



Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*
at the
high-level meeting on countering firearms trafficking in South East Europe, Brussels

Dear participants,

Dear guests,

There are lessons we learn from roadmaps, and the lessons we learn in sorrow. The recent tragic events that happened in Serbia are telling us that the damage caused by weapons is never small. The use of weapons from the lethal trade or civilian ownership can result in tragedies and is never taken lightly. While the motives for these recent attacks are still being investigated, I would like to reiterate our condolences to the Serbian authorities and the families affected by this tragedy.

The first lesson of sorrow that we can draw from these events is that increased cooperation among the Western Balkans' six nations can play a significant role in reducing the circulation of small and light weapons, thus contributing to a safer and more secure region. Other factors, including support for mental health, must also be considered. Although mental health conditions are often unfairly stigmatized as potentially leading to violence, community support and efforts can only assist in creating a more compassionate society. We all recognize the need for more extensive medical and psychological checks for gun owners.

Since 2002, the Regional Cooperation Council has been strongly supporting the work of the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons in executing its mandate given by the governments of the region, and it supports their efforts on disarmament and arms control. Thus, the RCC takes pride in providing the political umbrella under which the Western Balkans' control roadmap has been developed, adopted, and is being implemented. This roadmap is an indisputable testament to the commitment undertaken by the region collectively and serves as a great example of a regionally-owned process. Allow me, once again, to congratulate the governments of the Western Balkans for their unwavering support in achieving the commitments and objectives outlined in the implementation of this roadmap.

However, many things have changed since our last meeting. The Russian aggression in Ukraine has rapidly escalated into a full-scale war, causing a negative global socio-economic impact. The region itself presents a different landscape today, as the war in Ukraine has had a considerable impact on the Western Balkans in various aspects. More than 66% of Western Balkan citizens, as reported through our Securimeter, believe that this war has put their countries at risk. Regional integration remains a great strategy for strengthening resilience, even in the context of war. Extensive support, at 83%, has been



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registered among the citizens of our region for regional cooperation as a useful path to cope with the implications of war. Widespread misuse of firearms is considered a threat by 45% of the citizens, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 56% of citizens feel threatened by illegal possession and misuse of firearms.

Unfortunately, the citizens' perception aligns with alarming statistics. In the first quarter of this year, 2023, 821 firearm incidents were reported in South East Europe, resulting in 334 victims. As I mentioned earlier, the death toll continues to rise. The right to life is the most fundamental human right, but it also has a strong socioeconomic dimension. Data from SEESAC reveals that from 2019 to 2021 in SEE, more people were killed with firearms in domestic settings than in any other type of incident, including criminal contexts or public disputes. Shockingly, almost 80% of women killed with firearms during this period were victims of their intimate partners or other close family members.

The challenges we face are manifold. The digital age and the ever-expanding influence and innovation of technology have unfortunately extended to firearm violence. Social media has also contributed to the increase in similar events by encouraging behavior that promotes imitation and creates a sense of pride in the virtual world. I must emphasize that digital safety is an area that requires further attention. A safe society cannot exist without digital safety. Now, more than ever, it is crucial to come together and work on effective solutions to identify and comprehensively address these issues to prevent tragic events from occurring in the near future or tomorrow.

Efforts towards regional growth cannot succeed without ensuring the security and safety of our region first. Rest assured that the RCC remains committed to supporting all regional initiatives aimed at confronting and responding to security challenges in the region and beyond. We strive to make the Western Balkans a place of dialogue, freedom, and mobility where every person feels safe and protected.