



Ukraine forced to answer difficult questions over what happens to billions in weapons

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Russian Telegram channels have been buzzing for months with claims of advanced foreign weapons donated to Ukraine going missing in action.

A French howitzer was said to have been captured by Russian forces. A prized US rocket launcher was allegedly sold by Ukrainian soldiers. A viral video claimed to show anti-tank weapons on display at a Balkan car boot sale.

These claims – often minimally evidenced – are denied by Ukraine and attributed to Russian propaganda intended to discourage foreign partners from supplying arms that are vital to the Ukrainian war effort. But concerns are being raised by allies as well as enemies.

On July 11, the EU launched a “Support Hub” in Moldova to address crimes arising from the war and its first meeting focussed on arms trafficking. On July 22, EU police authority Europol reported cases of criminal networks that “operate or plan to smuggle significant quantities of firearms and ammunition, including military weapons” from Ukraine. Interpol had previously warned of “proliferation in illicit arms.” In the US, Ukraine-born Republican Congresswoman Victoria Spartz recently demanded “proper oversight of critical infrastructure and delivery of weapons and aid.”

The Ukrainian parliament is hoping to shut down suspicions with the formation of a commission for monitoring the dispersal of military aid. The cross-party commission launched on July 19 is tasked with creating a legal framework for government oversight and gathering information about violations.

“Propaganda...is actively alleging that Ukraine is using weapons provided by its international partners inappropriately,” states Resolution 7563. “Ukraine must prove to the whole world that the procedures for transportation, distribution, and use of international material and technical assistance are transparent and devoid of corruption.” The Ukrainian parliament did not respond to questions about details of the commission’s brief.

Ukraine has responded strongly to the allegations, recognising that they are potentially damaging. Vital support packages from the US are facing growing domestic opposition.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has told foreign allies the claims are part of a Russian propaganda campaign designed to exploit war fatigue. "This topic is strategically necessary for them," Mr Kuleba told Forbes Ukraine.

But the commission may struggle to provide comprehensive accountability. Ukraine was one of the largest illegal arms markets in Europe before the Russian invasion with an estimated 300,000 weapons lost or stolen between 2013 and 2015, according to the Small Arms Survey, with only 4,000 recovered. Full-scale war has brought a surge of new weapons and increased the challenge of monitoring them.

"Tracking who uses these weapons and how is difficult during peacetime but it is an entirely different situation during a war," says Jordan Cohen, an arms trade specialist at the Cato Institute.

"An active conflict means battlefield casualties, change in military leaders, and difficulty transmitting information across the military leadership. The creation of the commission is a noble goal, but in implementation it is going to be impossible to track all – or even most – of the weapons sent to the country."

Prospects for tracking weapons are likely to have improved over time, suggests N.R. Jenzen-Jones, director of the Armaments Research Services consultancy. Monitoring would have been most difficult in the chaotic early days of the war given the imperative not to slow down the supply chain, and the task of regularising disparate militias into the army.

"At a minimum level, I'm sure the commission will be reporting on distribution," says Mr Jenzen-Jones. "Stakeholders will get a sense of which arms and munitions are being distributed to which regions and military formations." Ukraine should also be able to detail the expenditure of munitions, he adds, so that donors know "which pieces have been taken off the table."

The risk of foreign weapons being lost go beyond the EU's concerns of trafficking by criminal gangs. The US has at times withheld advanced technology from the weapons it provides out of fear they could fall into Russian hands and give up military secrets. Mr Cohen adds that without strong oversight, foreign weapons could be used for attacks inside Russia's borders and cause a major escalation. There are also concerns about a post-war environment in which heavily-armed militias pose a threat to national security.

Ukraine's new weapons monitors will be monitored with great interest.