



Firearms Possession and Human Security: Do we see firearms as a provider of personal security or a security risk?

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SUMMARY

Widespread presence and (il)legal possession of firearms stands for one of the major threats to human security in Serbia. This is supported not only by the official estimation that between 200.000 and one million pieces of firearms circulate across Serbia, but also by the fact that significant number of incidents, occasionally with fatal outcome, includes use of both – legal and illegal firearms.

Women and youth are especially vulnerable groups within the context of this social issue. Women are more prevalent among victims than perpetrators of incidents involving firearms, whereas young people are the most represented social group among perpetrators and, at the same time, social group most exposed to the negative effects of rigid patriarchal culture, personified with firearms.

The policy brief is aimed at analysing not only existing practices, but also the vulnerable groups' opinions and attitudes concerning firearms possession, in order to offer recommendations for further dealing with this problem in Serbia.

Envisaged recommendations are primarily directed to improving actions and campaigns for firearms legalization, as well as to the important topics and contents to be included in the proposal of the new Strategy for firearms control in the Republic of Serbia, which is planned for the forthcoming period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of the Public Policy Research Centre's project, conducted in four local communities in Serbia, indicate the need for adopting human security approach in solving issue of widespread possession of (il)legal firearms, giving the fact this approach emphasizes security of each individual, but understood as possibility for undisturbed life and fulfillment of personal potentials and aims.

Bearing this in mind, in formulating future policy measures and steps it is necessary to start from the security needs of citizens, primarily vulnerable groups, as groups in difficult social position. It is important to recognize that the issue of firearms possession reflects various important social problems. Therefore systematic approach to this issue offers possibility for taking other significant actions, with the aim of raising the levels of security culture of citizens, but also of their trust in the work of security institutions, primarily police. Suggestions for achieving this goal are the following:

- In order to successfully create policies aiming to prevention of firearms proliferation based on security needs of vulnerable groups, it is necessary to have official data and statistics on the incidents involving firearms – this statistics has to include all relevant data on sex, age, relation of victim and perpetrators, type and the source of used weapon, as well as on the context of the incident and other information. This statistics has to be available to the public and all relevant social actors in their work on solving issue of firearms proliferation.
- The process of developing the new Strategy for Small Arms and Light Weapons Control and accompanying Action Plan has to recognize wide significance of the problem of widespread possession of (il)legal firearms, and based on that to enable public consultations and involvement of different civil society organizations and citizens. It is important to rely not just on the experience and knowledge of professional and hunter associations, but also of organizations dealing with protection and promotion of human rights, and especially rights of vulnerable groups – women (Roma women, older and women from rural areas etc.), LGBT population and youth. These civil society organizations may contribute significantly to the process of drafting documents, as well as to the implementation phase and to the citizens' monitoring of the Strategy and Action Plan.
- The Strategy and Action Plan have to include wide range of “soft measures” aiming to inform and educate young people on risks and threats of firearms possession. These activities would contribute to raising level of security culture of youth. They have to be planned and conducted in the close cooperation of national and local institutions with civil society, educational institutions, youth offices, and other relevant stakeholders.
- The Strategy and Action Plan have to envisage activities aiming to enhancing security of students in primary and secondary schools and prevention of firearms presence in the schools. These activities have to be conducted within coordinated efforts of schools, local self-governments, local security councils, Ministry of Interior and other actors in the field of youth security.

- Planned Strategy has to recognize the interconnection of firearms possession and gender based violence and domestic violence, and within this context, to envisage measures and activities directed to raising conscience of relation of these serious social problems.
- It is of greatest importance to ensure full commitment of all institutions to reducing the frequency of domestic and gender based violence, including „zero tolerance” for all perpetrators of violence, especially in the cases of security sector representatives as offenders.
- Future campaigns for firearms legalization and handing over have to be thoroughly prepared, with clear messages including promotion of values opposite to patriarchal culture and culture of firearms. These messages would contribute to raising conscience on dangers of firearms possession. Likewise, messages have to be presented in a manner more receptive to citizens, in order to ensure proper and timely dissemination of reliable information.
- Civil society organizations, especially those active in the field of vulnerable groups’ position, have to be consulted in the process of preparing campaigns for firearms legalization, in order to assure including of specific security needs of vulnerable groups.
- It is important to comprise specific characteristics of different local communities within the process of preparing campaigns for firearms legalization. Therefore, there is a need for organizing activities on the local level, tailor-made for the local context and involving all relevant local actors (including media).
- Secure consistent implementation of the provisions of the Law on Arms and Ammunition related to mandatory medical check of firearms owners, as well as the provisions stating obligation of doctors to report to the responsible authorities every change in the medical status of firearms owner, which affects his ability to hold the arms.
- Developing educative and informative materials for firearms owners on the significance of psychological health and possible negative effects of firearms on psychological health of each individual.
- Continuous work on raising awareness of security sector employees on the importance of responsible handling of firearms, but also on the need for them to be a positive example of promoting values opposite to predominant patriarchal culture.
- Improving of the existing and developing new educational programs for security sector representatives in the field of (anti)discrimination, gender based, domestic and other kinds of violence.
- Constant engagement on strengthening system of psycho-social support to security sector employees and on promoting importance of prevention and protection of psychological health.