

Blue Skies and Dark Clouds

KAZAKHSTAN AND SMALL ARMS

Unlike some of its Central Asian neighbours, Kazakhstan has been spared civil war and ethnic strife, earning it the reputation of a pillar of stability in an otherwise volatile region. The country also has a relatively comprehensive set of measures in place to regulate civilian acquisition and possession of small arms, and it is an active participant in international small arms processes. Yet several incidents of armed violence with terrorist undertones took place in 2011, suggesting that the country is not immune to the misuse of firearms.

Based on original household survey and focus group research as well as other research methods, this chapter documents levels of small arms availability in the country, explores the impact of firearms on crime and security, and discusses government initiatives to address small arms issues. The main findings are:

- Civilians in Kazakhstan owned an estimated 190,000 to 225,000 firearms in 2010, which translates into a low per capita rate by international standards. Civilian firearm ownership appears more prominent among young men and in urban areas; it seems to be motivated by a perceived need for protection against criminals.
- Although the country's homicide rate has decreased significantly since the 1990s, it remained above the world average in 2010, at more than 8 per 100,000. The percentage of homicides and robberies committed with small arms has increased in recent years, but it remains low when compared with rates elsewhere.
- Kazakhstan's overall positive security outlook is clouded by an increase in crime rates since 2010, as well as recent incidents of armed violence with terrorist, ethnic, and political undertones.
- Kazakh authorities report having collected and seized more than 60,000 firearms from civilians between 2003 and 2009. They destroyed at least 20,000 civilian small arms during the same period.



Security personnel guard the site of a shootout in the village of Boralдай, near Almaty, December 2011. © Vladimir Tretyakov/Reuters

- The Ministry of Defence reported the destruction of more than 1.1 million rounds of surplus conventional ammunition between 2003 and 2009 (out of a declared total of 2.5 million). The Ministry also reported destroying about 38,000 state-held small arms and light weapons between 2002 and 2006.
- Kazakhstan has been disproportionately affected by unplanned explosions at munitions sites, with six major incidents known to have occurred since 2001.

As of late 2011, the information that the Small Arms Survey was able to gather indicated that security in Kazakhstan had improved since post-Soviet independence. Household survey respondents put employment, healthcare, and access to water ahead of security when asked about the most serious problems affecting them. Violent crime rates have declined overall in the last 15 years.

There are, however, important caveats to the assumption that Kazakhstan is a secure country in a region that has experienced recurrent instability in recent years. Threats to Kazakhstan's stability are not limited to events in neighbouring countries; rather, they include a domestic homicide rate that exceeds global and Central Asia averages and a recent increase in the use of firearms in violent crime. Perceptions of insecurity appear to be higher in urban areas, fuelling civilian demand for firearms as a means of self-defence in cities and among young men. Additional causes for concern relate to apparent increases in the illicit manufacture of small arms and reports of the use of firearms by prisoners and teenagers. The recent surge in terrorist violence on Kazakh territory, combined with prominent cases of ethnic and political violence over the past five years, is especially worrying. While it would be alarmist to speak of an approaching storm, Kazakh skies are not entirely clear.

Authorities do not organize emergency response training for civilians living near ammunition depots.

The six large-scale, unplanned explosions at munitions sites that have occurred in the country since 2001 highlight problems in the management of state stockpiles. The explosions have caused death, injury, and the destruction of private property and public infrastructure. Over the longer term, they have also harmed local environments, livelihoods, and employment. The lack of emergency response training for communities based near depots points to a shortfall of government capacity and political will to respond effectively to such accidents. Ensuring the safety and security of state stockpiles, including stores of surplus ammunition, would not only help prevent further accidents, but would also decrease the risk of arms being diverted to unauthorized entities and individuals. While Kazakhstan has taken some unilateral steps in this direction, increased transparency and international cooperation, as is occurring elsewhere, would help the country to benefit from the expanding international knowledge base in this area. ■



A group of international OSCE experts examine the condition of conventional ammunition designated for disposal at the Aris Central Arsenal, near Chemkent, June 2005. © Yurii Kryvonos/OSCE