

SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS “TARGETING WEAPONS” – MISUSE OF FIREARMS IN SERBIA

Contrary to the general impression the public gets through media reports, firearms-related incidents taking place in the context of family violence are more deadly than those taking place in criminal activities. Most incidents occur between friends and relatives. Young people make up one half of targets/victims, but in most cases these incidents result in non-fatal injuries. On the other hand, death is more frequently the result of firearms-related incidents when older citizens are victims. Perpetrators are predominantly men, while among women victims are more numerous. Illegal weapons are most often used in these incidents – among them often pistols and hunting rifles that can be legalized. Most citizens think that it is important to possess firearms for personal protection, but they are against the concealed carry of weapons.

These are some of the findings of the Public Policy Research Centre that analyzed 470 different entries collected through the platform *Oružje na meti/Targeting weapons* (www.oruzjenameti.org), established by South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of the Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC). The entries included comments made by Serbian citizens expressing their attitudes on the possession and carry of weapons, their testimonies of weapons seen, as well as reports found in daily media reports on arms-related incidents collected in the period from August 2012, when the platform was established, until the end of February 2015. The reports come from all parts of Serbia, from Veliki Trnovac to Zrenjanin.

The Public Policy Research Centre analyzed all entries available on the platform. The quantitative data presented were drawn from 400 media reports and analyzed according to the following criteria: the type of weapon used in the incident, and whether it was in (il)legal possession; gender and age of the victim(s) and perpetrator(s); their relationship; the outcome and context of the incident; and the type of settlement (urban or rural) where the incident took place and its location/setting, time of day, and season.

According to the media reports analyzed, most incidents (almost 39%) involved the use of pistols and revolvers, followed by several types of small arms and light weapons (SALW) (9%). In 31% of reports, the type of weapon used was not indicated. The reports which contain information on the legal status of the weapon used show that the use of illegally possessed weapons was almost six times more

prevalent than that of legal weapons. 32% of illegal weapons cases involved 'several types of weapons and ammunition', followed by 'pistols' in 28% of cases, and with 'grenades' figuring in 20% of cases.

The data also suggests that weapons that by law can be legalized (pistols, revolvers, hunting rifles) were five times more common than weapons that cannot be legalized (automatic weapons and grenades).

Young people aged 18-35 are most likely to be targeted in armed incidents, making up one half of the victims. Sustaining non-fatal injuries is the most common result of such incidents for this age group, while death was predominant among victims aged 36 to 65.

Men were perpetrators almost 32 times more often than women. Women were also five times more likely to be victims than perpetrators.

Arms-related incidents had a fatal outcome in almost one fourth of the cases, and non-fatal injury was the result in one third of the cases. Men were almost five times more likely to be the victims of incidents than women, including those without physical consequences. However, death was more prevalent among female victims – 44% as opposed to 34% for male victims. A majority of the cases involving men resulted in injury (54%).

Among cases where the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim was known, over 40% involved friends/acquaintances and 30% involved blood relations or spouses.

Most cases involving the misuse of firearms were crime-related incidents (38%), followed by conflicts caused by property/money-related disputes or jealousy – 9.75%, and family violence – 6.25%.

Although the misuse of weapons in a criminal context is most commonly reported by the media, in two thirds of such cases no injuries were reported. A fatal outcome is relatively rare in crime-related incidents. On the other hand, in family-related violence one half of the reported cases are fatal. Although there are almost six times more incidents involving firearms in a criminal context than that of family violence, the absolute number of deaths in the context of family violence (12) is actually higher than the absolute number of deaths in the criminal context (11). According to the available data, most

deaths were the consequence of conflict around money, property, or jealousy (15), as well as suicide (13).

According to the data, incidents occurring in urban areas were much more frequent (78%) than those happening in rural areas. Regarding the former, the location of incidents was most often a public space such as street or road (25%), and much less frequently private space (15%). In rural areas on the other hand, one half of incidents happened inside a house or in a yard. Almost one fifth of cases involving the misuse of firearms happened in public or on business premises – including offices, shops, and border crossings, and almost 10% took place inside bars, restaurants, and similar facilities.

The number of incidents in the summer season is almost two-fold compared to the number of incidents in the winter. Moreover, incidents occurring in the evening hours and at night were clearly more prevalent than those happening in the morning and during daytime.

In terms of citizen attitudes which were expressed in their entries posted on the platform (59 entries, 2012-2013), most (46%) have a positive attitude towards weapons in general. The put forth reasoning included: the necessity of owning weapons for the purpose of self-defence or the protection of home and property; security officials or persons with high risk jobs needing to possess firearms; and the importance of the defence industry's contribution to overall technological development. A negative attitude towards weapons (35%) was most often justified by the risk arms cause in public spaces, especially in relation to children; negative attitudes in some cases were also linked to a perceived lack of professionalism of the police. An absolute majority is against carrying weapons, except under very limited conditions, such as weapons carried by members of the military and special police forces, or when lives are clearly at risk.

Positive attitudes regarding the carrying of weapons were expressed mostly by persons with complaints about the weapons legislation, requesting that the laws and regulations be amended in specific areas and offering specific solutions. This contributes to the assumption that these particular entries were provided primarily by the citizens who professionally or through a hobby use weapons. Negative comments on general safety are put forward more often by citizens who think that the carrying of weapons is unnecessary than by those who find it necessary.

There were a few reports about seeing a weapon or witnessing gunfire (15 entries). Sightings of weapons on the street were most often reported (67%), followed by those seen in an apartment, house, or a yard (20%), and in facilities such as restaurants and bars (7%). Along with the often criticized celebratory gunfire, there were also complaints about traffic-related situations.