

# INTRODUCTION

After years of inaction, Bulgaria has taken important steps to curb the trade of arms to troubled regions and countries, including improvements in its licensing procedures, regulations and enforcement. However, more work needs to be done to tighten legal controls, improve enforcement and strengthen the capacity of Bulgarian governmental agencies to ensure that they have both the specialization and the necessary resources to implement the new policies and normative provisions. This is particularly crucial at a time when Bulgaria continues to face economic hardship and the country still retains huge surplus stocks of arms, in particular small arms and light weapons (SALW).<sup>2</sup>

A number of domestic pressures make the export of arms, particularly SALW, important to any Bulgarian government. On occasion, this has resulted in exports to countries in conflict and to governments with poor human rights records. These internal pressures, which slow the creation of a strong and functional arms export control system, include: the over-capacity of the Bulgarian defense industry for SALW production; the financial difficulties of many defense companies; and the social and economic importance of the defense industry to some regions. Additional factors such as strong organized criminal networks, a weak judiciary, registered firearms proliferation, corruption in customs and border controls and entrenched institutional interests, further obstruct the functioning and the improvement of the current arms export control system.

The best prospects for the future would be offered by the adoption of a national program combining strict implementation of existing arms export controls with a strategy to reduce the economic over-dependence of some regions on SALW production and with effective international assistance. Such steps would boost Bulgaria's credentials as a reliable producer and exporter of arms while seeking membership of the European Union. It would also put Bulgaria at the forefront of the Stability Pact's efforts to tackle SALW in South East Europe.

The current report is a first step towards achieving the above goal. A national assessment of existing arms export controls was undertaken by a team of Bulgarian experts from governmental institutions and non-governmental groups from January to May 2003. Building on Saferworld's previous research work on Bulgaria, this new assessment, whose findings have been used to develop this research report, provided more in-depth analysis of the key challenges posed by the Bulgarian arms control system and outlined ways to overcome such problems. The assessment focused on a range of issues, including the implementation of policy and legislation on arms export controls, the mechanisms, routes and circumstances involved in proliferation, trafficking and transport of SALW and the economic impact of stricter arms export controls on the regions where SALW production is an important source of income.

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<sup>2</sup> Definition of SALW was provided on page 9

The writing of this report was based on continuous partnership between governmental and non-governmental sectors. CSD formed a working group that included experts from the MoD, the MFA, the Mol, the Ministry of the Economy, and the University of National and World Economy. In May 2003, Saferworld, CSD, and the Atlantic Club organized a workshop that discussed the feasibility of a Bulgarian National Action Program. The conclusions of the workshop have also been integrated into this report.

A necessary element in the system of public accountability in the implementation of arms export controls is the involvement of civil society organizations. The participation of civil society in monitoring a traditionally secretive sphere of governmental activities is necessitated by the need for objective assessments, not influenced by political, institutional or commercial interests. Apart from NGOs working on humanitarian issues (e.g. the Bulgarian Red Cross), there has been little involvement of Bulgarian civil society in this area. The Atlantic Club of Bulgaria and the Center for the Study of Democracy are the only two other organizations that have been involved in organizing round-table discussions on the issue of arms controls. The current paper is the first of its kind in Bulgaria.