRAFFICKING FROM THE
UKRAINE CONFLICT

FEBRUARY 2025

NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, drafted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine, summarizes the findings of the High-Level Arms Trafficking Conference, held in Brussels in January 2025. The authors would like to thank the conference attendees for their engagement and active participation in the conference, and those who participated in the December 2024 scenario-simulation exercise. We would also like to thank GI-TOC colleagues for their input and review, and the Publications and Communications teams. This project was supported by the UK government.

© 2025 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Global Initiative.

Please direct inquiries to:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva

www.globalinitiative.net

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
Understanding the risk	1
Key points.....	2
THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE END GAME.....	2
Scenario 1: A peace agreement.....	3
Scenario 2: A stalemate conflict.....	6
Scenario 3: A decisive victory	8
SCENARIO RISK ANALYSIS.....	9
Understanding the risk	9
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	12
Criminal ingenuity a constant	12
A long-term threat requiring long-term cooperation	12
Factoring in Russia as an external driver.....	13
Recommendations	13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given recent announcements, the end game of the Ukraine conflict may be approaching sooner than expected. The pace of negotiations may bring a rapid end to the fighting, but early indications suggest they will leave many underlying issues unresolved. What this means for organized crime, and specifically the smuggling of weapons and ammunition into Europe is unclear, but by using scenario modelling we can divine insights and provide concrete recommendations.

On 20–21 January 2025, the GI-TOC hosted a conference in Brussels to discuss three potential trajectories of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the ramifications of each on arms trafficking dynamics in Europe.

The conference gamed three scenarios – a peace agreement, a stalemate conflict and a decisive victory for Ukraine or Russia. Participants were asked to respond, from the perspective of organized crime, law enforcement and multilateral policymakers, to emergent arms trafficking dynamics, working through various turns to discover second- and third-order implications. Asking participants to step outside their role and think like a criminal is rewarding and illuminates the discussion, while building trust and personal connections.

The purpose of this exercise was to provide policymakers with a forward-looking perspective that would map the potential risk of arms trafficking across a range of situations, point up gaps in responses and develop specific and measurable policy response options for national authorities to implement with the aim of reducing the risks of illicit firearms markets in Europe from the conflict.

Fostering international cooperation and information-sharing was also a primary goal of the conference. More than 60 high-level stakeholders attended from a range of organizations focusing on arms trafficking.

Understanding the risk

Understanding of the risks of arms trafficking arising from the conflict has improved since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Countries are closely monitoring the supply and movement of Western weapons and ‘trophy’ battlefield weapons, assessing civilian attitudes to gun ownership, and working closely with Ukrainian authorities to combat the immediate threats. Yet recent research suggests criminal groups are establishing more organized arms trafficking markets, routes and supply chains, and the scale of the problem is much larger than past occurrences of large-scale diversion, such as the Balkans and Afghanistan. Experts and policymakers in neighbouring and other European countries continue to express their concerns about the threat of large-scale diversion of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and ammunition from Ukraine. The exercise identified the following key pathways to mitigate these risks:

Plan for uncertainty

Each scenario had many layers of complexity, and it was challenging to discern credible deductions and formulate concrete policy responses. The potential activities of organized criminal groups in responding to the scenarios were numerous. An overarching conclusion was that policy responses must be flexible and scalable from the start.

Use lessons learned (and learn new ones)

The conference highlighted the fact that many policy bodies in Europe have a deep and multilayered understanding of the legacy of the Balkans conflict on arms trafficking trends in Europe. While Ukraine has already benefited from a preventative approach informed by that experience, more can be done to apply the lessons learnt from old conflicts and adapt to the new illicit firearm types, such as converted blank guns, reactivated firearms and 3D-printed guns. The criminal groups are innovating rapidly.

Crime has time

Time was deemed a critical factor in the scenarios. Organized criminals are likely to be the fastest movers in any scenario, but they have also built resilient networks over a long period. Mitigating risks from illicit arms trafficking will require immediate, short-term responses and long-term durable solutions.

Realism, not over-reaction

Managing expectations and avoiding knee-jerk reactions is of critical importance. Some leakage must be expected, and understanding this reality should persuade policymakers to act sooner rather than wait for a trigger event in a European city.

Key points

- Draft, support and implement policy measures that reduce arms trafficking risks in Ukraine, including (when it is formulated) Ukraine's demobilization law, and its security sector reform and veteran policy.
- Improve Europe-wide operational capabilities in terms of information sharing, coordination and access to data.
- The arms trafficking trade is likely to be multifaceted: a small-scale trade to European organized crime, and a larger volume trade to other regions (Africa, Latin America, Middle East, Central Asia), potentially to conflict actors.
- 'Traditional' organized crime may be involved in arms trafficking alongside other more lucrative activities, like the drug trade, but ex-military personnel may form a new class of 'brokers', using connections with other military and politicians to set up larger-scale operations.
- Tailor responses that recognize demand is king: the right kit for the right customer. Criminals in Europe prefer handguns and explosives, while heavier weaponry, such as assault rifles, machine guns and RPGs, may be sent to other markets. These preferences will shape the development of the post-conflict illicit arms market.
- Türkiye may become a key hub for the arms trade, due to the prevalence of transnational organized crime, logistics links and strong smuggling capacity.
- It will be critical to think imaginatively about the Russian dimension of the arms trafficking risk. Better identify the risks in Russia (and beyond), which could act as a back door for weapons entering Europe.

THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE END GAME

The scenario exercise considered three potential trajectories for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: a peace agreement, a stalemate situation (i.e. a frozen conflict) or a decisive victory (the latter for either Ukraine or Russia). These scenarios were developed during a working group in October 2024, and a small-scale simulation of the exercise in December 2024. Responses, feedback and analysis from both sessions were used to refine the methodology and content of the exercise.

While it was acknowledged that the nuances of these three scenarios may not align with some analytical thinking, they provided broad frameworks to consider certain triggers of change. The intention was to enable an open-ended, argument-based discussion between experts, and to elicit opinions and judgements. Players were immersed in a context, assigned roles (organized crime, law enforcement and policymaker), asked to respond to the scenario variables and then understand the consequences of their decisions. The ultimate aim of the

simulation was to empower decision-makers with robust, evidence-based strategies that can be implemented and foster the development of recommendations for strengthening European security frameworks against arms trafficking.

For each scenario, participants engaged in the following rounds:

1. Intelligence gathering

- Assess the scenario's operational landscape, identifying key risks, actors and trends in arms trafficking.
- Analyze the implications for law enforcement, cross-border coordination and organized crime syndicates.

2. Policy and operational decision-making

- Develop tailored policy responses and operational strategies.
- Test interventions for feasibility, effectiveness and scalability in the context of the scenario.

3. Consequence management

- Explore second- and third-order effects of decisions.
- Identify unintended consequences, resource implications and opportunities for international collaboration.

To increase the sense of reality for the arms trafficking risks, intelligence 'injects' – or hypothetical incidents of arms trafficking – were provided in certain turns. These injects are included in the narrative below to highlight the ways in which arms trafficking may manifest.

Scenario 1: A peace agreement

Context

A peace agreement puts an end to active fighting between Ukraine and Russia. Participants were asked to consider two outcomes: whether Ukraine is given adequate Western security guarantees or not; and the issue of what territory is ceded to Russia or regained by Ukraine under such an agreement.

In a peace agreement scenario, several actions will happen. Martial law will end in Ukraine and a 90-day window for citizens to return trophy weapons to the police will open. Elections will also then be possible in Ukraine, potentially leading to a change in leadership. Demobilization of the army will begin, although the number of reservists will depend on the nature of security guarantees and the prospect of a resumption of Russian aggression. In Russia, demobilization will get underway. In both countries, society will begin to move away from a war footing. With territory ceded to either Ukraine or Russia, the challenge of governance and integrating traumatized populations will arise. Trade will increase, including potentially between Russia and Ukraine. Flights to Ukraine will resume, and the Black Sea will be open for business without risk of air strike or naval interception. The arduous process of reconstruction will begin in Ukraine. There will be fewer border control checks, and internally, as military and law enforcement personnel begin to deprioritize national security tasks.

Western support for Ukraine may begin to wane as new geopolitical priorities emerge and states and their electorates grow reluctant to continue foreign aid, and their focus instead shifts to domestic needs. Despite this, a visible international monitoring presence (albeit not a peacekeeping force) may be deployed to the new border.



Criminal opportunity

As the participants engaged in the scenario, several criminal opportunities presented themselves. The first and arguably the most significant risk will be how to manage trophy weapons. The 90-day window for civilians to return trophy weapons would open. Current evidence is not encouraging. To date, registering such weapons has been sluggish, with only 2 000 weapons registered in Ukraine's new Unified Registry in December 2024, the first month of the initiative. It remains unclear how willing civilians may be to yield up their means of self-defence, given that many are likely to regard peace with Russia as only temporary. Some civilians may look to sell their trophy weapons to organized crime groups and arms traffickers during the window, aware that they would face penalties for retaining them for longer, but reluctant to hand them in without any financial reward. This would allow organized crime to build stockpiles, at relatively little risk.

In territory ceded to either side, the state will struggle to impose arms control mechanisms immediately after hostilities cease, and law enforcement will face many challenges working with a traumatized population. These regions will have witnessed sustained military presence in the preceding years, and weapons will be pervasive. The local economies of these regions are also likely to have suffered the most during the fighting, creating all the more incentive for citizens to sell trophy weapons. However, if Ukraine does not secure strong Western security guarantees, citizens may be more inclined to retain their trophy weapons for self-defence than sell them.

Another major risk will be the demobilization of soldiers, who will also in many cases hold (undeclared) trophy weapons and be returning to struggling economies, particularly in Ukraine. Some may be incentivized to sell their weapons, creating a piecemeal trade, but more ambitious veterans may look to harness their connections and know-how to engage in larger-scale trade, including by setting up legal businesses and exporting weapons shipments across the Black Sea, where shipping is once again able to operate. These traffickers, it is believed, would be likely to deal in heavier weaponry (such as assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers) and target customers in the Middle East and Africa, exploiting emerging insecurity and conflict dynamics. Their expertise in weaponizing drones is likely also to be highly prized. Other veterans may seek to form private military companies, using their connections to acquire weapons, which could lead to what one participant termed 'another Wagner group'.

Meanwhile, organized crime groups are more likely to focus on small-scale trafficking into Europe, it was thought, dealing mainly in handguns and explosives, including grenades. Linkages with Western Balkans networks, who have established arms trafficking routes, to move weapons was also deemed a possibility. Reconstruction may also make logistics easier, as large numbers of people and goods cross Ukraine's western borders, where checks will be eased after the end of martial law, and corruption remains entrenched. Looking eastwards, Ukrainian organized crime may once again forge links with Russian organized crime, which were broken after the 2022 invasion, creating opportunities for transnational cooperation.

It was suggested that criminals might embark on a series of phases: acquisition, penetration testing and exploitation. In the first phase, criminals may exploit demobilization and the general uncertainty of a society transitioning to peace time to amass stockpiles of weapons, as discussed above. Serious operators would then 'test the system' in the words of one participant, embarking on dry runs, using, for example, cars adapted with concealment spaces to attempt to cross the border. They may also use paid informants at ports and border crossings to ascertain opportune windows to move illicit stock. Once routes, connections and customers have been established, then arms trafficking can begin in earnest. Criminals would wait for law enforcement attention to flag or waver before making their move.

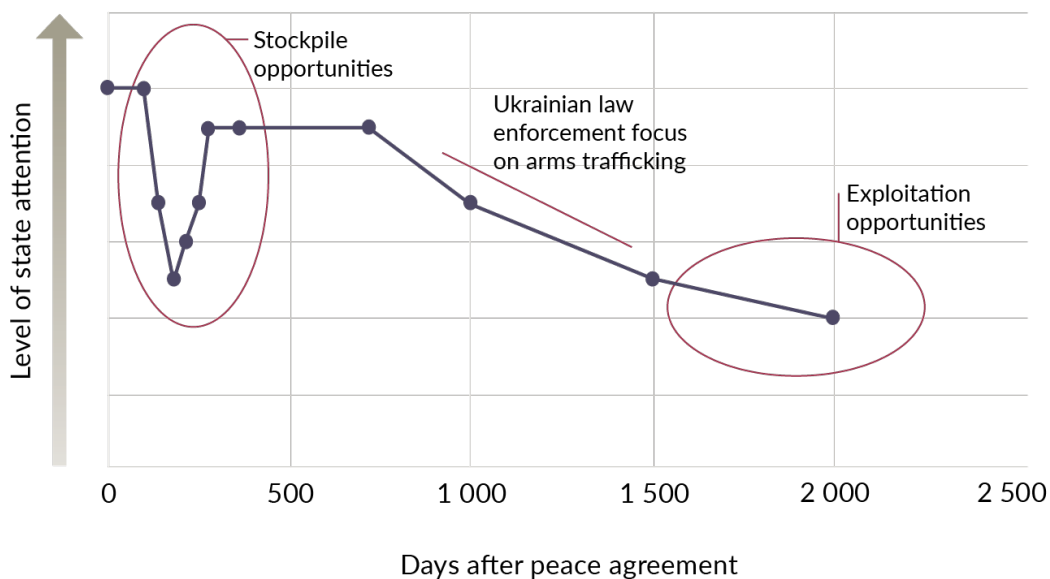


FIGURE 1 Levels of state focus on illicit arms trafficking over time.

Responses

Law enforcement and policymakers would face steep challenges in a peace settlement scenario. The end of martial law would reduce the degree of oversight the state has over internal security and criminal dynamics, while handling the large number of weapons, many undeclared, in the civilian population would prove a major challenge to law and order.

One suggestion to manage civilians' desire to carry weapons was to create community arsenals, whereby weapons could be stored in local police stations or community stockpiles, but the disadvantages were immediately clear. Civilians who have little trust in the state may be reluctant to use such facilities, and centrally held arsenals could well become a target for theft, feeding criminal stockpiles of firearms. Buy-back programmes faced similar drawbacks, potentially being used by criminals as a means to convert illicit weapons into cash.

Should evidence of cross-border arms flows into Europe emerge, pressure may ratchet up on Ukraine's EU and NATO allies, potentially to the detriment of reconstruction and security assistance (see the box below). To counter these risks, various strategies were suggested. Firstly, it was acknowledged that some leakage was inevitable, even with strict controls. It would therefore be critical to launch awareness campaigns as a counterbalance to Russia's information warfare tactics.

HYPOTHETICAL INCIDENT: A RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION DROP

French police discover four Javelin anti-tank weapon systems in Nanterre, an area of Paris known for drug trafficking. Early evidence indicates that the weapons were lost in Ukraine in 2023, and probably taken back to Russia before being rerouted to France via Kiel, in Germany. Biker gangs may have been involved in the transport, and given the type of weapon, it is suspected the end users are terrorists.

Media reports of the case are quickly taken up by a Russian disinformation campaign, which claims Ukraine trafficked them to Europe. Calls grow in the US administration for reconstruction aid to be put on hold.

To bolster institutional resilience in a peace agreement scenario, it was agreed that ongoing coordination between Ukraine and European partners was essential to maintain pressure on arms traffickers. In practical terms, this took the form of enhancing intelligence sharing. Setting up a national firearms focal point (NFFP) in Ukraine, and linking this into the network of NFFPs in Europe (which was also seen as requiring closer cooperation) was deemed an essential operational step to ensure the volume of intelligence could be shared efficiently. Enhancing border management in Ukraine with FRONTEX support was also critical. Creating a single NATO database of weapons supplied to Ukraine from various Western partners would also facilitate tracing efforts, although it was acknowledged that national militaries may be reluctant to share this information. Still, an incomplete database was judged more useful than none.

Harnessing Ukraine's EU accession process to maintain close cooperation and ensure Kyiv maintains its focus on arms trafficking was also seen as mutually beneficial. Tackling failings in border security, particularly corruption, will be essential to prevent the flow of illicit goods (including firearms) into Europe. That said, the Ukrainian elections added an unknowable factor to cooperation discussions. 'Who do we deal with in Kyiv after the elections?' asked one participant. It was thought likely that a military figure may become president.

Preventing large-scale exports of weapons from Ukraine will be critical and entail tightening security at Ukraine's maritime and riverine ports, including enhancing the Danube Project. If Ukrainian weapons are used in criminal activities or armed conflicts globally, it could damage the perception of Ukraine as a responsible global partner. Russia could amplify this through disinformation campaigns, portraying Ukraine as a hub for global arms trafficking. This might erode the political and financial support willing to be provided by the EU and other Western allies.

Arms trafficking would also begin to emerge in Russia. Many of its challenges will mirror those experienced in Ukraine, such as the demobilization of hundreds of thousands of military personnel and the large numbers of illicit weapons percolating through society. Russia is also unlikely to have the institutional support of international partners, at least in the immediate term, to assist with DDR efforts. If unchecked, illicit firearms could exacerbate security issues along Russia's southern borders, including terrorist activity, as was seen at the Crocus Hall attack in March 2024. Cooperation with Russia over the issue of arms trafficking is the great unknown in this scenario.

Scenario 2: A stalemate conflict

Context

In this scenario, the front lines have effectively frozen. Both armies remain engaged, launching localized offensives and counter-offensives, but with no prospect of a breakthrough. The intensity of the conflict diminishes, but drone and missile strikes continue to target Ukrainian and Russian territory. Subversion activities and sabotage will also continue, undermining efforts to reach a peace agreement.

The frozen conflict remains a constant drain on both states' resources, but the relatively stable front lines allow Russia and Ukraine to begin replenishing their arsenals as domestic production ramps up (particularly in Ukraine) and as international military aid to Ukraine begins to wane. Martial law remains in effect in Ukraine, with men of military age still not allowed to leave the country, but civic resistance begins to grow, especially regarding the curfew and lack of elections.

Regional instability begins to spill over into NATO territories, potentially straining alliances and causing domestic unrest. Desire for weapons grows among civilians in adjacent countries, including the Baltics and Poland.



Criminal opportunity

Both sides continue to devote a disproportionate amount of state resources to the conflict, undermining internal mechanisms to counter transnational organized crime. War fatigue and diminished budgets erode enforcement and intelligence-gathering capacity at the western borders, making illicit arms smuggling easier.

Criminal creativity will seek new opportunities, routes and connections. As the intensity of the conflict diminishes, a sense of stability and confidence returns to the criminal business environment. A protracted conflict may also see Ukrainian and Russian organized crime setting aside patriotism and they begin working together again, although cross-border business will largely remain out of bounds. Such connections may open up a broader region for arms trafficking, including into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

HYPOTHETICAL INCIDENT: GUNS AND GRAIN

The Security Service of Ukraine raid an agricultural company outside Odesa where the grain is being prepared for export. In the transport vehicle, buried in the grain, they find forty M224 mortars and their ammunition, shrink-wrapped in plastic. Documents indicate that the grain was due to be exported the next day from the terminal in Odesa to Kenya. Although uncertain, it appears that the weapons may have been intended for al-Shabaab fighters in Somalia.

Despite the front line being frozen, Russian attrition has complex effects. In parts of the country close to the front lines, citizens will retain their weapons, but in the centre and west, where sizeable stockpiles were seized in 2024 and early 2025, more organized arms trafficking may flourish. The supply of trophy weapons will lessen, but replenished arsenals (particularly of domestically made weapons not subject to Western oversight) may be exploited by corrupt military personnel, both in Russia and Ukraine, who begin organizing the movement of new weaponry. This may be especially the case as Ukrainian military forces are transitioning from AK-series rifles to a Czech Republic-designed Colt CZ Bren 2 assault rifle, which fires NATO standard ammunition. AK-type weapons are popular in many insecure and conflict-affected settings around the world, and Ukraine's massive potential supply may be diverted to meet this huge customer base.

Responses

Tackling corruption was seen by participants as the principal concern in a stalemate scenario, given that it undermines border security and could enable trafficking from Ukraine to other regions. With an eye to EU accession, Ukraine must continue to root out corruption from agencies that may play a role in facilitating arms trafficking. It was also seen as a Ukrainian law enforcement priority to enhance their intelligence picture of networks, routes and operations by questioning suspects and sources in the criminal underworld.

In Europe, it was seen as necessary to enhance cooperation between law enforcement and military authorities, particularly in countries where judicial and operational systems are separated. This would enable greater information sharing about the supply of weapons to Ukraine, in turn enhancing tracking and tracing efforts (using, for example, INTERPOL's iARMS platform) to determine likely points of diversion and identify those involved. Establishing a European database of ballistic data would also help improve tracing capabilities when weapons and ammunition are seized or used in firearms-related offences. Participants proposed the formation of a multilateral monitoring task force to provide reporting on arms trafficking, share best practices and coordinate responses. Its mandate could also include monitoring emerging technologies, such as drones, in both enabling weapon trafficking and as weapons.

Scenario 3: A decisive victory

Context

A definitive victory has different implications, depending on who the victor is. A decisive victory for Russia may involve a collapse of Ukrainian military stockpile management, a puppet government in Kyiv, continued Ukrainian guerrilla warfare, and a transitional period where law enforcement and border controls are weak. Russia would impose strong internal controls in newly acquired territory to deal with ongoing sabotage and subversion (potentially directed by a Ukrainian government-in-exile). A Russian victory would also escalate threat perceptions in Eastern Europe, particularly in Moldova and Poland.

Conversely, a Ukrainian victory may be a shallow one, with an exhausted society and the problem of how to reassert control over occupied territories. As with the peace agreement, martial law would come to an end and both sides would then face DDR challenges. Reconstruction would begin, but Western attention may start to wander now the crisis has passed. Issues over corruption, particularly in the case of reconstruction contracts, may also intensify friction between Kyiv and its Western partners.

Criminal opportunity

As the working group discussions progressed, the participants realized a decisive Russian victory scenario merited greater weight of analysis because it would have such a profound impact on organized crime in general and arms trafficking in particular. While a Ukrainian victory was also analyzed, one participant commented, 'The defeat of Ukraine would be catastrophic for arms flows.' The most immediate danger would be in the time period immediately after a Russian victory, where criminals could seize the chance to acquire large quantities of weaponry from abandoned Ukrainian supplies. A collapse of the Ukrainian armed forces could also see the disorganized dispersal of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, together with their weapons. A refugee crisis could emerge, with Ukrainian men attempting to leave the country. With border controls overwhelmed or evaporating, there may be ample opportunity for the export of weapons.

Organized crime interests within Ukraine, meanwhile, may face a restricted operating climate, as old arrangements with corrupt law enforcement are swept away and new power structures take their place. Russian organized crime may be emboldened to enter Ukraine, potentially displacing domestic groups and leading to violent armed clashes between rival gangs, although cooperation may also be possible.

But amid the political turbulence, there will be a window of opportunity for organized criminal groups. They may become arms brokers, fuelling an Ukrainian government-in-exile's insurgency. Russia may use criminal groups to export small packages of arms to Europe to destabilize the region. Containers of illicit arms may be shipped from Ukraine's Black Sea ports to Mediterranean countries or Latin America, with one participant identifying Mexican criminal groups as 'willing to buy anything'. Türkiye may emerge as a node of organized criminal trade, with links with Ukrainian, Russian and European organized crime. The country may also act as a transit platform for arms trafficking from Russia and Ukraine to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. New routes may emerge, including the Danube corridor, or from Murmansk, on the Barents Sea, through the Baltics or Scandinavia.

The decisive end of the conflict (and disruption in border controls) may also embolden foreign organized crime groups to penetrate Ukraine's illicit markets, particularly those from the Western Balkans, which have expertise, routes and customers already in place for smuggling drugs, migrants and guns into Europe. Terrorists may also try to connect with organized crime or come to Ukraine to secure weaponry for mass attacks. That said, one participant reflected that foreign organized crime or terrorist groups may struggle to engage in Ukraine, especially those without connections and a pre-established network.

HYPOTHETICAL INCIDENT: THE DANUBE TRAFFICKING ROUTE

After receiving intelligence, EUROPOL launch a raid on Nuremberg's dry port. They find a shipping container of scrap metal, but which in fact also contains boxes of grenades, land mines and other explosives. The container was reportedly loaded at Izmail, Ukraine, and sent up the Danube to Germany.

The police replace the illicit arms, ammunition and explosives with more scrap metal and wait for the container to be collected. The next day, a truck collects the container and transports it to a warehouse near Berlin owned by a Turkish businessman. A parallel investigation reveals widespread corruption among customs officials along the Danube.

Responses

Managing the fallout of a decisive Russian victory will pose a serious challenge for European policymakers. EU countries would have borders with a Russian-controlled Ukraine, where refugee flows, smuggling and guerrilla activities may all create instability. Efforts to engage Russia in small arms control through the UN are likely to face resistance because of geopolitical tensions and its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

No longer able to cooperate with Ukrainian law enforcement, European policy will have to be repurposed to adopt a reactive stance over arms trafficking. Reassessing capabilities and vulnerabilities at the land, sea and air routes from occupied Ukraine will be an essential first step to improving measures to detect trafficking. Bolstering joint maritime search and interdiction operations in the Baltic and Mediterranean regions may be one policy option to achieve this.

As with other scenarios, strengthening bilateral and multilateral intelligence exchange, and establishing mechanisms for better collaboration between law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies were suggested. Prioritizing transnational organized crime and small arms trafficking as major law enforcement issues was also seen as a necessary step for European countries.

SCENARIO RISK ANALYSIS

Understanding the risk

Discussions over the risks of arms trafficking arising from the conflict began soon after the Russian invasion in February 2022, mainly centred on diversion of Western-supplied weapons. Since then, understanding of the nature and scale of the issue has improved. While monitoring the supply and onward movement of Western weapons remains a foremost concern among Ukraine's Western partners, the emergence of a large reservoir of so-called 'trophy' weapons – those left on the battlefield or from abandoned weapon dumps – has also become a focus. According to official data, it is estimated there could be anywhere between 1 and 5 million such weapons in Ukraine. Many of these may be in civilian hands, as the need for self-protection is very deeply felt among Ukraine's population. However, recent developments have also pointed to the emergence of a more organized trade in these weapons in Ukraine, raising fears that some trafficking to Europe and elsewhere is ongoing.

Ukraine has been making strenuous efforts to prevent such diversion. Soldiers recover Western weapons left on the battlefield and there are frequent seizures of illegal stockpiles and sting operations against would-be sellers. Meanwhile, Europe is better prepared for arms trafficking from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict than it was for the Balkans conflict in the 1990s. There are a host of multilateral organizations, research bodies and law enforcement agencies investigating the issue and building cooperation with one another and with Ukrainian stakeholders to bolster prevention.

But the arms trafficking risk from the conflict is an order of magnitude larger than that posed by the Balkans conflict, the weapons from which continue to supply organized crime in Europe decades after the end of hostilities. The end of the conflict, in whatever shape or form, will bring fundamental changes. As the political and economic space reconfigures, new challenges, risks and priorities will emerge, complicating efforts to contain and forestall arms trafficking from the conflict zones.

The outcome of the scenario exercise identified several common risks that applied across the scenarios, and some scenarios-specific risks. This report details both, but key pathways for dealing with arms trafficking were as follows:

Plan for uncertainty

Each scenario had many layers of complexity, and it was challenging to discern credible deductions and formulate concrete policy responses. The potential actions of organized criminal groups in responding to the scenarios were numerous. An overarching conclusion was that policy responses must be flexible and scalable from the start.

The exercise highlighted the challenge of analyzing how criminal groups would respond to different scenarios. Each scenario had many layers of complexity. The response of criminal actors to each layer was difficult to imagine. Participants had to continually reassess and agree which factors were credible and which to discard. The layers of added complexity increased the uncertainty behind outcomes. Each scenario also highlighted the interest Russia will have in continuing to foster uncertainty in Ukraine and beyond, even if Ukraine were to achieve victory and regain the occupied territories.

This makes formulating policy hard and plays into the hands of arms traffickers. Organized crime groups thrive in uncertainty; policy does not. Without responses that accurately identify and tackle these challenges, there will be manifold opportunities for organized crime in the sphere of arms trafficking. For this reason, policy must be flexible and forward-looking: a range of policy options need to be developed that encompass all scenarios and are grounded by timely intelligence about the criminal groups engaged in arms trafficking. It will also be critical to reinforce core policy measures that cut across all scenarios, especially those involving veterans, law enforcement coordination and intelligence sharing.

Use lessons learned (and learn new ones)

The conference highlighted the fact that many policy bodies in Europe have a deep and multilayered understanding of the legacy of the Balkans conflict on arms trafficking trends in Europe, and that while Ukraine has already benefited from a preventative approach informed by that experience, more can be done to apply the lessons learnt.

When presenting their findings of current arms trafficking trends in Europe, participants emphasized the highly innovative capacity of organized crime, from converted blank guns, reactivated firearms and 3D-printed guns. Future forms of arms trafficking may adopt some of the classic models, including linking into the Western Balkan flows, but there may also be other forms. Learning from this, Ukraine has made tackling arms trafficking a political priority, even during a full-scale conflict, but there are doubts to the effectiveness of these efforts.



New trafficking routes, such as the Danube, may emerge; new criminals and brokers may arise (especially among ex-military); and new kinds of weapons may emerge, such as drones. To tackle this, it is necessary to be equally innovative, such as establishing an integrated national firearm focal point system across Europe (including Ukraine), or a consolidated NATO database of the supply of materiel into Ukraine, to boost tracking and intelligence efforts.

Crime has time

Time was deemed a critical factor in the scenarios; organized criminals are likely to be the fastest movers in any scenario, but they have also built resilient networks over a long period. Mitigating risks from illicit arms trafficking will require immediate, short-term responses and long-term durable solutions.

This was most evident in the scenarios of a peace agreement or total victory, both of which would precipitate rapid changes. In the event of a peace agreement, several policy gateways are triggered: the end of martial law, the beginning of demobilization and the opening of the 90-day window for the return of trophy weapons held by civilians. If adequate provisions and resources are not in place to support these processes, organized crime will take advantage. If the outcome is a total victory, Ukraine may undergo seismic changes in a matter of days in terms of the structure of the antagonist armed forces, civilian security and rapidly changing political circumstances.

Organized crime will be quick to find loopholes and opportunities. But criminals also have time on their side. Phases of acquisition and the exploitation of firearms may not be contiguous. As was the case in the Balkans conflict, criminals may wait for years for law enforcement attention and local insecurity to diminish before acting, using the intervening time to build customer lists, co-opt corrupt border officials, test out new routes, establish legal entities for volume smuggling, and develop and resurrect partnerships with other criminal networks.

Realism, not over-reaction

Managing expectations and avoiding knee-jerk reactions are of critical importance. Some leakage must be expected – understanding this reality should persuade policymakers to act sooner rather than wait for a trigger-event in a European city.

If arms trafficking policies are benchmarked to a zero leakage threshold, they will be judged as a failure. Arms trafficking from Ukraine will certainly happen in some shape or form, at some point. As outlined in our June 2024 report ‘Smoke on the Horizon’, the number of weapons is too high, the variables too manifold, the criminal networks in Europe exist and the customers are ready to buy.¹ But in an increasingly reactionary public-information sphere, the first incident of a Western weapon supplied to Ukraine ending up in Europe may be read as a systemic failure of efforts. Public calls to reduce support to Ukraine in the wake of such an incident may have the counterproductive effect of making the conflict situation worse. Conversely, waiting until after a catalytic event to enact changes would be poor policymaking: responses need to be designed now.

Realism is also needed when it comes to resource management. Arms trafficking is one priority in a very long list when it comes to Ukraine, and efforts in one sphere may well come at a cost to others. Making border checks much more stringent may intercept more weapons, but will have impacts on the economic vitality of the region. There will be the need to strike a fine balance between security and prosperity. After martial law ends, law enforcement will no longer have the military resources to manage checkpoints and security, and, therefore, maintaining a high priority on arms trafficking may come at cost to other policing areas.

¹ See GI-TOC Arms Monitoring Project, *Smoke on the horizon: Trends in arms trafficking from the conflict in Ukraine*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/trends-arms-trafficking-conflict-ukraine-russia-monitor/>.

In a stalemate conflict or post-conflict scenario, the level of multilateral and bilateral engagement with Ukraine will also be a critical variable. Other geopolitical priorities will arise, funding will be strained and European sentiment may turn against maintaining the earlier wartime levels of support.

Understanding and incorporating these requirements will be essential in creating a response to the risk of arms trafficking from the conflict that is able to pivot between different outcomes and is robust and realistic. Now is the time for the groundwork to be done. Ukraine and its Western partners must put the best measures in place, harnessing the arms control system and expertise that already exists.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In assessing each of the three end game scenarios for the war in Ukraine – a peace agreement, a stalemate or a decisive victory – several themes recurred that point to the underlying arms trafficking dynamics of this conflict.

Criminal ingenuity a constant

Criminals benefit from stasis and change alike. Stasis provides a stable business environment in which criminals become increasingly emboldened, can develop mature and sustainable relationships with corrupt officials, and adapt their approach by means of increasingly sophisticated techniques.

Rapid change, by contrast, creates opportunities for criminals to stockpile illicit goods, operate more freely (as law enforcement attention may be distracted) and reorientate to new markets. In the case of weapons, criminals may swiftly exploit opportunities to gather illicit weapons, but are prepared to wait until the time is right to sell. In the meantime, they may test new routes, such as the Danube, looking for exploitable vulnerabilities and weak points. They may also build contacts and customer lists both close to home and abroad.

The only exception to this may be in the case of a decisive Russian victory, which may see a changing of the criminal guard in Ukraine, reshaping criminal dynamics in the country. That said, it is also conceivable that the end of the conflict will enable Ukrainian and Russian criminal groups to set aside the issue of patriotism and return to doing what they do best: making money illicitly. In either permutation, criminal opportunities will not be in short supply.

For this reason, lateral and creative thinking is also required on the part of those tasked with responding. Geographical focus must be broadened and new ideas considered. Analysts and law enforcement experts must be forced to see the problem from the eyes of the criminal.

A long-term threat requiring long-term cooperation

Assessing all scenarios, participant groups emphasized that arms trafficking resulting from this war is a long-term issue that will require long-term collaboration to address. The challenges were often discussed in a frank way – for example, they drew attention to how national law enforcement bodies are reluctant to share sensitive information that may compromise their own operations and often prefer to work bilaterally with external partners they trust rather than with multilateral platforms. Building institutional trust and common working practices is therefore essential if intelligence sharing across Europe and Ukraine is to take place in a meaningful, efficient and timely manner.

Maintaining the focus on arms trafficking as a major risk affecting Europe will also be challenging among other competing priorities, especially in a stalemate situation, where the risk may be lower than in the other two scenarios. If European and Ukrainian law enforcement and policymakers take their eyes off the ball, then criminals will capitalize.

Above all, maintaining engagement with and support to Ukraine was deemed critical, and Europe must be on the watch for Russian spoiler efforts. If Ukraine becomes politically isolated, then the continent will lose its best chance to tackle the arms trafficking issue (among many others) at source – and will have to pay the costs downstream.

Factoring in Russia as an external driver

As the scenario exercise proved, arms trafficking does not exist in a vacuum but is shaped by a range of military, political, social, economic and criminal factors. Arguably foremost among these is the role of Russia. In Ukraine, many believe that ‘peace’ will be only fragile and temporary, and fear Russia will resume its aggression when it has reconstituted its forces and judges the time is right. There are many civilians who now view weapons, legal or otherwise, as essential to their security. As one participant said, ‘If Ukraine didn’t have a culture of gun ownership before, it does now.’

Threat perceptions in Ukraine, the state of the economy, political engagement with Europe and the developments at the front line will all profoundly shape the future of the arms trafficking market in ways not yet foreseeable. But thinking through potential permutations, which the scenario exercise allowed, allows for policymakers and law enforcement to better understand the connections between different drivers and view the challenge holistically, rather than fall back on a reactive, incident-led approach.

It is also true that this conflict is not the only future source of weapons in Europe. Closely monitoring the ecosystem in Europe and its surroundings will be as important as a rigorous understanding of dynamics in Ukraine, to understand how patterns of demand for and use of firearms, ammunition and explosives will develop among different illicit economies and other security-risk actors such as terrorists.

Recommendations

From these conclusions, five broad recommendations and imperatives for immediate action emerge:

- 1. Seize the chance to act now in a fast-disappearing window of opportunity.** The time to act is now – policy formulation to address the risk of illicit arms flow from potential scenarios in Ukraine must happen immediately. The illicit arms market is changing rapidly before our eyes. While Europe focuses on the Ukraine–Russia war as a security challenge for Europe, NATO and the West, and prepares for the possible outcomes, criminal groups are gearing up to capitalize on potential new routes, new connections and new opportunities for making money. Taken together, the increasing organization of the illicit arms markets, the immense supply of small arms and light weapons (SALW), a traumatized population with large numbers of veterans having experienced combat and military organization add up to a pressing risk for Europe. The reservoir has risen so high that a flood is near-inevitable, and policy measures are needed straight away to shore up the dam.
- 2. Create a comprehensive and reactive intelligence picture of illicit arms markets that accounts for factors related to the Ukraine conflict.** The arms diversion from Ukraine may be simultaneously small scale and localized, and large scale and internationalized, and this only exacerbates the complex nature of the problem for policymakers. Demand is king and this will lead to cases whereby reopened ports, new flows of legal trade from

reconstruction and redevelopment efforts could make large-scale, shipping-container volumes of illicit arms trafficking feasible. These may include heavier and more lethal weaponry. At the same time, citizens and ex-military personnel may well seek a quick profit by selling the assault rifles taken from the battlefield. Ultimately the result is the same – there is a risk of weapons being used by organized crime to enable other activities, in power struggles or to settle turf wars. The growing incidence of gun crime, as observed, for example, in Sweden and in some cases of narco-criminals using high-end combat weapons against the Guardia Civil in Spain, is a foretaste of things to come if the flood is not stemmed.

Therefore, Europe also needs to have an efficient intelligence database on which to base decision making. When we combine the inputs from law enforcement, legislators, policymakers, civil society and multilateral bodies, the arms control community in Europe is challenged by excessive and often stove-piped data, and is therefore at risk of having an incoherent picture of the threats. Ideally, an intelligence picture would assess factors such as terrain, historical understanding of smuggling routes and hotspot locations, political economies, state control or corruption, network analysis of connections between organized criminal groups, market analysis and others. The aim must be to create a commonly recognized intelligence picture.

This responsive and comprehensive intelligence picture of Europe's illicit arms markets will connect human source information with all data points, such as seizures, pricing and routes. It will incorporate multi-factor analysis based on real time, detailed intelligence to prevail among the uncertainty outlined above and allow governments to develop effective policy responses. Europe must take control of its own policy space by building the required information architecture and resourcing it with the necessary personnel, structures and connectivity.

3. Base policymaking on future scenarios, but informed by the past. Law enforcement and policymakers must lift their eyes from the tyranny of the now and think longer term, basing their responses on analysis of credible scenarios. While it is impossible to predict the future, it may be useful to glean creative solutions from foresighting exercises. The timeframe for thinking should be pushed out as far as possible, using historical examples as the guiderail. Here, the experience of SELEC (the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center) and the Western Balkans is instructive, as well as what is happening now in Libya, Afghanistan and, more recently, Syria.

4. Strengthen the network of European arms control experts, law enforcement and policymakers. It is critical to have resilient networks built on mutual trust and well-developed, interoperable methodologies to counteract the organized criminal arms markets. The work to develop these inter-organization relationships has been occurring, but there needs to be improved, regular information-sharing opportunities and forums for open, critically challenging discussion. The nodes in the network need to be as well informed as possible, free to represent their country or organization and empowered to share data. The connections between the nodes must be frequently refreshed and strengthened. This will create a durable network that is vital to defeat the organized crime networks. Critical to this is closer cooperation of National Firearms Focal Points (NFFP) in Europe with one another and with their counterpart in Ukraine, and formation of consolidated databases of materiel supplies to Ukraine to allow European law enforcement to improve tracing and map arms trafficking networks.

5. Immediately design and implement a plan for weapons and ammunition management in Ukraine. Lastly, Ukraine needs to have a fully implementable and resourced weapons and ammunition management plan. The vast numbers of weapons, ammunition and explosives in circulation in Ukraine – and across the border in Russia – mean that without easy access to safe storage facilities and effective control mechanisms in Ukraine, the risk of diversion and leakage is high. Criminal groups are becoming more organized and waking up to the opportunities of illicit arms trafficking from Ukraine. Tangible plans to store uncontrolled SALW, if enacted now, will reduce this risk.





**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net