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Serbia's Recent Gun Violence and Response



Photo Credit: People attend a protest "Serbia against violence.." REUTERS/Zorona Jevtic

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13,500 Weapons Surrendered *Photo Credit: Serbian Presidential Press Service*¹

Summary

Serbia and other Balkan states are filled with a high number of illegal weapons due to the wars and unrests in the 1990s. In Serbia, a 2021 estimate concluded that there are 39 firearms per 100 people - the third highest in the world, behind the United States and Yemen.² However, mass shootings are rare in Serbia. Before the recent spike in shootings, the last deadliest shooting was in 2013 and before that 2007. In 2013, Ljubisa Bogdanovic killed fourteen people in the central village of Velika Ivanca and, in 2007, Nikola Radosavljevic killed nine and injured five others in Jabukovac.

The recent gun violence in Serbia changed these statistics as eighteen people were killed and nineteen people were injured in the span of two days in two separate shootings. Following these mass shootings, protests ensued and called for stricter gun laws and new policies for gun ownership. President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, acted and imposed new gun measures, a lower criminal responsibility age, stricter medical and psychological checks on gun owners, and hired 1,200 police officers for schools. He also enacted a one-month amnesty for surrendering illegal or unregistered weapons and ammunition.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/after-two-mass-shootings-serbians-rally-against-violence-2023-05-08/>

² <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/277867/Balkanski-mentalitet-Srbija-u-vrhu-po-broju-oruzja-na-100-stanovnika.html>

Serbia's quick action against gun violence and implementation of gun measures highlights the ability and willingness of a country to lower gun violence through policy making and national unity.

Recent Mass Shootings

On May 3rd, 2023, a school shooting at Vladislav Ribnikar Model Elementary School in Belgrade, Serbia resulted with ten people dead and six people injured.³ The shooter, a thirteen-year-old male student used his father's guns that were legally owned in the incident. He was carrying two pistols, four Molotov cocktails, and detailed plans of the attack. Since the suspect is thirteen, he was unable to be held criminally responsible as, under current Serbian law, those under the age of fourteen cannot be held responsible for committing crimes.

One day later, on May 4th, 2023, Uros Blazic killed eight individuals and injured thirteen others in a drive by shooting outside of Belgrade.⁴ He used an automatic assault rifle and fled the scene but was apprehended the next day. In the house the suspect was living at, the police found four bombs, a flare gun, a submachine gun, two silencers, a hunter's knife, and various ammunition. Interior Minister Bratislav Gasic and President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic denounced the shooting as a terrorist act.⁵

People and Government Response

Following the shootings, opposition parties, namely the Ujedinjeni parliamentary group (People's Party, Do not let Belgrade down, Together, Democratic Party, and Dveri) organized a protest against violence on May 8th, 2023.⁶ The protestors met in front of the parliament building and marched in silence near government buildings. They called for the resignation of Vulin, Gasic, the Minister of Education Branko Ruzic, and the cancellation of programs that promote violence. It is estimated that 50,000 people attended this protest. There was then a second protest on May 12th, in which a march took place in front of the building of the National Assembly of Serbia to Sava Center. The following day, another "Serbia Against Violence" protest occurred in Kragujevac.

There was also an increase in arrests following the two shootings. There was an escalation in photos of weapons being posted by juveniles with threats or mentions of the mass shootings. On May 18th, police evacuated students from the Stari Grad Electrical

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/world/europe/serbia-school-shooting.html>

⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-shooting-school-belgrade-guns-523b9bf8fdc0e89778baf0d8859401bf>

⁵ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-najavio-novih-1-200-polica-jaca-za-skole/>

⁶ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/opozicija-pozvala-gradjane-u-setnju-protiv-nasilja/>

Engineering School in Belgrade following an unknown person threatening to come armed into the school.⁷



Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic announces changes to gun laws. *Milos Miskov/Anadolu Agency*.⁸

As for government response, President Aleksandar Vucic implemented stricter regulations on gun ownership, hired 1,200 police officers for schools, and increased mental and psychological checks for gun ownership. However, the government was criticized after the Minister of Education, Branko Ruzic, said that the influence of internet and Western values led to these attacks.⁹ He submitted his resignation shortly after this statement.¹⁰ The Health Minister, Danica Grujicic, announced that the Institute of Mental Health would activate two telephone counselling helplines and have in-person counselling available.¹¹ On May 8th, the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs offered a one-month amnesty for surrendering illegal or unregistered weapons and ammunition. On June 6th, the ministry reported that 57,651 firearms, 2,692,641 rounds of ammunition, and 20,451 pieces of ordnance were turned in.¹² Additionally, on May 11th, the government formed the Peer Violence Prevention Council that will focus on reducing peer violence.¹³ Overall, the

⁷ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=05&dd=18&nav_category=16&nav_id=2335985

⁸ <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3990351-serbia-president-calls-to-disarm-country-after-second-mass-shooting-in-two-days/>

⁹ <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/ruzic-poguban-uticaj-zapadnih-vrednosti/>

¹⁰ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/branko-ruzic-podneo-ostavku/>

¹¹ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/prof-dr-danica-grujicic-institut-za-mentalno-zdravlje-pruzice-podrsku-svima-poslepucnjave-u-os-vladislav-ribnikar/>

¹² <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/akcija-prikupljanja-ilegalnog-oruzja-u-srbiji-rok-produzen-od-30-juna-preti-i-robij/0qe9meh>

¹³ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=05&dd=11&nav_category=11&nav_id=2332066

government of Serbia took quick action in implementing policies that target gun violence and the obtainment of guns.

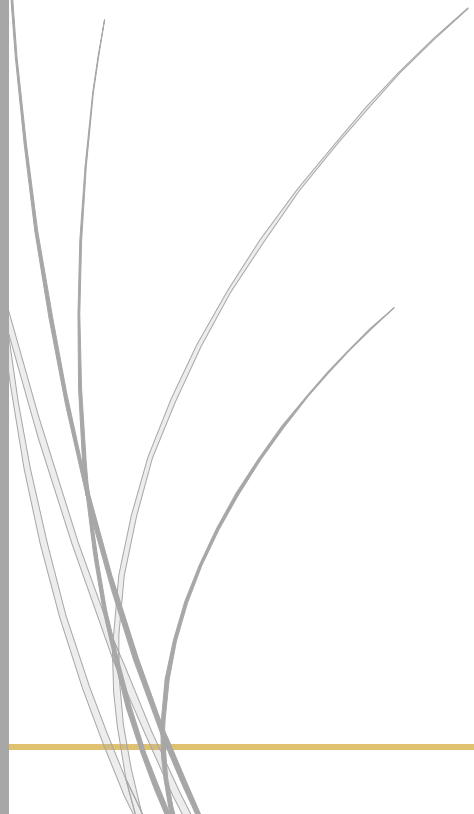
Conclusion

Obtaining a gun legally in Serbia is a complicated process that requires the person to have a background check, medical check, a training course, and provide a good reason to own one.¹⁴ However, with the highest level of civilian gun ownership in Europe and fifth highest in the world, mass shootings are not common in Serbia. Therefore, the back-to-back mass shootings in May profoundly shook Serbia, prompting the implementation of significant changes to their gun regulations and policies. For instance, the government is proposing a two-year moratorium on the issuing of new gun permits and will review existing permits within the next three months.

The protests that ensued following the shootings also prompted anti-government conversations. These protests blame the government for letting a culture of violence continue to be shown on social media and on news outlets. This strong anti-Vucic sentiments led to Vucic to stand down as the head of the governing Serbian Progressive Party and schedule new parliamentary elections that would be held no later than September.¹⁵ While the shootings sparked political divisions within the country, there was remarkable national unity when it came to revising gun regulations and voluntarily relinquishing firearms to the government, demonstrating to the world the potential for change in the aftermath of mass shootings. Serbia's swift denouncement of the incidents and proactive measures to develop new policies hold significant importance, serving as a noteworthy example for other nations to emulate.

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/05/europe/serbia-reacts-school-shooting-intl/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-snap-election-2023-aleksandr-vucic-mass-shootings-protests/>



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