



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

DNIPRO

THE FRONT LINE
OF CRIME

JULY 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was authored by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Eurasia Observatory, the successor to the Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine, which was established in 2022.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dnipro's economic importance and powerful organized crime groups have long made it one of the most significant cities for crime in Ukraine. While the city has been close to the front line since fighting broke out in the Donbas in 2014, the dramatic escalation following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 has the potential to turbocharge crime in the region, particularly in the spheres of arms trafficking and drugs, not least since serving military personnel may be involved in both. Scam call centres have also flourished in the post-invasion phase, at first claiming to be 'patriotically' targeting Russians, but now increasingly switching their attention to wealthier Europeans and beyond.

But control of the city's vast illicit revenues (be they outright illegal or the proceeds of corruption) has also undergone a transformation, with the result that there is currently no major player on the ground. As such, the city is a lucrative prize for those able to position themselves effectively.

Given the national importance of Dnipro, the situation in the city will have repercussions for Ukraine as a whole. Therefore, it should be a primary focus for law enforcement agencies striving to intercept the evolving landscape of organized crime in Ukraine.

Methodology

This policy brief was compiled through combination of fieldwork in Dnipro in September 2024, remote interviews with journalists, law enforcement and civil society and a survey of open source information in Ukrainian and English.

Key findings

- **A front line city for drugs and guns:** Since 2014, Dnipro has been a logistics hub for the Ukrainian military and close to areas of active fighting – a circumstance that has fuelled arms trafficking – while drug trafficking groups in the Dnipropetrovsk region are some of the most powerful in Ukraine.
- **Scam call centres dominate:** Dnipro has emerged as Ukraine's hub for fraudulent call centres, employing approximately 30 000 individuals. These operations are reportedly shielded by law enforcement and connected to organized crime groups.

- **Shifting crime–politics nexus:** Power in Dnipro has historically been shared between those associated with the underworld and political–business elites. The ongoing war has disrupted this balance, resulting in key figures being exiled, imprisoned or placed under investigation.
- **Corruption resurges after the invasion:** Following an initial decline after the 2022 invasion, corruption has experienced a significant resurgence. Budget transparency has decreased, and major scandals have surfaced in infrastructure and procurement.
- **Organized crime adapts and expands:** Criminal organizations from Dnipro have established operations in Kyiv and Odesa and elsewhere, taking advantage of wartime displacements and exploiting internally displaced persons (IDPs) in both scam call centres and forced labour.
- **The future of organized crime in Dnipro:** The future of organized crime in Dnipro depends on political transitions, the outcomes of the war and the extent to which Kyiv will assert stronger central control. The city continues to be a strategic focal point for Ukraine's internal security.



INTRODUCTION: A BIG-TIME CITY

Dnipro has long been one of Ukraine's most significant cities. Straddling both banks of the country's primary waterway, it emerged as an industrial powerhouse in the late 19th century, with an economy centred on manufacturing and trade. The city also boasts a rich military history: during the Soviet era, when it was still known as Dnipropetrovsk, it was designated a 'closed' city to foreigners in 1959 due to its missile development and production programmes.¹ Its location and strong employment prospects have attracted many Russians seeking work since the 19th century, although Dnipropetrovsk has consistently maintained a strong Ukrainian identity, particularly during the Soviet era, when policies aimed at promoting the Ukrainian language and culture were in place. In Tsarist times, then called Katerinoslav, the city was also home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Ukraine, alongside Odesa; in the 1920s Jews constituted approximately 40% of the population.² Following the Russian-backed insurgency in the Donbas region in 2014, the city was renamed Dnipro to distance itself from its Soviet past.³

The city was home to several of the most influential figures in the Soviet Union and newly independent Ukraine, including Leonid Brezhnev (general secretary of the Soviet Union), Volodymyr Shcherbytsky (first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party), Leonid Kuchma (the second president of Ukraine), Pavlo Lazarenko (who served as governor of Dnipropetrovsk before becoming prime minister in 1996) and Yulia Tymoshenko (one of the country's most prominent political leaders).

These influential figures firmly established Dnipro on the map. The Brezhnev era is widely regarded as the golden age of the Soviet Union, while Kuchma is seen as the architect of Ukraine's distinctive political and economic system, characterized by the dominance of several tycoons. Indeed, Dnipro was the point of emergence of many of the first wave of oligarchs, including Ihor Kolomoisky, Hennadiy Boholyubov and Viktor Pinchuk, all of whom hailed from the city's strong Jewish minority. Kolomoisky and Boholyubov, along with several other local businesspeople, formed the Privat Group, which encompassed interests in fuel, chemicals, metallurgy, banking and media. The revenues generated were substantial: Kolomoisky's PrivatBank was one of the first private banks in independent Ukraine and quickly became the largest. The lines between business and politics were often blurred; for instance, Pinchuk married Kuchma's daughter, while Tymoshenko leveraged her control over the gas industry as a springboard for her political career, eventually becoming prime minister.⁴ Kolomoisky was also a



FIGURE 1 Ukraine, showing the location of Dnipro.

substantial supporter of Volodymyr Zelensky, whose ‘Servant of the People’ comedy show aired on a media network in which Kolomoisky held a majority stake.⁵

Through these transitions, Dnipro has emerged as one of the most economically and politically important cities in Ukraine. Today, it has the second-largest budget in the country. In addition to its traditional industrial strengths, the influence of Kolomoisky has also introduced banking and other major sectors to the city. Following the loss of the manufacturing hub of Donetsk to Russian occupation in 2014, Dnipro’s role in Ukraine’s financial landscape has become even more crucial.

The criminal landscape

Alongside the substantial formal economy, Dnipro also has a large informal sector, which ranges from the grey economy – characterized by tax evasion in trade – to outright organized crime. As in other parts of Ukraine, organized crime began to take root in the city during the 1970s, primarily among young men, many of whom had backgrounds in martial arts and thus were useful for muscle work. In an economic environment where private trade was largely unregulated, racketeering emerged as a major illicit activity.⁶ One of the earliest major figures in this landscape was Oleksandr ‘Sailor’ Milchenko, a former footballer who established a gang that began extorting individuals involved in the grey economy.⁷

The 1980s witnessed the rise of Oleksandr ‘Narik’ Petrovsky, a judo athlete, and Serhiy ‘Umka’ Oliynyk, another martial artist.⁸ Petrovsky has never been convicted in any criminal cases and has consistently denied media allegations regarding his purported role as a kingpin in the Dnipro underworld. He has successfully won several defamation lawsuits against journalists and the prosecutor general.⁹

However, in December 2019, the editor of Censor.net, which had published multiple articles referring to Petrovsky as the 'criminal authority of Narik', successfully overturned a 2018 ruling against the outlet on appeal – a decision upheld by the Supreme Court in July 2020.¹⁰

In June 2022, following the filming of individuals connected to Petrovsky assaulting a taxi driver in Vienna, Dnipro's mayor, Borys Filatov, made a public statement identifying Petrovsky as the leader of an influential organized crime group in Dnipro involved in scam call centres. He stated, 'It's time to finally stop pretending that these people don't exist.'¹¹ (For more information on the Vienna incident, see 'Dnipro at war' below.) Petrovsky was subsequently reported to be under investigation by German authorities for money laundering.¹²

According to media reports, in the late 1980s, Petrovsky formed a group that engaged in extorting companies, restaurants, bars and the city's lucrative Ozerka market.¹³ The local Soho restaurant became a crucial venue for criminals to meet and discuss business, and was cited in the song 'What is Dnipro' ('Что Такое Днепр') by Big Skeelz, a local hip-hop artist: 'Dnipro is "offices" [scam call centres], Soho and escorts, / [...] Luxurious life, scammers and drugs.' Petrovsky's reputation quickly grew – he was feted in song and the target of two failed assassination attempts in the mid-1990s.¹⁴ Then came a divergence of careers: according to media and official reports, Oliynyk emerged as a leading figure in the underworld and was ultimately 'crowned' a *vor v zakone*, or thief-in-law, by his underworld peers in St Petersburg in February 2014, indicating his elevation to a criminal 'aristocracy' that nominally follows certain rules and traditions.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Petrovsky reinvented himself as an influential businessman, becoming the owner of the D1 TV station, and a philanthropist, before leaving Ukraine in 2005.¹⁶ His metamorphosis arguably culminated in January 2019, when, after a long public absence, he was photographed in Istanbul alongside President Petro Poroshenko at a ceremony conferring autonomy on the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.¹⁷

Besides racketeering, the Dnipropetrovsk region also became a hotbed for drug trafficking. The drug trade in Kryvyi Rih, the region's second-largest city, was dominated by the Twenties gang. This gang evolved from a racketeering group in the 1990s into a highly complex and compartmentalized organization that generated approximately US\$1 million per month.¹⁸ Control of the city was divided among six subsidiary groups, which had minimal contact with one another, and drug laboratories were frequently relocated.¹⁹

The region has also gained a reputation for its involvement in the sex trade. In 2019, official statistics ranked it second only to Odesa in the country regarding the number of identified sex workers.²⁰ Foreigners would even travel to Dnipro for sexual services.²¹ More recently, scam call centres referred to as 'offices' have emerged as a significant illicit industry in Dnipro, with the city being characterized as 'the capital of telephone fraud'.²² These scam call centres deceive people into handing over their financial information by impersonating employees of banks or other financial institutions, or lure them into investing money in fictitious schemes.

Controlling these substantial revenue streams, both legal and illegal – racketeering, drug trafficking, the sex trade and scam call centres – would become the central issue in the complex political economy of Dnipro.

Politics, business and crime

Like its eastern counterpart Donetsk, Dnipro possesses a fundamental characteristic that distinguishes it from many other cities in Ukraine: the intricate entanglement of business, politics and crime. This connection was most vividly illustrated during the tumultuous 1990s, a decade marked by widespread violence that intertwined these three spheres, resulting in a series of high-profile assassinations involving businesspeople, politicians and criminals.

Milchenko and Lazarenko were both implicated in two of the most high-profile assassinations in Ukraine during the 1990s: the murder of politician and businessman Yevhen Shcherban in 1996²³ and the assassination of former National Bank head Vadym Hetman in 1998.²⁴ Lazarenko fled Ukraine in 1999 for the US, where he was eventually convicted of money laundering and handed a prison sentence in 2009.²⁵ In another instance, Pinchuk alleged that Kolomoisky was involved in the murders of gang members whom he had hired to assault a Ukrainian lawyer; however, these claims were dismissed by the judge.²⁶



FIGURE 2 Linkages between influential figures of Dnipro.²⁹

But the alleged connections between crime, business and politics were often more nuanced. In the 1990s and 2000s, individuals seeking to acquire profitable businesses, including newly privatized entities, sometimes resorted to unscrupulous methods, particularly corporate raiding. Media reports frequently identify Hennadiy Korban as a prominent 'raider' for Kolomoisky's Privat Group during this early period of independence, although he preferred the title of 'conflictologist'.²⁷ Korban was supported by Mykhailo Koshlyak, a martial arts expert who, according to media accounts, began his career under Petrovsky. Koshlyak later became the head of the city's judo federation and eventually served as the deputy head of the city council.²⁸

The influence of business, particularly that of Kolomoisky, in Dnipro underwent substantial transformation following the Maidan revolution in 2014 and the Russian-backed insurgency in the Donbas. Appointed as the governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region in March 2014 to counter the Russian-backed separatist movement, the oligarch reportedly invested over US\$10 million to set up the 'Dnipro battalion' to resist the insurgents, in addition to funding various volunteer groups.³⁰ Korban and Filatov – Korban's business associate and a former journalist who had investigated Lazarenko – both served as deputies to Kolomoisky.³¹

After being celebrated for resisting the insurgents, Kolomoisky was dismissed as governor after only a year due to disputes with President Poroshenko over fraud allegations involving PrivatBank and an incident in which the oligarch sent armed men to the national oil producer, Ukrnafta. Subsequently, legislation stripped him of his control over the energy sector.³² (Both Kolomoisky and his co-accused, Boholyubov, deny the allegations.³³) Korban left office alongside his boss, and then ran for election to the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) in Chernihiv, as well as for mayor of Kyiv in 2015, but lost both races.³⁴

Filatov and Korban's city

Kolomoisky's departure from the Dnipro political scene (he left Ukraine in 2017, only returning after Zelensky's electoral victory in 2019) paved the way for a new status quo, led by Filatov, who was elected mayor of Dnipro in 2015 with the support of Korban.³⁵ A tumultuous few years saw Korban facing charges of embezzlement and forming a criminal organization in 2015 (the charges were later dropped) and receiving an 18-month suspended prison sentence in 2016 for kidnapping a representative of Ukrainian parliament. (Koshlyak was also arrested in the 2015 Korban case before being released.³⁶) He returned to the city in 2017 to serve as Filatov's 'freelance advisor', engaging with contractors and officials interested in the allocation of the city's budget. He was subsequently appointed head of the Dnipro public council, a body under the city council designed to involve the public in policy formation and implementation.³⁷ In 2019, NV, a media outlet, ranked Korban, Petrovsky and Filatov as the top three among the city's 30 most influential politicians.³⁸

Numerous media reports and local sources speak of corruption as a major issue under Filatov and Korban's stewardship of the city. After a promising initial year, during which the mayor's office was receptive to input from civil society pressure groups, the opportunity for engagement diminished and allegations of corruption increased, according to one activist.³⁹ For instance, following a non-transparent auction, a Cyprus-based company secured the rights to collect parking fees in Dnipro, with only 10% of the revenue being returned to the city budget.⁴⁰ The construction sector has also proven to be a lucrative source of income, characterized by inflated projects and material prices, as well as companies securing tenders with minimal genuine competition.⁴¹ The city's metro system has been

synonymous with dubious financial practices and persistent mismanagement.⁴² Plans initiated in 2011 to add three additional stations to the original line have yet to materialize.⁴³ According to a local activist, prior to the invasion, Korban was responsible for half of all construction in the region, while an additional quarter was managed by Volodymyr and Leonid Dubinsky, brothers currently wanted for mortgage fraud in the US.⁴⁴ (Leonid Dubinsky was detained in January 2025 for large-scale embezzlement related to critical infrastructure in the Dnipropetrovsk region.⁴⁵)

While Korban was able to engage with the city's budgetary processes, illicit revenues – particularly from drugs – remained under the control of organized crime groups in the city.⁴⁶ According to one analyst, Dnipro was the last stronghold of 'traditional' organized crime left in the country, insomuch as the criminal structures operating in the city were largely unaffected by the influence of Kyiv.⁴⁷ Notably, Kolomoisky's influence in the city changed dramatically after 2015, as both Korban and Filatov publicly discussed their break from him, while the oligarch maintained his connections with Petrovsky.⁴⁸ In February 2022, Petrovsky's bodyguards assaulted journalists who were filming at Dnipro airport, reportedly while Petrovsky was en route to attend Kolomoisky's birthday celebration.⁴⁹

But just a little more than two weeks later, the status quo underwent a fundamental reconfiguration when Russia launched its full-scale invasion.



View of the Dnipro Metro transit system, where expansion plans have long struggled to make headway against mismanagement and corruption. *Photo: GI-TOC*



DNIPRO AT WAR

Faced with the imminent and tangible threat of Russian aggression, certain individuals linked to organized crime in Dnipro swiftly departed the city. In some instances, they relocated to safer areas and continued their operations as usual. Reports indicate that organized crime groups from Dnipro established scam call centres in Kyiv and Odesa, and subsequently across the country.⁵⁰

Petrovsky and Oliynyk fled the country on the second day of the invasion, travelling to Europe through Transcarpathia, a region bordered by Slovakia, Romania, Hungary and Poland.⁵¹ Oliynyk soon returned to Ukraine, reportedly to manage Petrovsky's affairs on the ground,⁵² and was allegedly instrumental in leveraging his influence as a criminal authority to prevent Russia from destabilizing the prison population in the early days of the invasion.⁵³ (In Dnipro, a criminal authority known as 'Aryan', who had previously served as a watcher or overseer of criminal activities in Sevastopol, Crimea, and reportedly had close ties with the Russian security service, attempted to incite unrest among the prison population with the aim of creating chaos.⁵⁴) However, he was apprehended at the Transcarpathian border in August 2022.⁵⁵ Oliynyk was arrested again and detained in December 2022, along with his associate Lasha Svan, before being released in January 2024.⁵⁶

Petrovsky remained in Europe but soon faced law enforcement scrutiny after several members of his security team were filmed assaulting a taxi driver in Vienna in May 2022.⁵⁷ As Austrian authorities launched an investigation, he reportedly relocated to Slovakia.⁵⁸ According to a local activist, Petrovsky's influence in Dnipro has waned since his departure from the country;⁵⁹ even so, his name continues to surface in discussions related to Ukrainian grain exports,⁶⁰ drugs⁶¹ and scam call centres that reportedly recruit, among others, IDPs in Dnipro.⁶²

These events seemed to leave the city entirely under the control of Filatov and Korban; in spite of this, Korban soon encountered difficulties. In July 2022, while attempting to re-enter Ukraine, the 'conflictologist' was detained at the border with Poland and was informed that his Ukrainian citizenship had been revoked.⁶³ After being denied entry, Korban reportedly relocated to London.⁶⁴

Kolomoisky also witnessed the further erosion of his business empire in Ukraine. PrivatBank had already been nationalized in 2016 by President Poroshenko. In November 2022, the state energy companies Ukrnafta and Ukrtatnafta – of which Kolomoisky was a shareholder – were also nationalized as strategically important assets.⁶⁵ In September 2023, Kolomoisky was arrested and placed in pre-trial custody on allegations of fraud and money laundering.⁶⁶ Court proceedings are ongoing.

A residential building in central Dnipro after being hit in a missile strike. The threat of Russian aggression caused some organized crime figures to leave Dnipro early in the Ukraine invasion. *Photo: GI-TOC*



Along with the shifting fortunes of the major power brokers in Dnipro, the city was also undergoing a radical transformation as a result of the Russian invasion. With Kharkiv to the north almost on the front lines and subjected to heavy aerial bombardment, Dnipro became the primary logistics and medical hub for the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) in the east, as well as a coordinating centre for humanitarian aid.⁶⁷ The Pivdenmash weapons factory in Dnipro, known as Yuzhmash during Soviet times, allegedly resumed missile production and was targeted by Russia's experimental Oreshnik hypersonic missile strike in November 2024.⁶⁸ As the conflict spread to surrounding regions, a significant number of IDPs began to arrive in Dnipro, with nearly 175 000 in the city by the end of 2024.⁶⁹

In the early days of the war, many criminals volunteered to go to the front lines.⁷⁰ But others remained, keen to take advantage of the new opportunities in the spheres of drug and arms trafficking. Meanwhile, scam call centres in the city flourished, partly due to a 'patriotic' focus on supposedly targeting mostly Russians, which was unofficially permitted by the authorities, but primarily because of the increased profits that came from targeting wealthier Europeans and other Westerners. IDPs became particularly vulnerable to criminal exploitation, either being recruited into scam call centres or, in one case, subjected to forced labour in agriculture and construction.⁷¹ Additionally, corruption intensified after a period of relative restraint.

Arms trafficking: more guns than buyers

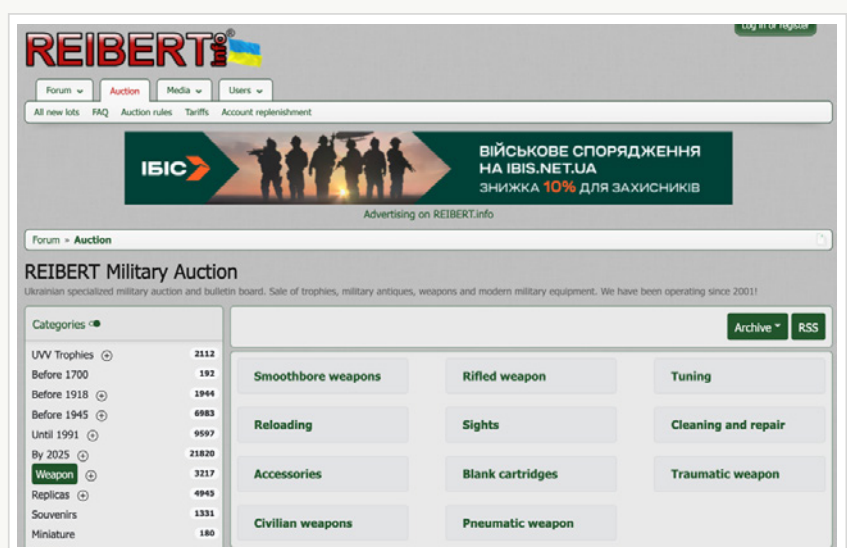
Weapons in Dnipro are readily accessible. Reports indicate that there is a robust barter economy at the front line, where firearms are exchanged for other necessities.⁷² Additionally, soldiers on leave often return to Dnipro with trophy weapons.⁷³ A senior law enforcement officer noted that there are hidden weapons caches which make arms trafficking 'contact free'; once the location of the cache is shared, it is easy to go and get a weapon.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the officer highlighted a potential appeal of illicit weapons, stating that the issue with legally registered firearms is that all the registry information is publicly available online. If Russian sabotage groups sought to track these weapons, they could utilize the registry data to locate the addresses of legal owners, kill them and take the weapons, he said.

'In pure criminality you have rules. It's not considered good to work with prostitutes or weapons.'

However, similar to other regions in Ukraine, the overwhelming availability of illicit weapons has not resulted in a considerable increase in organized arms trafficking for several reasons. For one, organized crime in Dnipro, much like in Odesa, generally prefers to avoid engaging in the buying and selling of weapons. 'In pure criminality you have rules. It's not considered good to work with prostitutes or weapons,' said a senior law enforcement officer. While criminals in Dnipro certainly possess weapons, they are largely hesitant to use them without justifiable cause. 'They like it when it's quiet. If you fuck up, you get beaten or stabbed [not shot].'⁷⁵ There are exceptions to this rule, particularly in the realm of economic crime, where shootings and explosions may be used to resolve 'disputes'.⁷⁶ Even in the business world, organized crime tends to have a more professional approach to violence: 'Before the invasion, you would just hire hitmen or freelancers for assassinations,' the law enforcement source explained.⁷⁷ In other instances, personnel from security firms are utilized.

This indicates that, although acquiring a gun illegally in Dnipro poses no significant challenge, organized crime does not constitute a major customer base. The market is saturated, with more offers than buyers. Nevertheless, this has not deterred would-be sellers.⁷⁸ For example, one service station owner attempted to sell trophy weapons obtained from the front lines to a criminal clientele before being apprehended in October 2024.⁷⁹ Various methods, including postal services, websites and face-to-face cash transactions, are employed to conduct these transactions.⁸⁰ One notable example involved the Reibert military specialist auction website, where two traffickers attempted to sell a World War II Walther P38 for nearly UAH38 000 (approximately US\$920). Additionally, the suspects possessed modern weaponry, including assault rifles and a Glock, along with 15 kilograms of gunpowder and instructions for weapon repair, suggesting that they intended to make the weapons operational.

Screenshot of the military auction website Reibert, where traffickers attempted to sell a World War II Walther P38.





Part of the arsenal seized in a July 2024 bust in Dnipro. Photo: Main Directorate of the National Police in Dnipropetrovsk Region

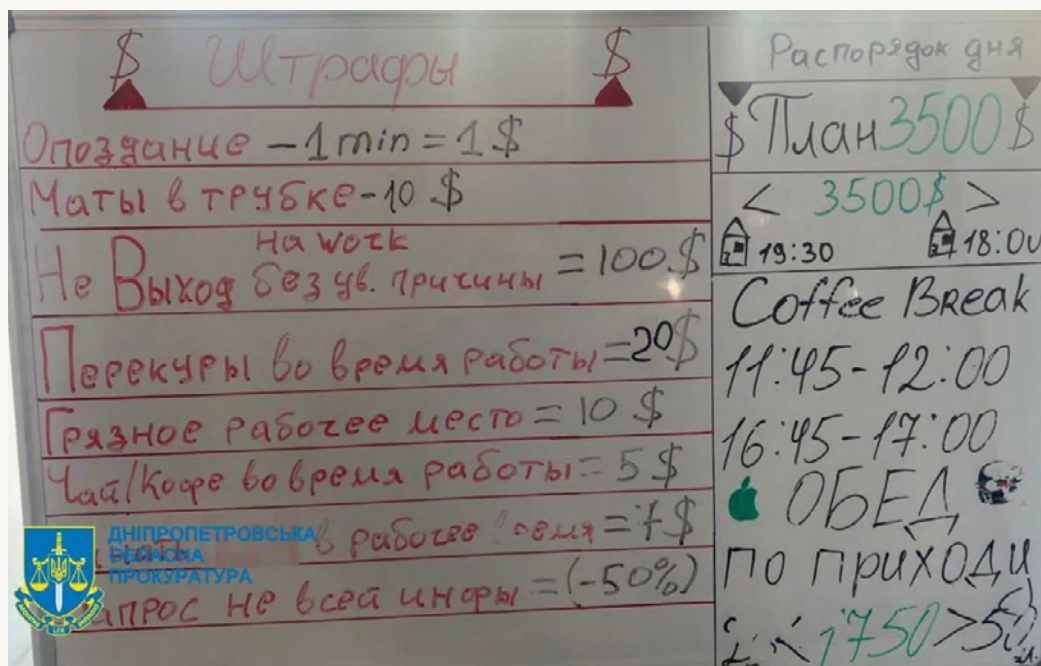


Weapons and ammunition uncovered during a January 2025 bust in Kryvyi Rih. Dnipro's proximity to areas of active fighting has fuelled arms trafficking. Photo: Main Directorate of the National Police in Dnipropetrovsk Region/Telegram

The size of the illegal arsenals has sometimes been substantial. In July 2024, for instance, police conducted a sting operation against a former police officer and an accomplice who were attempting to sell a Russian Pecheneg heavy machine gun, four AK rifles and ammunition for UAH300 000 (approximately US\$7 200). During searches of their residences, law enforcement officers seized grenade launchers, rifles, machine guns, shotguns, revolvers and nearly 40 000 rounds of ammunition.⁸¹ Another significant seizure occurred in nearby Kryvyi Rih in January 2025, where authorities uncovered seven anti-tank guided missiles, 67 rounds for an anti-tank grenade launcher, 50 artillery shells and a Glock pistol.⁸²

Black market prices reported by the GI-TOC in August 2024 align closely with national averages, suggesting a stabilization of the market as supply increases: the price of an AK-74 was UAH41 400 (approximately US\$1 000), a PKM (a Soviet-calibre machine gun) UAH62 000 (approximately US\$1 500) and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher UAH50 000–UAH62 000 (approximately US\$1 200–US\$1 500).

In 2023, official statistics indicated that 495 illegal weapons were recovered in the Dnipropetrovsk region, with 133 seized in Dnipro and 57 in Kryvyi Rih.⁸³ However, the total number of weapons being registered in the region – nearly 100 000 – suggests a far greater stockpile, with over half of these (51 457) registered in Dnipro alone. Despite these figures, firearm-related crimes remained relatively low, with 35 incidents reported in Dnipro, 37 in Kryvyi Rih, and a total of 189 across the region for 2023. Official police reports from 2023 identified railway and bus stations as critical points for intercepting the flow of illegal weapons. Preliminary data for 2024 indicates that 325 illegal weapons were seized – a decrease compared to 2023 – which is concerning given the increase in the supply of illegal weapons to the region as the war continues.⁸⁴



The work board from a call centre targeting Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Dnipro has become a hub for fraudulent call centres, which are reportedly shielded by law enforcement and connected to organized crime groups. Photo: Dnipropetrovsk region Prosecutor's Office

Scam centres boom

Call centres for scamming, which already constituted a substantial criminal industry in Dnipro before the invasion, have reached industrial proportions. As of September 2024, approximately 30 000 individuals were employed in scam call centres in the city, predominantly young people in their teens and twenties.⁸⁵ These scam call centres typically operate from office spaces, with the number of employees ranging from 30 to 100, although one centre with 200 employees was shut down in 2020.⁸⁶ According to an activist, these call centres primarily target Russians; he estimated that 50% of those scammed were Russian, 25% Ukrainian and 25% from the EU and UK.⁸⁷ In one instance, a call centre specifically targeted Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland.⁸⁸

It would be impossible for scam call centres to operate in Dnipro without a 'roof', the Ukrainian term for state and criminal protection. According to an activist, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Prosecutor's Office, the police and other law enforcement agencies all have connections to call centres.⁸⁹ The most notorious group that reportedly initiated this booming business in the city is called Devyatki ('The Nines').⁹⁰ Unlike other groups, they are said to employ more violent methods against their staff and especially their competitors, resorting to weapons, which are rarely used in local criminal disputes.⁹¹ The year 2020 saw a violent struggle between rival groups.⁹²

Usually, these scam centres pay a portion of their profits as protection money to local law enforcement, who alert them about potential raids from Kyiv. However, sometimes even such a 'roof' does not help, and call centres are shut down when external pressure is applied. In one instance, the EU and UK demanded the closure of a scam call centre, prompting law enforcement from Kyiv to travel to Dnipro to execute the operation.⁹³

Concerns are growing in Ukraine regarding the psychological impact of working in scam call centres on the employees. One activist stated, 'People who work in scam call centres for three years cannot return to normal life. They manipulate and lie.'⁹⁴ The head of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council, Mykola Lukashuk, echoed this sentiment: 'There are cases when scam call centres involve children as young as 14 or 15 in their work through social networks. What will become of these children in the future who are taught and instructed from childhood how to fool others?'⁹⁵ And although scam call centres may offer attractive salaries, they do not function as traditional workplaces, making it difficult for employees to leave in some cases. And while it may be easy to leave some call centres, in other cases, a discontented employee looking to leave might discover loans taken out in their name or even face physical assault.⁹⁶

The scale of the problem is extensive, not only in Dnipro but throughout Ukraine.⁹⁷ In part, Dnipro operatives have played a significant role in this spread, using their expertise to establish scam call centres in Kyiv, Odesa and other cities that actively recruit young men and women.⁹⁸

Corruption resurgent

According to a Dnipro-based activist, there was a period immediately after the Russian invasion when corruption levels in the city decreased, as officials were reportedly afraid to engage in corrupt practices.⁹⁹ However, since then, corruption appears to have resurfaced. A significant road scam involving the head and deputy head of the regional state administration resulted in the overinflation of prices, leading to a loss of UAH286 million (approximately US\$7 million) from the state budget.¹⁰⁰ Another scandal, involving the Dubinsky brothers, saw the regional administration attempting to secure European funding to renovate a building that had already been renovated before the invasion.¹⁰¹ The opportunity to scrutinize the crucial city budget for corruption risks has also diminished since the invasion; activists advocating for increased budget allocations for the military were barred from attending the council session where the 2024 budget was approved.¹⁰² As the activist noted, 'It is a clear violation of the law. I could go to a committee of the Verkhovna Rada in Kyiv – but not in Dnipro.'¹⁰³ In his recollection, December 2022 was the last time a corrupt procurement was discussed by the city's deputies.

In wartime, corruption and a lack of transparency can incur both security and financial costs. Reflecting on the budget allocation, the activist remarked, 'There are flowers to be planted, but the dragon's teeth [anti-tank defences] and city defences can wait.'¹⁰⁴ ■

A resilient drug economy and military clientele

The region has long been known for drug trafficking, particularly the production and sale of synthetic drugs. In 2021, law enforcement seized the largest haul of amphetamine in Ukraine's history: 120 kilograms from a factory capable of producing 300 kilograms per month, supplied to drug traffickers throughout Ukraine.¹⁰⁵

Arguably, the epicentre of the drug trade in the Dnipropetrovsk region is Kryvyi Rih. This large industrial city was dominated by the Twenties drug trafficking gang for three decades until the group was reported to have been dismantled in a police operation in 2023, with the last remnants allegedly eliminated in February 2024.¹⁰⁶ The gang evolved from a racketeering group in the 1990s into a highly complex and compartmentalized organization that generated a million US dollars a month and supplied drugs throughout Ukraine.¹⁰⁷ Control of the city was divided among six subsidiary groups, which had minimal contact with one other; drug laboratories were frequently relocated.¹⁰⁸ The gang even pioneered a unique method of selling drugs in plastic cocktail tubes colour-coded according to territory; if one of the gang's dealers was found selling outside his designated area, he would face punishment.¹⁰⁹ The disbandment of the group has removed a major player from the Kryvyi Rih drug

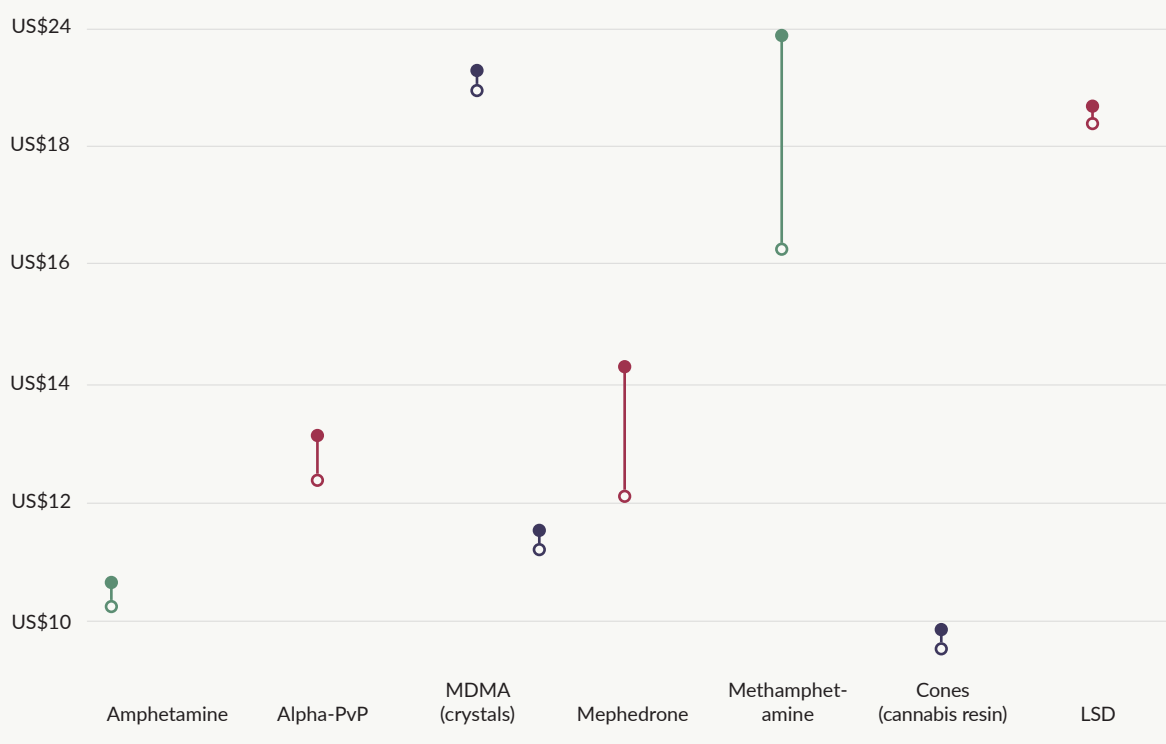


FIGURE 3 Drug prices in Dnipro in 2024 (per gram).

NOTE: Prices were calculated after three rounds of data collection.

● Maximum
○ Minimum

scene, but new drug trafficking organizations have quickly filled the void, including both former and new members of the Twenties.¹¹⁰

Drugs constitute a major part of the illicit economy in Dnipro, similar to trends observed throughout Ukraine. Sales are primarily conducted through Telegram, with deliveries made through dead drops and postal services. According to data collected by the GI-TOC, prices for drugs delivered through dead drops are generally on the lower end of the national price spectrum, particularly for amphetamines and mephedrone. As seen with the Twenties gang, drug trafficking groups in the Dnipropetrovsk region often have national aspirations. One gang, which distributed methamphetamine in Dnipro through dead drops and mail across the country, reportedly generated profits exceeding UAH10 million per month (approximately US\$240 000).¹¹¹ Additional smuggling methods include concealing drugs in food deliveries intended for prisons in the Dnipropetrovsk region.¹¹²

One of the most concerning aspects of the drug economy in Dnipropetrovsk is its proximity to military personnel stationed in and around the city. Research has indicated that drug use among Ukrainian service members is an escalating issue.¹¹³ In Dnipro, drug dealers are strategically positioned to exploit a relatively affluent clientele seeking to transport drugs back to the front lines for various purposes. Notably, one drug ring dismantled in August 2024 included an active soldier who sought to recruit new clients among his fellow service members.¹¹⁴ In another incident, from mid-2023, a drug ring, which had been operating under the protection of law enforcement agents, was broken up after selling methamphetamine to soldiers.¹¹⁵

While proximity is not the only determinant of soldiers accessing drugs – drugs have been delivered to soldiers in combat areas from as far away as Kyiv¹¹⁶ – the co-location of drug production facilities in the region, sophisticated drug trafficking networks and a military hub suggests significant risks regarding the accessibility of drugs among military personnel.



FUTURE RISKS

Dnipro's economic importance, illicit history and proximity to the front line amplify its criminal risks. The presence of entrenched organized crime groups in the city and the surrounding region, along with their connections to political authorities, poses a meaningful threat. The city's wealth largely insulates these groups from pressure exerted by Kyiv, while the front line may serve as a potential catalyst for the illicit trade in drugs and weapons.

It remains to be seen whether Dnipro's future will mirror the trends observed in the 1990s, when the intersection of organized crime, large corporations and politics produced figures of national significance in both the underworld and the upper echelons of society. One potential countertrend is that the impact of the war, particularly on the region's traditional industrial base, may accelerate the migration of organized crime from Dnipro (and similarly affected Kharkiv) to other areas of Ukraine and possibly beyond. Additionally, a combination of both scenarios is plausible, in which organized crime in Dnipro flourishes domestically and internationally, particularly in the realm of scam call centres – a local area of expertise.

As outlined in the introduction, control of the city will be the primary determinant. In this context, the release of Oliynyk from detention – after the investigation period prior to filing charges had expired – was cited by several sources as a significant development.¹¹⁷ His release was interpreted as a clear indication that Kyiv seeks a counterbalance to Mayor Filatov in the city, leveraging the influence that the central government holds over the judicial system.¹¹⁸ This was evidenced by the trial being relocated to Dnipro and the investigation's timeline being allowed to lapse without progress.¹¹⁹

Much remains uncertain about the Korban–Filatov duopoly following Korban's forced exile from Ukraine and Filatov's own statements indicating that he has not communicated with Korban since the citizenship incident.¹²⁰ Filatov has also expressed his desire not to pursue a lengthy political career in Dnipro, vowing to 'pack his suitcase and retire after two terms' (he is currently serving his second term until new elections are called).¹²¹ Whether such pledges are genuine remains to be seen. A media-savvy figure and a former journalist, Filatov has been the very public face of Dnipro since the invasion, taking pride in his city's role as a front line defence of the country. While he is not viewed as a contender for the presidency in the same regard as Vitali Klitschko, the mayor of Kyiv, his influence has undoubtedly increased, making it unlikely that he would simply walk away.

A bomb shelter in Dnipro. The city's proximity to the front line amplifies its criminal risks.

Photo: GI-TOC



What is clear is that, regarding illicit flows, the big-time city of Dnipro currently lacks a major player on the ground. It is possible that Dnipro, similar to Odesa, may in the future be governed by 'remote control', with the big bosses in exile; alternatively, new players may emerge, depending on the evolution of the conflict.

Ultimately, the situation in Dnipro will have repercussions for the entire country. If organized crime becomes exacerbated by the influx of drugs and weapons into the region, the consequences for Ukraine and beyond could be severe. Therefore, the city should be a primary focus for law enforcement agencies striving to intercept the shifting landscape of organized crime in Ukraine.



RECOMMENDATIONS

An in-depth investigation of the scam call centre economy is essential to understand its rise, and its significance within Ukraine and the climate of impunity that enables it to thrive. Analyzing the connections to law enforcement and other stakeholders is crucial for unravelling the network that profits from and sustains scam call centres. Additionally, it is necessary to examine the working practices within these centres to determine the extent of coercion and control over employees, particularly considering that some IDPs in Dnipro have been found working in scam call centres.

Given Dnipro's strategic location and its role as a military hub, it may be the most effective place to focus efforts on intercepting illicit arms flows returning from the front lines. This can be achieved through enhanced checks at railway and bus stations, strategic roadways and post offices. Additionally, public awareness campaigns encouraging individuals to register trophy weapons should be implemented throughout the region to ensure that a comprehensive record of these weapons is maintained.

Intelligence should be gathered to determine the extent to which drug trafficking organizations in the Dnipropetrovsk region are actively targeting serving military personnel as potential customers, as well as the methods they employ to develop this aspect of their business. This issue poses both national security and criminal concerns, considering the detrimental effects of drugs on soldiers' ability to operate effectively at the front line, as well as the potential long-term substance use issues that may arise thereafter.

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