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The Conflict in Ukraine and its Impact on Organized Crime and Security

A SNAPSHOT OF KEY TRENDS

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The conflict in Ukraine, which erupted on 24 February 2022, has had dire consequences with disastrous levels of suffering, death, and destruction in the country. It has caused the fastest forced population movement since the Second World War, as more than eight million people have crossed the border, leaving their homes behind. The conflict has accentuated the region's political divides and caused significant geopolitical shifts.

As part of its mandate to prevent crime and promote justice, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has closely followed emergency security-related developments in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, monitoring new and nuanced threats since the beginning of the conflict. Before the current conflict, UNICRI has been present in Ukraine and the European Union's Eastern Partnership countries for over 15 years, working closely with governmental and non-governmental entities at the national and regional levels.

In March 2022, UNICRI responded to a request from Moldova's Ministry of Internal Affairs to identify key priority needs to support the design and implementation of an integrated security strategy to respond to the evolving regional security context. Through this assessment of new and nuanced security threats exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, UNICRI launched this research to assist all key stakeholders involved in justice, crime prevention, and security-related matters in the region.

The conflict in Ukraine has already altered the regional security landscape and will have lasting consequences on the international order. As the situation on the ground is dynamic and constantly evolving, it is difficult to accurately assess the transformational nature of these consequences and the international community's response. The analysis in this report suggests, however, that the conflict and Ukraine's resultant destabilization already have several significant implications for organized crime, illicit trafficking, and security challenges in multiple ways across its borders and globally. Some changes related to the trafficking of people, arms, drugs, and illicit goods may be permanent, while others may be transitory as power dynamics and physical threats shift. This constantly changing nature, and the fact that these crimes often cross borders thousands of miles away, can make confronting these challenges particularly difficult. The situation requires continuous analysis of evolving threats and risks, training and capacity building of the region's law enforcement, and updated public awareness campaigns.

The multiple and evolving challenges outlined in this report call for urgent common action. Regional cooperation is key as the challenges are common across the region. As transnational crime groups are increasingly outpacing national criminal justice responses, border law enforcement agencies need to improve cooperation and communication across borders and in the region to share real-time information and intelligence on criminal activities and trafficking routes. UNICRI will continue to leverage its expertise to advance understanding of new crime and security related trends and to tailor appropriate interventions. I look forward to working with our international and regional partners to contribute to enhancing collaboration across all levels in response to the urgent needs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

Antonia Marie De Meo
Director | UNICRI

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

- **AI**–Artificial Intelligence
- **ARO** – Asset Recovery Office
- **CBRN** – Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear materials
- **CEPOL**– European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training
- **CPC–** Criminal Procedure Code
- **DPR** – Donetsk People's Republic
- **EaP**– The Eastern Partnership
- **EMPACT**– European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats
- **EU** – European Union
- **Eurojust**– European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation
- **Europol**– European Union's Law Enforcement Agency
- **Frontex** – European Border and Coast Guard Agency
- **IAEA** – International Atomic Energy Agency
- **IDP** – Internally Displaced Person
- **LPR** – Luhansk People's Republic
- **NABU** – National Anti-corruption Bureau of Ukraine
- **NGO**– Non-Governmental Organization
- **NPP** – Nuclear Power Plant
- **OCG** – Organized Crime Group
- **OSCE**– Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- **OSINT**–Open-Source Intelligence
- **SAPO** – Specialised Anti-corruption Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine
- **SSU** – Ministry of State Security of Ukraine
- **UNICRI** – United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute
- **UNODC**– United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
- **USD** – United States Dollar

Executive Summary

This report assesses the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and its implications for organized crime and security-related issues for neighbouring countries, with a focus on Moldova. These include: i) Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking (including human trafficking, drugs, arms, illicit tobacco, and other goods); ii) Cybercrimes and Fraud; iii) Disinformation and Propaganda; and iv) Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) threats. This study provides key recommendations to inform concerned stakeholders at the national and regional level, to identify lessons learned and guide future initiatives to mitigate risks in the above-mentioned areas.

Conflicts usually weaken state capacity, resulting in a conducive environment for organized criminal activities. Criminal groups may take advantage of the chaotic and unregulated circumstances to smuggle various commodities under the fog of war, and these activities may become protracted and permanent once the active phase of the conflict is over. However, at the same time, the uncertainty and violence of conflict can also threaten traffickers, especially during active warfare.

The report found that illicit trade in various commodities suffered only temporary setbacks and rebounded soon. While some local production of illicit goods declined in the first weeks of the conflict, as the violence has progressed, human trafficking and the illicit markets in arms, drugs and other commodities have either grown or remained at the same level. The only lasting disruption as of writing appears to be the disintegration of illicit trade networks stretching across combat lines in Donetsk and Luhansk. While before February 2022, cross-border criminal cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian criminal groups was commonplace, this is no longer the case.

The conflict has allowed new and emerging organized criminal enterprises to develop and expand. New activities include the transportation of commercial goods under the guise of humanitarian aid; smuggling of deficit products, such as fuel and lubricants from neighbouring countries into Ukraine; smuggling of newly sanctioned goods; and trade in looted commodities, such as grain from Ukraine. The report also found that there isgrowing concern regarding the increasing flow of illegal firearms and illicit substances such as heroin and alpha-pvp towards the European Union. The availability of arms may increase the risk of crime and terrorism-related violence across Europe and beyond. The conflict has generated plenty of opportunities for traffickers and human smugglers, putting especially women and children at risk, and there is an urgent need for preventive and monitoring measures. Significant demand has also risen for the smuggling of military-aged men out of Ukraine.

These examples demonstrate how transnational crime can rapidly transform in Europe, its borderlands, and at its seaports. The conflict may result in changing routes and shifting production, allowing for new opportunities for criminal networks to emerge in Ukraine and across the wider region. Some changes

may be permanent, while others may be transitory as power dynamics and physical threats shift.

Armed conflict has also elevated the risks of radioactive emission from the occupied Chernobyl exclusion zone and Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plants while compromising security at various other facilities containing chemical, nuclear, radioactive, or biological materials. The vulnerabilities include the equally devastating potential for leakages and the risk of theft. The region has a history of illicit trafficking of dangerous materials, such as nuclear and radioactive substances. The implication for international security could be extremely damaging if some of these materials were stolen under the fog of war and diverted to the illegal market.

The conflict has not only impacted physical security but has also opened opportunities for various forms of cybercrime, including phishing attacks, fraud, and other deception schemes. Some of these have continued to evolve, while others are constantly appearing and targeting a wider audience. This constantly changing nature, and the fact that these crimes often cross borders thousands of miles away, can make confronting these challenges particularly difficult and requires continuous analysis of evolving threats and risks, training, and capacity building of the region's law enforcement, and updated public awareness campaigns.

Despite obvious limitations imposed by the conflict, Ukrainian and regional law enforcement structures have been performing effectively, even over-performing in some respects, such as cyberdefence. However, local, and wider regional law enforcement are not well-prepared to counteract new and emerging illegal flows of goods and substances and constantly evolving threats. They may find themselves in catch-up mode with innovative and highly skilled smugglers and cybercriminals,as international law enforcement cooperation was not prioritised from the very beginning of Ukraine's invasion.

Moldova, a small country with limited resources and lower capacity compared to Ukraine's EU member neighbours, could have benefited from more support at the immediate beginning of the conflict. Launching the EU Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management is a step in the right direction. However, more support, especially in capacity building, is needed as institutions do not have the knowledge and experience to deal with multiple complex and interrelated threats. As transnational crime groups are increasingly outpacing national criminal justice responses, border law enforcement agencies need to improve cooperation and communication across borders and in the region to share real-time information and intelligence on criminal activities and trafficking routes.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish or strengthen mobile cross-border/ anti-trafficking units drawing on proven expertise within European countries, Europol, Interpol, Moldovan, and Ukrainian law enforcement communities.

Given the overlaps in criminal networks involved in the trafficking of various commodities and emerging threats, it is paramount to establish or strengthen well-trained anti-trafficking / anti-smuggling units to directly blunt all major forms of cross-border trafficking and smuggling. Such work should include, where needed, the creation or strengthening of streamlined information-sharing mechanisms (e.g., to conduct controlled deliveries) and to identify and seize assets of those involved in cross-border trafficking and smuggling. The regional network of authorities established after February 2022 for sharing information and coordination on trafficking and organized crime should be considered in addressing this issue.

Establish ongoing research and intelligence systems as a key element to understanding and anticipating emerging threats.

Analysis of Europe-wide data on irregular trade and ever-evolving criminal modalities to transit through Europe's seaports and borders is needed. The conflict in Ukraine has fostered different modalities, particularly for smuggling and trafficking, and law enforcement agencies need to be regularly updated on these modalities and good practices to counter them. Based on such assessments and information exchange, customs and other law enforcement officials would be able to identify more targeted training needed to counter ongoing and emerging threats and to understand the value of seizures and confiscations.

Provide technical assistance to build capacity and professional skills tailored to law enforcement operational mandates.

Initiatives to strengthen counterparts connected to their operational work have delivered good results and should continue. For example, there is an urgent need to enhance the capacity of the National Police Academy in Moldova, including revising training curricula, developing a new training syllabus for specialist (and

continuing education) training courses, and, for management, creating more efficient and sustainable deployment of resources. Areas of particular focus for Moldovan law enforcement agencies include trafficking in persons, drug trafficking, trafficking of arms, cybercrime, the tracing and seizure of criminal assets, and enhancing community policing strategies and approaches. Moldova's Criminal Asset Recovery (CARA) would also benefit strongly from specialised training. Moldova also requires assistance in the field of crisis and emergency management on how to respond to security alerts such as bomb threats.

Support the development of a National Strategy and Action Plan to counter radiological and nuclear trafficking.

An effective strategy to mitigate CBRN risks of criminal, accidental or natural origin requires a very high level of and coordination both between different national agencies as well as amongcountries and International and Regional. A comprehensive CBRN Action Plan, should be jointly developed by all relevant agencies. Ukraine and Moldova have also highlighted a common need for advanced practical training for law enforcement and nuclear regulatory authorities in countries trafficking radiological material through detection, particularly by intelligence gathering and sharing. Additionally, ensuring that nuclear security practitioners are well-trained, while a long-term process, should be given priority. This entails creating and consolidating the capacities of trainers, developing, validating, and regularly updating training material, and mandating that such material is included within relevant training institutions (police academies, intelligence academies, and nuclear security training centres).

Consider conducting training and capacity building on chemical emergency response for the civilian population in Ukraine, given the potential risk of chemical or related incidents.

Relevant national authorities and emergency response personnel must practice how to manage incidents involving chemical warfare agents and toxic industrial chemicals. Such events, should they occur, could lead to potential public health emergencies of international concern.

Provide training and capacity building to prosecute chemical and biological crimes for investigators and prosecutors in Ukraine and Moldova.

Chemical and biological agents have been used deliberately to harm humans and the surrounding environment. Previous cases in other conflicts have shown the need to increase awareness and skills in investigating and prosecuting chemical and biological crimes. Multi-agency coordination and cooperation are essential for the successful investigation and prosecution of these criminal cases. Teams need an increased appreciation of the challenges and greater insight into the key considerations related to CBRN crimes.

Increase public awareness of the threat posed by cybercrime and disinformation and educate citizens on how to be better consumers of information.

It important to support the public to embrace a more sustained, pro-active approach towards online safety and to promote awareness and dialogue about online dangers. Strengthened outreach towards vulnerable and marginalised groups could increase their resilience to modalities employed by organized criminal groups and others engaged in fraud, thus limiting the opportunity for crime to flourish. Awareness raising may include budgets for regular, ongoing public awareness campaigns through the most widely used forms of media (such as television and/or social media). Consideration should be given to successful campaigns done in other countries while considering local dynamics.

Support and strengthen the implementation of updated cybersecurity strategies.

Moldova and Ukraine have expressed the need to harmonise their legislative framework with European and International requirements on cybersecurity. Countries could consider establishing a central cybersecurity governance mechanism while having an updated training of specialists in public institutions and technical platforms for exchanging information.

> **Support and monitor law-enforcement reform implementation in the longer term.**
>
> Opportunities for corruption and organized crime infiltration can abound in post-conflict contexts when governments are recipients of large sums of foreign aid and institutions do not have the necessary monitoring mechanisms. While the conflict continues and the reconstruction needs of Ukraine are not yet known, the international community needs to stand ready to support longer terms law-enforcement reform and specific initiatives such as addressing illicit financial flows to prevent and fight corruption.

1. Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND

The conflict in Ukraine has led to disastrous levels of suffering, death, and destruction. It has caused the fastest forced population movement since the Second World War as more than a quarter of the population of Ukraine– over 8 million people– have crossed the border, leaving their homes behind.[1] Since the beginning of the conflict refugees have passed though Moldova alone, of which more than half are children. [2] The conflict has accentuated the region's political divide and brought major geopolitical shifts. These changes are exacerbating pre-existing conflicts that may further weaken political stability in the region.

Conflict and instability have long been fertile ground for organized crime and criminal networks, to which Ukraine and the wider region are no exception. In April 2022, Europol hosted a European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) meeting to focus on operational actions linked to threats of serious and organized crimes emerging from the conflict in Ukraine. Following this meeting, the EMPACT community warned that the conflict in Ukraine might lead to increased criminal activities. This EMPACT report called for swift and coordinated action from the international community. [3]

Assisting Member States to better understand emerging and evolving issues related to justice and security is a key strategic priority for the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). As one of six specialized research and training institutes of the United Nations, UNICRI is mandated to advance the understanding of crime and crime-related problems, foster just and efficient systems, support respect for international standards, and facilitate international law enforcement cooperation and judicial assistance.

UNICRI has been present in Ukraine and Moldova for over 15 years, closely

coordinating with governmental and non-governmental entities at the national and regional levels. UNICRI has worked with the State of Ukraine and Moldova within the framework of the European Union's Centres of Excellence Initiative for Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) safety. This includes capacity building on biosafety and biosecurity, CBRN waste management capabilities, and medical preparedness and response capabilities.

In June 2020, UNICRI launched the "CONTACT – Black Sea" project. CONTACT-Black Sea worked to enhance the capacities of security and law enforcement agencies to prevent the trafficking of radiological and nuclear material through a "detection by intelligence" approach. As part of its action-oriented research on Illicit Financial Flows, UNICRI

has also provided key recommendations to Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities to streamline the seizure and confiscation of assets linked to corruption, organized crime, and other criminal activities that impact regional security.[4]

In March 2022, UNICRI responded to a request from Moldova's Ministry of Internal Affairs to identify key priority needs to support the design and implementation of an integrated security strategy to respond to the evolving regional security context. Through this assessment, UNICRI identified the need for an updated analysis of new and nuanced security threats exacerbated by the conflict. UNICRI decided to launch this research to assist all key stakeholders involved in justice, crime prevention, and security-related matter in the region.

1.2 SCOPE OF THE REPORT

From the ongoing assessment of the conflict and its impacts on neighbouring countries, UNICRI has identified many key issues that merit an updated analysis. This study provides a situational report and explores the broad implications of the conflict in Ukraine on the region and in Moldova in particular. Further study is needed with respect to the impact of the conflict on other neighbouring countries, such as Poland and Romania. Still, for purposes of this report, the following four overarching themes were identified:

The four themes were selected based on UNICRI's expertise in global organized criminal activity and on targeted interviews, analysis, and research in Ukraine and Moldova.

» Organized crime and illicit trafficking (including human trafficking, drugs, arms, illicit tobacco and other goods)

» Cybercrime and fraud

» Disinformation and propaganda

» Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats

Based on an overview of regional trends, this report will inform the response and programming activities in Ukraine and Moldova by multiple stakeholders (and could be used as an indicator for responses in other neighbouring countries,

as well as, where needed, additional Western European countries). The Government of Moldova and other international agencies working in the region also contributed to defining the parameters of this report. According to a World Bank assessment in April 2022, Moldova is likely to be one of the countries most affected by the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine due both to its physical proximity and inherent vulnerabilities as a small, landlocked economy with close linkages to both Ukraine and Russia[5].

The overall structure of the report takes the form of five main chapters. This first section (**chapter one**) lays out the study's methodological approach. **Chapter two** provides a brief context and history of organized crime in Ukraine and Moldova. **Chapter three** describes the broad impact of the conflict on organized crime and law enforcement's response, with the next sections (**chapter four** to **chapter eight**) outlining the key trends shaping the current moment and their likely trajectory. Given the dynamic and agile nature of organized crime and the evolving conflict situation, these trend assessments require continued analysis and regular updates to provide an accurate base for further, more specified research. Lastly, **chapter nine** provides key recommendations to inform concerned stakeholders at the national and regional levels and guide future initiatives to mitigate risks in the above-mentioned themes.

1.3 A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The first stage of this research entailed a detailed review of available literature in English, Russian, and Ukrainian related to organized crime and security in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. The secondary sources of information included scholarly publications, legislation, official statements, LEXIS and FACTIVA databases for smuggling and trafficking cases, government agencies, and reports by international organizations on emerging threats and risks. Some of the allegations referenced throughout the report come from Russian-based outlets and are challenging to confirm.

The data collection methodology consisted of gathering and analysing qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, both online and in person, with law enforcement officers, experts, UN agencies, representatives of consumer industries, particularly tobacco and pharmaceutical, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). By necessity, some of these sources are anonymised. In June and September 2022, UNICRI conducted two mission visits to Chisinau, Moldova, to better understand the impact of the conflict on the country and its responses to pre-identified security threats. Representatives of the Ministry of Interior, including the Policy Directorate and the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situation, were interviewed by UNICRI's team of experts. Such inputs are also reflected in this study.

The interview questions were adapted depending on the respondents' expertise and the specific topic of interest. However, the main scope remained consistent. Interviewees were asked about new and emerging forms of illegal activities, how to better address them and the gaps in law enforcement capacity in counteracting these threats. Some of the interview questions included:

1. What are the new forms of smuggling and trafficking emerging due to the conflict?

2. How are the pre-existing forms of smuggling and trafficking changing?

3. Who are the key actors (e.g., state military units, armed non-state actors, individual military officers, businesspeople) in smuggling activities? Did the conflict lead to the reshuffle of actors?

4. How are the routes and *modus operandi* of smuggling and trafficking changing?

5. What are the key challenges in the cyber sphere during the conflict? How did the threat of cyber-attacks change since the outbreak of hostilities?

6. How would you assess the likelihood of elevated risk of smuggling in chemical, biological, radioactive and nuclear trafficking in the aftermath of the conflict?

7. What are the capacity gaps in addressing these threats (related to specific law enforcement structures or broader governance regimes)?

2. Contextual Background

This section provides an overview of organized crime in Ukraine and Moldova and the dynamics shaping it before the conflict.

This contextual background is based on an analysis of secondary literature.

2.1 OVERVIEW OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN UKRAINE

Organized crime has historically been a major issue in Ukraine, as the Ukrainian 2019 National Risk Assessment emphasises.[6] In 2019, the World Economic Forum ranked Ukraine 113th out of 137 countries after assessing the state's ability to respond to organized crime and minimize its impact on business.[7] Ukraine's professional organized criminals, so-called *vory-v-zakone* or 'thieves in law', emerged from the gulag system as key actors in the Post-Soviet transition. Once out of prison, these criminals took control of lucrative extortion rackets and illicit trafficking routes. These groups established near-monopolies over illicit

markets, with some racketeering schemes being successfully converted into legally owned enterprises. Several widely known oligarchs came out from this underworld.[8] In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the early and mid-1990s were characterized by criminal violence motivated by competition over previously state-held resources. However, the Ukrainian government was able to reclaim its authority in the early 2000s. Since then, while the power of thieves-in-law has decreased, state capture by criminal actors has been an endemic issue in Ukraine. This involvement is exemplified by some government actors

protecting criminal actors and facilitating the illicit trafficking of various goods.

Ukraine shares its eastern border with Russia, its northernborder with Belarus, and its westernborder with the European Union. The Black Sea demarcates Ukraine's southern border. This unique geographical position makes Ukraine an advantageous location for internationally networked organized crime groups to base their operations. These groups orchestrate human trafficking, drug trafficking, smuggling of regulated goods (tobacco, firearms, and timber) and counterfeit products, cybercrime, and threat of digital infrastructure.[9] In particular, over the past decade, Ukraine has emerged as an important source and transhipment point of illegal consumer products. By 2020, Ukraine displaced China as the leading supplier of illegal tobacco products to Europe.[10] Most organized groups operated in Crimea, the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia.[11] Most of these groups vary by city and region, with opaque dynamics that only become evident when a power vacuum arises from within their organization. Odesa has historically been a significant logistical and strategic centre for criminal networks because of its position as a transport hub and port on the Black Sea, which criminal organizations have used to smuggle drugs, fuel, alcohol, cigarettes, and other goods out of Ukraine. It was host to some of the most sophisticated smuggling networks in the country and the wider region, having collusive

links in the city administration, central government in Kyiv, the criminal underworld, and large business structures.[12]

The previous armed conflict in the Donbas region was a contributing factor to the activity of organized crime in the country[13]. The conflict began in 2014 between the Ukrainian government and two non-state armed actors – the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). DPR and LPR had effectively become 'bandit kingdoms' sustaining themselves mostly by smuggling and contraband.[14] These smuggling networks also had a close relationship with their counterparts in Russia due to their shared business interest that emerged in the post-Soviet period. Before February 2022, Russia and Ukraine's legal and illicit actors had few qualms about doing illegal business together. Illegal trade in various commodities across the contact line in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions was prevalent. According to various sources, the trade was led by a network of security services and government customs officials, protected by the military, facilitating or directly participating in it.[15] A Transparency International study in 2019 documented various cases before February 2022 when the combatants from all sides collaborated to facilitate illegal trade while continuing to launch military campaigns against each other.[16] Sometimes, military confrontation was caused by disagreements over the division of smuggling spoils.

2.2 PRE-CONFLICT GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

In 2021, Ukraine scored 32/100 on the corruption index of Transparency International and was ranked 121 out of 180

countries.[17] Ukraine has suffered from corruption for many years, characterized by the informal connections between

government officials, law enforcement agencies, managers of State-Owned Enterprises, and politically connected individuals and companies. State budget losses due to corruption, fraud and contraband schemes have been significant. Following the Euromaidan protests in 2014, preventing and fighting corruption became a national priority, and independent investigative, prosecutorial, and judicial institutions were established. As a result of the reforms, the number of convictions for high-level corruption has increased despite political pressure and undue interference.[18] The heads of two key agencies (the National Anti-corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and Specialised Anti-corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) were appointed in a transparent process, though in 2019 and 2020, there were reports of interference in their activities and attempts to undermine their investigations, including efforts to remove the director of NABU.

A major accomplishment in the fight against corruption was adopting an anti-oligarchic law in late 2021 that introduced a legal definition for an oligarch and made it a requirement for public officials to declare relations with them. Among other aspects, the law also forbade oligarchs from financing political parties or participating in privatisations.[19] In recent years, there were other successful initiatives, most notably the establishment of an e-procurement system, *ProZorro,* which transferred all major public tenders to a transparent online system; and the electronic asset declaration system of public servants, which enabled transparency over government officials' assets and earnings. Nevertheless, Ukraine's pre-conflict progress against corruption was limited, as reflected in the Transparency International perception index and World Bank's governance indicators mentioned above.

2.3 OVERVIEW OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN MOLDOVA

Transnistria Region

Chişinău ●

Tiraspol ●

Organized crime is a significant issue for Moldova. In 2017, the World Bank ranked Moldova 94th out of 137 countries with respect to combating organized crime.[20] Located on the very edge of the European Union, Moldova's geographical location is attractive to international organized crime groups wishing to smuggle illicit products between Europe and Asia. The principal criminal activities in Moldova are corruption, tax evasion, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, tobacco smuggling and the smuggling of illicit goods. Other organized criminal offences in recent years include counterfeiting, environmental crime, murder, and kidnapping.[21]

2.4. TRANSNISTRIA

Moldova's vulnerabilities related to criminal activities are amplified by the autonomous separatist region of Transnistria, which is located in the east of the country, bordering Ukraine.[22] It declared independence from Moldova in 1992, and after a brief armed conflict with Moldovan authorities, the region has largely acted autonomously. Transnistria is not recognised domestically or internationally as an independent state but has its parliament, president, economic system, and currency. An estimated 469,000 people live in Transnistria[23], and the region is defined by its porous border and an unstable and unregulated political and economic environment. This creates opportunities and incentives for organized crime to flourish.[24] Like the South Ossetian region in Georgia, Transnistria's economy has been heavily dependent on the illicit economy, including the smuggling of weapons, alcohol, oil, drugs, pharmaceuticals, tobacco and other goods.[25] Some major cases of smuggling in illegal and

dangerous commodities have been linked to Transnistria, most infamously, alleged arms diversion from the Soviet arms stockpile in Kolbasna[26] and several cases of smuggling in radioactive and nuclear materials.[27] However, although the region has reported a history of serving as a transit point for illegal weapons and a training ground for terror groups, there is little qualitative information indicating that there have been any significant weapons seizures. The key generator of illicit income and most smuggled commodities are illicit tobacco and illicit ethanol/spirits, which also represent huge illegal cash-flow and are considered to be a corrupting influence on the Moldovan economy and the Moldovan political system. While the region remains principally outside Moldovan government regulation, Moldova and Ukraine have taken substantial steps to establish greater control over the border in recent years.

2.5 PRE-CONFLICT GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

Moldova has a generally comprehensive legal system for applying effective anti-organized crime measures. In recent years, the country has revised its framework to align with European standards and practices more closely. Moldova has made considerable progress in combating organized criminal activity and dismantling criminal organisations in recent years. For example, Moldova has invested in bolstering its framework and capacity to combat human trafficking.[28] Moldova has prioritised joint investigations and operations with other governments and multilateral organisations. However, even Moldovan authorities recognise that there

is still much to be done to counter human trafficking. With recent amendments to the Criminal Code, CPC, and Contravention Code (law adopted on customs/ tax policy for 2021), and starting from January 2021, Moldova has strengthened penalties and enforcement on smuggling and vested the Customs Service with criminal investigation and prosecutorial powers. Moldova has had an operational agreement with Europol since 2014, demonstrating its commitment to regional initiatives. It is one of 12 non-EU countries with a liaison office at Europol. Moldova also has a cooperation agreement with Eurojust, the EU's Judicial Cooperation Agency.[29]

3. The Impact of Conflict on Organized Crime and Law Enforcement

There is a complex nexus between armed conflicts and organized crime. Conflicts usually weaken state capacity, resulting in a conducive environment for organized criminal activities. For instance, criminal groups may take advantage of chaotic and unregulated circumstances to smuggle various commodities under the fog of war. However, uncertainty and violence can also threaten traffickers, especially during active military warfare. Criminal activities may become protracted and permanent once the active phase of the conflict is over.

Since February 2022, several contrasting accounts have emerged on changes to the landscape of criminal activities in Ukraine and Moldova. Some illegal networking schemes, such as arms and human trafficking, experienced a significant boost from the conditions of conflict. Other industries, such as illicit trade in timber, have plummeted. Conflicting reports of increasing and decreasing use of bribery and corruption are also being circulated.

Despite these contradictory reports, the Ukrainian–Russian conflict has allowed new and emerging organized criminal enterprises to develop and expand. New activities include transporting commercial goods under the guise of humanitarian aid;[30]smuggling deficit products, such as fuel and lubricants from neighbouring countries into Ukraine; smuggling newly sanctioned goods; and trading looted commodities, such as grain, from Ukraine.

These examples demonstrate how transnational crime can rapidly transform in Europe, its borderlands, and at its seaports. The conflict may result in changing routes and shifting production, allowing for new opportunities for criminal networks to emerge in Ukraine and across the wider region. Some changes may be permanent, while others may be transitory as power dynamics and physical threats shift. As of October 2022, Odesa is no longer the regional smuggling hub it used to be before the conflict. As illicit and unregulated cargo has been rerouted to physically safer ports, it is uncertain whether the illicit cargo will return to previous trafficking routes, such as through Odesa.

3.1 THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS ON REGIONAL SMUGGLING

Another consequence of the conflict on the landscape of criminal activities in the region is linked to the comprehensive set of sanctions imposed on Russia by various countries following the invasion of Ukraine. Likewise, Russia has banned certain European-produced products from entering its territory. These

barriers are a key factor when analysing unregulated and illicit trade and smuggling activities and may contribute to the emergence of new networks and illegal markets in the region.

For instance, despite the high demand for luxury products and microchips from European countries to Russia, the international community banned their sale and subsequent entry to Russian entities. To fill this void, illicit networks have emerged to meet the demand. Due to these sanctions, smuggling networks are likely to become more innovative. Law enforcement measures to detect and seize these illegal flows will most likely be in catch-up mode, struggling to predict the new *modus operandi* of traffickers. In one instance, a truck load of these goods was intercepted at the border with Belarus. According to the truck's official paperwork, it claimed to be carrying automobile spare parts destined for Russia. After examination, it appeared that this was a disassembled luxury Range Rover car and, therefore, as a banned export, illegal cargo.[31]

The efforts of Russia-based exporters and importers to evade sanctions may sometimes involve Moldova as networks and enterprises may attempt to circumvent through Transnistria. In the past, goods allegedly destined for Transnistria were illegally diverted to Moldova and onwards to the EU.[32] In May 2022, a Moldovan politician warned against attempts to use similar transshipment schemes by sanctioned Russian companies. These companies may deliver metal using fake documents through Moldovan territory to Transnistria. Following this route, these companies might re-introduce these

products in the Moldovan market without indicating their source.[33]

Part of the sanctioned goods may be supplied to Belarus and Russia from Ukraine itself.[34] Some Ukrainian commercial and political entities on Ukraine's territory have been reported to be supporting Russian profits and products laundering schemes. Ukrainian Ministry of Justice officials charged a Ukrainian individual with helping a Russian business to launder money using a Cypriot company, registering their accounts into a private bank in Ukraine.[35] In another case from April 2022, a large shipment of Russian metal worth over the US$3 million million was discovered in one of the seaports in the Odesa region. This captured shipment was an attempt to smuggle metal via Ukrainian territory.[36] There are also attempts to supply the Russian military-industrial complex with Ukrainian products. These products may come from the sanctioned and Russian-owned plant in Dnipro, which the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) prevented from resuming military supplies to Russia[37]. Given the close linkages of Russian and Ukrainian smuggling networks, similar cases would not be surprising.

Considering the new routes, networks, and illegal markets that may emerge in response to the conflict and related international sanctions, law enforcement agencies in the region should receive support on how to deploy adequate response mechanisms to counteract their development and potential impacts on regional security.

As the emphasis was on humanitarian assistance and military aid, international police cooperation was not prioritised in the early days of the conflict.[38] Resources were allocated to support Ukrainian citizens fleeing the conflict towards the EU and assist front-line border agents in adapting to the humanitarian crisis. As a result, there was less focus on cross-border crime.

Ukrainian law enforcement has been overwhelmed with new assignments, and police capacity suffered significantly during the first few weeks of the conflict. For instance, border authorities from neighbouring countries reported that Ukraine border guards would have to leave their posts frequently, leaving the entire management up to the counterparts across the border.[39] Such increased demands could also negatively impact law enforcement agencies' capacity to protect the country's vulnerable targets, whose overall security is critical during active fighting.

Despite the many challenges, the number of border seizures and arrests throughout Ukraine indicates that SSU, police officers and border guards largely remained capable of carrying out their daily tasks. More generally, State institutions maintained a certain degree of efficiency in counteracting organized crime, but allegations of corruption are still numerous. in March and the first half of April 2022 there were 76 attempts to bribe Ukrainian border guards.[40] Considering that most corruption cases go unreported and undetected, this could represent a small portion of a much larger problem. In April 2021, President Zelenskyi ordered the firing of 125

employees of the State Customs Service following allegations they were complicit or complacent with contraband, including many in senior positions within various regions of Ukraine. The President also initiated legislation against the purported smugglers,[41] which indicates that Ukraine has started to focus on threats related to smuggling. According to interviews with selected experts, Kyiv understands the problem's urgency. However, it is unclear whether the reshuffle of personnel will solve the issue or might simply lead to the redistribution of profits gained from smuggling from one elite group to another.[42]

The fast-changing security landscape also requires cross-border cooperation and continuous information exchange. The prioritisation of police and regional cooperation improved when Interpol's missions were deployed to Moldova in March,[43] and the EU Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) agencies (including CEPOL, EIGE, EMCDDA, EUAA, Eurojust, Europol, FRA, and Frontex) started supporting Ukraine, Moldova, and the EU Member States to bring law enforcement agencies closely together in fighting serious and organized crime. Following the initiative of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EM-PACT) community to assess, anticipate, prevent and counter existing or emerging serious and organized crime threats, the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) conducted a training needs analysis of law enforcement on a variety of topics.[44] This analysis found that law enforcement and other professionals across Europe have expressed the need for assessing up-to-date information on changing patterns of existing

and new criminal groups, as well as specific training on digital skills and the use of new technologies.

In June 2022, the EU announced that it would establish the Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management in July to support Moldova, one of the most vulnerable countries in Ukraine's Western border, in the fight against organized crime.[45] The hub will focus on combating firearms trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, terrorism and violent extremism, and countering cybercrime and drug trafficking. This is a significant qualitative improvement and scaling up of the existing EU operational presence in Moldova, which has mostly been grounded in the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine.

The Government of Moldova will continue to require urgent support. Representatives of the Ministry of Interior, including the Policy Directorate and the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situation, indicate that there is a need to strengthen the capacity and knowledge of the law enforcement community in light of both new and increasing threats and trends in organized crime, including trafficking in persons, drug trafficking, trafficking of arms, and cybercrimes, as well as strategic analysis and new investigative techniques. Moreover, Moldova has expressed concern about decreasing public order, and they have faced challenges responding to the increased number of fake bomb threats across the country, further stretching law enforcement resources.

4. Human Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons: Key Trends

Traffickers have recruited and exploited victims in Ukraine, and Ukrainians have been recorded as trafficked both domestically and internationally for many years.[46] Moldova has also been a country of origin and transit for trafficking Moldovan citizens domestically and internationally for sexual and labour exploitation. The Balkans have traditionally been a common transit point for both countries, with the Russian Federation, Poland, Italy, and Germany being key destinations.[47] In recent years, Ukraine has adopted various anti-trafficking measures,[48] such as increasing the number of investigations and doubling the number of traffickers convicted. However, the conflict inevitably stunted their enforcement. On 4 March 2022 the Ukrainian government communicated to the UN Secretary-General that it could not guarantee full implementation of the Palermo protocols until territorial integrity was restored.[49]

The conflict has generated additional opportunities for traffickers and human smugglers

There is already established evidence that conflict is a key driver of human trafficking.[50] While the real number of human trafficking cases is often not known for a long time after the conflict, as victims may not recognize they are being exploited and take time to come forward – it is clear that the conflict in Ukraine has increased trafficking in the region.

The conflict has generated opportunities for traffickers and human smugglers (especially for undocumented migrants, given that Ukrainians can benefit from a visa-free regime for entering the EU), ranging from providing illicit services to forging documents and smuggling men of military age across the Ukrainian border (these men are banned from leaving Ukraine by the law)[51] to abusing the vulnerable status of refugees in host countries. Of the millions who fled Ukraine, 90% are women or children[52]– the primary and most vulnerable targets for trafficking.

The potential risks to IDPs and refugees are diverse inside and outside Ukraine, including forced labour, illegal surrogacy, forced begging, and sexual exploitation.[53] UNODC has identified the categories of people that are at heightened risk of trafficking. This includes unaccompanied and separated children; people who cannot access Temporary Protection because they are not eligible or due to lack of information or incorrect information; non-Ukrainians, including undocumented and stateless people; Roma people; LGBTQI+ people; older adults; and mentally and physically disabled, people.[54] Unaccompanied and

separated children[55] are particularly vulnerable, and some might have already fallen victim to human trafficking rings which have operated in Eastern Europe for decades.[56]

According to the EU solidarity platform, multiple investigations have been initiated in European countries for human trafficking linked to the conflict in Ukraine.[57]

The activation of temporary protection by the EU and the possibility of visa-free travel for Ukrainians meant a temporary lower demand for migrant smuggling services. However, the chaotic situation at the beginning of the conflict established favourable conditions for human traffickers to deceive, abuse, and/or exploit refugees and internally displaced people. While it was impossible to verify, there were reports of Ukrainian women being offered free transportation and accommodation by suspected pimps at the Polish border and near refugee shelter points.[58] Even if done with good intentions, the provision of service by unvetted volunteers and volunteer organizations also exposed displaced Ukrainians to the risk of exploitation. La Strada, an important European anti-trafficking NGO, reported that Ukrainian girls were offered plane tickets to countries like Mexico by men without ever having met them.[59]

In June 2022, Ukrainian prosecutors claimed to have stopped the activities of a criminal gang that forced women into sex work abroad after luring them with false adverts for legitimate employment.[60] The suspected leader of the trafficking ring based in Kyiv was arrested for trafficking a 21-year-old Ukrainian woman across Hungary and Austria to Türkiye with the false promise of a legitimate job offer. The investigators for this case suspected that more women were being exploited in Türkiye In March 2022, two Chinese nationals were arrested for trying to smuggle undocumented children out of Ukraine into Romania.[61] Moldovan law enforcement officials have also been put on high alert against potential organ trafficking and child trafficking cases.[62] From March to June 2022, Moldova registered 778 minors who tried to cross the border without a legal representative.[63] Law enforcement cooperation is still challenging in the current context, with issues like the identification and reporting of cases and information sharing.

Previous research has highlighted how conflict increases the demand for goods and services derived from exploitative labour, especially in at-risk sectors in receiving countries, such as agriculture, construction, and cleaning services.[64] Traffickers can lure victims by creating foster predatory relationships with potential victims contacted through social media. Risks for victims are particularly severe in Russia, where tens of thousands of Ukrainians trafficked there before 2019 found themselves in modern slavery. In Europe, the problem may become more acute when refugees enter the labour force, with some finding employment in the informal or criminal economy. Several longer-term issues will need to be considered to address potential risks for individuals in Ukraine, particularly once the conflict is over and the EU Temporary Directive is no longer applicable. Many NGOs focusing on this

issue have claimed that while it is challenging to track the full extent to which people are lured into exploited labour, they have received more reports of women asking for help. Media outlets, OSCE, and other reports have cited Thomson Reuters data indicating "huge spikes in online searches for explicit content and sexual services from Ukrainian women and girls." The UK searches for "Ukrainian escorts" increased by 200% after the breakout of the conflict. "Ukrainian porn" saw a 600% increase in internet interest in Spain and a 130% increase in Poland. The pattern is the same in other European countries.[65] This is a worrying trend, as roughly 40% of sex trafficking victims have been recruited online, as reported by UNODC in 2021.[66]

Significant demand has risen for the smuggling of military-aged men out of Ukraine

Since martial law was passed prohibiting Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country, demand for smuggling services for these young men has also increased. Fixers play an important part in all types of smuggling. Some fixers are more organized and specialise in specific services, such as the border transfers of military-age males. Some have elaborate ways of advertising their services via social media (mostly Telegram since this is among the most popular platforms in Ukraine). In contrast, others keep a low profile and can only be found via networks in the border communities. Depending on the service, fixers charge a fee; for example, if they help transport cash across the border, they will charge five to 10% of the total amount to be transported. For smuggling military-age males, their fees may range within $1,000 and $3,000.[67]

According to Ukrainian media sources, young men have been trying to cross the border using various justifications, such as claiming they need to take their children to a refugees helter and losing the other parent after the bombardment. This only constitutes a crime for Ukraine; once men cross the border, they are still detained by border guards of the neighbouring countries. Their entry into these countries is not illegal per se, so they are almost always released unless they carry illicit firearms.[68] Moldova alone has registered over 2,500 illegal state border crossing cases in which 4,659 people were involved, 99% of wwhom h were military-age males.[69] The Moldovan Border Police have also detected three cases of people being smuggled in cars across the state. Moldova's authorities have expressed concern that, as they have no access to the Ukrainian army's prison database, they have no way of determining the level of danger that some of these individuals may pose to the country.

In response to the fear of facing problems upon return to Ukraine, having crossed the border illegally, illicit service providers have emerged within the country. According to sources within Ukraine, these providers claim to have access to to relevant government databases, so they can create fake entries to attribute disabilities or other urgent medical conditions that could facilitate legal cross-border trips.[70] The price for similar services ranges from$3,000 to $7,000.[71] One telegram channel, called *Belyi Bilet,* which was still active at the

time of writing with more than 3,000 subscribers, is advertising the services of removing military-age males from conscription based on fake medical conditions. The group claims to be connected to the military enlistment office. In another proposed scheme, men are offered to exit Ukraine as lorry drivers for humanitarian aid. Reportedly they carry fake documents claiming that they are travelling to Europe to collect items for humanitarian assistance from there. In. Bribery is a key factor facilitating this kind of passage. In another scheme, illicit service providers were backdating border crossing in government databases capitalising on corrupt connections in the border agency of Ukraine.[72] Similar schemes have also recently been uncovered by SSU in the Ivano-Frankyivsk region. Law enforcers detained an organized group that would help men

cross the border with fictitious documents 'confirming' that the men supposedly belonged to volunteer organisations. On this basis, their names were entered into a database of persons allowed to cross the border.[73]

In conclusion, since the beginning of the conflict, many UN agencies and civil society organizations have partnered with governments of receiving countries to provide information and critical services to people at risk of trafficking. However, despite these efforts, the threats persist. Authorities in Moldova highlighted the lack of recorded cases of human trafficking amongst refugees arriving from Ukraine and the need for more training to monitor the country's borders.

5. Trafficking of Drugs and Arms: Key Trends

5.1 DRUG TRAFFICKING

Evidence from other conflicts suggests that traffickers often use to use alternative routes, as areas of active military combat may become too risky for their operations. Although Ukraine is not a major drug source country, before the conflict, its location next to several important drug trafficking routes into Western Europe made it a critical transit country. Ukraine was an attractive route for Afghan heroin destined for Western Europe, although the amount trafficked was smaller compared to opiate flows moved along the Balkan route. Afghan opiates would travel through Iran, Türkiye, Mariupol, and Odesa.[74] Ukrainian seaports also served as a major conduit for Latin American cocaine destined for Europe and Russia. Drug smuggling was also present across the Moldova–Ukraine border, with significant seizures reported in 2021.

Pre-conflict Ukraine also hosted many clandestine laboratories producing synthetic drugs (including amphetamine, methamphetamine, and alpha-PVP), covering the needs of Poland, Romania, Moldova, Belarus, and Russia. In 2020 alone, 79 such laboratories were dismantled, the highest number of disassembled labs reported in the world.[75] There were attempts to move some of the synthetic drug laboratories to Moldova, and there were reports of criminals looking for chemists with relevant skills in Chisinau.

Pre-conflict heroin and cocaine trafficking routes have been altered

Under these new conditions, shipping via the Black Sea is problematic. Smugglers are therefore opting for new routes to reach their markets. Some smuggling may be rerouted to the already significant Balkan route or diverted to the Baltic Sea routes. In April 2022, in cooperation with Europol, Estonian customs officers seized 3.5 tonnes of cocaine shipped from Latin America worth around half a billion euros in the Estonian port of Muuga.[76] This is one of the largest seizures in the Baltic and Nordic regions, representing an observable implication of this changing shipping landscape. In Spring–Summer 2022, Türkiye has also seen record seizures of cocaine from South America.[77]

Amphetamine manufacturing is continuing in Ukraine and expanding in neighbouring countries

According to the interviews done in Moldova, most synthetic drugs continue to flow unabated from Ukraine.[78] In June 2022, an eight-person organized crime group was dismantled, bringing more than 10kg of drugs from Ukraine to Moldova.

Moldovan police seized several large batches of drugs, including Alpha-pvp, amphetamines, and marijuana. Overall between April and July 2022 Moldovan police have detected five cases of illicit trafficking in drugs seizing 14.9 kg of PVP.[79] This indicates that illicit drug production is still active in Ukraine and may be trying to expand to neighbouring countries and use Moldova as a transit corridor to Western markets. Afghanistan's move into large-scale ephedra-based methamphetamine production could also have implications. The EU drug agency has expressed concerns that cheap Afghan meth could make its way to Europe through Ukraine along the pre-established Balkan route. As with other synthetic drugs, any increase in demand for the drug could likely be met by an increase in domestic production.

The conflict will likely make Ukraine's population more vulnerable to drug use disorders

Before the conflict, 350,000 people in Ukraine (1.7 per cent of the adult population) were estimated to inject drugs, mostly opioids, including heroin and methadone, sold on illicit markets.[80] Ukraine also has one of the highest prevalence in the world of people who inject drugs and live with HIV. As a UNODC brief from April 2022 states, the conflict and related problems (including stress and trauma) may exacerbate this problem further and make people more vulnerable to drug use disorders.[81]

The potential radical transformation of the drug market with new routes for smuggling into Europe and new types of synthetic drugs produced will require updated knowledge and efforts from the law enforcement community.

5.2 ARMS TRAFFICKING

There is an established history of illicit arms trafficking[82] in Ukraine, dating back to the fall of the Soviet Union, when large amounts of small arms and light weapons were left behind without adequate record-keeping and inventory control. According to the Small Arms Survey, a portion of the 7.1 million small arms stocks held by the Ukrainian military was "diverted to conflict areas."[83] In 2018, Chief Military Prosecutor Anatolii Matios estimated that around 400,000 illegal weapons were circulated in Ukraine.[84] Even before the February 2022 invasion, many were concerned about the quantities of illicit military weapons discovered by Ukrainian authorities.[85] Compared to the transnational trafficking of drugs and people into the EU, transnational firearms-trafficking routes are more complicated to trace, as they do not represent linear movements along a trafficking route from A to B.

The availability of arms may increase the risk of crime and terrorism-related violence across Europe and beyond

There is a consensus amongst experts that Ukraine's large black market dedicated to the sale of firearms has further grown since the outbreak of armed

conflict, and more Western-produced and heavier weaponry has now back-filled it. In June 2022, Jürgen Stock, the head of Interpol, expressed worries that after the end of the conflict, the arms from the Ukrainian warzone would be traded internationally.[86] Many cases show how large-scale illicit trade and arms proliferation can increase gun violence, terrorist attacks, and criminality. For example, following the former Yugoslavia conflicts in the 1990s, a wide range of Balkan arms entered Europe's black market and were used even decades later, more recently in the 2015 terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS supporters in Paris.[87] The fact that the Ukrainian army arsenal is much larger than what was used in Bosnia is therefore causing concern. While there is still limited data on actual cross-border trafficking, between March and June 2022, Moldova state authorities identified 43 cases of illicit arms and ammunition trafficking, with 24 weapons and 2,289 cartridges registered at the border.[88] While these figures may seem low, they nevertheless represent a significant increase from before February 2022.

Some respondents from Ukraine claimed that light weapons and arms were given out to the population in the first days of the conflict without proper accounting and registration. People willing to get arms only needed to show their ID, but often, these would not be requested or checked. In later periods the process has became better organized and managed. Despite this, there is evidence that some light weapons have already been diverted to the illicit market. For example, in July 2022 two individuals in Odesa were arrested trying to sell Kalashnikov rifles and ammunition, and when confronted by the police, they resisted and threw a grenade at them.[89] There have also been reports of criminal groups collecting light weapons from battle sites. In March 2022, in Kharkiv, two individuals were arrested for using arms for a robbery picked up in the warzone.[90] The Security Services of Ukraine also uncovered an attempt to illegally sell over 1,000 Ukraine-made bulletproof vests worth over $407,000through affiliated commercial structures instead of handing them over to the defence sector at no charge.[91] There are also recent allegations that an individual in a senior position in Ukraine's foreign fighters' units was related to a Polish organized criminal group and was implicated in arms theft, among other crimes.[92]

There are as yet no formal reports of diversion of Western-supplied arms, but there is a high risk of small weapons proliferation

Diversion to criminal groups is a risk inherent to all arms transfers, but it is especially relevant in a context of active conflict without appropriate safeguards in place. In the months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Council of the European Union, the US, and several other states provided weapons and ammunition, including heavy conventional weapons, large-calibre artillery systems, and small arms light weapons.[93] Such an unprecedented accumulation of new military hardware has led to concerns of diversion given the logistical challenges of tracking systems, efficient end-use monitoring, and the previous experience after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.[94] A Small Arms Study reported that at least 300,00 small arms, most of which were given to

Ukraine's defence by western partners, were stolen or lost between 2013 and 2015, with just 4,000 retrieved since then.[95] According to UNODC, most of these small arms entered the wider illicit market in Ukraine and abroad via the Odesa region, sustaining criminal enterprises.[96]

However, no formal reports of diversion of the weapons supplied in 2022 have been recorded at the time of writing this report. The probability of diverting heavy weaponry can be low[97] as they attract more scrutiny, while the proliferation of smaller and light weapons constitutes a higher risk. There have been widespread allegations from Russia that deliveries of weapons to Ukraine would not be used to defend against Russian aggression but instead sold to criminal organizations. In response, Ukraine called these allegations of arms diversion a Russian propaganda campaign[98] and simultaneously promised better and more stringent controls.[99] Prominent Ukrainian anti-corruption campaigners made a public statement in May 2022 that they do not see any signs that their armed forces are misusing Western military supplies in connection with criminal groups.[100] Indeed, there is some evidence of this being an orchestrated disinformation narrative in the case of a fake story about French howitzers being sold into the black market and ending up in Russian hands.[101]

Nevertheless, if the 2014 dynamics were to repeat themselves, there might still be cases where weapons do not arrive at their intended destination. In June 2022, Israeli cyber-intelligence specialist KELA supposedly found nine online listings on several dark web markets associated withy three vendors in Ukraine. These include rifles, grenades, bulletproof vests, and even ATGM and NLAW anti-tank missiles and Kamikaze drones, supposedly coming from Western countries that were sent to support the Ukrainian army. Given that many listings were later spread on Russian telegram channels in a coordinated manner, the investigator concluded that they could be part of a disinformation campaign.[102] It is also possible that scammers are trying to take advantage of the situation and make a profit with fake listings. Alternatively, these might be real weapons seized from Russian forces from Ukrainian stockpiles and then sold on the black market.

In conclusion, the conflict in Ukraine has significantly increased the opportunities for illicit arms trafficking, both regionally and to and from the EU. Existing criminal structures and new trafficking routes can give individuals withm alignant intentions access to these weapons and the possibility of smuggling them across the borders. As mentioned above, the number of weapons seizures on the Moldovan border jumped exponentially after the start of the war. Although the overall number of documented cross-border arms trafficking remains low, there will be a consistent threat of small arms and light weapons proliferation from Ukraine in the future.

6. Trafficking of Tobacco and Other Commodities: Key Trends

Since an active phase of the war impedes legal and illegal businesses alike, counterfeit production inside Ukraine declined in the first weeks of the conflict. However, similar to the impact on legal commodities, the conflict has displaced production elsewhere. Just like the conflict and the related difficulties for Ukrainian grain producers offered an opportunity for Latin American exporters to boost production and exports,[103] criminal networks in neighbouring countries may now fill in the gap in demand for several illicit goods.

6.1 ILLICIT TOBACCO TRADE

Ukraine has always been a major source of illicit tobacco products to the EU. Cigarettes can produce high-profit margins and are among the most commonly traded products on the black market due to relative ease of production and movement, low detection rates and penalties.[104] According to a KPMG Stella report, there were 43.6 billion illegal cigarettes on the EU market in 2018, amounting to 8.6% of all cigarettes, and 4.2 billion were from Ukraine.[105] There are several semi-legal factories based in Ukraine and the factories of big tobacco companies that have experienced large illegal outflows of their Ukraine product. In this regard, Ukraine overcame even the Grodno Tobacco Factory in Belarus, a key source of smuggled cigarettes.

One of the largest counterfeiting groups, Khamadey, who were previously operating in the Donbas region, has long since relocated to Russian territory (before the 2014 conflict) and continues to make cigarettes (mainly Russian domestic brands) for the Russian market; however, some of its products are also occasionally trafficked to the EU. Tobacco smuggling has also been highly profitable for organized crime in Moldova and through Transnistria. The European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) estimates that tobacco smuggling across the Moldova-Ukraine border costs each country millions per year.[106]

Data from Ukraine's border police data suggests that the most-seized item at Ukraine's western borders since the start of the conflict is tobacco

The photographic evidence supplied by border police suggests that some cigarettes are illicit whites[107], most likely produced in Ukraine-based factories.[108] According to illicit tobacco experts, semi-legal Ukrainian cigarette factories – Lviv Tobacco factory and United Tobacco in Zhovti Vody – continue their operations despite the conflict. There were also smaller factories in Luhansk

and Debaltseve that would sell half of their produce in Ukraine and send some of it to the EU. The conflict has most likely undermined these cross-frontline smuggling schemes.[109]

Border guards in Lithuania and Latvia have also noticed an increase in the quantity of illicit tobacco coming from Belarus since the start of the conflict.[110] In the first quarter of 2022, Lithuanian border guards intercepted four times more illicit cigarettes than in the same period of 2021 and five times more compared to the first quarter of 2020.[111] This is especially notable given the sanctions-related limitations on cargo movement from Belarus that make illegal commodities more difficult to hide in the trade flow. In July 2022, Ukrainian intelligence agencies alleged that Belarussian authorities are not obstructing but actively encouraging smuggling on the borders with Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania to replace lost revenues resulting from sanctions and allow the flow of sanctioned goods.[112] Meanwhile, as the Odesa route has become impossible to use, most of the tobacco smuggled from Transnistria will likely find a way over Moldova's western land borders.[113] In August 2022, a truck was detected by Moldovans attempting to transport a large amount of illicit tobacco from Moldova to Romania.[114] With the cost of living increasing in the West, it is a potential opportunity for smugglers to take advantage of an increasing appetite for cheap cigarettes.

6.2 OTHER COMMODITIES

There are also many other trafficked commodities, other than tobacco, which have received less international attention. For example, there have been reports of the theft of valuable historical artefacts from occupied Ukrainian cities that are then moved to Russia[115] or are trafficked via Moldova;[116] or large-scale, undeclared smuggling of cash out of Ukraine. Cash smuggling cases are often detected in neighbouring countries, such as Hungary,[117] after successfully clearing the Ukrainian border thanks to bribes paid to border guards.

Counterfeit Agrochemicals

The head of Interpol has warned that the conflict in Ukraine had led to a rise in large-scale fertiliser and fuel theft and an increase in counterfeit agrochemicals.[118] Before the conflict, Ukraine was a key source of counterfeit agrochemicals. Counterfeit pesticides occupy roughly 15% of the $60 billion billion global crop protection market. In Ukraine, illicit pesticides make up 25% of the $2 billion billion market.[119] Chemical ingredients are shipped to Ukraine in container shipments from China, where illicit pesticides are assembled, packaged, labelled and distributed further to the EU and Russia.[120] According to a representative from the pesticides industry in the Black Sea region, Chinese chemicals are no longer shipped to Ukraine in the same quantities. However, the illegal flows of illicit pesticides continue from Ukraine to Russia, despite the conflict.[121] Counterfeit pesticides and the fertiliser industry have a great chance to grow and thrive, especially in the imminent global food crisis and the urgent need for increased crop production.

Medicines

Furthermore, the conflict has led to a shortage of medicines in the country. The fighting has caused a sharp increase in the demand for painkillers, antibiotics and tourniquets — essentials for wounded soldiers. In Kyiv, the media have reported long lines in front of pharmacies.[122] This has boosted the trade in counterfeit, expired or diverted pharmaceutical products. A small fraction of these medicines could have come from within Ukraine. However, bigger portions are smuggled from India and Türkiye via the seaports of Ukraine's western neighbours and then transported to Ukraine via road transport.[123] Along with Turkish and Indian products, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health is detecting an increasing number of unregistered medicines in Polish packaging[124] that could have entered Ukraine under the guise of humanitarian aid. Observers also report increased availability of low-quality illicit medicines of Russian, Belarussian, and Crimean origin in the occupied territories.[125]

Natural Resources

Smuggling illegally mined amber is yet another problem. This business boasted an estimated turnover of nearly a half billion US dollars in 2017.[126] Amber mining was strongly dominated by criminal gangs in collusion with representatives of government and law enforcement officials,[127] and criminals tried to move some of the amber abroad under the fog of conflict. Since the start of the conflict, there have been at least two attempts to transport amber in large quantities outside of Ukraine with forged documents.[128]

6.3 ILLICIT TRADE FROM TRANSNISTRIA

The border and customs checkpoints on the Transnistrian-Ukrainian border were closed soon after February, seemingly putting a halt to smuggling schemes there.[129] In some cases, it may have led to legalizing contraband flows. For example, before the conflict, fertilizers and plant protection products smuggled to Moldova via Transnistria now have to go through Moldova-controlled customs checkpoints instead.[130] The closure of Black Sea ports also led to the re-directing of some commodities, such as tobacco, through alternative routes. However, there is evidence that some forms of contraband survived despite all logistical hurdles. For example, in July 2022, Ukrainian border guards discovered a 300-meter-long underground pipeline pumping illicit ethanol from Transnistrian to Ukrainian territory.[131]

6.4 ILLICIT TRADE IN THE DONBAS AND LUHANSK REGIONS

Due to heightened tensions and active hostility, the practice of collaborating in smuggling schemes does not exist anymore. Most of this smuggling has reportedly ceased now. However, smuggling itself and smuggling-related corruption did not disappear overnight. Recently Moldovan security service

seized a large portion of consumer products illegally smuggled from the Odesa region to Moldova via Transnistria. Of the three detained smugglers, two were employees of the Ministry of Interior.[132]

The trade between Ukraine and newly occupied territories is minimally evidenced by a deficit of Ukrainian products in places like Kherson.[133] The occupied territories have been flooded by goods of questionable quality from Crimea and Belarus. These goods may still be taxed in informal ways. For instance, there are reports of Russian soldiers setting up illicit checkpoints in newly occupied territories and imposing a tax on the passage of cars and trucks.

Short and medium-term obstacles to illegal business deprive the Donbas and Luhansk regions of a significant income that is not easy to replace. There are reports of DPR and LPR-based drug trafficking groups expanding their activities to the newly occupied territories (such as Mariupol and Volnovakha), trying to recruit drug couriers there. However, this market is small given Russia's limited military success and near-complete destruction on these territories.[134]

Pre-conflict Russian subsidies were only enough for the core expenditure of the state and fighting, while money from the illicit economy would fill the gap.[135] Russia may likely need to take more direct responsibility for subsidising these regions, just like in South Ossetia, a breakaway republic in Georgia that was living off of the income of contraband between Russia and Georgia before the full-scale Russia-Georgia war in 2008. Since then, the de-facto independent republic's budget has lost income from illicit markets and depends more heavily on Russian subsidies. Given the prospects of a shrinking Russian economy due to international sanctions, the prospects of replacing illicit incomes in the DPR and LPR look increasingly meagre.

Another risk is related to drones, which have been used widely before for smuggling, for example, in the case of illicit cigarettes. The availability of drones may increase as some can be diverted from military stockpiles, a concern also voiced by Moldovan law enforcers.[136] In Donetsk, drones have been offered over social media channels for discounted prices (such as DJI Mavic AIR 2S).

7. Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Threats: Key Trends

When discussing CBRN threats, it is important to note that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited approximately 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads, representing the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal at the time (after Russia and USA). The 1994 Budapest Memorandum, according to which the United States, Russia, and Great Britain committed "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "to refrain from the threat or use of force" against the country,[137] played a key role in persuading Ukraine to renounce these weapons.[138]

Nowadays, Ukraine hosts some of Europe's largest nuclear power plants, and there are 15 pressurised water reactors of Russian VVER design on its territory. Of these, six reactors are at Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), while the rest are at Rivne, South Ukraine, and Khmelnytskyi NPPs. The Chernobyl NPP, located within the Exclusion Zone, is undergoing decommissioning.[139] Furthermore, the chemical industry is one of the principal sectors of Ukraine's economy and includes chemical, petrochemical and pharmaceutical sub-sectors with over 1,600 enterprises and structural units.[140] This means many chemical plants, civilian industry, or medical institutions inside or near the combat zone store radioactive sources, radioactive waste or dangerous chemical compounds. These sites could be highly vulnerable since non-nuclear facilities, such as chemical plants, host radioactive sources but do not enjoy the same physical protection as nuclear facilities.[141] Indeed, some of these have been looted in the aftermath of the occupation in 2014.[142]

Compromised security and damage to nuclear power plants

The presence of military forces near or within nuclear power plants represents an unprecedented risk that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has closely monitored since February 2022. In this context, the agency has developed a tailored approach to assess the situation against seven indispensable pillars for ensuring nuclear safety and security during this armed conflict.

The most concerning case is Zaporizhzhia (ZNPP), the biggest power plant in Ukraine. Russian forces took control on 4 March 2022, while its Ukrainian staff continued to operate it under stressful and deteriorating conditions.[143] In June, an IAEA's update indicated

potential dangers to the plant's safety, including supply chain interruptions resulting in spare parts not reaching the plant.[144] The situation around ZNPP escalated in August 2022 when shelling compromised all seven pillars identified by IAEA, including those related to an NPP's physical integrity, functioning safety and security systems, staff and external power supply. Consequently, a radiological emission caused by shelling became a real possibility, and the site became a 'nuclear blackmail tool' for both sides of the conflict. Russian military started using ZNPP facilities as a cover to attack Ukrainian positions. In this context, while Ukraine accused Russian forces of shelling the territory around the plant, threatening a nuclear catastrophe, and forcing Kyiv into concessions,[145] Russian officials denied the responsibility. They accused the opposite front of shelling the plant.[146] On 1 September, the IAEA held a Support and Assistance Mission to Zaporizhzhya (IS-AMZ) to assess and help stabilize the nuclear safety and security situation at the ZNPP.

From 24 February to 31 March, Russian forces also controlled Chernobyl NPP. After their withdrawal, Ukraine's security service has documented widespread violations of nuclear safety norms, including damaging the premises (e.g. to communication towers, hindering radioactive monitoring), mining the territory (over 100 mines have been discovered), and provoking several fires.[147] IAEA's technicians and Ukraine's State Nuclear Regulatory Inspectorate were able to repair unattended monitoring systems and install additional satellite communication channels. However, there were still reports of a partial loss of safeguards data transfer from Chornobyl in July.[148] There have also been unconfirmed reports of Russian soldiers stealing radioactive materials from the power plant.[149] However, it is unclear whether individual soldiers or a more organized endeavour were responsible for it.

Moreover, in three separate, widely-reported incidents, Russian missiles passed over the South Ukraine Nuclear Power Plant, raising concerns about the severe risk to the physical integrity of the nuclear facility if such missiles go astray. Russian shelling also caused damage to the Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology (KIPT) on 25 June, causing damages to the cooling system and the diesel generator building. However, radiation levels at the site remained stable[150]. Overall, military action has compromised the safety of radiation sources, destroyed nuclear infrastructure; damaged waste repositories; threatened collateral damage at nuclear power plants, and negatively impacted Ukraine's nuclear plants in multiple ways.[151] According to IAEA's Director General, the escalating situation at ZNPP "could lead to a severe nuclear accident with potentially grave radiological consequences for human health and the environment in Ukraine and elsewhere".[152]

Increasing risks for trafficking and smuggling of radioactive and nuclear materials

The record indicates that the region's smuggling networks have traditionally been interested in trafficking radioactive and nuclear sources. There are at least three cases related to Moldova whereby weapons-grade materials were involved,

while other cases concerned less potent sources usable for a 'dirty bomb.'[153] Some smugglers were opportunists trying to make a profit without specific knowledge of the sources involved. However, there is also evidence that professional smuggling networks were implicated. A law enforcement officer mentioned that 'there is already chatter in certain criminal circles that new opportunities are arising [to radiological traffic materials], and everyone is waiting for the end of military conflict so they can move around freely.'[154] Representatives of security and intelligence services have pointed out that intelligence and law enforcement officials sometime do not have sufficient knowledge and experience in using radiation detection equipment during an operation. This is particularly problematic since correct use and analysis of data from radiation detection and identification equipment is often crucial for the success of an operation. Ukraine and Moldova have highlighted a common need for advanced practical training for law enforcement and nuclear regulatory authorities in countries trafficking radiological material through detection by intelligence.

To respond to this threat, in 2020, UNICRI launched the "CONTACT – Black Sea" project, which aims to reinforce States' capability to devise, plan, and carry out intelligence and law enforcement operations to thwart attempts to traffic radiological and nuclear material in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In particular, the project has supported partner countries by reinforcing a capacity-building strategy through tailor-made training and improving cross-border cooperation through the exchange of best practices and the identification of shared challenges and actions related to countering radiological and nuclear malevolent acts.

Increased chemical and biological risks

Lastly, the conflict has also undermined the safety of chemical materials in Ukraine. Local media sources have reported that Russian bombings could have damaged the fortifications holding back hydrogen sulphide solution in the Azovstal steel plant, which would mean an environmental catastrophe for the Azov Sea,[155] creating severe risks for the population in adjacent areas. In another incident, a Russian bombing caused ammonia leakage from Sumy's fertiliser-producing plant, which was luckily contained later.[156] Several chemical plants fell under Russian occupation more recently. Firtash-owned Ostchem lost control over the Azot plant in Severodonetsk and stated that shelling damaged ammonia and nitric acid containers.[157]

Phenolic plants in Donbas[158] and Avdiivka Coke plant[159] were also damaged by shelling. These incidents indicate the elevated risk of military conflict leading to chemical and radioactive hazards for the general population. At the same time, there are also fears of targeted use of chemical weapons as "part of an assassination attempt, or to spread fear and panic."[160]

Similarly, public health laboratories are also considered vulnerable, whereby accidental, or deliberate attacks could potentially spill dangerous pathogens. In this regard, in March 2022, WHO urged Ukrainian authorities to destroy any such disease-causing pathogens in its research facilities

8. Cybercrime and Attacks: Key Trends

Cybercrime in and around Ukraine has, even before 2022, been an issue both for national and international law enforcement. From a criminal side, this has included the black-market distribution of counterfeit movies and related material, credit card information sharing, fake online auctions, spamming, online gambling, the development of viruses and theft of personal data and information. However, Ukraine, and the entire region, have made progress in recent years. In 2017, Ukraine was rated 59 in terms of its global cybersecurity commitment score, and overall, its cyber defence capabilities have improved due to the training and advice provided by allies.

8.1 HACKING AND CYBERWARFARE

With the start of the conflict in Ukraine, many analysts feared the Russian military advance would be accompanied by destructive cyberwarfare and attacks from Russian-backed agents. While Ukraine and its neighbours have seen Russian-backed cyberattacks, both in the lead-up to and during the conflict, the cyber assault has largely fallen short of the devastating expectations,[161]mostly due to Ukraine's enhanced cyber defence capabilities and the support of sympathetic external private and government actors. For example, Ukraine benefited significantly from the support of private technological companies, such as Microsoft and Google, who contributed to Ukraine's cyber defence capabilities, as well as from the hacker communities within groups like Anonymous, who mounted sophisticated attacks on the Russian government and private sector.

Nevertheless, the kinetic war in Ukraine has still been accompanied by assaults in cyberspace, with both sides attempting to undermine the conflict efforts of the opposing party. Russia-affiliated actors at least semi-successfully disrupted Ukraine's government, IT, energy, and financial organisations. According to a special report by Microsoft, cyber-attacks launched alongside the military invasion often targeted the same sectors or geographic locations at approximately the same time as military attacks on the ground.[162] These largely focused on data collection and espionage, disrupting the Ukrainian government and key industry activities, interfering with citizens' access to reliable information and critical life services, and discrediting the country's leadership[163] through disinformation.[164] For example, in the early days of the conflict, Russian agents sabotaged a satellite communications network called Viasat, with some damage spreading over to other European countries.

Critical infrastructure, not only within Ukraine but also throughout wider Europe, has been threatened by Russian-backed attackers and cybercrime groups. Russian network intrusion efforts have been detected on 128

targets in 42 countries outside Ukraine. These represent a range of strategic espionage targets likely to be involved in direct or indirect support of Ukraine's defence, 49%of which have been government agencies, mostly in NATO member countries.[165] According to the Cyberpeace Institute, most of these cyberattacks (51%) were comprised of Distributed Denial of Service, or DDoS attacks, and Hack and Leak operations. Most hack and leak operations (56 out of 64) were deployed against targets within the Russian Federation. In contrast, 61 out of 91 DDoS attacks have been deployed against targets in foreign countries outside of Ukraine, most likely by Russian actors. The DdoS attacks attributed to the Russian group Killnet have also targeted government agencies of Ukrainian border countries like Romania and Moldova, with national governments attributing these attacks to retaliation in response to their support for Ukraine.[166]

Although Russian-backed attackers demonstrated the capacity to inflict damage through DdoS attacks, wiper malware, and ransomware, now and in the past[167] with the help of private tech companies and allied intelligence, Ukraine has fixed most of the damage quickly highlighting the Ukrainian government's ability to act swiftly and efficiently in this arena.[168] Its cyber defence capabilities have been vastly improved, evidenced by the finding that only 29% of the Russian targeting since the start of the conflict was deemed successful.[169] Ukraine's expertise should not be downplayed;

Years of experience and continued Western support have given Ukraine the improved capacity to counteract cyber-attacks from Russian actors.[170]

However, cyber threats against Ukrainian targets and their allies and supporters will continue to pose a risk, including private companies in the financial services, telecommunications, and energy sectors.[171] Russian cybercriminals have threatened to undermine critical infrastructure in the West and leak secretive information, and the Russian government still enjoys support from its own hacker community. While some cybercriminals are seemingly acting out of patriotism to support Russia's war effort, there is evidence that many are helping under pressure or blackmail by Russian law enforcement officers.[172]

Russian ransomware actors may also get more active in the future, using this cybercrime as one of the few remaining means of revenue generation in the face of sanctions. However, the same sanctions have also interfered with attackers' capacity to accept ransom payments. Indeed, there is some evidence that ransomware attacks have decreased in Russia recently following sanctions,[173] although opportunities remain to accept cryptocurrency payments. With the ongoing de-coupling of Russia from the Western economies, some experts[174] fear that cyberattacks may have less economic backlash in Russia and potentially embolden potential attacks similar to the scale of the 2017 NoPetya [175] or 2021 Colonial Pipeline attack.[176]

8.2 FRAUD AND DECEPTION SCHEMES FOR PROFIT

As with other illicit activities, the conflict has opened opportunities for various forms of cybercrime, including phishing, frauds, and other deception schemes. Fraudsters have used various online means to profit from the conflict, including setting up websites soliciting donations to support humanitarian aid or military assistance to Ukraine, baiting email recipients with giveaways of fake gift cards, and links in the emails to malicious websites designed to steal money and personal information. In addition to fake pleas for help, fraudsters have also used over 419 identified scams posing as rich businessmen trying to send their money out of Ukraine (sometimes known as the "Nigerian prince scam").[177]

The deception schemes soliciting aid may continue in the future. However, as the conflict continues, the decreasing urgency to help and increasingly institutionalized aid delivery may make these schemes profitable. As the conflict shifts, so too will profiteering prospects. In June 2022, SSU arrested criminals in Zaporizhzhya engaged in defrauding relatives of soldiers. The fraudsters monitored the internet and collected data on missing soldiers and their families. They would contact relatives and friends of soldiers, claiming the missing soldier was being held in captivity and offering their help and promising faux commercial "services," such as telephone conversation with a captive soldier, release from captivity, or, in some cases, transportation of the body of a deceased soldier.[178]

In addition to fraud and phishing schemes, there were reports of attempted online attacks against ATMs in Moldova. According to officers from the cybersecurity unit of the Ministry of Interior, there were no similar incidents in the pre-conflict period, suggesting these may have been perpetrated by the criminals who moved to Moldova camouflaged in the refugee flows.[179] Criminals who stayed in Ukraine found other lucrative means to make illicit profits. In July 2022, SSU dismantled a clandestine cryptocurrency mining centre in Kharkiv region using large volumes of unaccounted electricity obtained through an unauthorised connection to the grid.[180]

8.3 COORDINATED DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

One of the most recent and evolving challenges in the cyber world is the online environment being inundated by coordinated disinformation and propaganda.[181] With the region battered by coordinated disinformation campaigns for years before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, it is perhaps unsurprising that the intentional spread of false information has quickly shifted to include false narratives about the conflict and neighbouring countries, with an intent to influence conflict dynamics. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, some of the best illustrations include the deep fake video of Zelenskyi urging the army to stop fighting[182] or the fake "evidence" being spread about purported bioweapons labs in Ukrainian territory.[183]

This threat has spread quickly across borders, with coordinated disinformation

campaigns targeting neighbouring countries, especially Poland and Moldova, with a barrage of fake news.[184] In the case of Moldova, in particular, disinformation circulated via multiple channels, including traditional media and social networks, amplified the false narrative that Ukraine is trying to involve Moldova in the conflict against Russia.[185]

As of the end of June 2022, more than 500 YouTube channels (with an estimated audience of 15 million people), 1,529 Telegram channels, 426 Instagram accounts, 93 Facebook accounts and 1,050 TikTok accounts had been blocked at the request of Ukraine's Security Service for allegedly spreading false, pro-Russian disinformation, fake news, and propaganda.[186] In addition, Microsoft also identified more than 300 Russian-sponsored websites promoting fake news about "biolabs" operating in Ukraine.[187]

Particularly worrying for its potential effect on social cohesion in nearby countries is the smear campaign against Ukrainian refugees, occasionally drawing on limited evidence (e.g., a few minor traffic violations by Ukrainian refugees in Moldova)[188] to intentionally generate negative views and occasionally violence towards refugees through false narratives. The videos expressing anti-refugee messages are being artificially amplified through coordinated campaigns across Facebook and TikTok with national politicians, including the Moldovan president, describing it as a "concerted and organized effort to divide society."[189] In Poland, the coordinated campaign has been built on the purposely false narrative of Ukrainian refugees being aggressive and violent and more privileged than Polish citizens, referring to the influx of refugees as "Ukrainization of Poland" and an "invasion." In just one example, a disinformation investigation by DFRLab identified 27 telegram channels spreading anti-refugee information.[190]

One trait that all the discussed cyber-threats share, from hacking to scams to disinformation, is their ability to evolve continually and rapidly in response to technological advances and efforts to counteract them. This constantly changing nature, and the fact that these crimes often cross borders thousands of miles away, can make confronting these challenges particularly difficult and requires continuous analysis of evolving threats and risks, training and capacity building of the region's law enforcement, and updated public awareness campaigns.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The invasion on 24 February 2022 and the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine will have long-term consequences on the international order. As the situation on the ground is dynamic and constantly evolving, depending on the outcome of the conflict, it is difficult to properly assess the transformational nature of these consequences and the international community's response. The analysis in this report suggests, however, that the conflict and Ukraine's destabilization has already several significant implications for organized crime, illicit trafficking, and security challenges in multiple ways across its borders and globally. While some key trends and events outlined in the sections above can be explained by underlining dynamics prior to the armed conflict outbreak, new factors have undoubtedly changed the regional security outlook.

The immediate impact of the conflict was the physical disruption of key illicit trafficking routes across Ukraine, as bridges were destroyed and roads closed. However, despite these changes, the only lasting disruption is the disintegration of illicit trade networks stretching across combat lines in Donetsk and Luhansk. Before February 2022, cross-border criminal cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian criminal groups was commonplace; this is no longer the case. Aside from this, illicit trade and trafficking suffered only a temporary setback and rebounded soon after the beginning of the armed conflict. While the domestic production of illicit goods declined in the first weeks, the markets in arms, drugs, and other commodities either got a boost or remained at the same pre-conflict level. For example, in the context of violence and instability, the displacement of millions of people has generated opportunities for traffickers and human smugglers, ranging from providing illicit services to abusing vulnerable people, particularly women and children.

Armed conflict has also elevated the risks of radioactive emission from the occupied Chernobyl exclusion zone and Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plants while compromising security at various other facilities containing chemical, nuclear, radioactive, or biological materials. Vulnerabilities include the equally devastating potential for leakages and the risk of theft. The region has a history of trafficking dangerous materials, such as nuclear and radioactive substances, and the implication for international security could be extremely damaging if some of these materials were stolen under the fog of war and diverted to the black market. Despite obvious limitations imposed by the conflict, Ukrainian law enforcement structures have been performing relatively effectively, even over-performing in some respects, such as cyberdefence. But local and wider regional law enforcement are not well-prepared to counteract new and emerging illegal flows and constantly evolving threats. They may find themselves in catch-up mode with innovative and highly skilled smugglers and cybercriminals.

Ukraine is characterised by a long history of corruption and sophisticated criminal networks, and the conflict has undoubtedly provided fertile ground for new illicit activities to thrive. While Ukraine's priority now is to defend its territory, there is a risk that strengthened illicit markets might undermine the country's governance structures and have negative effects on its post-conflict recovery. The experience of other conflicts, such as in Syria, has shown that criminal activities may grow once the active phase of the conflict is over, spilling over into neighbouring countries while further spreading instability. Pre-existing criminal actors and emerging groups might take advantage of potential power vacuums during and after a conflict as they seek to maintain control over their new profits.

Given the country's complex nature and history of organized crime, there is a risk that a post-conflict Ukraine will not be able to implement its existing governance commitments against corruption and kleptocracy, exacerbating state fragility and undermining legitimacy. There are already some positive signs, including adoption of several anti-corruption laws[191] and the appointment of well-known anti-corruption activists in the High Council of Justice.[192] While not the focus of this report, addressing these issues may also generate much-needed funds for reconstructing the country. The opportunity cost for the state of allowing or encouraging organized crime and corruption is lost potential income and foreign investment that could be

generated and contribute to addressing some of the key needs of post-conflict reconstruction. According to some estimates, Ukraine is losing over $37 billion every year due to corruption,[193] which is the amount required for the reconstruction and recovery of 80% of the transportation and infrastructure sector destroyed by the conflict (estimated at $42.3 billion as of 1 August 2022 by Kyiv School of Economics).[194]

The research also focused on Moldova based on its Ministry of Interior's request to collaborate with UNICRI and because it is one of the countries most exposed to the impacts of the conflict in Ukraine. The increased flow of people and goods was exacerbated by increased illegal border crossings and generated further risks for cross-border criminality. While the country's humanitarian response received immediate support from the international community with the formation of various national and international mechanisms, the Ministry believe the security component is still underestimated. Launching the EU Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management is a step in the right direction. However, more support, especially in capacity building, is needed as institutions do not have the knowledge and experience to deal with multiple complex and interrelated threats. Nevertheless, the impact of this initiative strongly depends on the EU's ability to accurately identify strategic gaps, requiring a thorough understanding of realities in Chisinau.

Regional cooperation is key as the

challenges are common across the re-gion. As transnational crime groups are increasingly outpacing national criminal justice responses, border law enforce-ment agencies need to improve cooperation and communication across borders and in the region to share re-al-time information and intelligence on criminal activities and trafficking routes.

Although a preliminary step, the findings of this research make clear that more re-search and actions are urgently needed. Further study is needed with respect to the impact of the conflict on other neigh-bouring countries, such as Poland and Romania. As the conflict continues and due to their immediate threat to the wid-er region, the international community should urgently focus on countering the

trafficking of illicit weapons and radio-logical and nuclear materials. Strengthening cross-border manage-ment and information sharing on the smuggling of illicit goods and trafficking of people also need to be prioritised. Moldovan Law Enforcement needs ur-gent training in line with the EU Support Hub's focus areas. In the medium to long-term horizon, the focus should be on strengthening capabilities to design and implement security planning poli-cies and strategies to respond to the rapidly evolving regional security con-text. Structural and institutional reforms for Ukraine and Moldova also need to be supported as they will come increasingly under focus following their EU candidate status granted in June 2022.

KEY RECOMENDATIONS

Establish or strengthen mobile cross-border/ anti-trafficking units drawing on proven expertise within European countries, Europol, Interpol, Moldovan, and Ukrainian law enforcement communities.

Given the overlaps in criminal networks involved in the trafficking of various commodities and emerging threats, it is paramount to es-tablish or strengthen well-trained anti-trafficking / anti-smuggling units to directly blunt all major forms of cross-border trafficking and smuggling. Such work should include, where needed, the creation or strengthening of streamlined information-sharing mechanisms (e.g., to conduct controlled deliveries) and to identify and seize as-sets of those involved in cross-border trafficking and smuggling. The regional network of authorities established after February 2022 for sharing information and coordination on trafficking and organ-ized crime should be considered in addressing this issue.

Establish ongoing research and intelligence systems as a key element to understanding and anticipating emerging threats.

Analysis of Europe-wide data on irregular trade and ever-evolving criminal modalities to transit through Europe's seaports and borders is needed. The conflict in Ukraine has fostered different modalities, particularly for smuggling and trafficking, and law enforcement agencies need to be regularly updated on these modalities and good practices to counter them. Based on such assessments and information exchange, customs and other law enforcement officials would be able to identify more targeted training needed to counter ongoing and emerging threats and to understand the value of seizures and confiscations.

Provide technical assistance to build capacity and professional skills tailored to law enforcement operational mandates.

Initiatives to strengthen counterparts connected to their operational work have delivered good results and should continue. For example, there is an urgent need to enhance the capacity of the National Police Academy in Moldova, including revising training curricula, developing a new training syllabus for specialist (and continuing education) training courses, and, for management, creating more efficient and sustainable deployment of resources. Areas of particular focus for Moldovan law enforcement agencies include trafficking in persons, drug trafficking, trafficking of arms, cybercrime, the tracing and seizure of criminal assets, and enhancing community policing strategies and approaches. Moldova's Criminal Asset Recovery (CARA) would also benefit strongly from specialised training. Moldova also requires assistance in the field of crisis and emergency management on how to respond to security alerts such as bomb threats.

Support the development of a National Strategy and Action Plan to counter radiological and nuclear trafficking.

An effective strategy to mitigate CBRN risks of criminal, accidental or natural origin requires a very high level of cooperation and coordination both between different national agencies as well as among Countries and International and Regional Organizations. A comprehensive CBRN Action Plan, jointly developed by all relevant agencies should be developed. Ukraine and Moldova have also highlighted a common need for advanced practical training for law enforcement

and nuclear regulatory authorities in countries trafficking radiolog-ical material through detection, particularly by intelligence gathering and sharing. Additionally, ensuring that nuclear security practition-ers are well-trained, while a long-term process, should be given priority. This entails creating and consolidating the capacities of trainers, developing, validating, and regularly updating training ma-terial, and mandating that such material is included within relevant training institutions (police academies, intelligence academies, and nuclear security training centres).

Consider conducting training and capacity building on chemical emergency response for the civilian population in Ukraine, given the potential risk of chemical or related incidents.

Relevant national authorities and emergency response personnel must practice how to manage incidents involving chemical warfare agents and toxic industrial chemicals. Such events, should they oc-cur, could lead to potential public health emergencies of international concern.

Provide training and capacity building to prosecute chemical and biological crimes for investigators and prosecutors in Ukraine and Moldova.

Chemical and biological agents have been used deliberately to harm humans and the surrounding environment. Previous cases in other conflicts have shown the need to increase awareness and skills in investigating and prosecuting chemical and biological crimes. Multi-agency coordination and cooperation are essential for the successful investigation and prosecution of these criminal cases. Teams need an increased appreciation of the challenges and greater insight into the key considerations related to CBRN crimes.

Increase public awareness of the threat posed by cybercrime and disinformation and educate citizens on how to be better consumers of information.

It important to support the public to embrace a more sustained, pro-active approach towards online safety and to promote awareness and dialogue about online dangers. Strengthened outreach towards vulnerable and marginalised groups could increase their resilience to modalities employed by organized criminal groups and others engaged in fraud, thus limiting the opportunity for crime to flourish. Awareness raising may include budgets for regular, ongoing public awareness campaigns through the most widely used forms of media (such as television and/or social media). Consideration should be given to successful campaigns done in other countries while considering local dynamics.

Support and strengthen the implementation of updated cybersecurity strategies.

Moldova and Ukraine have expressed the need to harmonise their legislative framework with European and International requirements on cybersecurity. Countries could consider establishing a central cybersecurity governance mechanism while having an updated training of specialists in public institutions and technical platforms for exchanging information.

Support and monitor law-enforcement reform implementation in the longer term.

Opportunities for corruption and organized crime infiltration can abound in post-conflict contexts when governments are recipients of large sums of foreign aid and institutions do not have the necessary monitoring mechanisms. While the conflict continues and the reconstruction needs of Ukraine are not yet known, the international community needs to stand ready to support longer terms law-enforcement reform and specific initiatives such as addressing illicit financial flows to prevent and fight corruption.

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