

University of Belgrade-Faculty of Political Science

MA in Peace, Security and Development

MA Thesis Proposal

**Millions Non-Smoking Guns:
The Nexus Between Firearms Possession and Security in Serbia**

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1. Abstract

In view of the omnipresent phenomenon of firearms today and their continuously expanding use, discussions on their risks and dangers remain highly relevant. Their evident increase in various legal activities, as well as in violent crimes and terrorist attacks around the world, renders them an alarming issue. Numerous studies demonstrate a clear correlation between the number of weapons owned by civilians and the levels of crime and violence within a country. Yet, this research shows that such a correlation does not exist in Serbia, despite its leading position in Europe—and its very high global ranking—regarding the number of weapons in civilian possession. The central hypothesis suggests that the major reason for this lies in the persistent securitising approach to the firearms issue, adopted both by national authorities and by the international community, often involving strong emotions as facilitator, particularly after critical events. The role of the media in the process is also highlighted. This study applies discourse analysis to the case of Serbia, observed through the lens of securitisation theory, in order to comprehensively depict the main causes, scope, and effects of such policies. It situates these developments within a broader socio-political context, tracing the consequent evolution of regulatory and cooperative frameworks that have gradually enhanced the country's security situation. For this purpose, a wide range of relevant primary and secondary sources is employed, including official documents, newspaper articles, activity of the civil society. Quantitative data for statistical purposes are drawn mainly from official police databases. The research illustrates how the firearms issue is addressed, the primary motivations of securitising actors, public opinion on the matter, and the potential trade-offs in terms of democratic principles. The interplay of different influences outlined in this study underlines the importance of a holistic and durable approach to the problem of firearms that creates the possibility of stable and safe conditions for citizens, regardless of their abundance.

2. Introduction

2.1 Wider political background and problem statement

Over one billion firearms exist in the world today—a figure that is as alarming as it is real. And guess what?—the outlook is even more concerning: the global weapons market, currently valued at approximately 42 billion USD, is projected to grow to 71.7 billion USD by 2032 (LinkedIn, 2024). The demand for firearms has grown exponentially since their invention. Originally developed for state defense and conquest, firearms later became tools for personal protection. Today, they are often associated with historical legacy, masculinity, and social status.

This widespread popularity has also led to increasing misuse, raising awareness of the dangers that firearms pose. Of particular concern are the rising rates of peer violence, violence against women, and even mass shootings—especially in a context where societies appear increasingly desensitized, even numb to violence. At the same time, serious crimes such as human trafficking, migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and armed robbery remain widespread and frequent.

Global conflicts continue to elevate security risks, contributing to a state of constant alert. The wars in Gaza and Ukraine are currently among the most high-profile, with potentially far-reaching consequences. Along with the recent conflict in Afghanistan, these wars are expected to fuel the illicit arms trade, leading to the proliferation of illegal weapons across Europe and beyond. When terrorism is added to this already ominous equation, the threat landscape becomes even more complex and alarming.

Should we be deeply concerned by these facts? At first glance, there appear to be numerous reasons for fear and even panic among citizens across many countries. In this context, firearms—widely used in the unlawful and violent activities mentioned above—can be seen as an existential threat to human security. There is a well-documented correlation between the possession and availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and their misuse, particularly in the context of homicides and suicides. Numerous studies conducted over the past three decades support the conclusion that more firearms equals to more deaths (Dalberg, Ikeda and Kresnow, 2004; Hemenway and Miller, 2000; Hepburn and Hemenway, 2004; Johnson and

Robinson, 2024; Kellerman and Rushforth, 1994; Miller, Azrael and Hemenway, 2002; Siegel and King, 2013; Wiebe, 2003).

However, I argue that a high number of firearms does not necessarily lead to greater insecurity, gun-related crime, or violence. This argument will be explored through the case study of Serbia, and more broadly, the Western Balkans. When we examine global civilian gun ownership rankings, the United States holds the top position in this infamous competition, followed by Yemen. Serbia ranks third globally—and first in Europe (Zaheer, 2024). These figures are based on data from the Small Arms Survey, a widely respected source on global firearms ownership. According to estimates, the total number of legal and illegal firearms in Serbia is approximately 2.5 million (Ćopić and Dokmanović, 2022: 278).

Given that Serbia is awash with firearms, one might naturally expect the country to be a hub of serious crime and widespread misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW). However, despite these assumptions, crime statistics reveal that Serbia is, in fact, a rather safe country. The misuse of firearms in violent crimes remains at a moderate—if not low—level, especially when compared to many other nations with similar or even lower levels of gun ownership.

According to a survey measuring the intentional death rate¹ (IDR) globally, Serbia occupies only 143th position in the list of 219 countries. In contrast, other countries that also top the global list of civilian gun ownership have significantly higher IDR rankings—such as the United States (45th) and Yemen (35th). Even countries with moderate levels of gun ownership (ranked between 60th and 90th) report higher intentional death rates, such as Mexico (17th), Russia (24th), and Ukraine (36th). Notably, the majority of countries in Africa and Latin America have even higher scores. Furthermore, two-thirds of EU member states rank above Serbia in terms of intentional death rate.

¹ Intentional deaths include homicide (from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's study) and suicide (from World's Health Organization's study).

2.2 Research questions and goal

The main aim of this research is to provide an explanation for the apparent paradox: why is the misuse of firearms in Serbia relatively low—and even decreasing—despite the country's extremely high rate of civilian gun possession? To address this, the study explores several key questions. The central research question is: *Why is firearms abuse in Serbia low and declining despite widespread possession?* This is supported by several sub-questions:

- How is the misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) being curbed in Serbia?
- Are the Serbian government and the European community on the right track with their continual strengthening of anti-SALW measures?
- Can the restriction of democratic rights through securitization be justified in addressing alleged existential threats?
- What are the main motivations behind the tightening of Serbia's firearms regulatory framework?
- What does public discourse in Serbia reveal about societal attitudes toward firearms?
- How do media representations influence public perceptions?

In exploring these questions, I aim to analyze the interplay of various political, legal, and societal influences and their consequences, using discourse analysis as the primary research method. This approach is situated within the theoretical framework of securitization theory, which emphasizes how political actors frame certain issues as urgent security threats in order to justify extraordinary measures. When successful, this framing legitimizes exceptional policy responses by appealing to public fear, urgency, or moral concern.

In this study, I argue that firearms in Serbia are predominantly framed as a major security threat and a source of social harm. Because language, supported by emotionally charged imagery and rhetoric, plays a central role in constructing such perceptions, discourse analysis is a fitting methodological choice. Human security remains at the core of Serbia's public discourse, as reflected not only in official state documents but also in civil society activism and media narratives.

I argue that one of the primary reasons for the relatively low levels of SALW-related violence in Serbia is the comprehensive and continually evolving legislative framework regulating firearms. This framework—occasionally strengthened through urgent legal amendments—provides a solid foundation for maintaining a secure environment and limiting both the misuse and proliferation of small arms.

In contrast to countries such as Mexico and the United States, where gun ownership is regarded as a constitutional right, or Yemen, where no license is required for firearm possession, Serbia enforces notably strict gun control laws. Over time, this security framework has become increasingly restrictive, shaped by a combination of external pressures and internal developments. Accordingly, the goal of this research is to examine the causes and extent of the securitization of firearms in Serbia, as well as its broader implications for national and human security.

2.3 Research structure

After establishing the broader context and socio-political background of my topic, and clearly defining the research problem and objectives, the study proceeds with a review of the existing literature that forms the foundation of the research. This literature review provides an overview of academic work related to SALW issues and criminality in Europe, with a primary focus on Serbia and the Western Balkans.

Following this, I develop the theoretical framework based on securitisation theory. I begin with the original formulation of the theory and then examine its further elaboration by various scholars. Particular attention is paid to specific elements that enhance the success of the securitization process, such as the role of the media and the use of emotions in security discourse. The subsequent chapter outlines the methodological approach employed in the study, which consists of discourse analysis complemented by the interpretation of quantitative data obtained from official sources.

The core and most comprehensive part of the thesis is the empirical analysis. In this section, I explore a range of international, regional, and national factors that contribute to the

ongoing securitisation of SALW in Serbia and the Western Balkans. I also examine the resulting shifts in regulatory frameworks, international cooperation, and overall levels of security.

The empirical section concludes with a summary of key findings, followed by a broader discussion of the results. The thesis ends with final reflections and suggestions for related topics that could be explored in future research.

3. Literature review

The question of security—both of the state and its citizens—is a constant and pressing concern. Although it may appear routine or commonplace, it remains a dynamic and evolving issue, continually reshaped by changes in the global security environment. The issue of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is closely intertwined with this broader security context, particularly in the Western Balkans—a region historically marked by conflict, which has left to its people, as a legacy, a mass of weapons and fragments of peace.

Despite the significance of this topic for both domestic and international audiences, SALW in Serbia and the wider region has been relatively underexplored in academic literature. This gap may be attributed to the complexity of the issue, the multitude of challenges involved in regulating SALW, and the scarcity of reliable data—especially on the illicit dimensions of weapons possession and use. Existing studies primarily focus on the intricate political and social background of Serbia and the Western Balkans, examining the factors that either hinder or promote progress in arms control and crime reduction. A dominant theme in the literature is the impact of the wars that took place in the region at the turn of the millennium, along with their enduring and serious consequences.

3.1. Academic literature on SALW

In the early 2000s, the European Union began to intensify its security measures in the Western Balkans, largely as a response to the 1998 Kosovo crisis and with the broader aim of integrating the region into the EU framework and maintaining control (Kantokoski, 2021). This shift notably impacted the SALW policy landscape. Kantokoski argues that EU enlargement is driven not only by security concerns—such as preventing instability from spilling over into EU territory—but also by political motives (*ibid*). In any case, the EU’s strategic objective was to expand its influence and monitor the security situation in the region, with firearms trafficking identified as one of the key threats. While the influence of SALW originating from the Western Balkans declined during the 2000s, the Union adopted a long-term stability strategy and chose to act proactively. As a result, numerous reforms and initiatives were introduced in this field.

At the same time, organized crime in the region was flourishing. Several scholars have noted that Serbia and the broader region became increasingly aware of the threats posed by both legal and illegal firearms—recognizing their origins and the challenges involved in curbing their misuse and proliferation (Prezelj, 2007; Čopić and Dokmanović, 2022; Nicolin, 2022). These works largely acknowledge that some progress has been made in addressing SALW-related problems at national, regional, and international levels. The issue is now widely recognized, and substantial efforts have been invested in developing a robust regulatory framework. Some authors even argue that the Western Balkans has evolved from being a security consumer into a reliable security provider within Europe (Klemenž, Hrabálek, and Đorđević, 2021), emphasizing in particular the significance of cooperation with Europol and the capacities devoted to the region.

Anders (2003: 10) similarly notes certain progress in the area of SALW control, highlighting the important role of “advocacy networks”—comprising NGOs, researchers, and other non-state actors—in advancing arms control in Europe. These networks function as supportive actors in the securitisation process, aiming to influence state policy through public campaigns and advocacy, with the goal of promoting the adoption of desired regulations. Nonetheless, the ultimate structure of SALW and conventional arms control regimes remains largely in the hands of national governments.

On the other hand, some scholars remain skeptical about the effectiveness of these efforts. Nicolin (2022), for example, argues that the adopted measures and legal frameworks have limited impact, and that the SALW-related security situation in Serbia and the Western Balkans remains bleak—primarily due to high levels of corruption and the inconsistent enforcement of laws. She explicitly blames the Serbian regime, labeling it a “neopatrimonial state” marked by systemic corruption and a political culture based on personal networks. According to Nicolin, the close ties between political elites and criminal actors send a dangerous message to citizens: that crime and violence are tolerated. This dynamic undermines public trust and, inevitably, affects the situation surrounding firearms. While she acknowledges the competence and commitment of law enforcement agencies, and even recognizes that the regulatory framework itself is adequate, she concludes that no legal system can function

effectively in a state where the ruling party's primary goal is to maintain power and secure personal gain.

Stojarová (2022) points to the broader political environment as a factor in the slow progress of crime suppression, highlighting the rise of authoritarianism and the spread of extremist and radical ideologies in both political and social arenas. Similar conclusions were drawn earlier by Prezelj (2007), who identified entrenched “cultures of violence,” radicalism, and nationalism as major obstacles.

Several more targeted studies have focused specifically on the dangers that firearm availability poses in the context of domestic violence, particularly violence against women (Pavlov, 2023; Pavlović and Milutinović, 2020; Kovačević, 2022; Topalović and Kolarova, 2024). The findings in this area are especially alarming—from both human rights and legal perspectives—as incidents remain frequent and, in some cases, are even increasing. This is despite the adoption of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the implementation of multiple SALW-related measures aligned with EU standards. The legal framework is still inadequate. Particularly troubling is the low percentage of reported domestic violence cases, which reflects a widespread lack of trust in state institutions and represents many missed opportunities to protect victims and save lives.

3.2. Research gap

To date, there is no research that directly addresses the discrepancy between Serbia's alarmingly high rate of civilian firearm possession and its relatively low crime rates and infrequent incidents involving weapons. This is the gap I aim to address by offering a possible explanation for this paradox and opening space for further academic discussion on the topic.

Additionally, within the theoretical literature, there is a notable absence—or at best, a scarcity—of research exploring the role of emotions, such as grief and anger, in the securitization process facilitation. This study seeks to contribute to that underdeveloped area by examining how emotional responses influence public and political discourse, using practical examples from the Serbian context. In doing so, I aim to make a modest contribution to the ongoing development of securitization theory.

The central research question guiding this study is: Why does the misuse of firearms in Serbia remain low—and even show signs of decline—despite extremely high levels of civilian gun ownership?

3.3. Objectives and practical contribution of the research

The primary objective of this research is to address a significant gap in the academic literature concerning small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Serbia and the Western Balkans. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are currently no contemporary studies that examine the causes and effects of the intensified securitisation of SALW in this region, nor the broader implications of such a political approach on the extent of firearm misuse and the overall security environment.

A complementary contribution of this study lies in its potential to foster greater academic engagement with this issue. The Roadmap Midterm Review (SEESAC, 2022) highlights the importance of enhancing collaboration between academic institutions and civil society in order to raise awareness about the threats posed by SALW and to maximize the impact of strategic documents such as the Roadmap. In line with this recommendation, this research aims to serve as a step toward strengthening the connection between academia and the security sector. It is hoped that this effort will encourage similar initiatives and contribute to building a more robust link between academic research and policy-making in the area of arms control.

A further, more general contribution of this study is its effort to draw attention—both locally and internationally—to Serbia and the Western Balkans as a region that can be viewed not only through the lens of past conflict and instability, but as a reliable and responsible security partner. The study underscores the existence of a strong legislative framework, alignment with EU standards, and active participation in SALW-related initiatives. By reshaping outdated perceptions and promoting a more positive reputation, this research may contribute to regional development and help accelerate Serbia's EU accession process.

4. Theoretical framework

Security can be understood as the pursuit of freedom from threats (Buzan, 1991: 432–433). However, perception plays a vital role in determining what constitutes a threat. Individuals interpret their surroundings in different ways, and their thresholds for perceiving danger vary. At the state level, there are designated actors responsible for maintaining safety and stability. These actors must assess various events and phenomena, and classify them as highly threatening, moderately concerning, or irrelevant to security.

Within this context, securitization theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine the issue of firearms in Serbia and its implications for both national and international security. The large number of weapons in civilian possession is widely perceived as a source of numerous risks, including serious crime and violence. Some of these perceived threats have been framed as existential and requiring urgent intervention. While fear surrounding firearms may at times appear exaggerated, it is important to recognize that public perception—shaped largely by discourse and social construction—is what ultimately drives securitization processes.

This research is grounded in the classical theory of securitization developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, 1998), which serves as the primary theoretical framework. The study also incorporates key insights from scholars who have further developed or critiqued this approach, including Balzacq (2011) and Stritzel (2007). In addition, the framework is enriched by more recent contributions that emphasize the roles of media (Vultee, 2007, 2011; Williams, 2003) and emotions (Aradau, 2004; Huysmans, 2006; Hansen, 2011; Vuori, 2010) in shaping securitization processes. By integrating these perspectives, this study adopts a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the problem.

4.1. The Copenhagen school of security studies' theory

According to its founders, the securitisation theory aims to explain the reasons and processes by which some phenomenon in a society starts to be treated as a high-risk security threat whereas others, even if more devastating, stay in the domain of ordinary state agenda. It deals with various issues that pose existential threat to a certain entity, and describes the

procedure of handling it by expeditive utilization of appropriate special measures. The father of the securitisation theory is Danish scholar Ole Wæver, who presented the theory in his early works, but gave it more comprehensive form few years later, together with his colleagues belonging to the Copenhagen school of security studies, Barry Buzan and Jaap de Wilde.

They explain the main elements of the securitisation process, defined as a “speech act”, which represents an action in itself that has a power of changing political practice, if other “felicity” conditions are satisfied. Buzan and Wæver argue that security is not a predefined notion, but socially constructed in speech, which serves to „securitizing actors“ (usually political elites) to persuade the audience, based on their authority and by using proper security language, of the existence of a threat that requires immediate reaction through the use of some „special measures” in order to protect “referent object” whose existence is in danger. „Functional actors“ are those that do not take active part in securitization process, but facilitate or impede it.

Being rather inter-subjective and socially constructed, security does not have objective measure (ibid: 30-31). Even if not existential in a full sense, the threat has to bear sufficient importance, that is, capacity to cause “substantial political effect” (Buzan et al., 1998: 25). Such an issue is then given a high priority, and dislocated from an everyday political agenda into the realm of urgency. Apart from mutually experiencing certain issue as existential, its significance can also be observed through the cascading effect on other sectors and wider patterns of relations in a society and consequently facilitation of new securitisation processes (Buzan et al., 1998: 26).

This strategy jeopardizes democratic values and practice, as securitising actors avoid “procedures and rules by which [they] would be normally bound” (ibid). Securitization can be thus seen as the contrast of democracy, since it breaks its rules, and uses power and authority to quickly make decisions and put new rules of the game in practice, as opposed to slow regular democratic procedures that can be as such contested and challenged (Aradau 2004a: 4-8)). Nevertheless, proper balance between security and freedom is difficult to achieve, and it is always the question of priorities which one will go down on the scales.

The audience is more likely to support securitising actor's explanation of the problem and proposed remedy if the moment is right and the phenomenon has already been known as threatening in the past. If an acceptance is given, the „securitizing move“ is considered successful. Apart from familiarity of the audience with the threat, there are two more conditions

that facilitate the process of securitisation, which include the use of a proper security grammar, and the authority of securitizing actor (ibid: 32). The discourse chosen by securitizing actor needs to be convincing enough so that the audience “at least tolerates the measures” (ibid: 25). The acceptance does not always have to be in the form of clear consent, but likewise coercion. In this sense, security can be seen as an “effect of content”, as the choice of wording is of crucial importance for successful securitization (Vultee, 2011). Vultee (2010: 4) finds in one of his researches that people (audience) react to the mere word “terror”, which qualifies terrorism as a “securitizing word”, that easily justifies extraordinary measures (Vultee, 2010: 6).

The reverse process of securitization is known as desecuritization, which refers to the return of an issue from the realm of emergency politics to the sphere of normal political processes, once the perceived existential threat no longer exists (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). While *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998) does not devote significant attention to desecuritization, it nonetheless acknowledges it as an important element of the broader security framework.

Desecuritization can be understood as a reversal of securitization, though not in a strictly linear or symmetrical sense. It does not require the same actors, conditions, or procedural steps. Rather than a mirror image of securitization, it more closely resembles a "reset" mechanism—activated when the urgency that justified extraordinary measures has passed, and a return to ordinary political procedures becomes viable. As Wæver explains, desecuritization involves “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Buzan et al., 1998: 4).

Although enhanced security might appear desirable to the general public, desecuritization is often viewed as a positive and necessary outcome. This is because securitization—by definition—suspends regular democratic procedures in favor of swift, exceptional responses. In doing so, it reduces the space for deliberation, negotiation, and evidence-based policymaking. Affective and emotional responses frequently dominate in securitized environments, pushing rational analysis and democratic discourse into the background. Therefore, desecuritization is commonly seen as a normative goal in democratic societies, where issues can be addressed through inclusive, transparent, and accountable mechanisms.

In *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) move beyond the traditional, state-centric understanding of security by expanding the concept into new, non-military sectors. They argue that, particularly in the post–Cold War era, the military dimension had become too narrow to address the complexity of emerging global threats. In response, they proposed a broader framework that, while still recognizing the state as the primary referent object in the military and political sectors, also incorporates three additional sectors: environmental, societal, and economic. Each of these sectors has its own security dynamics, actors, referent objects, and types of threats.

This sectoral division helps to more clearly identify the elements involved in specific securitization processes. However, it is not always easy to assign a given threat to a single sector, as many contemporary security challenges are cross-cutting in nature—affecting multiple referent objects simultaneously and spilling over sectoral boundaries. This interconnectedness makes such threats more complex and potentially more dangerous, requiring a comprehensive and coordinated response.

In addition to expanding the concept of security across sectors, Buzan also contributed to spatially rethinking security through the theory of regional security complexes. In light of the post–Cold War dissolution of bipolar global order, he sought to establish a new analytical framework capable of capturing regional security dynamics. According to this theory, the regional level represents a critical intermediate layer between the global and national levels, and is especially relevant due to patterns of security interdependence and historical amity or enmity among neighboring states (Buzan, 2003: 40; Buzan, 2008: 105).

The central premise of the theory is that most political and military threats travel more easily across short distances, creating heightened security interdependence within regions. Thus, a regional security complex is defined as “a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan et al., 1998: 12). Within this framework, the European Union and the Western Balkans are viewed as two distinct sub-regional security complexes within the broader European security complex (Buzan, 2008: 106; Buzan et al., 1998: 12).

4.2. Critique of Copenhagen school's securitisation theory

Although the form, content, and timing of a speech act are undoubtedly important, Stritzel and Balzacq argue that these elements alone are insufficient to explain or reflect real-life situations. Stritzel critiques Wæver's conceptualisation of securitisation as theoretically vague. While Wæver attempted to shift from the internal dimension of the process towards greater externality in his joint work with Buzan and de Wilde, he ultimately remained somewhere in between.

To address these limitations, Stritzel and Balzacq build on the Copenhagen School's theory in a more pragmatic manner. They elaborate on its weaknesses and seek to expand it in order to better correspond with empirical cases, thereby increasing its practical applicability. For them, securitisation is not a discrete event marked by a singular "speech act" but rather a dynamic and gradual process embedded in broader social and political contexts (Stritzel, 2007).

Stritzel emphasises the gradualism of the securitisation process. In contrast to focusing on a speech act as the primary analytical unit, he adopts the notion of "text," which is more complex and structured, encompassing hidden influences and constructed over time using multiple sources. By incorporating the importance of context and the positional power of the securitising actor, this broader perspective grounds securitisation more firmly in the social realm than in the purely linguistic sphere.

Similarly, Thierry Balzacq seeks to reformulate securitisation theory, shifting it from a linguistic foundation toward a more sociologically informed framework (Balzacq, 2010: 26). Like Stritzel, he views the Copenhagen School's tripartite model—comprising the referent object, securitising actor, and functional actors—as incomplete. It overlooks the crucial role of the audience, contextual factors, and what he terms the *dispositif*—a set of practices and tools involved in meaning-making.

Balzacq thus develops a modified model with three levels of analysis: agents, acts, and context (ibid: 35–43). *Agents* include the actors involved in the process, the relationships among them, their identities, as well as the referent subject and object. *Acts* consist of linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms used to perform securitising moves, such as speech figures, media

channels, and the *dispositif*. *Context* is more difficult to define, but Balzacq adopts Wetherell's (2001) distinction between proximate and distal contexts—the former referring to the immediate setting of discourse, and the latter encompassing broader socio-cultural, ethical, and ethnic environments in which the discourse is embedded. Despite his revisions, Balzacq's model maintains parallels with the original securitisation theory, especially in terms of the centrality of actors and felicity conditions.

4.3. Images and emotions in securitisation process

Some scholars further expand the process of securitisation to include the realm of images and media, examining their influence on public perception and, consequently, on the securitisation process itself. In the age of visual technologies and mass media, it would be naive and reductive to “put all eggs in one basket”—that is, to rely solely on the ‘speech act’ as the primary medium of securitisation. Written media, images, and the emotions they evoke can be understood as additional, highly effective tools of securitisation.

Vultee (2011) conceptualises the media as a securitisation “frame” that presents the public with a particular perspective on a phenomenon or event. Through this frame, the issue is either portrayed as part of the normal realm of everyday politics—requiring standard policy responses—or as a threat to the referent object's very existence, thus demanding exceptional measures. To attract and maintain public attention, media outlets often employ language of specific quality and stylistic form. Here, rhetorical devices such as metaphors, comparisons, and especially stereotypes play a crucial role in shaping the securitising discourse (Balzacq, 2011: 36). These discursive elements help construct the framework through which reality is perceived.

Moreover, Vultee has empirically demonstrated a direct correlation between media framing aligned with government narratives and increased levels of public trust and support (Vultee, 2011: 31–32; Vultee, 2007: 86). The government is often positioned as the primary securitising actor in such cases. He also suggests that a reciprocal interaction exists between the media and the audience: while the media influence audience perception, audience responses can, in turn, shape future media content. In this way, the media construct a specific vision of events and may identify threats or culprits—even in the absence of definitive evidence—aiming to

promote a particular understanding, align with governmental interests, and satisfy audience expectations.

Williams (2003: 255–258) underscores the critical role of visual media, highlighting their capacity to transcend geographical boundaries and reach global audiences far beyond the immediate context of securitisation. He also notes the need to account for the distinct logic that drives media behaviour—such as the pursuit of popularity and profit—which differs from that of securitising actors. To this end, media often utilise universally recognisable symbols and imagery. As a result, visual content can reach vast audiences through modern technology, with the potential to produce far-reaching discursive effects.

Vuori (2010) and Hansen (2011) highlight a key characteristic of images—their capacity to evoke strong emotions, which can, in turn, facilitate the process of securitisation. Hansen argues that images lend reality and immediacy to events, particularly in representations of violence and death. However, she contends that images can only be properly understood when combined with accompanying text or speech, which provides necessary explanation and context. Similarly, Vuori (2010: 260) emphasises the importance of historically constructed meanings of symbols for accurate interpretation. Yet even this is not a guarantee, as individual experiences and perspectives also shape one's understanding. Despite these nuances, both scholars clearly agree that images affect people's emotions and shape their perception of events—though this effect is always mediated by context.

Koschut (2017) explores the role and significance of emotions in official discourse within the field of international relations. Among these emotions, fear emerges as the most prominent (Aradau, 2004; Hansen, 2011; Vuori, 2010; Huysmans, 2006; Williams, 2003), particularly in life-threatening scenarios or in anticipation of terrorist attacks. Aradau (2004) draws attention to the securitising potential of everyday fears, such as the fear of crime. Huysmans (2006: 52–53) argues that the foundational fear is the fear of death itself, framing security practices as methods of postponing that inevitable moment. In interpersonal contexts, the dominant fear is often the fear of being killed by another—an emotion that extends beyond physical fear to include psychological dimensions, particularly when uncertainty surrounds the identity of the perceived threat.

In this light, the role of the state becomes one of applying expert knowledge to mitigate such threats and to institutionalise rules and orders that limit individuals' capacity to dominate others at will. The elimination of fear can thus be seen as a primary driver of securitisation, while other emotions such as anger and sorrow may further enable or accelerate the process.

4.4. Theoretical Contribution

Building upon the foregoing, and taking into consideration the perceived role of images and emotions, the theoretical hypotheses on which this research is based are as follows:

First of all, I posit that not every image requires explanation through pre-text or historical context. Some images depict realities that are blatantly wrong and cannot be interpreted in an “improper way”—for instance, children starving to death, vast oil spills contaminating the oceans, or scenes of ruins and ashes with the bodies of people and animals following a war. Such visuals are universally recognisable and evoke a profound emotional response across diverse audiences.

Secondly, while numerous scholars within the field of securitisation theory emphasise fear as the predominant emotional driver, there appear to be few, if any, studies—at least to the best of the author's knowledge—examining the influence of the combined emotions of grief and anger on the securitisation process. This lacuna is what I seek to address here. These particular emotions strike the individual immediately and viscerally, bypassing deliberation, and can exert a substantial influence on behaviour, often producing a strong desire for retaliation. Alongside fear, they are fuelled by a range of media content, such as distressing images of victims of violence and crime, and accompanying narratives. Media reports frequently offer more than mere factual or verified information.

The combination of such visual and textual elements creates fertile ground for the proliferation of dark thoughts among audiences, which, in turn, amplifies and intensifies these emotions in a vicious cycle. This emotional escalation necessitates an urgent response—an intervention capable of transforming this mental state, offering relief and hope, and ultimately restoring a sense of safety. A similar dynamic likely applies in the case of terrorist attacks. It is not fear alone that drives the securitisation process, but also anger and grief. All three emotions

can serve as catalysts for initiating securitisation and act as stimuli that increase the likelihood of its success.

Thus, the modest theoretical contribution of this work may be found in its elaboration of the role of grief and anger—as emotional responses to distressing events, further intensified by media content—in the securitisation process. Through images of death and physical violence, which often convey an unambiguous message, and through related textual content that frequently violates journalistic codes of ethics, the media intensifies these emotions within the audience, sometimes to the extent that a country's internal stability may be jeopardised.

4.5. Choice of the Theory from This Work's Perspective

Securitisation theory appeared to be the most appropriate framework for analysing both domestic and foreign political dynamics related to the issue of firearms. I employed it to illustrate the persistent efforts of securitising actors to bring SALW under increasingly strict control and to elevate the fight against SALW-related crime as a policy priority. I sought to demonstrate the position of the EU as the primary securitising actor on the international stage, engaged in firearms securitisation through the continuous reinforcement of legislation and the application of measures—measures not always fully justified, but presented as necessary. Securitisation theory is suitable in this regard, as it conceptualises the process of threat construction and emphasises the power of discourse to channel attention and action in a preferred direction, portraying the object of interest as an existential threat.

The theory enabled me to examine a broad spectrum of actors involved in firearms-related activities, all exerting pressure from different angles. I describe a securitisation process that has persisted for years, and I also aim to demonstrate that it has become almost a form of best practice—a readily available solution for politically sensitive or complex situations. Following evident success in suppressing SALW abuse—largely attributable to various EU measures—the Serbian government adopted and maintained this approach as a proven method for addressing pressing societal challenges. Given the considerable history of arms securitisation and its establishment as the dominant response to perceived threats, new securitisation processes are now more easily facilitated. This ongoing process is partly responsible for Serbia's relatively

low levels of gun-related crime, despite high rates of civilian firearm possession, as well as the further decrease recorded in 2024 and expectations of a continued downward trend.

Furthermore, I found that the theory of security complexes offers broader analytical relevance for this research, as its insights are applicable to the entire Western Balkans—a region characterised by numerous shared traits, significant historical commonalities, and similar contemporary challenges. A broader perspective is crucial to my topic, particularly given the EU's tendency to view the region, with Serbia at the forefront, as a source of firearms-related threats.

Balzacq's framework is also useful to this research, particularly in enabling the identification—through discourse analysis—of different levels of influence and their respective effects on the securitisation process. This includes a special focus on power relations among various actors, and the strategies and tools they deploy in discourse. Power is evident both in the case of the EU and the Serbian government. The European Parliament, as a powerful supranational institution, can exert considerable influence over both member states and candidate countries.

In the Serbian context, President Aleksandar Vučić wields a degree of power and authority more characteristic of autocratic leadership than of a consolidated democracy. Consequently, the Serbian Parliament does not function as a genuine check on presidential proposals, as it is largely dominated by members of his political party who rarely express dissent and, in most cases, merely endorse and enact his initiatives. The President also maintains significant influence over the media, shaping a favourable version of reality. Opposition parties, despite frequently expressing disagreement with government initiatives, lack the capacity to exert tangible influence.

Such an imbalance of power has profound effects on both foreign and domestic policy. As Buzan notes, acceptance of exceptional measures does not necessarily require explicit consent; it may also occur under coercion. This is particularly evident in contexts where democracy does not function as it should—a description that fits Serbia.

Context, as highlighted by Balzacq, also plays a significant role in shaping the firearms discourse in Serbia. Negative global events have gradually contributed to the formation of a worldwide perception of firearms as a security problem. National circumstances, including Serbia's turbulent history and the dominance of organised crime in the early 2000s, made the population more willing to relinquish firearms in pursuit of a safer and more peaceful life. These were favourable conditions for the securitisation of SALW.

Given that one of my key arguments concerns the important role of the media in the process of weapons securitisation, I also draw on theoretical strands that recognise the significance and widespread impact of media reporting—particularly when supported by powerful visual imagery—on public perceptions of threat. My research places particular emphasis on the emotions of grief, anger, and fear. These theoretical elements collectively provided a strong foundation for exploring a topic characterised by a clear security dimension and complex implications associated with the issue of firearms.

In this work, the main securitising actors are the Serbian government and the EU, but also SEESAC and certain security and civil society organisations. Functional actors include opposition parties, SALW sellers, private security companies, and some international organisations. As Buzan, de Wilde, and Wæver note, in the political sector, the state or government is typically the primary securitising actor, alongside domestic and international non-governmental organisations and the media (ibid: 149). In Serbia, however, the media cannot be considered a genuine securitising actor, as most television and newspaper outlets are closely aligned with, or even orchestrated by, the government and ruling elites. Consequently, the media function more as securitising instruments, or at best as functional actors. The situation is markedly different with foreign media, which are generally less subject to the influence of national leaderships.

The securitised object and principal focus of my research is firearms. The referent object is more difficult to define, as multiple issues are at stake. This intersection of sectors illustrates the complexity of the issue—an attribute that also characterises arms. The primary referent objects are the lives and well-being of citizens; secondary referent objects include political stability and European values.

Individual security and basic human rights—such as the right to life—are under threat, along with certain European principles and legal norms that belong to the political sector (Buzan et al.: 142). The European Parliament and other key EU institutions seek to protect and securitise human rights and internal security, viewing their violation as a threat to the Union’s core principles—most notably, the free movement of people and open borders (ibid: 184–186). Moreover, certain events analysed in this thesis may pose a potential threat to governmental stability. In political discourse, such challenges are often deliberately framed as threats to the state itself and, by extension, to its sovereignty as a core principle and referent object (ibid: 152).

5. Methodological Approach

In order to successfully conduct my research, I selected a methodological approach that I believed would best align with my aims. I opted for the case of Serbia, which I examined through qualitative analysis, supported by the interpretation of relevant quantitative data obtained from verified sources. This combination enabled me to test my hypotheses in practice and to address key research questions concerning the general securitising attitude toward SALW in Serbia, the role of various security actors—including the media—and the causal relationships among different aspects of firearms, most notably civilian ownership, the regulatory framework, and instances of abuse.

5.1. Case Study: Serbia

In my investigation into the relationship between firearms possession and its misuse, I chose to study Serbia as a deviant case. Although the observations and hypotheses I propose are largely applicable across the broader region, I consider Serbia to be the most prominent example in this regard, as the production and legal trade of firearms in the Western Balkans are most extensive in Serbia (Ćopić and Dokmanović, 2022: 277). Moreover, my familiarity with the local context enables a more in-depth analysis, thereby providing a stronger foundation for future research.

Another feature that distinguishes the case of Serbia is the transformation in its image within international discourse. There is a stark contrast between Serbia's historical reputation in Europe and the world and the present-day narrative constructed by European powers. Historically, the Serbian people were seen as heroic and principled—champions of freedom who often fought against significantly stronger enemies while upholding honourable conduct. Today, however, Serbia is frequently regarded as a threat and a source of instability, especially due to the proliferation of Serbian firearms, which are perceived to endanger security in other countries.

There are many historical examples that illustrate Serbia's formerly celebrated role, and I will highlight only a few here in order to draw a parallel with the present. In the Battle of Kosovo (Kosovski boj), for instance, Serbia made the decision to confront the mighty Ottoman Empire and succeeded—at least temporarily—in halting its advance into the rest of Europe. During the

World Wars, Serbian forces were respected and even honoured by their adversaries. A unique example can be found in the German army's construction of a monument to Serbian soldiers, in recognition of their heroic resistance on the Avala mountain, despite being vastly outnumbered.

Similarly, within the premises of the International Red Cross in Geneva, there is a commemorative plaque inscribed with the words: "*Be as humane as Serbia was in 1885.*" This refers to a remarkable act during the war against Bulgaria, when Serbia halted combat operations for a day to allow a medical convoy carrying aid for the Bulgarian army to pass through its territory. Not only did Serbia permit this passage, but it also contributed substantial medical supplies of its own—enough for the Bulgarians to establish a hospital. This extraordinary gesture, in which Serbia aided its enemy, remains a singular event in the history of warfare.

As these examples illustrate, throughout history, when Serbs possessed and used firearms, they were perceived as doing so with bravery and honour, serving as a protective shield for Europe and its ally. In stark contrast, present-day Serbia and its firearms are often viewed as a significant security threat to the EU. Strong external pressure to neutralise this perceived threat is evident in the various initiatives undertaken over the past decades.

Accordingly, I chose to compare the situation in 2002—the year SEESAC was established, marking the beginning of the development of a comprehensive SALW-related regulatory framework—with that in 2023 and the first half of 2024, which represent the most current data, the deadlines for several key objectives within the Roadmap, and the period following tragic events and the government's subsequent introduction of stringent measures.

By comparing these years, I was able to observe the progress achieved in the field of SALW control as a consequence of the sustained efforts by key securitising actors, accumulated over time. This approach also provided insight into recent developments, particularly the continued application of the securitisation strategy in 2023, which had already yielded initial results by 2024. Furthermore, the actions observed in 2024 demonstrate the commitment of these actors to maintain rigorous control over firearms. I therefore offer an overview of various initiatives and the evolution of legislation and regulations aimed at tightening firearms control.

5.2. Discourse Analysis

In this research, I combine qualitative analysis with the interpretation of quantitative data. The qualitative component encompasses a detailed examination of the development of the SALW regulatory framework and international law enforcement cooperation, as well as discourse analysis, given that one of my central arguments concerns the importance of robust legislation for effective gun control.

Discourse is a crucial element in any securitisation process, whether understood narrowly as a “speech act” or more broadly as wider discourse, as explained in the theoretical framework. *“Neither ideas nor materiality have meaningful presence separate from each other”* (Hansen, 2006: 19). For instance, in relation to this study, a firearm may be interpreted as a means of defence and protection or, conversely, as a tool for threat and violence, depending on the context. Through discourse, we assign specific meanings to material objects, thereby shaping the audience’s perception of a phenomenon or event. A particular “identity” of an object is thus constructed within discourse; simultaneously, the discourse also frames the appropriate responses or actions (Hansen, 2006: 19). In this way, discursive framing of a given issue—and thereby of people’s reality—leads to changes in security practice, which lies at the heart of securitisation theory.

Discourse analysis helped me identify the elements of securitising moves within both verbal and non-verbal public discourse and to trace the synergy among these elements. The primary sources I rely upon include Serbian and EU official documents, legislation, European Commission reports, and interviews with the President and other government officials. Secondary sources comprise relevant newspaper articles, transcripts of important speeches, coverage of key events, civil society initiatives, and citizen protests. The analysis of selected discourse illuminates the conditions that enabled the securitisation of firearms and reveals certain discrepancies between the public statements made by securitising actors and their actual understanding of the topic.

In an attempt to gain a comprehensive picture of the gun-related climate in Serbia and its wider impact on society, I adopted Lene Hansen’s approach to discourse analysis (Hansen,

2006). Her concept of intertextuality refers to the interplay between current and previous discourses on a given topic, as well as to the interaction between discourses of various securitising and functional actors operating at different levels and in different forms (genres) circulating within the public domain. This concept is particularly suitable for my research, as numerous links and cross-references are evident across the various segments of the discourse I examined. These are visible both at the national level—where every layer of the state structure has been shaken by fear and defiance in response to perceived existential threats—and within the EU, which exhibits a unified stance regarding the threats allegedly emanating from the Western Balkans.

Hansen identifies three primary models of intertextual analysis, ranging from official foreign policy discourse produced by authoritative institutions and individuals (Model 1), through broader political debate in opposition circles, civil society, and the media (Model 2), to representations in culture (Model 3A) and marginal political discourse, including academia and NGOs (Model 3B) (Hansen, 2006: 54–57). I applied, to a certain extent, Models 1 and 2 to capture a wider spectrum of discourses surrounding SALW within the selected timeframe, as viewed through the lens of securitisation theory. In addition to analysing the roles of securitising and functional actors, I aimed to capture audience reactions and the outcomes of the securitisation process.

The research is centred around one relatively specific topic—firearms—studied through the single case of Serbia. This approach enabled me to explore the issue from various angles and to sufficient depth, focusing on key events and related challenges. The study is temporally bounded, covering approximately twenty years, with an emphasis on specific years and events that best align with my research questions. I used discourse analysis to map the long-running securitisation process in the area of SALW and to illustrate the substantial progress achieved through the influence of various actors and events. I sought to demonstrate how Serbian firearms have been portrayed across different levels of discourse as a threat to both national and European security.

Using Hansen's first two models, I explored diverse perspectives on firearms—ranging from those who support gun ownership to those who oppose it strongly. I aimed to identify in official discourse both the actual need for regulation and the proportionality of control measures.

Model 1 was used to analyse official EU and Serbian documents—whether enacted or in the process of amendment—as well as interviews with the President and ministers, and their public addresses to the parliament and public, particularly in the aftermath of key events. From the perspective of international actors, the Western Balkans—especially Serbia—has long been viewed as a hotspot, due to the problem of illegal firearms trafficking to Western Europe, further exacerbated by concerns about terrorism. This provides ample material for discourse analysis.

Domestically, Model 1 was applied to analyse the political discourse surrounding two mass shootings in 2023 and terrorist incidents in 2024. These events prompted swift reactions from the government and relevant authorities, whose discourse was saturated with immediate public statements in the hours and days following the incidents. As might be expected, firearms once again came under severe scrutiny, and urgent measures were proposed—particularly amendments to the Law on Weapons and Ammunition and the Criminal Code. Some of these measures were implemented almost immediately, while others remain in process but were publicly announced. Discourse analysis allowed me to trace a behavioural pattern developed over time that now influences political responses "by default".

Model 2 is essential for examining the facilitating role of the media and non-elite actors in the securitisation process. Regarding the latter, significant support for the sensitive issue of femicide has come from numerous civil society organisations, particularly the Victimology Society of Serbia. These organisations are often the sole source of information about such cases—largely through media reporting—since femicide has not yet been legally defined as a separate criminal offence in Serbian law, and as such, no disaggregated police data exist. Frequent femicide cases spark public protests and advocacy campaigns, which also form part of the broader public discourse. Vuori (2010: 265–266) notes that actors lacking formal state power but endowed with sufficient social capital may influence political decision-making by highlighting the seriousness and immediacy of threats and advocating for urgent responses.

The most concrete contributions to addressing femicide—and possibly the most significant impacts on security practice—come from SEESAC and the UNDP, who actively support civil society efforts on this issue. They conducted a comprehensive study on femicide committed with firearms (Pavlov et al., 2023), and in 2024 developed two sets of guidelines for police officers on handling firearms in cases of domestic violence (SEESAC, 2024). These guidelines represent a powerful example of collaborative, bottom-up securitisation—an outcome of grassroots mobilisation.

Regarding the media, they played an active role in covering all of the events mentioned from the outset. Naturally, the media coverage of mass shootings and brutal femicide was extensive, exerting immense public pressure on authorities. Even aside from such extreme events, crime reporting occupies substantial space in Serbian media, often accompanied by speculation and conspiracy theories. Negative stories tend to remain in circulation for prolonged periods, dominating headlines and television coverage, often supported by interviews with officials, experts, and victims' relatives.

To captivate their audiences and meet the demand for sensationalism, the media frequently rely on stereotypes and generalisations that are easily understood and widely shared. In addition, images are often even more impactful than words. As a result, visual portrayals of blood, violence, and national grief are heavily featured, especially following major tragedies. This strategy fosters the impression that horrific events are constant, although this does not reflect reality.

Unlike domestic media—often under the influence or patronage of the ruling party—foreign media, free from local political pressures, are expected to provide more analytical and unbiased coverage. However, they too tend to conform to familiar narrative frameworks, often depicting Serbia and the Balkans in predictable and sometimes reductive terms.

This model of discourse analysis helped me trace the construction of a security frame across various forms of discourse—speech acts, texts, and public protests—particularly those facilitated by the media as either functional actors or securitising instruments. The results highlight rhetorical strategies such as hyperbole, metaphor, and the use of emotion-laden

imagery. Other features of discourse and the nature of its principal actors also provide valuable insights into underlying power dynamics and the intentions behind securitising moves.

Lene Hansen also outlines key conditions that must be met to produce a reliable sample for intertextual discourse analysis. These include:

- a temporal dimension, meaning that the sample must span different time periods;
- a spatial perspective, where the object of analysis must have clearly defined boundaries;
- inclusion of multiple events; and
- consideration of multiple “selves” (i.e., different actors in the securitisation process).

My research meets all these conditions. It is based on a detailed comparison of security circumstances across different years, offering insight into the evolution of SALW securitisation. It is spatially delimited to Serbia (or the Western Balkans more broadly), whose identity is clearly distinguishable in contrast to “the other”—namely, the European Union. It also encompasses several distinct events identified as pivotal in the firearms securitisation process. Finally, it incorporates discourses from a variety of political actors, including ruling and opposition parties, civil society, and international stakeholders.

Given that my research also partially focuses on the role of emotions in SALW securitisation, I draw additionally on the work of Simon Koschut, who explores emotional discourse in international relations (Koschut, 2017). He was among the first scholars to systematically introduce emotions into the study of foreign policy, which he argues has traditionally underestimated their influence. Koschut outlines the criteria for analysing emotions in discourse, concentrating on linguistic features and rhetorical figures that express emotional content and the effects they can produce. According to him, emotional discourse can take three forms:

- Emotionally indicative – reflecting the speaker’s emotional state;
- Emotionally provocative – intended to elicit emotional reactions from the audience;
- Emotionally invocative – intended to enhance the significance or legitimacy of the discourse (Koschut, 2017: 7).

These distinctions were particularly relevant to my analysis of the emotionally charged narratives surrounding firearms discourse in Serbia.

5.3. Quantitative Data

The analysis begins with an interpretation of quantitative data obtained from official statistics provided by the police, relevant domestic institutions, and international organizations such as SEESAC, UNDP, and UNODC, as well as reputable research platforms. These data concern various aspects related to SALW, both in terms of their misuse and the measures implemented to control them, alongside the subsequent changes in this domain. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by incorporating multiple dimensions of the issue.

The primary goal is to demonstrate the correlation between different indicators of SALW misuse, the number of firearms in civilian possession, and the scope and strictness of the regulatory framework over time. To aid this, I developed several tables and charts that present key data from the years 2002, 2023, and the first half of 2024. These visual representations provide a clearer picture of the evolving situation and support a more in-depth interpretation of the underlying causes.

This statistical overview, together with a review of relevant legal provisions, serves to set the stage for the empirical part of the study, which is based on discourse analysis and grounded in the securitisation theory.

5.4. Limitations of the Chosen Methodological Approach

Some limitations of this methodological approach should be acknowledged. The first concerns the unavailability of certain data. However, this does not substantially affect the results of the research, as I have succeeded in obtaining all essential and most relevant information.

A second limitation lies in the difficulty of precisely quantifying the degree of influence that each individual event or actor discussed in this study has had—or continues to have—on the securitisation of firearms in Serbia. In some instances, the causal relationship is direct and

evident; in others, it is more circumstantial and nuanced, embedded in a broader context of overlapping factors and evolving over time.

For this reason, I frame the analysis in terms of the synergy among various contributing factors that collectively trigger change and drive the adoption of specific measures. Despite these constraints, I believe the research design has successfully addressed the main challenges, and that the approach taken remains robust and fit for purpose.

5.5. Quantitative data interpretation

5.5.1. SALW Possession and Abuse Statistics

Serbia, like other countries in the SEE region, continues to grapple with the legacy of substantial stockpiles of arms left over from the wars following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. These were further compounded by weapons looted from warehouses in Albania during the 1997 unrest, as well as those used during the conflicts in Kosovo (1998–1999) and North Macedonia (2001).

According to a statement made by the President following the mass shootings in May 2023, Serbia had, in recent years, reduced the number of legally owned firearms from over 900,000 to approximately 766,000. Although this may appear to be a significant decrease, it is not necessarily so. What truly matters is the total number of both legal and illegal firearms per capita, which has remained nearly the same—or even increased—compared to twenty years earlier.

Specifically, according to the 2002 population census, Serbia had 7,893,125 inhabitants (7,498,001 residing within Serbia proper), whereas by 2023 this number had declined to 6,623,183 (Republički zavod za statistiku Srbije, 2024), representing a drop of around one million people. In contrast, the number of legally registered firearms had only decreased by approximately 200,000 by mid-2023. Although this figure declined more significantly by mid-2024, as a result of special measures introduced in 2023, it remains insufficient to meaningfully alter Serbia's position—still ranked among the top three countries in the world in terms of civilian firearm ownership.

Reliable data on the number of illegal SALW is unavailable, as previously explained. Nonetheless, estimates suggest that the number of illegally possessed firearms exceeds the number of legal ones. According to the Small Arms Survey (2017), the estimated number of illicit firearms in Serbia stood at 1,532,914, with a projected upward trend (Ćopić and Dokmanović, 2022: 278). The total number of firearms in Serbia thus exceeds two million.

In contrast to this high volume of arms, official statistics show a steady decline in the number of criminal offences involving firearms. The number of such acts dropped from 1,481 in 2002 to 247 in 2023, and further to 112 in the first half of 2024. The most significant decline is observed in the case of robberies, which fell by over 800 during the observed period. While there were 915 robberies committed in 2002, this number dropped to 94 in 2023 and just 40 in the first half of 2024—representing a reduction of nearly 20% (*see Figure 1*).

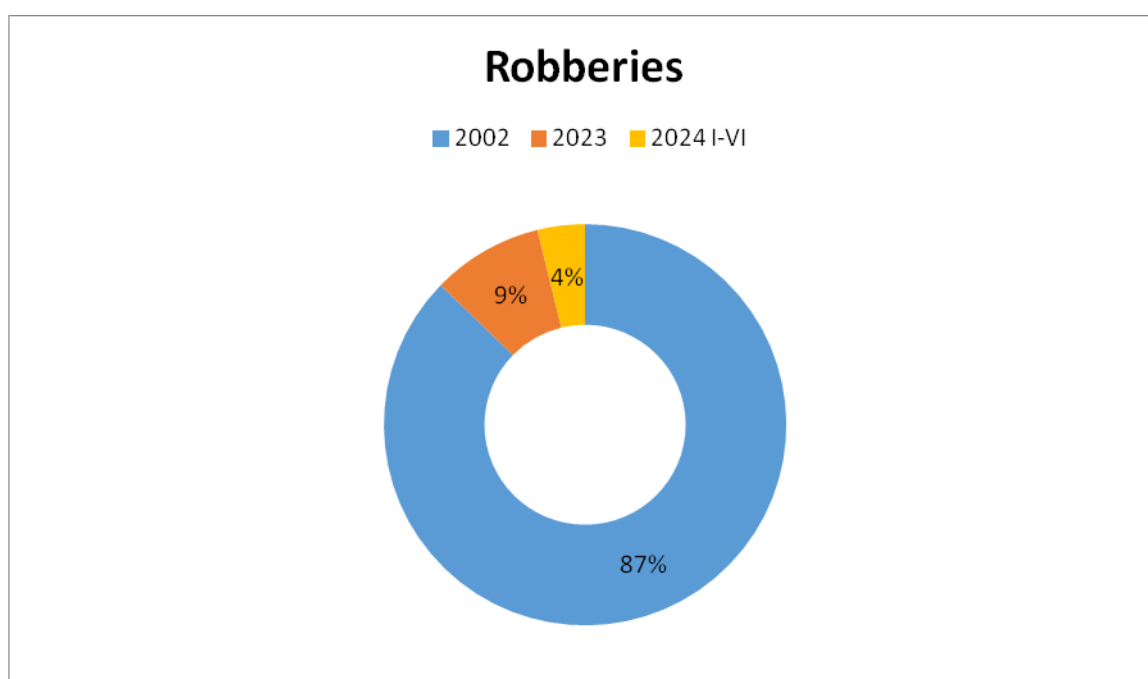


Figure 1: Number of robberies committed with firearms displayed in percentage

With regard to the offences outlined in Article 348 of the Criminal Code—"Illegal Production, Possession, Carrying and Circulation of Weapons and Explosives"—which represents the principal legal provision addressing the issue of firearms, the available data indicate a relatively stable trend in recent years. In 2023, the number of such offences remained around the average level, with 1,030 recorded cases. However, in the first half of 2024, this

number dropped significantly to 290 offences. When compared to the 1,828 offences recorded in 2002, these figures reflect a marked improvement in this particular area of SALW-related abuse (see Figure 2).

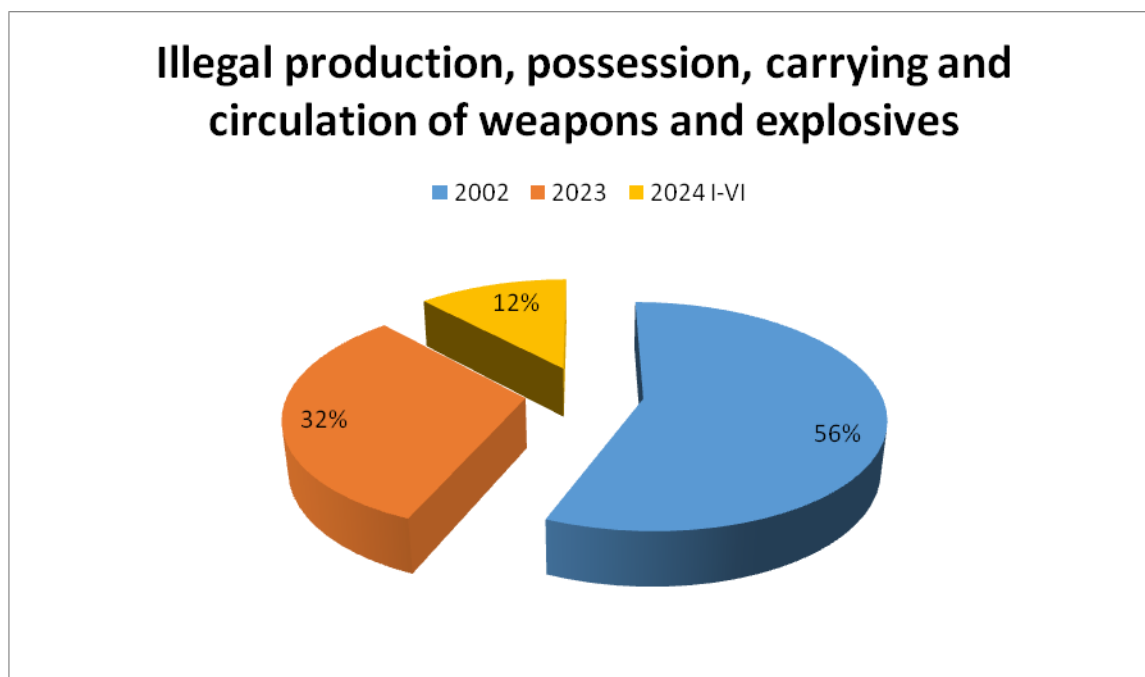


Figure 2: Number of criminal offenses, displayed in percentage, in which firearms are the objects of crime

In the overall crime landscape, as illustrated in the charts below, both the most serious criminal offences and other offences committed with firearms show a significant—and in some cases, sharp—decline in 2023 and 2024 compared to 2002. A continued downward trend is observable in 2024, which may be attributed to the intensified measures introduced in 2023 and the considerable efforts invested in achieving the goals set out in the Roadmap. The fact that organised crime was still thriving during the 2000s undoubtedly influenced the earlier figures. The operation “*Sablja*” represented a major blow to criminal groups, with a particular focus on firearms, as substantial seizures and voluntary surrenders of weapons were among the special measures implemented at that time.

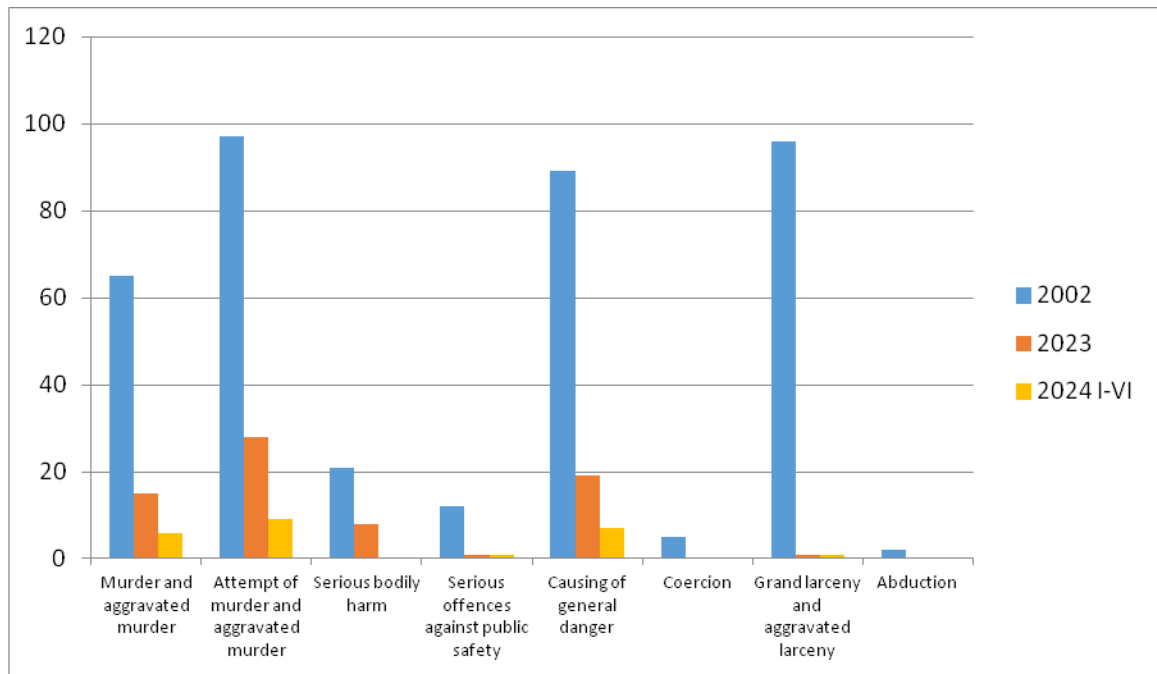


Figure 3: Number of serious crimes committed with use of firearms

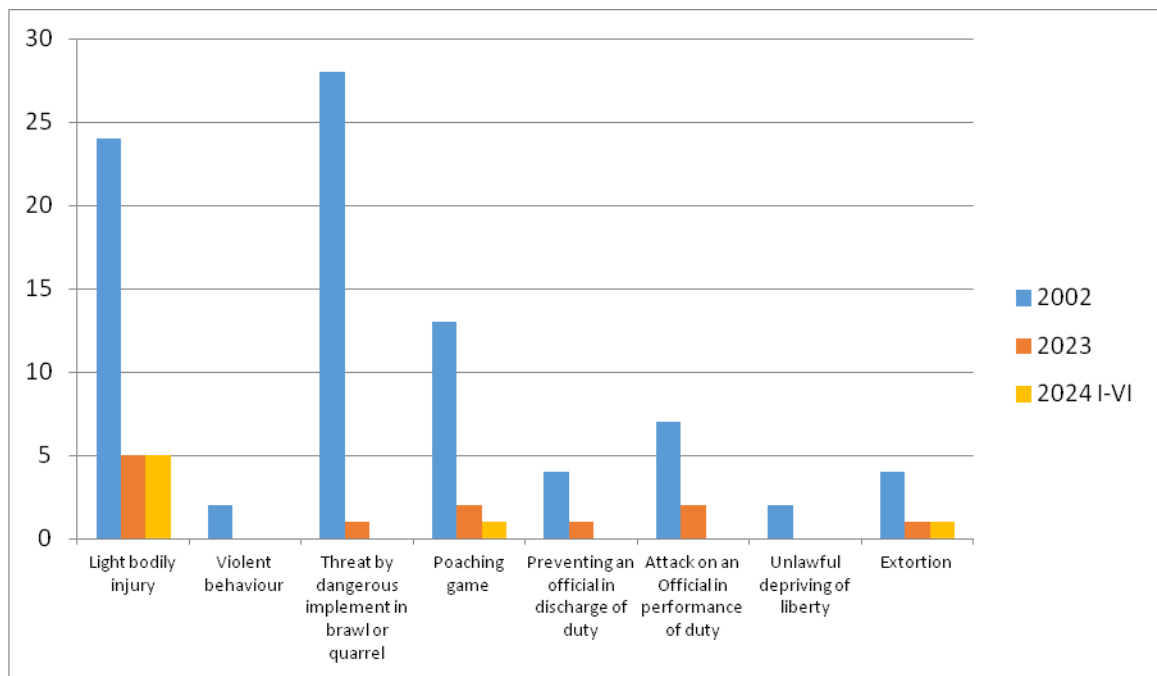


Figure 4: Number of less serious criminal offenses committed with the use of firearms

Even suicides committed with firearms have become noticeably less frequent. In 2023, there were 97 such cases, while in the first half of 2024 the number was even lower—35 (Figure 5). It should also be noted that firearms are used in only a small proportion of suicides, accounting for between 9 and 12 percent. In 2023, there were 850 recorded suicides in total, and 433 in the first half of 2024. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, a significant number of femicides conclude with the perpetrator’s suicide, thereby precluding the possibility of a trial.

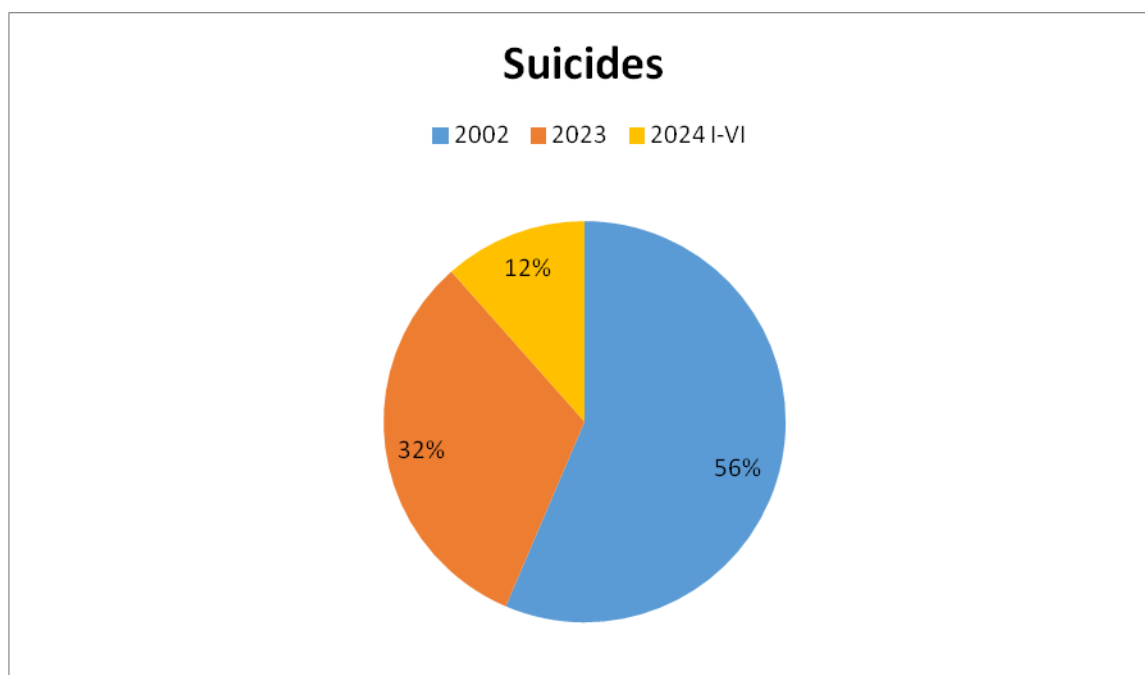


Figure 5: Number of suicides committed with firearms, displayed in percentage

5.5.2. SALW control and suppression

At the same time, the authorities have been doing their job diligently, and vital improvement is observed in many fields of SALW suppression in comparison to 2002, proving that legal and practical possibilities for coping with the problem were getting stronger and capacities were improved. That made sufficient basis for more successful dealings of law enforcement. Both strategic and operational activities undertaken with the aim of firearms control had been giving solid results. This is reflected in many fronts. To begin with, significant

amounts of weapons, ammunition and explosives were seized in the last years, in police actions mostly in connection with illegal activities covered by Article 348 of the Criminal Code of Serbia. (Table 1).

Arms type		2023	2024 I-VI
firearms		1380	590
ammunition		34118	16214
bomb and mine		100	44
explosive	gunpowder	3876g	1435g
	explosive materials	564g	2196g
	stick explosive	1	1
zolja and bazooka (grenade launcher)		5	1

Table 1: Seized arms

These results are partially attributable to advanced regional and international cooperation, which was notably underdeveloped in 2002. At that time, most activities relied on bilateral agreements, as no broader legal framework had been established. Regional security cooperation gained traction with the establishment of SEESAC, followed by the creation of several other bodies and the signing of international treaties. Today, however, the cooperation framework is robust and ongoing. Intelligence and operational information are regularly exchanged via various channels, including Europol, Interpol, SELEC, domestic and foreign liaison officers, and direct communication between police departments in different countries. Serbia actively participates in international operations coordinated by Europol and Interpol, as well as in EMPACT Joint Action Days (JAD). In the second half of 2023, Serbia took part in Europol’s operations “Armstrong” and “JAD”, and in the first half of 2024, the operation “Conversus”. Serbia is also a member of Europol’s Analysis Work File (AWF) on Weapons and Explosives, contributing relevant data.

In addition to improved operational outcomes, this increasingly intensive cooperation has been reflected in numerous projects, training sessions, and conferences. The scale and scope of these initiatives represent a significant development, especially considering that such a landscape in the field of firearms control was unimaginable in 2002. The total value of these projects exceeds €15 million, with a focus on enhancing the capacities of Serbian institutions—including

law enforcement, prosecution, and the judiciary—and providing support for a more effective response to firearms-related threats. These initiatives address a comprehensive range of firearms-related issues and vulnerabilities, including the application of artificial intelligence in police investigations, all aiming to establish a modernised and robust framework for action.

The most impactful ongoing projects include: 1. *Support to Strengthening the Fight Against Illegal Possession, Abuse and Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans – Multi-beneficiary Programme IPA 2020*, implemented by SEESAC; 2. *Strengthening Capacities of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia with the Aim of More Effective Decrease, Prevention and Suppression of Illicit Trafficking and Abuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Ammunition and Explosives*, implemented by the OSCE; 3. *Support to Creating and Implementing Awareness-Raising Campaigns on SALW Control in the Republic of Serbia*, with the OSCE as implementing partner; 4. *Improving Capacities of the Ministry of Interior in the Area of Small Arms and Light Weapons Control III*, implemented by UNDP; 5. *Reduce Risk, Increase Safety III*, implemented by UNDP; 6. *Criminal Justice Response to Illegal Trafficking in Firearms in the Western Balkans II – Justitia*, implemented by UNODC; 7. *Strengthening Capacities of the Ministry of Interior for Keeping Evidence, Crime Scene Investigation, Ballistics Laboratories and Firearms-Related Trafficking and Criminal Activities*; 8. *Ceasefire: Advanced Versatile Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Interconnected Cross-Sectoral Fully Operational National Focal Points for Combating Illicit Firearms Trafficking*, coordinated by the Greek Centre for Research and Technology Hellas. The latter project involves a large number of European countries.

Forensic capacities have improved significantly. Ballistics, a crucial element in providing evidence during police investigations, has been notably enhanced through SEESAC's donation of specialised equipment and training. France donated the *Evofinder* system to Serbia, while the UNDP made substantial contributions to the development of ballistics capacities through its aforementioned project, thereby aiding the investigation of firearms-related crimes. The country's capacity for weapons storage has also improved. Several amnesties have been organised, with varying levels of success; the most effective was undoubtedly the one implemented in 2023 as a special crisis-response measure. Although Serbia has not yet achieved

full compliance with firearms deactivation standards, one of the OSCE's current projects aims to assist in establishing a proper legislative framework for this activity.

Another indicator of progress is SALW destruction. This practice was non-existent in 2002, whereas since 2003, the destruction of seized, dysfunctional, and surplus firearms has become a routine procedure. While there remains room for improvement when benchmarked against EU standards, Serbia is evidently on the right path. Destruction is a crucial method of eliminating substantial quantities of arms that could otherwise be misused in various ways. All of the aforementioned projects and activities have recently been aligned with the goals outlined in the Roadmap.

5.5.3. SALW regulatory framework

In the year 2002, which represents the initial point of my research, old Criminal Code was in force and the main article that is today regulating the problematic of weapons² did not even exist, it was a part of the Law on Weapons and Ammunition³. That Criminal Code was in force since 1977 and new one was introduced only in 2005. Some basic international documents had been signed, though, like UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime in 2001, but regulatory framework was still rather poor and inappropriate for the amount of SALW-related insecurity. There was no strategy in place to drive concrete preventive and repressive activities of the state.

Notwithstanding such unawareness of the seriousness of the situation in the field of firearms trafficking and misuse, very comprehensive and enduring actions of regional and European actors generated securitisation impetus, and thus security network was getting bigger and stronger very fast. National awareness of the problem was slowly raised, too, as a consequence of the organized crime rule in the country and external impulse, particularly after the EU association negotiations started. All those forces have joined into powerful momentum and resulted in salient advancement of security framework.

Serbia have signed since many important international documents and agreements, and joined key regional and EU organizations in the field of security, including Europol as one of the

² Article 348 „Illegal Production, Possession, Carrying and Circulation of Weapons and Explosives”

³ Article 33 „Criminal Offences in Relation to Weapons”

most important. Many vital laws were adopted at national level. National SALW Coordinator was also established in the MoI, and the SALW Council was formed in 2011 as multisectoral body for the purpose of more effective monitoring of Action Plans and all activities related to firearms. New Law on Weapons and Ammunition was adopted in 2015, which was of critical importance for firearms control, this being the umbrella of all legal documents in the area. The Permanent Team of the Ministry of Interior for Advancing the Measures for Suppression of Weapons and Explosives Smuggling and Cooperation in That Area at National and International Level was formed in the same year.

SALW Strategy for the period 2019-2024 and accompanying Action Plan 2019-2020 were adopted, which have been aligned with the Roadmap and its goals. Weapons smuggling and abuse is also recognized as important security threat in SOCTA⁴ document (MUP, 2023: 61-67). The Roadmap is undoubtedly most comprehensive regional document in the area of SALW regulation, covering all aspects of control, which reflects strong commitment of the region and the EU to coping with this serious threat. Firearms Focal Point (FFP), predicted by the Roadmap, was established and became operational in Serbia and most countries of the Western Balkans. Serbian FFP team is made of representatives of all relevant lines of work tasked with collection of different statistical data and with some role in suppression of gun abuse, trafficking and proliferation.

Detailed overview of SALW regulatory framework over time is given in Table 2 below.

SALW regulatory framework	2002	2023/2024
Arms regulating national laws	- Law on Weapons and Ammunition (1992)	- Law on Weapons and Ammunition (2015) - Law on Testing, Marking and Labeling of Firearms and Ammunition (2014) - Law on Export and Import of Arms and Military Equipment (2013) - Law on Trade of Explosive Materials (2018) - Law on Private Security (2013) - Law on Detective Activity (2013) - Law on Police (2011) - Law on State Border Protection (2008), replaced in 2018 with Law on Border Control - Criminal Code, Articles 348 and

⁴ Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment

		347 (2005) - Criminal Procedure Code (2005)
National SALW-related bodies and units	- Unit for Suppression of Weapons and Explosives in Criminal Police Directorate	- Unit for Suppression of Weapons and Explosives in Criminal Police Directorate -National SALW Coordinator - SALW Council - Permanent Team of the Ministry of Interior for Advancing the Measures for Suppression of Weapons and Explosives Smuggling and Cooperation in That Area at National and International Level -Firearms Focal Point
International documents (conventions, treaties etc.)	-UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime	- UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UN PoA SALW), - International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons (2005) - Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (2005) supplementing UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime - Arms Trade Treaty (2013) - OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2012)
Strategic documents		- Strategy for SALW control in the period 2019-2024 and accompanying Action Plan for 2019-2020 - Roadmap for a sustainable solution to illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of SALW and their ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024 - EU Action Plan on Firearms Trafficking 2020-2025
Basis for cooperation	- Interpol membership (2001) - Bilateral agreements in criminal matters signed with 24 countries	- EUROPOL Agreement on Operational and Strategic Cooperation with EUROPOL (2014) - Interpol membership; In 2024 initiative launched for establishing Regional NCB Interpol Office in Belgrade - PCC SEE membership (2006) -Bilateral agreements in criminal

		matters signed with 33 countries
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Table 2: SALW regulatory framework in Serbia

The *Law on Weapons and Ammunition* has undergone several amendments since its adoption in 2015. It was significantly revised again following the tragic events of 2023, with further changes currently under consideration after the terrorist attacks in 2024. These amendments primarily concern the imposition of stricter conditions for obtaining licences for the possession and carrying of firearms. Notably, a two-year moratorium on issuing new licences was introduced immediately, even before being formally incorporated into the law.

The *Criminal Code* has also been amended on several occasions in recent years concerning SALW-related issues, often under pressure from the European Union—such as in the case of criminalising convertible weapons. The most substantial amendments to date were announced in 2023. Key articles governing firearms offences, namely Articles 347 and 348, are set to be extensively revised, with the inclusion of additional paragraphs and significantly harsher penalties. For instance, the minimum and maximum prison sentences for illegal carrying of firearms will increase from 2–12 years to 5–15 years. For the unauthorised carrying of firearms by individuals who are licensed for possession but not for carrying, the penalties will rise from 6 months–5 years to 1–8 years of imprisonment.

Several new offences are also being introduced: *Irresponsible Keeping of Firearms*, *Training a Minor for the Use of Firearms*, and *Unlawful Carrying of Dysfunctional Firearms and Cold Weapons in Public*. Another proposed offence currently under discussion is *Publishing Material Containing Advice Aiming at the Perpetration of a Crime* (Euronews, 2024b; NIN, 2024).

Having presented both the statistical trends and the legal framework related to firearms, a clearer picture of the current situation in Serbia has emerged. However, the root causes underlying these developments remain insufficiently understood. For this reason, the next chapter turns to the empirical analysis, which seeks to shed light on the factors driving these outcomes.

6. Empirical Analysis: SALW Securitisation

This chapter forms the core of the thesis, as it aims to demonstrate, through empirical evidence, the public's attitude toward the complex issue of small arms and light weapons (SALW). The analysis spans three levels—national, regional, and international—with the aim of comparing the focal concerns, dominant narratives, and the corresponding measures proposed and undertaken at each level. The sources include official documents, public statements by key officials, media articles, and the activities of civil society actors, all used to construct a representative and meaningful sample for in-depth analysis.

Each level of analysis reflects a distinct context and set of dynamics, yet they are interrelated and aligned toward a shared goal. As firearms represent a global concern, and Serbia forms part of the European security architecture, the analysis begins at the international level. It explores the European Union's role as the principal securitising actor, offering a broader perspective on the problem and the EU's efforts to bring it under control.

The second section examines the regional dimension, focusing on the Western Balkans, where countries face similar challenges and have engaged in cooperative initiatives. At this level, SEESAC emerges as the central securitising actor, with other regional bodies playing the role of functional actors.

Finally, the focus is narrowed to the national level, with particular emphasis on the motivations for securitisation and the long-term consistency of securitising practices. These have contributed to a steady decline in firearms-related crime. At this level, the Serbian government acts as the main securitising actor, although in certain instances, non-governmental organisations and civil society groups also play a significant role.

6.1. International and Regional Perspective

6.1.1. European Level

The infamous 1990s left a conspicuous mark on Serbia and its neighbours, who struggled for many years thereafter to catch up with countries that had previously lagged behind them. The

region's severe conflicts were followed by another dark chapter—arguably even more dangerous. Weak states, damaged institutions, and a plethora of weapons were all consequences of the war, creating fertile ground for the rise of organised crime and corruption, which typically go hand in hand. These conditions were highly conducive to the distribution and smuggling of illegal firearms and explosives from the extensive stockpiles left behind. This was facilitated by the well-organised structures and effective coordination of criminal groups, as well as the transnational character of the crime. The Western Balkans thus became a successful, albeit unlawful, exporter of these highly sought-after goods.

Already in the early 2000s, allegations surfaced regarding arms shipments from Yugoslavia to Iraq and to African conflict zones under UN embargo, such as Liberia. In the case of Liberia, the state was not directly accused, as private firms acted as contractors and the arms were formally consigned to Nigeria, suggesting a diversion that could not be proven due to insufficient evidence. Nonetheless, Serbia was criticised for its weak arms export control and advised to implement improvements (McMahon, 2002), as even a lack of diligence regarding European laws and the safety of EU citizens was considered a potential threat. The region was already viewed as a security risk for the EU due to its instability and complex political situation—especially in Kosovo—and the overall fragile peace.

As a cohesive and robust security community, the EU endeavours to maintain internal stability and uphold its normative framework based on liberal democracy. Similarly, it seeks to protect its external borders. The EU's securitising approach is often directed at actors beyond its immediate community, such as candidate countries. Accordingly, at the turn of the 21st century, the Union began preparing a strategy to bring the Western Balkans under its influence to prevent a spillover of insecurity. Viewing the region as a 'single security space', these countries were perceived as having a dual role: potential reliable partners in the near future, and, for the time being, a buffer zone. This perspective underscored the EU's need to support the region in building institutional capacities and resilience. Enlargement was seen as the most effective tool for achieving these objectives and safeguarding the EU's critical interests (Dokos, 2017: 105–110).

Negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between Serbia and the EU began in 2005, and Serbia formally applied for membership in 2009. Enhanced international law enforcement cooperation accompanied this process. In 2008, Serbia signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Europol, which was revised in 2014 to include operational cooperation. A dedicated department for the Western Balkans was established within Europol; Serbia's Ministry of Interior established a National Central Bureau (NCB), and a Serbian police liaison officer was stationed at Europol headquarters. Serbia also became a partner in several European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) initiatives, including Joint Action Days (JAD), and joined Europol's Analysis Project "Weapons and Explosives"—all of which significantly boosted international cooperation and firearms-related investigations.

However, despite the positive impact of international trade and free movement—facilitated by the Schengen Agreement and visa liberalisation—these developments inadvertently enabled the trafficking of firearms. Increasing reports emerged of illegal weapons from the Western Balkans appearing on the EU black market. Although Serbian and EU authorities dismantled many smuggling routes, the illicit trade proved too lucrative to be eradicated, prompting the EU's growing impatience and concern. Concurrently, terrorist attacks became more frequent in Europe, especially after the 2001 attacks in the United States, and firearms began to surpass explosives in frequency of use.

It appears that the EU reacted to illicit firearms proliferation rather late (TIME, 2015), only after recognising their widespread use in violent crime and terrorism. Firearms were easier to handle than explosives, practical even for 'lone wolves', highly lethal, and evidently easy to obtain. The urgency of the issue became undeniable, necessitating prompt and tangible action. Consequently, the European Commission announced a firm commitment to combating armed violence (European Commission, 2013a). A communication followed (European Commission, 2013b), advocating an integrated approach and declaring firearms suppression a law enforcement priority for 2013–2017, based on Europol's SOCTA 2013. One part reads: "Candidate countries for accession to the EU are required to align national legislation with existing instruments concerning the export, brokering, acquisition, possession and trafficking of weapons." New trends in weapon misuse and trafficking were also noted, such as 3D printing and weapon conversion, due to their affordability.

The EU adopted a resolute stance to combat terrorism and SALW-related organised crime, which are closely intertwined. Terrorists and criminals both rely on weapons as tools or targets of illegal activities, with criminals often supplying terrorist networks for financial gain. In response, the EU launched a series of measures, including the Action Plan on firearms trafficking between the EU and South-East Europe for 2015–2019, endorsed in December 2014. Given the Western Balkans’ designation as the primary source of firearms trafficked into the EU, the region was central to the plan.

The plan’s goals included: 1) Modernisation of law enforcement—including the establishment of firearms focal points in each country and unification of data systems; 2) Strengthening mutual trust through joint activities and meetings; 3) Capacity-building through specialised firearms trafficking training. Western Balkan countries expressed strong interest, and implementation commenced.

Only a month later, however, the January 2015 terrorist attack in Paris occurred, followed by a second, even more devastating attack in November that killed 147 and injured nearly 400 people. Investigations revealed that some of the rifles used—specifically Zastava M70s, the Serbian version of the AK-47—originated from Serbia. These revelations further entrenched the perception of the Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular, as a security threat. This was reflected in foreign policy discourse, media coverage, and official EU documents.

Global media outlets swiftly reported on this link between Serbian firearms, organised crime, and terrorism (TIME, 2015; Radio Free Europe, 2015; Reuters, 2015; DW, 2015). While Serbian officials acknowledged the weapons’ origins at the Zastava arms factory, they emphasised that most had been legally exported to former Yugoslav republics prior to the 1990s, or more recently to the U.S. As such, Serbia could not be held accountable for their subsequent diversion.

Nevertheless, in times of crisis, the media often amplify public condemnation, using narratives designed to elicit anger and fear. This kind of framing facilitates acceptance of stringent measures against the perceived source of the threat. In the wake of the Paris attacks, both the EU and Western Balkan states took immediate action to address SALW regulation. The

EU Firearms Directive was amended to close regulatory gaps, especially concerning imports from the Western Balkans, underlining the acute threat the region was perceived to pose.

Just five days after the second Paris attack, the European Commission issued a special package of measures, specifically targeting the Western Balkans. These included revisions to the Firearms Directive, introducing stricter rules for firearm acquisition and possession (European Commission, 2016). Semi-automatic weapons—such as those in the AK-47 family—and certain deactivated firearms were banned for civilian use. Online arms trade came under tighter regulation. Full harmonisation with EU standards was deemed essential.

The Commission also announced a new action plan on illegal weapons and explosives trafficking, with particular focus on the Balkans. The plan addressed black market arms sales, import controls—especially from the Balkans—and organised crime. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated: “The recent terrorist attacks on Europe’s people and values were coordinated across borders, showing that we must work together to resist these threats” (European Commission, 2015).

The crisis led to stronger law enforcement cooperation between Serbia and France, culminating in the Agreement on Forming Joint Teams in the Fight Against Weapons Trafficking (BalkanInsight, 2016). In line with the SAAs, counter-terrorism collaboration was also intensified in 2018 through the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans, which partly addressed firearms trafficking.

Yet the smuggling of Serbian firearms to conflict zones persisted. Accusations emerged that weapons and equipment were reaching Syrian rebels, violating international arms trade agreements (BalkanInsight, 2017). Serbian arms allegedly reached Cameroon, where they were reportedly used in extrajudicial executions. Amnesty International urged Serbia to halt exports in light of documented human rights abuses (N1, 2018a). In 2018, Serbian weapons were observed in Yemen’s civil war, with photos circulated on social media (BalkanInsight, 2018).

In July 2018, the Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to the Illegal Possession, Misuse and Trafficking of SALW and their Ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024 was adopted at the initiative of France and Germany and endorsed by the European Council. Though detailed

analysis is reserved for the next section, it is noteworthy that the EU allocated €11.8 million to its implementation, reflecting the urgency and importance assigned to the issue.

At the Roadmap's launch in late 2018, France's Foreign Minister declared that Balkan weapons posed the greatest threat to European security, as millions of SALW continued to circulate—mainly among criminal and terrorist networks (European Western Balkans, 2018; Politika, 2018; N1, 2018b). Although the 2015–2019 Joint Action Plan yielded positive outcomes—such as improved coordination, shared intelligence, and more seizures—it had shortcomings: inconsistent legal frameworks, overlapping activities, undefined financial responsibilities, and a lack of progress indicators (European Commission, 2019).

To address these, the 2020–2025 Joint Action Plan for the EU and South-East Europe was developed. The European Commission reaffirmed that firearms trafficking must be treated as a cross-cutting security priority (European Commission, 2020). The Western Balkans were again identified as the main source of illicit firearms in Europe. The UNODC Global Firearms Study supported this, attributing the problem to large price differentials with Western Europe. Arms are often smuggled in small shipments or hidden within other goods, particularly by poly-criminal networks, making detection difficult.

Unfortunately, these assessments were validated in 2020, when a Serbian M70 rifle was used in a terrorist attack in Vienna that killed four and injured 23. Media dubbed the Balkans a “weapons supermarket, hotbed of Islamism” (BBC, 2020; N1, 2020). That same year, Serbia, along with Russia and China, was held “directly responsible” for atrocities in Myanmar following its military coup, due to arms exports condemned by the European Parliament (BBC, 2022; N1, 2022).

Numerous media outlets continue to highlight the widespread circulation of Western Balkan firearms. Analyses confirm that most illegal weapons in Europe originate from the region, even after the war in Ukraine began. There are also concerns that Balkan smuggling routes may now be used to funnel arms to Ukraine (Balkanska bezbednosna mreža, 2024). According to Frontex, the primary risk for arms smuggling lies along the EU's land border with the Western Balkans—where the majority of seizures and criminal cases are recorded (N1,

2022b). Recent reports point to growing popularity of converted firearms among youth, with Serbia mainly acting as a transit country. However, the continued use of Serbian arms in terrorist attacks remains a key concern (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime).

6.1.2. Regional Level

At the time when the European Union decided to intensively engage its resources and efforts in Serbia and the region, local awareness of the scale of the SALW problem was gradually increasing. Initial steps had already been taken by the first democratic government (25.01.2001–12.03.2003) against organised crime, which had enjoyed a safe stronghold for years in the war-torn countries of the region. Free access to a vast quantity and variety of weapons had bolstered the influence and operational capabilities of such criminal networks.

The establishment of the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) in Serbia in 2002 marked a turning point in this field at the regional level. Funded from its inception by the European Union as a technical support unit, SEESAC has since been dedicated to assisting countries in addressing the challenges posed by firearms. Among other things, it ensures that European funds are directed towards appropriate initiatives in Serbia and other countries of South Eastern Europe (European Commission, 2019). Furthermore, SEESAC coordinates meetings of SEEFEN and SEEFEG, which were established to enhance regional cooperation in this area and now also contribute to the work of the Roadmap. SEESAC may therefore be regarded as the main securitising actor at this level—the long arm of EU law. The fact that a country is not yet an EU member is not crucial to its position, as candidate countries must behave as model pupils and comply with the requirements to maintain their status and associated benefits. SEESAC has been actively involved in all matters concerning firearms, and its control mechanisms are based on meticulously developed goals that seek to address every aspect of this phenomenon.

The most important and comprehensive strategic document relating to SALW regulation at the regional level is the *Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to the Illegal Possession, Misuse and Trafficking of SALW and Their Ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024* (SEESAC, 2018). It was developed by Western Balkans authorities with the technical support of SEESAC,

under the auspices of the Governments of Germany and France, and financially supported by the European Union. The Roadmap was adopted at the London Summit in 2018. In light of the generally concerning global situation with respect to firearms, and the Western Balkans having long been labelled one of the principal sources of weapons-related threats, an urgent need for robust and immediate action was identified. The solution was envisaged as a firm and comprehensive regulatory and operational framework, harmonised with EU standards, which would facilitate effective responses to existing threats.

The Roadmap comprises seven specific goals, each accompanied by several targets and defined indicators for measuring progress. These cover the broad, arguably complete, field of SALW regulation. The fulfilment of all goals was planned by 2023 and 2024, which remain the final deadlines (ibid). The Roadmap stipulates that legislation related to firearms must be “fully harmonised with the EU regulatory framework”. Intelligence-led policing and evidence-based investigations are prioritised in efforts to control firearms. Illegal flows of weapons and ammunition are to be significantly reduced, as are the supply, demand, and misuse of firearms, along with the number of weapons in illegal possession and the surplus of SALW and ammunition. The risk of proliferation and diversion of firearms, ammunition and explosives must also be substantially diminished. The measures outlined in this strategic document rest on EU and international standards, ensuring coordination in terms of “prevention, mitigation, response, consistency, maximised compatibility, interoperability, and quality” (SEESAC, 2018).

Although carefully analysed and selected, and formally initiated by the WB countries, the Roadmap may rightly be viewed as heavily influenced and prompted by the EU, which both finances the project and funds SEESAC, and has for some time been pulling the coordination strings of regional security. The EU as a whole, as well as its member states, may also be seen as the principal referent object of protection. Thus, the document does not represent a fully autonomous decision of the WB countries in the strict sense, but rather a guided and patronised initiative, even though the region did express a genuine willingness to cooperate fully and has undeniably benefited from the implementation of the Roadmap.

Complete harmonisation of national legislation with the EU *acquis* and contribution to its databases are presented as imperatives throughout both the Roadmap and its Review, once again

highlighting the EU's strong influence and supervisory role in all regional SALW-related activities. Regional and European influences often appear to overlap, but in practice, all actions are coordinated by the EU. Nonetheless, the regional perspective is crucial for the standardisation of legislative discrepancies among the countries, with regional actors serving as mediators. As the security challenges facing countries in the region are so deeply interwoven that they cannot easily be addressed in isolation (Buzan et al., 1998: 12), joint efforts are essential for more lasting effects. Layered in this way, and largely interdependent, regional and international securitising initiatives create a synergy that strengthens their overall impact.

Beyond its leading role in the Roadmap, SEESAC has issued a number of other significant documents, with a particular focus on the gender dimensions of firearms—either concerning the role of women in the military and security sector or female victims of SALW-related violence. Some of these documents are analysed in the section on femicide. SEESAC also regularly publishes reports on armed violence, firearms-related incidents, and arms exports in the region of South-Eastern Europe. Moreover, it supports field projects and, since 2003, has assisted in the destruction of surplus weapons, thereby helping to prevent their potential use in criminal activity. In one instance alone, in 2017, 18,000 pieces of SALW were destroyed (UN Serbia, 2017).

The fight against SALW misuse and proliferation has also been incorporated into the agendas of other bodies and processes active in the region, which may be seen as facilitators of the securitisation process at this level. Among the most prominent are the OSCE, PCC SEE, RACVIAC, and SELEC. RACVIAC (Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre), established in 2000, originally focused on organising arms control training, promoting security-building measures, and enhancing cooperation in the SEE region, but later expanded its scope to include broader security issues. SELEC (South Eastern Europe Law Enforcement Centre) facilitates coordination meetings and joint operations in combating serious and organised crime. PCC SEE (Police Cooperation Convention for South Eastern Europe) provides a legal framework for cross-border law enforcement cooperation. It incorporates a range of modern forms of collaboration based on EU best practices, aimed at more effectively combating cross-border crime. It also serves as the framework convention for the agreement on the automated exchange of DNA data, dactyloscopic data, and vehicle registration data among

the Parties—representing a milestone in enhancing security in the PCC SEE region. This framework supports authorities in solving various cases, including gun-related incidents, and in establishing stronger control over firearms.

The OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) is highly active in improving security across the region and is a reliable partner of Serbia’s security institutions. In the field of firearms, it has issued several key documents, including the *Plan of Action on SALW*, the *Best Practice Guide on SALW*, and the *Handbook of Best Practices on Conventional Ammunition*. An ongoing project—*Strengthening the capacities of the Serbian Ministry of Interior to more effectively reduce, prevent, and counter illicit trafficking and misuse of SALW, ammunition and explosives*—has key goals that include assisting in the development of a legislative framework for deactivation, ensuring its effective implementation, and enhancing police capacity through training in the detection of weapons and explosives using K9 units. These efforts also contribute to the fulfilment of the Roadmap.

Nonetheless, Serbia and the Western Balkans have proven to be a tough nut to crack in certain respects. Despite numerous positive outcomes and tangible progress, it must be acknowledged that firearms smuggling and other forms of misuse persist. The mid-term review of the Roadmap also highlighted the need for increased scrutiny of firearms exports, as well as the connection between firearms trafficking and other serious criminal activities such as violent extremism (SEESAC, 2022). Another conclusion of the review was the necessity for more active engagement from civil society, public institutions, and academia to strengthen the overall commitment to SALW control and thereby enhance the impact of the Roadmap’s implementation (SEESAC, 2022: 17).

6.2. National Level

In addition to the continuous and significant influence of the international community, strong drivers of securitisation should also be sought within the country itself, particularly as a consequence of unsettling domestic events. These include the frequent cases of femicide, the mass murders of 2023, and the recent terrorist attacks in the summer of 2024—all of which were followed by various campaigns and substantial media attention.

An earlier event that had similarly profound consequences for firearms regulation and national security was the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister in 2003, which prompted the declaration of a state of emergency. In the aftermath of this tragic incident, the state decisively resolved to confront organised crime. In addition to the arrests of numerous notorious and dangerous criminals, this period involved widespread raids and the seizure of illegally held firearms, accompanied by a call for their voluntary surrender. This initiative undoubtedly improved national security and marked the beginning of a concerted campaign against serious crime and its primary tool—firearms.

Nevertheless, the events examined in this thesis differ markedly from *Operation Sabre* (*Sablja*). At that time, only criminals were the target of extraordinary measures. In contrast, the current circumstances place the entire Serbian population on the frontline, subjected to heightened scrutiny and affected by a special security regime.

6.2.1. Mass Murders

Serbia was left in shock following the first mass murder, which occurred on 3 May 2023. A 13-year-old boy entered his school on the first day after the spring holiday and began to shoot, in cold blood, at his schoolmates, a security guard, and a teacher. Nine people were killed and seven wounded. Afterwards, he calmly called the police himself, set the weapons aside, and surrendered. Police arrived within minutes, arresting the boy while frightened parents, passers-by, and journalists began to gather at the scene.

The shock was overwhelming, the sorrow profound, and the anger steadily rising—not only towards the violence itself, which appeared to many as evil in its purest form, but also towards a society and institutions perceived to have failed to prevent such a tragedy. Just a day before, such an event seemed like something that could only happen far away, to other people. But now the unthinkable had occurred—raising difficult questions. Who is to blame? The minor? The school? Or should all relevant institutions bear responsibility, especially if those tasked with educating children have overlooked signs of violent or negligent behaviour? Perhaps the government itself is culpable for failing to conduct effective preventive measures and for not ensuring the safety of the country's most valuable citizens—its children.

None of these potential explanations casts a favourable light on the nation, nor do they contribute to political stability. A thorough investigation was imperative to establish what went wrong. In the meantime, however, the public demanded accountability—someone to blame—in order to restore a sense of order and provide some measure of consolation. Life had to go on. People needed to return to work and send their children back to school, despite the fear for their safety. No one wishes to live in a state of constant uncertainty over matters that should be taken for granted, such as expecting one's child to return home from school safe and sound. As the collective anxiety, grief, and anger intensified, pressure on the country's leadership grew immensely.

The President delivered his first public statement (RTS, 2023a) just a few hours after the incident, immediately proposing a set of urgent measures. He began by expressing condolences and acknowledging the magnitude of the tragedy, referring to it as one of the darkest days in Serbian history and describing the nation's shared grief as “greater than ever before.” He urged everyone to reflect on their individual responsibility rather than place blame solely on the government. When first mentioning the perpetrator, he referred to him simply as “the boy.” He stated that the boy's father had been arrested for improper storage of firearms and revealed that the father had taken the boy to a shooting range on three occasions, where the boy had used a Zbrojovka 9mm pistol. The President criticised the father for teaching such a young child how to shoot and concluded, “We must change our behaviour.”

He described the school where the incident occurred as one of the best in the country, among the top three, and similarly praised the boy's family. He referred to the parents as “*crème de la crème*” of society—well-off, highly educated intellectuals. The father was a doctor of microbiology and an esteemed member of a shooting federation. The boy was characterised as highly intelligent, talented, ambitious, and focused on science and sports. The only issue, he noted, was that the boy had not been well accepted by his peers due to his extraordinary abilities and status as the best student.

The President then announced a list of concrete measures which, he believed, would be welcomed by the majority of citizens. He highlighted that Serbia had 766,665 registered firearms at that time—a figure already reduced from over 900,000 in previous years—and stressed the

need for stricter controls. He proposed the following ten measures, which he described as intended to “calm the parents”:

1. A two-year moratorium on the issuance of firearms licences;
2. A review of all existing licences;
3. Inspections to ensure proper firearms storage by current owners—requiring new staff, time, and funding;
4. Oversight and regulation of all shooting ranges;
5. Criminal liability for individuals who enable minors to access or use firearms;
6. Lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12;
7. Sanctions against media outlets that propagate crime or violence;
8. Mandatory biannual drug testing in high schools;
9. Establishment of special units and mobile teams within social services to respond promptly to peer violence;
10. A ban on access to websites such as the Darknet, which offer instructions on how to commit murder or obtain drugs and weapons.

He clarified that the Government held decision-making authority, and that he was presenting these proposals as part of his presidential responsibility. He expressed hope that parents would at least find solace in the fact that preventive steps were being taken. The President reaffirmed that Serbia was still among the safest countries in the world, noting the absence of mafia-related murders in the preceding two years. Yet, such a tragedy had occurred—an event he labelled a “planetary-scale disaster,” a “creepy tragedy—one that cannot be creepier.” He acknowledged that society was now, as often happens, seeking someone to blame, repeatedly asking, “Who is guilty?” as if that were the only path to closure. The President expressed understanding for this reaction, emphasising that schools must be safe spaces for children.

He drew comparisons with similar incidents in Russia and the United States, suggesting that Serbia was not an outlier and could, like those countries, respond effectively. At one point, the speech took a more personal and political tone as he spoke about threats directed at himself and his family from opposition figures. He concluded with an emphasis on the need to prevent a potential “copycat” effect and insisted on the necessity of a firm response.

A second mass murder, equally brutal, occurred just one day later in the villages of Dubona, Šepšin, and Malo Orašje near Mladenovac. A 20-year-old man mercilessly killed nine and wounded twelve young people. In under 48 hours, numerous families once again lost their children, grandchildren, siblings, and loved ones. This time, the perpetrator fled the crime scenes and took a taxi to another town where his cousins lived. Thanks to a successful police operation, he was soon located and arrested. The investigation revealed that he had used illegal weapons and that a larger cache had been stored at his and his cousins' homes, having been purchased on the black market. The ease with which a young person could acquire such an arsenal once again brought the issue of illegal firearms to the forefront and underscored the urgent need for action.

The following day, the President held another press conference (RTS, 2023b). In his speech, he drew further international comparisons—citing England and its experience with hooliganism, Australia and its mass shootings, and the strict yet effective measures those countries adopted. He stated that Serbia could follow a similar path. During this appearance, he also used the opportunity to briefly praise his political party by highlighting economic achievements such as rising salaries and pensions, suggesting that Serbia was progressing toward the standards of other developed countries.

He issued bold predictions regarding one of the new measures: deploying more police officers in schools. He claimed this would increase school safety by nearly 99% and reduce peer violence by 80%. The initiative, estimated at a cost of €25 million, had already been budgeted for, and he emphasised that it would make a substantial difference. These new measures were added to the original package of ten proposed less than two days earlier. The President now adopted a more assertive tone, announcing that the Government would immediately adopt the new measures. He instructed the Ministry of Interior to prepare urgent amendments and additions to the Law on Weapons and Ammunition, bypassing standard legislative procedures.

Among the newly introduced and expanded measures were the following:

1. Stricter conditions for owning and carrying firearms, with those failing to meet criteria required to sell them. The President estimated that no more than 30,000 legally held firearms would remain. Penalties for illegal possession would be nearly doubled, and he

remarked, somewhat triumphantly, “Let me see now from whom you will get illegal weapons.”

2. Regular medical, psychological, and psychiatric examinations for firearms owners, including mandatory drug testing;
3. Equal conditions and review procedures for hunting weapons;
4. An immediate moratorium on all types of firearms;
5. A nationwide campaign for the surrender of illegal weapons, with the threat of severe consequences for non-compliance;
6. Urgent amendments to Article 348 of the Criminal Code to increase penalties;
7. Special regulations for possession of sharp objects in schools;
8. Deployment of 1,200 armed police officers to schools, with near-constant presence, eventually institutionalised as standard practice;
9. Strict monitoring of social media, including interviews with individuals who posted negative or provocative comments supporting the killers or promoting violence.

The President openly admitted to having recommended the reintroduction of the death penalty in Serbia, although the Prime Minister declined, citing obligations under “very smart” European conventions. He confessed that he once opposed capital punishment but now regretted that stance. In response to a journalist’s question, he said there was no need to declare a state of emergency, as the state had sufficient legal grounds to act decisively. He announced increased police presence on the streets and a heightened state of alert for the following two weeks due to potential copycat attacks. The President ended his speech with a message affirming Serbia’s commitment to liberal values—though this appeared contradictory in the context of extensive securitisation. He concluded with a declaration that Serbia did not need more weapons but rather knowledge for the future—clearly signalling his support for disarmament.

In a subsequent appearance on RTS, he reiterated many points from his previous speeches. He reaffirmed the government’s commitment to a drastic reduction in legally held firearms and promised “very, very strict measures that will change the entire society.” Having visited the families of the victims of the second mass murder, he reflected on those experiences as “full of emotions” and admitted to having cried and prayed for the success of the proposed measures (Informer, 2023).

Once more, he drew parallels with other countries: the school shooting in Dallas, USA; Germany's zero-tolerance policy on hate speech following a high school massacre in 2002; and the Breivik case in Norway, where 77 people were killed, yet the maximum prison sentence was only 21 years. He noted that, in those countries, such events did not result in mass resignations, whereas in Serbia, some opposition groups had called for his resignation and a change of government. He responded defiantly, stating that they would have to "kill him" to achieve that, as he would not allow such violence to prevail. He ended by highlighting the importance of the ongoing firearms surrender campaign, pleading with the public to be responsible and surrender their weapons to avoid harsh sanctions.

It can be observed in the presented (Model 1) discourse that the securitisation process began on the same day the first incident occurred, as was also the case with the terrorist attacks, while the situation was still 'hot'. All measures were proposed and adopted literally overnight, while the public remained in a state of shock, overwhelmed with fear, deep grief, and anger—thus far more susceptible to accepting any proposed solution and the suspension of regular rules and procedures (Buzan et al., 1998: 26).

A significant shift in the President's attitude can be seen between his first and second address. The courtesy, modesty, and professionalism displayed in the initial speech noticeably dissipate in the second. Emotions of rage and revolt dominate over the earlier grief and sadness. His earlier assurance that he was "only giving proposals" transforms into a decisive statement: "the Government will pass the conclusions at once." The President approaches the process with determination. Aware of his power, he does not question the success of his securitising acts and accordingly expresses extremely high expectations of the proposed measures, making grand promises without hesitation.

It is important to note that two-thirds of the nearly twenty proposed measures directly and exclusively target SALW, with the remainder indirectly connected. It appears that the central question of guilt and responsibility was answered symbolically by pointing to weapons. The President attempts to redirect the public's grief and frustration from the government towards firearms.

He plays on two fronts in his securitising strategy. The first serves to construct an image of a terrifying existential threat and, simultaneously, a fearless state ready to eliminate it. On one side, the President asserts that he does not care what people say about him or whether the accused might be innocent. He claims he is unafraid of judgment or criticism. No one will be protected due to their reputation; no one can be trusted; no one is safe; everyone must be checked, and every threat taken seriously. He expresses no mercy towards the perpetrators. From his second speech onward, he labels them “devils,” “psychos,” “small and big monsters”—terms repeated frequently, echoing in the ears of the public.

Vučić even attempts to classify the second mass murder as a terrorist act, although it bears no connection to terrorism, emphasising that the perpetrator wore a T-shirt bearing the phrase “Heil Hitler.” He also refers to the individual as a “bastard,” underlining the offence given Serbia’s historical suffering under Hitler. He issues threats and promises that the perpetrators “will never get out” and will “not see daylight anymore”—a mantra he repeats, despite being aware that the first perpetrator cannot be prosecuted due to age and the second can receive a maximum prison sentence of 20 years. He also issues direct threats to anyone who chooses not to comply with the measures, promising severe and terrifying consequences.

The second front is a soft ground intended to absorb and legitimise all the radical measures and sweeping promises without much resistance. Here, Vučić appeals to the public to stand by their country and assures them that the government knows what to do, claiming that the measures will work wonders and significantly reduce violence and firearms possession. He acknowledges that these are difficult and courageous decisions for society. While he admits that many will hate him for taking away their weapons, he also claims that mothers will respect him. He insists that no mother or grandmother has slept in the past 48 hours and that every mother will feel safer with police officers in schools. He describes the love shown by mothers and grandmothers as a source of pride, declaring their strength, love, and bravery as invincible. Serbia, he insists, must prevail for its children, grandparents, and parents—a refrain he returns to repeatedly. Evil, he claims, must be confronted, just as the nation has triumphed in the past. He frequently compares the threat facing Serbia with grave challenges that other societies have faced and the severe, unpopular measures they had to implement.

It is evident that, in all his speeches, the President manipulates emotions skilfully, knowing their facilitating effect on the securitisation process. His discourse is both indicative of and provocative of emotions (Koschut, 2017: 7). First, it is indicative of grief—expressed through his personal sorrow, tears, and concern for children as a parent, and for suffering women—presenting himself as a loving and compassionate leader. Second, by depicting himself as resolute, willing to do whatever it takes to eliminate threats and increase security, he seeks to inspire admiration and trust. Third, his expression of rage—through persistent use of insults and calls for retributive justice, such as proposing the death penalty—positions him as righteous and firm. All of this enhances his social authority as a securitising actor.

Emotion-provoking discourse is also seen in his repeated references to mothers, grandmothers, and other family members overwhelmed by sorrow and fear for their children. At the same time, he suggests that “our mothers and grandmothers” will “love or at least respect” him for his actions. This rhetoric seeks to evoke the same emotional responses from the entire Serbian public, so that any opposition to the proposed measures would seem like an attack on these grieving women. Furthermore, by repeatedly using words like “evil,” “monster,” “devil,” and “psycho”—symbols of something faceless, dreadful, and unpredictable—he amplifies the perceived threat. By invoking Hitler and terrorism, he further magnifies the severity of the situation. This generates fear and anxiety in society and thereby facilitates the acceptance of extraordinary measures. Finally, his discourse aims to foster feelings of unity and optimism. He portrays the measures as courageous and the mothers as heroic, assuring the nation that it will emerge victorious.

In addition to the emotional appeals, his speeches are rich with rhetorical devices. Each is laden with hyperbole and superlatives, such as “a tragedy of planetary range,” “measures that will change the entire society,” or “measures that will increase school security by 99%.” There are also poetic depictions of the perpetrator’s family or of the strength and courage of mothers and grandmothers. Many clichés and stereotypes appear—for instance, calling the boy “from a good family,” claiming that “everyone shares responsibility,” or insisting that “our behaviour must change.” Metaphors such as “he will not see the daylight anymore” (meaning life imprisonment) are also present. These devices help hold the audience’s attention and render the exceptional measures more persuasive, thereby strengthening his securitising acts.

Every speech also carries a political undertone. Vučić never misses an opportunity to disparage his political opponents and gain additional support. Beyond this basic objective, such remarks also serve a strategic purpose. By contrasting himself with the ‘other’—the opposition accused of provoking violence and undermining the country—Vučić presents himself as a responsible leader who, unlike others, does not exploit tragedy for personal gain but instead protects his people and leads Serbia towards prosperity. This, in turn, further justifies and legitimises the urgent adoption of extraordinary measures.

On balance, the speeches delivered during press conferences and the articles published in the aftermath of these heinous crimes were characterised by sensationalist journalism. Numerous pieces of fake or unverified news, along with horrifying and heart-wrenching details, were shared with the public—often breaching laws on privacy, the presumption of innocence, or even undermining the police investigation. For example, the identity of the perpetrator and his family was published. Statements from senior police officials were also questionable in tone and resembled scenes from a thriller or horror film. During one press conference, the Chief of Belgrade police, alongside the Minister of Interior, displayed schemes and plans the boy allegedly prepared. The public learned that he had made Molotov cocktails, visited violent websites, played shooter video games, and had a list of children marked for elimination that exceeded the number of victims—details presented vaguely (N1, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). These gruesome and unprofessional disclosures contributed to the public’s demand for swift and effective solutions and consequently facilitated the securitisation process.

Numerous articles (Model 2) simply repeated the President’s words with minimal commentary. Some rephrased key elements of his speeches—such as the issue of teaching the boy to shoot, the responsibility of instructors, or the case of Uroš Blažić’s illegal firearms—and turned them into catchy headlines. While these reports provided little new content, they played a significant role in the securitisation process by disseminating information to the broadest possible audience and reinforcing traumatic narratives through repetition.

These articles were also accompanied by emotionally charged imagery that resonated deeply. Images of children’s and teenagers’ bodies outside the school or sports ground, a brother and sister murdered in front of their house, distraught parents covering their faces, grandmothers

fainting, crowds lighting candles, and placing teddy bears and roses at the crime scene—all serve to deliver a clear and devastating message. The bullet holes in the classroom walls, the screaming relatives, and the mourning citizens portray an unmistakable sense of tragedy and injustice. Such powerful visuals reinforce the perception that a great evil has been unleashed and that it must be stopped immediately.

Many headlines focused on firearms, such as “Police will raid houses and seize illegal weapons” (Blic Biznis, 2023), stressing that the government introduced urgent measures and that sweeping legislative changes were being pushed through on extremely short deadlines. Severe punishments for non-compliance with new rules and the call for voluntary surrender were prominently featured. Another headline read: “Serbia and the region full of firearms: Serbs love arms” (Vesti Online, 2023), which highlighted the high costs of firearm licence renewals and the repeated extensions of re-registration deadlines due to bureaucratic complexity and high taxes (eventually concluding in 2024). A representative from the National and International Security Institute proposed that licences be granted only to individuals for whom firearms were a primary tool of work before retirement—such as military, police, and BIA personnel. He also stated that EU membership could allow Serbia to become an exporter of security and emphasised the importance of the Roadmap. Another headline, “This is the gun from which the pupil shot in primary school ‘Vladislav Ribnikar’ in Vračar: He took it from the house,” showed a photo of the weapon and described the event with further horrifying details (Telegraf, 2023).

However, some media outlets, both domestic and foreign, offered more critical perspectives on the state’s response. For instance, *Deutsche Welle* interviewed a psychologist (DW, 2023) to provide expert insight into the mass murders. She stressed the importance of psychological support and the roles of teachers and school staff, arguing that repressive measures are ineffective and overly simplistic. She criticised the belief that “just take away arms and hire more police officers” is a sufficient solution, noting that firearms are only one factor among many. She also condemned political manipulation in such sensitive situations.

In another text (Al Jazeera, 2023b), individuals from the public sphere speak about media aggression and primitivism, highlighting how highly questionable figures—or even well-known criminals—have become superstars and idols to younger generations. Similar accusations

regarding the detrimental influence of the media have emerged from multiple sources. One of the principal demands made by protestors was directed at broadcasters of reality shows, which are replete with inappropriate scenes of violence, foul language, and offensive behaviour.

The President, on the other hand, repeatedly claimed in his public addresses that schoolchildren do not watch television at all, but rather spend all their time on the Internet. Nevertheless, he silently accepted the bottom-up proposal aimed at media regulation and incorporated it into a list of urgent measures announced on the very day of the first tragic event.

The *BBC* also reported on the appalling incidents that affected Serbian society (BBC, 2023b). They noted that the initial shock soon transformed into outrage, as vast numbers of citizens took to the streets in peaceful protests against violence. While the public appears to support the government's strict gun control policies, many do not view them as sufficient, and the government itself appears unsettled. The President announced a general disarmament initiative and "harsh consequences" for those found in possession of firearms without a permit or those storing them improperly. However, some experts have deemed certain proposed measures problematic—such as lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12, and reintroducing the authority of police to enter private homes without a court order.

Further commentary on these contentious measures can be found under gun-related headlines, such as "The Nation Disarmament—New Measures: Populist Politics or Bare Necessity?" (Danas, 2023b). While effective operational checks and robust legislation are essential for enhancing security, Serbian gun laws are already considered among the strictest, even by international standards. Concerns have been raised that the tragedy could be exploited to expand police powers, as exemplified by the policy allowing officers to enter homes and conduct inspections. It has also been argued that illegal firearms, not legal ones, should be the greater concern, as they are implicated in the majority of offences. Multiple domestic and international sources share the opinion that Serbia's legislation is stringent, the conditions for obtaining firearms are severe, and mass shootings remain rare (Reuters, 2023; DW, 2023b). One report underscores the United Nations' opposition to lowering the age of criminal responsibility, noting that Serbia is among the signatory states and is therefore urged not to breach this standard (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023a).

Regarding the amnesty, which was strongly advocated by the President, media regularly reported on the updated figures related to surrendered firearms and the overall progress of the campaign. Most outlets portrayed the amnesty as a success (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023c; *Politika*, 2023; N1, 2024a). Some questioned its actual benefit (DW, 2024), suggesting it might unintentionally fuel demand for illegal weapons, which are cheaper and easier to acquire, as individuals seek to avoid Serbia's highly complex and rigid legal procedures. Others noted that the amnesty was implemented "in a hurry", resulting in numerous oversights. These include: the surrender of stolen or lost weapons, poor record-keeping in some cases, and a lack of clear guidance to citizens on how to hand over firearms—leading some to use public transport or walk with a loaded gun.

The second mass murder incident was, regrettably, overshadowed by the first. Media reports described the event as equally harrowing, marked by dark emotions, and focused on the weapon in the killer's possession and the gruesome bloodshed (Blic, 2023). One headline used the metaphor of a "black cloud" to convey deep sorrow and mourning (021, 2023). It was also reported that the President visited the families of the victims and promised that the "monster" would never be released (Blic, 2023; *Informer*, 2023b).

Another important component of the public discourse surrounding these events was the series of peaceful protests against violence, held between 8 May and 28 October 2023, and supported by opposition parties. The initial protests were the largest and most influential, with an average turnout of around 50,000 demonstrators. As early as 5 May, protestors demanded the resignation of key officials, including the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Education, the Director of the Security Information Agency, and the leadership of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). They also called for the revocation of broadcasting licences for several television channels with national frequencies that promote violence and aggression, as well as similar sanctions for certain print media (Danas, 2023c; France24, 2023).

The Minister of Education resigned on 7 May, but no other high-ranking officials followed. Moreover, regime-affiliated television channels—which comprise the vast majority of Serbian media—did not report on the protests at all, and the President dismissed them as

politically motivated. He refused to meet any of the protestors' demands, instead standing firmly by the measures he had already enacted.

Even if the protests ultimately had no tangible policy effect, the public outcry against violence and media permissiveness reflects positively on Serbian civic identity, which has demonstrated a strong foundation in peace, compassion, and solidarity. At the same time, citizens did not express resistance to strict SALW-related measures—on the contrary, they largely supported them—but they did not consider firearms to be the root cause of the tragic events.

It can be concluded that the primary criticisms expressed by the general public and experts centred on the pervasive *culture of violence* and the inadequacy or inappropriateness of certain governmental measures. Many citizens, as demonstrated through the protests, believe that the authorities bear significant responsibility for perpetuating violent rhetoric in both the media and political discourse, which heavily influences young people. The President, however, denies such responsibility. The perceived inadequacy of the government's response is rooted in the overemphasis on weapon control and policing, while overlooking the need for psychological support systems and media regulation.

Several of the adopted or proposed measures have been considered morally, legally, practically, or financially problematic. These include: the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility; the reinstatement of police authority to conduct home searches without notice; the introduction of a moratorium that significantly harms firearms dealers whose livelihoods depend on the trade; and the restriction of access to certain websites, such as the Darknet, which would be extremely difficult to enforce in practice.

The deployment of 1,200 police officers to schools, though appealing in theory as a reassurance to parents, also appears unrealistic in practice. There is insufficient human capacity to allocate officers exclusively for this task, and hiring such a large number of new personnel would be extremely costly and difficult to implement on short notice—even if the government possesses the financial resources, as the President claims. Notably, Serbia already ranks second in Europe—after Montenegro—in terms of police officers per capita (Telegraf, 2019). Despite

this, a decision was made to further increase these numbers. It is also worth noting that legal firearms have come under significantly more scrutiny than illegal ones, even though the latter represent the greater problem in reality.

Regardless of these criticisms, President Vučić remained unwavering in his stance, declaring that he would disregard any judgment—and indeed, he did. None of the initial measures were revoked, and all original conclusions remained in force. The effects of these emergency measures were visible almost immediately, as numerous gun owners rushed to purchase safes for proper firearm storage (Paragraf, 2023). Although the cost of a safe is not insignificant, retailers quickly sold out—likely driven both by fear of punishment and concern over potential tragedies.

It must be acknowledged that the process of securitisation was significantly facilitated by the concentration of power in the President's hands and the strong backing of both Parliament and the majority of the public. A crucial role was also played by state-controlled media, which actively supported the political elite's intentions.

6.2.2. Femicide

The media is, in fact, the primary source of information on femicide cases, as they are not classified as a separate offence in the Serbian Criminal Code—an omission also seen in most countries around the world. The civil sector is well developed in this field, encompassing numerous associations and NGOs such as the Autonomous Women's Centre, Women Solidarity, Women in Black, Femplatz, Women for Changes, Right to Law, and others. This sensitive issue is also supported by the Victimology Society of Serbia.

Typically, following the murder of a woman or girl, these actors issue statements, produce reports, and organise protests in order to raise public awareness and alert all relevant stakeholders in the country to the seriousness and urgency of the issue of femicide. Meanwhile, they continue advocacy campaigns to maintain pressure on the government and to elicit appropriate political decisions. The ultimate goal is to convince the competent authorities of the imminence of these threats and the necessity of prompt action to effect lasting change in societal attitudes towards women.

Several protests have recently been held in response to the frequent murders of women: in Belgrade (25 February 2023); Novi Sad (21 February 2024, 29 February 2024, 13 March 2024, 29 March 2024); Pirot (18 March 2023); and Gračanica (2 August 2024). Women—and many men—have united in profound sorrow over the victims and in outrage over the violence, as well as the inaction or inadequate response by authorities. Messages on protest banners have expressed demands for healthy, violence-free families, an end to the loss of lives, and the termination of violence, alongside urgent calls for legislative and practical reforms. Some of the more resolute slogans included: “Life sentence for murderer”, “Bullies to prison, not in the media”, and “Pain, anger and non-surrender” (N1, 2024; Aljazeera, 2024; Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024b). Protesters have consistently reiterated the demand for femicide to be treated as a distinct criminal offence—specifically, as aggravated murder—citing its gender-based nature and the underlying motives of hatred and the perceived ownership of women. They also advocate for the establishment of family courts to deal with such cases, as practised in some other countries.

As firearms are used in approximately one-third of femicide cases, protesters have called for urgent measures, including more restrictive regulations on the issuance of licences for possession and carrying of firearms, as well as improved risk assessments. Some demands go further, explicitly calling for the resignation of officials deemed responsible for failing to prevent these crimes by not confiscating weapons or monitoring the behaviour of men previously identified as dangerous—even in cases where restraining orders were already in effect. A widespread perception exists that institutions are not fulfilling their responsibilities adequately, resulting in a lack of trust from women, who therefore often refrain from reporting violence (BBC News in Serbian, 2023; Euronews, 2023; Aljazeera, 2024; Vreme, 2024; Danas, 2023; Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023; Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024a). Protesters emphasise that the “red alarms” have long been triggered and that a prompt response is imperative. They remain determined to continue mobilising until the government implements concrete measures to counter this serious threat, as women live in fear for their lives and girls grow up in a climate of anxiety.

This situation clearly illustrates one of the theoretical hypotheses underpinning this thesis: namely, that emotions such as anger, pain, sorrow, and grief—often born from a persistent lack of institutional reaction—can act as powerful catalysts for collective mobilisation. Women

who have lived in fear, and in anguish over being treated with cruelty by men they love or once loved, often lack anyone to turn to for help. Having witnessed previous institutional failures, they do not trust the authorities and frequently refrain from reporting violence. As a result, no one pays attention until it is too late. Even after a tragic event, justice is rarely served, and perpetrators often receive inadequate punishment. This fuels societal outrage. Alongside genuine grief over lost lives and traumatised children, this outrage galvanises individuals and advocacy groups to persevere in demanding change—in both behaviour and political practice.

The second hypothesis proposed in this research concerns the communicative power of images in the securitisation process—images that do not require historical or contextual explanation but convey a clear and universal message. Women are most often killed either in the privacy of their homes—where they should feel safest—or in public while performing ordinary daily activities. Many of these horrific acts are committed in front of their children, who are left deeply traumatised. Images of defenceless women being tortured or murdered while cooking in their kitchens or taking children to the doctor, children screaming in shock and pain, horrified witnesses, and brutal, remorseless men are universally recognisable. Whether encountered in person or through media, such imagery unequivocally communicates the urgent need to end this violence once and for all.

Unfortunately, it has predominantly been anti-regime and local media outlets that have reported on these incidents and related developments in recent years, thereby making it more difficult to generate the critical mass needed for real change. Nonetheless, these securitising moves by civil society have gradually gained momentum. They have stirred public consciousness and garnered the support of influential regional and international organisations such as the UN, UNDP, OSCE, and SEESAC. Through projects, research, surveys, and related recommendations, these organisations aim to raise awareness of this pressing issue and exert additional pressure on the government to act. The UN Women office in Serbia and the OSCE organised a major conference on violence against women in October 2024, while the OSCE has previously held several similar events. These gatherings have brought together experts, international organisations, civil society representatives, and public officials to address urgent issues related to violence against women and femicide specifically. The OSCE conducted a regional survey on women's safety in 2018, which was published in 2019, and launched a

dedicated website for preventing and combating violence against women (www.stopVAWnow.org).

However, the most impactful support and advocacy aimed at reducing the number of murdered women in Serbia appear to be those spearheaded by SEESAC and UNDP. The UNDP-led research project titled *Characteristics and Prevention of Intimate Partner Femicide-Suicide Cases Committed with a Firearm* (Pavlov et al., 2023) provides a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of firearm use in femicide. The most significant findings indicate that the majority of such crimes are committed using illegally possessed firearms, and that firearm access is a key risk factor—albeit one that is interlinked with other issues, such as intense jealousy, controlling behaviour, propensity for violence, substance abuse, and more. The research also highlights a lack of coordination among state actors across sectors and levels of governance. This study undoubtedly presents a thorough approach to understanding the connection between SALW and femicide.

As key actors in the domain of firearms control, UNDP and SEESAC possess considerable potential to influence femicide statistics positively. The fact that the research was financially supported by the EU and several European countries further reinforces its significance and helps elevate the issue's visibility. Moreover, the initiative aligns with the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap, particularly Goal 4, which aims to “significantly reduce the supply, demand, and misuse of firearms through increased awareness, education, outreach and advocacy, by 2024.”

A more tangible outcome of this initiative is the publication of two sets of operational guidelines for police officers dealing with firearms in the context of domestic violence (SEESAC, 2024): *Guidelines for Gender Responsive Firearms Licence Approval* and *Guidelines for Assessing and Addressing Risks Related to Firearms Misuse in Domestic Violence*. These guidelines stress the urgency of enhancing existing assessment procedures to prevent the use of firearms in domestic violence incidents. They propose very strict and time-consuming procedures and advocate for the strengthening of an already rigorous legislative framework. Authorities responsible for firearms licence approvals are expected to adhere fully to these new measures.

The guidelines include a detailed description and listing of risk indicators and intervention triggers in domestic violence cases. Preventative measures include comprehensive background checks for each firearms licence applicant, including interviews with family members, current and former partners, colleagues, fellow association members, school staff, social workers, family doctors, NGOs, and open-source data checks. Instructions are provided for conducting interviews with all relevant individuals, including the applicant. The objective of this thorough—even intrusive—approach is to obtain a complete picture of the individual’s past and current behaviour, with particular attention to any violent tendencies or problematic conduct across all areas of life. The same procedures apply for licence renewals. It is also vital that spouses and close family members be notified when a person is granted a firearms licence.

In parallel, amendments to the Criminal Code include provisions to increase the penalties for domestic violence. If a dangerous tool or weapon is used, the prescribed punishment will be increased to up to ten years’ imprisonment. This legal development is expected to aid in the prevention of future violence against women and stands as further evidence that grassroots activism and securitising moves are, albeit slowly, yielding tangible results.

6.2.3. Terrorist Attacks

Regardless of whether they are politically, religiously or ideologically motivated, one of the main aims of terrorism is to instil a sense of insecurity within society. Acts of terrorism cause fear and anxiety, disrupting daily routines and normal life. After such incidents, people are often afraid to go out for fear of encountering a terrorist, opting instead to stay at home or avoid regular gathering places and transport hubs, thereby interrupting their everyday functioning. According to Vultee (2007: 4), people react strongly even to the mere word “*terror*”. This was demonstrated following a recent incident in Serbia, characterised as the first terrorist attack in the country, which will be described in this section. The media were flooded with news coverage, and the story quickly captured public attention.

Kosovo in the 1990s was the site of intense separatist activities, often characterised as terrorism, carried out by the Kosovo Liberation Army against non-Muslim citizens. These activities were weakened and disrupted following the adoption of UN Security Council

Resolution 1244. However, former KLA members went on to form various militant and political organisations that sustained the agenda of Kosovo's separation from Serbia. Wahhabism in the Sandžak region, on the other hand, became more visible in the 2000s, though its followers remain relatively few in number. All suspicious activities and known members of terrorist and extremist groups are subject to continuous monitoring. The remainder of Serbia had, for a long time, remained untouched by this threat—until 2024.

The event described here involved an attempted murder of a police officer by a Serbian citizen who had converted to Islam. The officer, a member of the Serbian Gendarmerie, was stationed as security personnel in front of the Israeli Embassy in Belgrade, suggesting that the intended targets were likely the embassy staff, with the police officer being an incidental victim. The attacker used a crossbow, but the officer managed to retaliate, ultimately killing the assailant.

This act was notable for several reasons. Firstly, it was officially declared the first recognised terrorist act in Belgrade, Serbia. Secondly, the targeted officer was able to defend himself, survive, and neutralise the terrorist. Lastly, the use of a crossbow—a highly unusual weapon in Serbia—made the incident even more distinctive. Since the officer demonstrated a high level of training and competence, the public could feel reassured that their safety was in “the right hands.”

Nonetheless, a red alert was declared nationwide, signalling a state of emergency and the presence of an imminent threat. Police forces were deployed strategically to prevent further possible attacks. The President sought to avoid public panic and assured citizens that police authorities had been monitoring a specific group, including the perpetrator—a known Wahhabi—on suspicion of preparing terrorist activity. Authorities had reportedly been close to gathering sufficient evidence for an arrest. Unfortunately, the attacker acted before they could intervene. The government subsequently declared a zero-tolerance policy towards terrorism, vowing to identify and prosecute all perpetrators and to send a clear message.

In a post-event interview, the Minister of the Interior, Mr Ivica Dačić, appeared shocked to learn that no licence is required to own a crossbow. He was informed that it falls under

Category “D” of weapons, which may be purchased and owned by individuals over the age of 16, as well as by legal entities and companies, without the need for a licence, approval, or notification of competent authorities, as stipulated by the Law on Weapons and Ammunition. Category “D” includes: cold weapons, gas sprays, electroshock devices, air guns producing kinetic energy below 10.5 J or launching projectiles with a muzzle velocity not exceeding 200 m/s and of calibre 4.5 mm or smaller, and bowstring or string weapons with a tensile force of up to 450 N, i.e. a tensile strength of up to 101 lb.

Some types of bowstring weapons with greater tensile force must at least be registered after purchase, but the type used by the attacker can be cheaply bought with no formalities, like any other consumer good. Dačić stressed that the police officer nearly lost his life, surviving only due to his skill and experience in life-threatening situations. He emphasised that the crossbow clearly poses a serious threat to life and must be regulated accordingly. Consequently, he demanded immediate amendments to the law (Tok Televizija, 2024).

If we pause to consider other items in Category “D”, such as knives or wood-splitting axes, it becomes evident that these have caused more fatalities and injuries, whether intentionally or accidentally, than crossbows—especially in Serbia, where this is the first known case of a crossbow being used in an attempted murder. Nevertheless, these weapons have not been securitised. While it is true that all such objects may pose a threat, this is not their primary function. The law in this area is fully aligned with European recommendations and is no different from that in many other European countries. Overall, it is considered strict. However, the case also illustrates how easily something can become the subject of securitisation if deemed politically expedient by members of the elite. The Law on Weapons and Ammunition has already been amended three times since its adoption, and further changes are underway—arguably too frequently. The outcome of this securitising move remains to be seen.

Only two days later, another incident increased the likelihood of such changes being enacted. A second terrorist attack was attempted but successfully prevented by police officers, who noticed a suspicious individual approaching a police facility. Upon being approached, the individual tried to flee but was apprehended after a brief pursuit. He was found to be carrying an explosive device in a bag, along with other Category “D” weapons—including, once again, a

crossbow. It is possible that he had even learned from media coverage of the previous event about the ease of acquiring this particular weapon, which may be emerging as a new trend in Europe. He was later charged with attempted aggravated murder.

This second incident could facilitate the success of the Minister of the Interior's attempt to securitise a new class of weapons. The media further amplified public tension, as their coverage of both events was extensive (Euronews, 2024a; Euronews, 2024b; Beta, 2024; Blic, 2024; Direktno, 2024; Novosti, 2024). Some media outlets employed sensationalist headlines intended to provoke fear and attract public attention, while others focused on the legislative implications. In all cases, the media contributed to the securitisation process by framing the reality to suit a particular narrative. Although some analyses suggest that the threat of terrorism in Serbia remains low, and the described attack was an isolated act by a "lone wolf" (BBC, 2024), the situation was nevertheless portrayed as serious, with urgent countermeasures proposed—some targeting SALW.

While it is true that terrorist threats may at times be exaggerated, the issue remains highly sensitive and disturbing. No one wishes to live in fear of encountering a mentally unstable individual carrying a crossbow. This concern was compounded when the President publicly acknowledged the long-standing presence of terrorist and extremist activity within Serbian territory—of which many citizens had been unaware. The authorities again reassured the public that every effort was being made to protect them. The President underscored that Serbia remains a stable, safe, and peaceful country—and would continue to be so (Beta, 2024; Tok Televizija, 2024). Nevertheless, one of the government's primary responses was directed at SALW, which appeared to be treated as being almost as culpable as the underlying ideology itself.

6.3. Summary

When we consider the overall attention paid at both regional and European levels to the issue of firearms, along with the time, effort, and resources invested in mitigating the threat, it becomes evident that both the Balkan countries and the European community are addressing it seriously and consistently, leaving no aspect overlooked. A wide range of topics covered through training, projects, and other initiatives, as well as comprehensive measures supplementing

already strict norms and legislation, aim to encompass all forms of SALW abuse and mechanisms for their control.

There is a strong emphasis on modernising all segments of the state's response to the firearms issue, alongside the full harmonisation of Serbia's legal framework with EU laws and practices. The prescribed measures are generally mandatory and often urgent. Given that firearms from this region are perceived as a significant and omnipresent threat to European security, considerable pressure is placed on Serbia and other Western Balkan countries, often without due regard for the complications this may cause national authorities. Even the EU's recommendations are effectively treated as obligations, leveraging Serbia's status as a candidate country for negotiation—or, at times, open coercion.

Serbia is currently under scrutiny due to its neutral stance on the Russia–Ukraine war and its continued procurement of weapons from Russia despite the embargo. Kosovo has long been a point of contention between Serbia and Albania and remains a permanent topic on the EU agenda. Recent incidents involving large weapons seizures and the alleged terrorist attack in Banjska have further deteriorated the situation. When these events are considered alongside accusations—albeit denied by Serbia—of illicit firearms exports, the result appears increasingly unfavourable for the country. This perception can be easily exploited by the EU to justify and facilitate its securitisation policies. Images of war crimes and terrorist acts committed using Serbian firearms are particularly impactful, as they are overtly disturbing and evoke strong emotional responses such as sorrow and anger. The tragic loss of innocent lives—whether during their daily routines or through execution—is a profound national shame, irrespective of the state's actual level of responsibility. Consequently, new securitisation moves regarding firearms can be anticipated at all levels.

The media plays a vital role in this dynamic, often capitalising on news that captures widespread attention. The topic of firearms and national security remains one of the most pressing political concerns for citizens. As a result, numerous magazines and outlets report on the same incidents, differing only in select sensational details. Horrific images of crime and bloodshed are thereby continuously circulated and kept alive in the public sphere, featuring in the discourse of multiple actors simultaneously. The discourse within official documents of the

European Commission and Parliament, as well as in the media, also persists over time. Every major new incident involving Serbian firearms is framed as an opportunity to reiterate past transgressions and assign blame. The spatial and temporal reach of this discourse, alongside the involvement of multiple actors, clearly illustrates the intertextuality discussed by Lene Hansen (2006: 49–50). This underscores the significance of the firearms issue, lends it broader implications across different layers of meaning, and reveals the predominant approach to the matter.

When such a strategy is employed, harsh reactions seem both necessary and justified. The intense activity of actors such as SEESAC in the SALW field places firearms at the centre of relevant policies. The securitising discourse constructs an urgent need for action—for instance, the rapid creation of new Action Plans or Roadmaps, legal amendments, and repressive measures. Power relations (Balzacq, 2011) are clearly evident, as key securitising actors utilise these dynamics to achieve their objectives: the EU as a dominant authority in Europe, and SEESAC in the regional context. The audience's consent is expressed through either active support or passive acceptance of their proposals.

A similar pattern is observable at the national level, where issues concerning physical and ontological security evolve into political security matters, sparking significant public debate and policy response. These issues are often elevated from the realm of ordinary politics to exceptional circumstances, particularly when the government's survival is perceived to be at risk due to its share of responsibility. Under considerable pressure from various actors, authorities have had to demonstrate decisive action to rectify the bleak reality while remaining committed to the EU path and showing concern for citizens both domestically and abroad. Securitisation, in the form of repressive measures, may serve as a visible expression of the state's effort to protect its people. Firearms offer a convenient target for such measures: they are easily stigmatised, allowing more complex or sensitive problems to be side-lined. Measures related to SALW are thus more readily justified as necessary for preserving order and stability—objectives typically welcomed by the public.

Whether or not firearms misuse genuinely poses an existential threat to the entire Serbian nation, it is frequently presented as such—both by the Serbian government and by the EU and its

member states, which perceive it as a major security concern. In the aftermath of recent tragedies in which 19 young people and children were killed and many more injured, the government recognised the need to respond decisively. Failure to do so could have encouraged further lawlessness or public outcry. Such events have the potential to provoke mass panic and unrest. If not addressed swiftly, the situation could escalate into widespread protests and national instability. Citizens might resort to vigilante justice, including the use of firearms—whether legally or illegally possessed. Given the prevalence and lethality of these weapons, unchecked outrage could quickly spiral into a cycle of violence and anarchy.

The uniqueness of these incidents lies in their precedent-setting nature. One such case marked the first mass murder committed by a child in Serbia, a rare occurrence globally. Another involved terrorist acts, previously unknown in the country. The path toward EU accession would be further endangered if the state descended into disorder. Serbs risk being stigmatised once more as ‘butchers’, and Serbia as the ‘powder keg’ of the Balkans. President Vučić clearly recognised the imperative to demonstrate the state's competence and capacity to address such grave threats. Accordingly, he redirected national outrage towards firearms—a tangible and easily vilified object. According to Buzan et al. (1998: 25), a securitised threat must involve a security issue capable of producing fatal consequences. Firearms can undoubtedly do so, with alarming frequency and relative ease.

Nonetheless, Vučić was aware of potential resistance to his proposed measures, recognising that Serbia's historical and cultural context could play a significant role. A common belief persists that Serbs have a traditional affinity for weapons, rooted in their historical use for achieving freedom and resisting aggression. In 1883, Serbs rebelled against the king's order to disarm the population. Many peasants were imprisoned, and nearly a hundred were sentenced to death. Aware of the likely consequences, they nonetheless risked their lives to oppose tyranny and retain their weapons. Paradoxically, they sacrificed their lives to defend the very tools meant to protect them.

Thus, Vučić proceeded with caution, frequently acknowledging the potential backlash. He skillfully blended classical securitisation strategies with appeals to emotion to win public support. As a result, aside from a small minority, the Serbian public largely accepted the

restrictive measures announced. Many citizens voluntarily surrendered their weapons. The collective grief over the loss of young lives and anger at the violence were so powerful and pervasive that people were willing to part with weapons that had once symbolised heritage and resilience and faithful companions of their ancestors throughout the turbulent times. Rather than being associated with cowardice or monstrosity, they chose to reject firearms. The fear of criminal penalties and hefty fines also played a role in shaping this response. All factors considered, the securitisation process at the national level may be regarded as successful.

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7. Discussion on the Research Results

There is now a robust legislative framework in Serbia concerning small arms and light weapons (SALW), largely harmonized with European Union norms. Remaining loopholes are expected to be addressed through the activities outlined in the Roadmap, with many objectives already successfully achieved since its adoption. However, there remains room for improvement—particularly regarding the illegal aspects of the problem. As demonstrated by the events and contested situations discussed in this thesis, illegal firearms continue to be a primary concern at both the national and international levels, and should be prioritized in future state policy. While some measures have been taken in this regard, the results remain unsatisfactory. The described modus operandi in firearms smuggling further aggravates the issue.

Although special measures applied and proposed at various levels target both legal and illegal SALW, the overall impression is that legal owners are more heavily impacted. National laws in this area are frequently amended, and already stringent regulations are continually tightened—often to the detriment of responsible and law-abiding gun owners. These regulations impose burdensome conditions for legal firearm possession, including significant associated costs. Beyond the high prices of firearms, owners face expenses for secure storage (safes), ownership fees, re-registration procedures, and repeated medical examinations. This appears particularly disproportionate when considering that only a negligible percentage of legally owned SALW has been used in criminal activities. For instance, by the end of 2023, 558,284 firearms were officially registered, yet only 55 crimes were committed using legally owned weapons—representing less than 0.001% of the total.

Frequent and often insufficiently considered amendments to firearms legislation in Serbia have also created challenges for legal authorities. This is evident in the *Firearms Case Law Collection in Serbia* (2015–2019), supported by the UNODC Global Firearms Programme and financed through the SALW Roadmap Trust Fund and EU funds. The document is the result of collaboration among law enforcement agencies, the prosecutor's office, and the judiciary, and it also contributed to improving inter-institutional cooperation in this domain. The findings confirm the complexity of Serbia's legal framework, particularly after the adoption of the new Law on Weapons and Ammunition, which introduced the criminalization of new categories such as

convertible and deactivated weapons, mines, and explosive devices, as well as the offense of firearm modification. Sentences were increased, and punitive measures made more severe.

In this context, the implementation of legislative reforms based on EU directives has caused certain dilemmas for prosecutors and judges. One example involves convertible weapons: ammunition for such firearms is not explicitly covered under the current law, and questions remain about whether they pose a real threat to public order, which serves as the referent object. Similarly, amendments to the Criminal Code in 2012 altered previous court practices by criminalizing core components of firearms, without requiring proof of the weapon's functionality. Many such legal issues are discussed in the case law analysis, which shows that overly broad legal formulations—as found in some “all-inclusive” EU directives—can undermine the principle of *lex certa* (UNODC, 2022).

It must be acknowledged, however, that these extensive, comprehensive, and stringent regulations have significantly contributed to a safer environment in Serbia and its neighboring countries. They have also raised public awareness about the various threats associated with firearms, even though legal gun owners might be considered disproportionately affected. Alongside the development and reinforcement of the regulatory framework and international and regional cooperation, instances of SALW abuse have steadily declined. The capacities of relevant state institutions have been noticeably enhanced and modernized, leading to substantial progress in the field of arms control. As a result, Serbia in 2024 is markedly safer than it was in 2002, with firearm abuse rates at modest—or even low—levels by global standards, and with crime rates continuing to decline despite persistently high levels of civilian firearm possession.

8. Concluding Remarks

The increasing proliferation and improved lethality of SALW, in the context of global political instability caused by wars, organised crime, terrorism, and violence, form substantial grounds for concern. Although numerous studies demonstrate a direct relationship between gun possession and crime rates, I argued that this is not the case in Serbia. Despite being ranked first in Europe and third globally in terms of firearms in civilian possession, Serbia is simultaneously among the safest countries in Europe. Millions of guns do not necessarily constitute a smoking gun indicating insecurity. They can remain non-smoking guns.

While some reasons for this can undoubtedly be found in the country's heroic and turbulent history, which has fostered a particular attachment to and respect for firearms among the Serbian people, I hypothesised that overly strict measures and a persistent securitising approach to SALW are primarily responsible for the relatively low level of SALW misuse and the country's comparatively high level of security, despite very high possession rates.

In this paper, I explored the scope and causes of the securitisation of firearms in Serbia and the consequent effects on national security. Unlike some other countries with loose firearm laws and procedures, Serbia's strict SALW regulations act as a barrier to their excessive and uncontrolled misuse. The main reasons for the frequent and comprehensive securitisation of firearms are multifaceted. On one side, there is the significant influence and supervisory role of the EU, which aims to prevent the spillover of Balkan organised crime and widespread firearms smuggling into its territory. The securitisation of firearms is not a difficult task when the pre-accession mechanism serves as a powerful lever. At the centre of this network are key regional actors seeking to break with the infamous legacy of the 1990s and alter the entire SALW landscape.

Finally, on the other side of this securitising network, the Serbian government acts with a sharp approach to firearms whenever faced with an allegedly existential threat—regardless of the actual magnitude of the danger. The President and government officials, as the principal securitising actors in the state, leverage their “despotic” power and appropriate securitising grammar—infused with emotions and stereotypes—to successfully pursue their objectives.

The media serve as a highly influential factor, used by the elite as a powerful auxiliary tool. The vast majority of broadcasters and print media are controlled by the ruling political party and therefore reflect and reinforce the government's official discourse, framing firearms in a particular light and making it accessible to a broader audience. With high media coverage of issues such as mass shootings, femicide, terrorism, and weapons smuggling, SALW has proven to be an easily securitised object—a convenient solution to various societal challenges.

All these securitising actors remain resolute, firm, and united in their approach. The desecuritisation of firearms in Serbia is an almost non-existent part of the process. Even though crime rates have been steadily decreasing—apart from a few exceptions—measures against SALW have paradoxically become increasingly strict. It appears that the securitisation process itself is being exploited, as the misuse of firearms is addressed solely through the restriction of their use, resulting in collateral damage for responsible legal owners.

This may be explained by the perception that threats posed by firearms are severe and constant. Unlike wars, pandemics, or natural disasters, such threats do not simply end or disappear. Human lives are irreplaceable and cannot be recovered like financial resources. Firearms remain present and dangerous, particularly in countries like Serbia, where they are widespread. Consequently, measures initially deemed “special,” “extreme,” or “urgent” soon become ordinary—even insufficient—and are replaced by newer, increasingly severe regulations. These measures persist even after the ‘existential threat’ has dissipated, continuing to play a preventive role.

Although such measures inevitably narrow democratic space and infringe on citizens' rights through flawed procedures and a lack of desecuritisation, the results are undeniable. Since 2002, the number of criminal offences involving firearms—either as instruments or objects of crime—has decreased significantly, in some categories even drastically. The same trend applies to suicide rates, despite similar or even higher firearm possession per capita in 2023. An additional decline was recorded in 2024 across many crime categories, attributed to stricter regulations introduced the previous year. Simultaneously, state capacities for combating SALW trafficking and misuse have been strengthened in every aspect: legislative, strategic, cooperative, human resources, training, and equipment. Multiple changes to relevant laws and regulations have been made, each time becoming more severe and comprehensive than the last.

With such a robust and evidently effective mechanism for preserving national security, the persistent securitisation of firearms may be justified, and the public might be willing to overlook the process's inevitable shortcomings. While it may be difficult to change the mindset of individuals with psychological disorders, a strong preventive policy should at least make the execution of lethal intentions more difficult. On the other hand, the number of illegal firearms remains high, and some individuals may attempt to compensate for the lack of legal firearms with illegal ones. Nevertheless, significantly increased penalties and an expanded scope of criminalisation are expected to deter ordinary citizens from engaging in criminal activity. Potential perpetrators are now more likely to weigh potential gains against increasingly severe consequences.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of a holistic approach to SALW monitoring, analysis, and prevention. A decisive regulatory framework, intensive activities by competent authorities, and public awareness campaigns in Serbia are complemented by the extensive and multifarious engagement of the regional and international security community and other relevant bodies. The academic community also plays a vital role in this network. This strong synergy among diverse actors and initiatives is essential for addressing any complex and potentially dangerous phenomenon—particularly one capable of profoundly impacting society as a whole.

The broader implications of my research—and a suggestion for further exploration—lie in its potential applicability to the wider Western Balkans region. Beyond their shared troubled histories, similar languages, and cultural commonalities, these countries also belong to the same sub-regional security complex based on “patterns of security practice” (Buzan, 2003). As such, they face comparable challenges concerning firearm possession and levels of crime and violence.

Given these shared realities and the EU's intention to strengthen resilience in this part of Europe, international activities and funding are predominantly region-focused. This has led to similar legal frameworks and comparable levels of expertise across the countries. Strengthening mutual trust is crucial for building a common security infrastructure—arguably the most effective way of addressing security threats. A regional perspective is also vital for creating personalised frameworks tailored to local needs, avoiding overly general approaches or simple replication of EU laws and practices. Therefore, many of the hypotheses and arguments

presented in this paper could be largely applicable to other Western Balkan countries. Such research would produce an overview of best practices that could be exchanged among countries to enhance overall regional stability and security.

Furthermore, this work raises several questions for future research, including: To what extent is the SALW securitisation process exploited for achieving the objectives of the Serbian government and the EU? What strategies can make firearms less appealing to Serbian and other youth? What can be done to reduce the number of illegal firearms in Serbia? How can domestic violence be addressed more effectively? It is my hope that this research will inspire further academic inquiry in this important field, contributing additional links to the securitising network to more effectively capture threats and help create a safer society with each passing year.

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