



## Executive Summary

*Taming the Arsenal – Small Arms and Light Weapons in Bulgaria*, is a report on the findings of research conducted on questions relating to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Bulgaria from July to November 2004 by the Sofia-based Center for the Study of Democracy, and London-based Saferworld. It sets out the findings of a comprehensive assessment of the 1) distribution of SALW in Bulgaria; 2) the impacts of SALW on individuals, communities and the state; 3) public perceptions of SALW and security; and 4) the capacity of the state to control the proliferation and misuse of SALW. The main findings of the study are as follows:

### Distribution

- There are currently just over one million SALW in Bulgaria, approximately 300,000 of which are registered civilian weapons.
- The rate of legal weapon possession among civilians has nearly tripled in the last decade with the gradual easing of restrictions on civilian gun ownership and a growth in imports. An important professional group that can obtain a weapon relatively easily under the current domestic arms control regulations are former and current Ministry of Defence and Interior personnel who are automatically presumed to be safe and responsible owners. A growing number of private security companies are also stimulating the domestic trade in arms by relying on their employees to use personal weapons at work.
- The Bulgarian Armed Forces hold around 200,000 surplus SALW and 21,000 tons of surplus SALW ammunition. At present there is a national programme for the destruction of surplus ammunition but not for weapons. The Bulgarian Government's preferred choice for disposing of surplus weapons is sale, whether on the national or international market, rather than destruction. Despite this, around 100,000 surplus military SALW have so far been destroyed with the assistance of international donors, with whom discussions are ongoing.
- An illegal SALW market exists in the country, drawing on an estimated pool of some 93,000 unregistered weapons. The main sources for illicit weapons include: thefts from households, factories and military depots; cross-border smuggling; and illegal craft-manufacturing and remodelling. Across the country, there are thought to be several hundred individuals involved in the illegal production and trading of craft weapons at any one time. Illegal producers are generally ex-defence factory workers who manufacture illegal weapons using parts stolen from factories or who remodel gas-spray guns.
- Despite significant improvements in border management in the past three years, corruption and a lack of equipment leave Bulgaria susceptible to cross-border SALW smuggling, albeit in small amounts and as part of a wider trade in illicit goods. At present, illegal SALW traffic is most prevalent along the Turkey–Bulgaria–Serbia and Montenegro route.

### Impact

- Despite the widespread availability of SALW, both legal and illegal, the impacts on public health, community security and inter-ethnic relations are not serious.
- While Bulgaria's firearm homicide rate is much below that of other Central and Eastern European countries, the continued use of SALW by criminal gangs, and the growing proportion of crimes in which guns feature, are a concern.
- Absolute numbers of firearm homicides have decreased in recent years in line with a general decline in crime rates. The proportion of homicides committed with SALW has, however, increased during the same period.
- The proportion of females who fall victim to gun crime has doubled in the last three years, to the point where it now exceeds the global average.



## Perceptions

- Most Bulgarians are well informed about SALW issues, including domestic and international arms control laws, international and national production and export practices. They do not perceive SALW proliferation to be a serious security concern at this time and rank gun-related problems far below other issues such as unemployment, crime and corruption. Most appear to support their government's declared policy of prohibiting SALW exports to sensitive destinations.
- Most Bulgarians feel that the current domestic weapons permit regime is not restrictive enough and believe that stricter controls will increase the general level of security in the country.
- A majority of Bulgarians are afraid they will become a victim of crime, with crimes against property being their main concern. Fear of crime is the single most important driving force behind civilian demand for weapons, with hunting coming a close second.

## Capacity

- Bulgaria's SALW production capacity is much reduced in comparison to a decade ago with only 8,000 – 9,000 persons directly employed on SALW production at present. The privatisation of defence industries has had mixed effects with respect to SALW control. While conversions and sell-offs have reduced total output in the sector, the emergence of many smaller companies has placed a burden on the arms and dual-use goods and technologies regulatory system.
- The arms and dual-use goods transfer control system has been progressively tightened from 1996 onwards and the regulatory framework is now fairly comprehensive in scope. Proposed SALW exports are assessed on a case-by-case basis by a specialist commission composed of representatives from all key government ministries. Despite the reforms, several official transfers to potentially sensitive destinations are thought to have occurred in the last few years.
- The Bulgarian Government is an active participant in numerous international SALW fora, and regularly exchanges information at the international and regional level. However, levels of public transparency have not kept pace with international information exchange, and the Bulgarian public's right to obtain information on SALW is severely curtailed by secrecy laws. The country's first ever arms export report is long overdue and will shed much-needed light in this area.
- Although the system for issuing civilian weapon permits is strict, its application is often flawed. Vague criteria for assessing licence applications appears to invite corruption on the one hand while causing frustration to many gun owners.
- Police statistics show a high clear-up rate for SALW-related crimes in comparison with many other types of crime. One important exception is firearm crimes committed by organised criminal groups, most of which remain unsolved.
- The efforts of Bulgaria's law enforcement agencies to combat SALW crime are undermined by a weak judicial system that is characterised by corruption, long delays and light sentencing. Concerns also remain over the apparent continued impunity of high-profile individuals implicated in past illicit arms deals.
- Two previous 'temporary' SALW collection and registration schemes have been implemented at times of political tension, with little success. There is, however, little support for voluntary weapons collection among the public at this time and more interest in anti-crime measures.
- A small number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are active within the country, sporadically researching SALW issues and occasionally advocating for change. There have not as yet, however, been collaborative projects between them.