

Article

Legal gun ownership as an important factor of state security: Reality or myth?

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Abstract: The question of whether legal gun ownership is a positive security factor in the Czech Republic is subject to expert debate and depends on several factors, including available crime data, public attitudes, and the legal framework. Some argue that legal gun ownership can dissuade criminals because they know victims may be armed. Many advocates argue that the right to own guns is a fundamental right that should be protected. Sometimes, it is difficult to clearly demonstrate that legal gun ownership directly contributes to crime reduction. Statistical data can be interpreted in different ways. In contrast, the presence of guns can in some situations escalate conflicts that could otherwise be resolved nonviolently. In the Czech Republic, legal gun ownership is relatively strictly regulated. Citizens must meet the conditions established by law, including criminal integrity and passing a theoretical-practical examination of professional competence. This regulation aims to ensure that only responsible and qualified individuals own guns. Therefore, the presented article discusses legal gun ownership as an internal factor of state security. Using statistical data, it analyses the amount of violent crime committed with firearms in relation to the possibility of holding and carrying a gun in the conditions of the Czech Republic and in selected EU countries. Furthermore, with the help of a questionnaire survey, it identifies that legal gun ownership can be considered a positive safety factor in certain situations, if it is associated with strict regulation and a responsible attitude of gun owners. The resulting effect on security depends on a combination of legal frameworks, gun culture, and effective law enforcement.

Keywords: legal gun owners; necessary defence; extreme emergency; safety; Europe

1. Introduction

The topic of the presented article is very important in terms of its relevance and topicality, as the concept of an armed/disarmed citizen (Horbach-Kudria, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2024) is now widely discussed not only in the Czech Republic (Valenta, 2019; Daniel and Eberle, 2021), but also in the entire European Union (Veilleux-Lepage, 2024), especially with regard to the security of the citizen and the security of the state (Garcia, 2024; Polovic, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2022).

According to the Czech legal system, a gun can be defined from the point of view of criminal law, property law and, last but not least, also private law. Probably the broadest definition of the term in question is contained in §118 of the Criminal Code (Act No. 40/2009 Coll.), where a gun is understood as anything that can make an attack against the body physically more forceful. Another concept of a gun can also be found in the Act on hunting and regulations regarding security forces or security material.

Security is an important concept in the security terminology. It is often used in

general speech as well as in a number of social science fields (political science, sociology, psychology, economics), natural science (medicine, ecology), and technical (engineering, special technology, and computer science). In the Dictionary of Documentary Czech for School and the Public (Filipec, 2003), safety is defined by the adjective „safe”, and the word certainty (or sure) is given as a synonym. Safe is the one who is not exposed to danger or provides protection against danger or is unquestionable, guaranteed, trustworthy.

In general, security is thus defined negatively in relation to (non-existent) dangers, threats, etc. (Porada et al., 2019). Already the Latin term “securus”, which forms the basis of the English and German words, meant carefree, calm, uncaring, having no worries (Zeman, 2002).

Therefore, we can take security as a state when threats to the object (usually a national state, or even an international organization) and its interests are eliminated to the lowest possible degree, and this object is effectively equipped to eliminate existing and potential threats and is willing to cooperate with it (ÚSS, 2002, p. 11).

The concept of security in Czech Republic often resonates in connection with the issue of individual gun ownership.

“Si vis pacem, para bellum.” (Publius Vegetius Renatus) “Who wants peace prepares for war.” This quote expresses the fact that both an individual and an entire state can be attacked if it has no means of effective defence. The Czech Republic, like most European states, has appeared to be a conflict-free place since the end of World War II. After the end of the so-called Cold War, we currently live in a safe territory with no serious signs of external threats. It is also due to our membership in the European Union and especially in the NATO military group. The increase in extremism and religious terrorism is particularly visible, mainly in the western countries of the European Union, as confirmed by Rodde (2024), Pethö-Kiss and Gunaratna (2024), or Pantucci and Singam (2024).

There is also an increase in attacks on soft targets. Whether it is attacks conducted with stabbing, slashing, or firearms, or by misusing motor vehicles and driving them into people (Cuesta, 2019; Jashari, 2018). Proof of this is the attack by a lone madman, an active shooter, a student of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague on 21 December 2023. This attack resulted in 14 victims and 25 wounded, and the attacker himself committed a suicide.

Many experts are of the opinion that aggressiveness in society is on the rise and with it the violence perpetrated (Ionascu, 2024; Siann, 2024). There are situations where a gun is the only chance for a victim of a violent crime to ward off an attack (Stepien, 2023).

In the conditions of the Czech Republic, the legal barriers for the area of civilian guns and ammunition are set by two laws and implementing decrees and regulations (Schelle et al., 2021, pp. 197–207). The first is Act No. 119/2002 Coll. on Firearms and Ammunition, as amended from 8 March 2002 (hereinafter referred to as the “Guns Act”). This law regulates the acquisition of ownership, possession, carrying and use of guns or ammunition for the protection of life, health, and property, the rights and obligations of the owners of guns or ammunition, the conditions for the export, import, or transit of guns or ammunition and for the operation of shooting ranges.

The second is Act No. 156/2000 Coll. On the Verification of Firearms,

Ammunition, and Pyrotechnic Articles (hereafter referred to as the “Verification Act”), which entered into force on 1 August 2000, i.e., before the adoption of the current Act on Firearms and Ammunition. The original implementing decree of the Ministry of Industry and Trade No. 313/2000 Coll., was gradually replaced by two implementing regulations, namely Decree No. 335/2004 Coll. and Regulation of the Government of the Czech Republic No. 208/2010 Coll.

The European Union (EU) leaves the area of gun management, including the control of gun exports and imports, mostly in the hands of individual EU states. Despite this, the EU states have committed themselves to respecting the principles of the common and security policy of the EU. In this context, the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports was adopted in 1998. The most important part of the Code is a list of eight criteria that member states have undertaken to observe when assessing each arms transaction.

The Code was transformed into a legally binding instrument in 2008 with the adoption of Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP of 8 December 2008, which lays down common rules for the control of exports of military technology and military material. However, the agreement was preceded by long-term disputes, when some member countries sought to lift the EU embargo on gun exports to the People’s Republic of China. Similarly, to the Code, it defines eight criteria that member states must accept when deciding on the granting of export licences.

Act No. 119/2002 Coll. gradually incorporates EU regulations represented by Council Directive 91/477/EEC of 18 June 1991 on the control of the acquisition and gun ownership, as amended by Directive 2008/51/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008, which amends Council Directive 91/477 /EEC on the control of the acquisition and possession of guns, and the currently valid directive for EU states is Directive (EU) 2017/853 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2017, which amends Council Directive 91/477/EEC on the control of the acquisition and guns ownership.

In contrast to these facts, there is a disarmament tendency of legal gun owners on the part of the European Union (Casey-Maslen and Vestner, 2020; Stefanovič, 2022; Wojciechowski, 2023). Under the pretext of the fight against terrorism, the rules and laws regarding the ownership of guns in EU countries are being gradually tightened (Schilde, 2023). The directive 2017/853 was created in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, in which insufficiently defaced automatic firearms were used, and demonstrates the current European trend of tightening the conditions for the gun ownership. Due to the estimated possible effects of the adoption of this EU directive (newly prohibited guns and ammunition, new obligation to register hitherto unregistered guns), the Czech Republic voted against the adoption of this directive. Despite this fact, the Czech Republic had to implement it in its legal system by 14 September 2018 at the latest (Schelle, 2021, p. 198).

Furthermore, the current trend in the large cities of western Europe is the creation and expansion of so-called no-go zones (Novotný, 2009; Sanandaji, 2020), which, however, can lead to situations where the armed forces of the state will be overloaded and the citizen will have to defend herself/himself for a limited period of time in an emergency (von Sikorski and Merz, 2023). Furthermore, the ongoing war conflict between Russia and Ukraine proves that civilian gun owners are absolutely essential

for the external security of the state (Barany, 2023; Foley and Kaunert, 2022). In the case of an unarmed society, state sovereignty can only be defended by the official military force of the country in contrast to a situation where civilians can and do own more guns and ammunition stocks, at least for the first moments of a war conflict, when they can strengthen the armed forces of the state and thus help slow down or even stop the progress of the aggressor (Davis, 2012). This moment is typical in situations where the combat activity of regular armies moves to densely populated urban agglomerations.

An integral part is the support of the armed forces in maintaining internal order, preventing looting, and other negative accompanying phenomena in the event of any war conflict or even just in the event of a natural disaster.

Furthermore, regular and responsible training of shooters can improve their readiness and ability to respond adequately in crisis situations, which is crucial for rapid and effective defence (Gunn, 2023; Maliwat, 2024).

1.1. Disarmament of legal gun owners

The issue of disarming the civilian population of the Czech Republic appears to be very sensitive, as this successor country has a 600-year-long tradition of gun legislation and, with the exception of the occupation by Germany in 1939 and the subsequent period 1945–1989, it was possible to hold and own a gun if the conditions given by law were met. Guns amnesties, as an effort to properly register guns that had been illegally held until then, in the history of the Czech Republic go back long before the last amendment to Act No. 119/2002 Coll., most recently on 15 August 2017 (Schelle et al., 2021, pp. 194–196). During this period, there were 4 guns amnesties (1996–3704 units, 2003–4192 units, 2009–7897 units and 2014–5744 units). The above statistics show that the number of surrendered guns increased linearly until 2009. The last 2014 amnesty ranks as the second most successful, but did not surpass the number of amnestied guns from 2009. Gun amnesties, in addition to the development of people who held a gun without a permit, pursued another very important goal, which was to legalise these illegally held guns and then return them to their owners for registration.

This topic is currently resonating throughout the European Union because today, when Europe is dealing with manifestations of organised crime and international terrorism and in connection with a major immigration crisis, the question remains of how to ensure the internal security of citizens.

With increasingly frequent terrorist attacks in Europe, bans and restrictions are multiplying, which should reduce the negative consequences of these attacks on citizens (Clarke, 2023; Tinn et al., 2022). However, it seems that these restrictions affect and restrict mainly regular citizens, not the target group—perpetrators of terrorism and violent crime (van Poecke and Wouters, 2022).

Citizens of the state perceive security primarily as a feeling of a state without threats to life and health. They are often guided only by the feeling that there are no security risks or other threats. In contrast, the state must deal with both external security and its internal form. The state must take care of the security of its citizens, monitor the threats of external attack, and also deal with economic security. In security,

everything is related to everything, and therefore it is important to realise that if something threatens the citizens, it also threatens the state and vice versa. The citizen and the state should cooperate for mutual security. After all, citizens make up the state.

The state has an obligation under the Constitution to ensure the safety of its citizens, but this should not mean that the citizen has no obligations in this sphere. The responsibilities and duties of both entities must be balanced and complement each other. For stability, it is important that both the citizen and the state are ready to deal with the threat and stand up.

Today's Europe is moving towards an attitude where the citizen is a mere object that needs to be protected, without him himself having the opportunity or even the right to participate in his defence (Gebre-Medhin, 2024). This model is very convenient for the citizen, or "the state will take care". Here we come across a problem that has been confirmed several times. The state cannot and will not be able to ensure the safety of all citizens at all times. *"The European model of security, where the citizen pays for his security and does not get involved, is partially ineffective, as we are witnessing in connection with the current immigration and terrorist situation in Europe"* (Entina and Entin, 2022; Montani, 2024).

"The clouds are gathering". That is how the Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonsson began his speech at the Society and Defense National Conference in January 2024, talking about the new European security policy situation. While not being as poetic as his colleague, the Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson kept the same serious tone in his speech, talking about how Sweden is facing a new and dangerous reality. He emphasized the importance of material resources, infrastructure and alliances in the preparation for war and crisis, but also the role of private individuals: *"Ukraine teaches us that a country's most important resource in war is the willingness to defend. We too must start speaking out loud about the expectations that follow from Swedish citizenship. Ultimately, it is about defending Sweden, our values and our way of life with weapons in hand and with life at stake. Citizenship is not a travel document"* (Government Office of Sweden, 2024).

The willingness to defend one's country is important from a security policy perspective, it has even been claimed to be indispensable (Jonsson and Wedebrand, 2021a; Ydstebø, 2023). Despite this, Gebre-Medhin (2024) has recently argued that research regarding willingness to defend one's country is very limited, and *"theory and measurements provided to capture this construct have been largely overlooked in the international scholarly community, with the bulk of debates having been internal to interested countries"*. Additionally, much of the governmental interest and research regarding total defense has mainly focused on the state level (Jonsson and Wedebrand, 2021b). Willingness to defend demands that the focus is shifted to the general public, the people. Importantly, the governmental view on the relevance of willingness to defend one's country and civic responsibility in war and crisis might differ from the citizens. We do not know what the concept of willingness to defend means to civilians, what people believe are worth defending or why they might feel obliged to defend it. The concept of willingness to defend one's country is dual. On the one hand, it becomes an abstract idea. To defend a nation, a set of values or a lifestyle, your culture and people, against a foreign power, a vicious 'other', a fictitious good versus bad story. On the other hand, it is highly embodied. It is a specific territory, a material

location, that needs to be defended by physical force, machines and humans. Or “with weapons in hand and with life at stake” as the Prime Minister put it (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024).

The issue of guns and armed citizens was opened by the January 2015 event in Paris, where two terrorists attacked the editorial office of Charlie Hebdo magazine and shot 12 people dead. Since this attack, the issue of guns in the hands of citizens has been addressed at the European level. In the same week of the attack, the European Commission came up with a proposal to limit guns and weapon accessories in all EU member states. The goal of this directive was clear: to increase security and minimise terrorist attacks. However, the impact of this directive has never been clear and the main effect of reducing terror is unlikely (Nwadike, 2020; Ponti, 2018).

The directive was supposed to concern only legal gun owners, not the fight against the black market in guns and its spread throughout the EU, etc. Therefore, the directive began to rely on the rights of legal gun owners, while terrorists used illegally held and modified guns, even in future attacks in Europe (Ponti, 2019).

From the point of view of history, not only in the Czech Republic, total disarmament has never brought anything good, as confirmed by Karásek (2011), Kyršová (2015), Weinrich (2020) or Kepka (2018). One of the first steps of the Nazi and Soviet regimes was always to disarm the citizen. In this way, the state, or the regime, gained the necessary control over the population (Casey-Maslen and Vestner, 2020). This control model was used all over the world and is still used more or less today. For example, in Venezuela, where there was complete disarmament of citizens and subsequent arming of individual groups to ensure control as needed by the regime (Villa and Wieffen, 2014). For this reason, the topic of disarmament is very delicate, and it is important to deal with this topic and laws carefully and responsibly in the spirit of Machiavelli: “*When you disarm your subjects, then you offend them with your distrust; they will think that you are a coward or that you do not trust them; and in them they will hate you for it anyway.*” The main role here is played by the balance of the legislation and, above all, the trust between the citizen and the state.

It is important that gun legislation promotes responsible gun ownership and includes thorough background checks and training for all gun owners. This ensures that guns are in the hands of people who are able and willing to use them only for self-defence and protection, not for crime.

In the long term, reasonably regulated legal gun ownership can contribute to the security and stability of the state, thus promoting overall peace and order in society (Ekpo, 2022; Giegerich, 2023; Kay, 2015).

1.2. Impacts of disarmament

Before Hitler started exterminating the Jews, he had to logically disarm them first. After all, no sovereign wants a citizen to be too active and interfere with the government of a higher power. “*Jews are prohibited from acquiring, possessing, and carrying guns and ammunition, as well as batons and stabbing weapons. Current gun owners must immediately surrender them to local police authorities.*” From the Reich Act, 1938.

If we do not count the European directive, Czechoslovakia has been subject to

disarmament twice in the last hundred years. First in 1939, when Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Nazis. Later, in 1948, when the Communists officially took power in the state. When the Nazis discovered the possession of guns by civilians, they immediately executed their owners and used these acts as acts of deterrence.

Great Britain is the biggest example of extreme disarmament of citizens. The right to a gun does not exist here. Defensive means are prohibited. A sale is only possible after proving a “good reason”, but this does not guarantee the protection of life (DeGrazia, 2023). Over the course of fifty years, Britain has gradually reached the stage where even the sale of airguns is regulated (LeClair, 2019). At the same time, this marathon of prohibitions began relatively innocently with the prohibition of rifles and the carrying of guns. Similar to what is happening in the EU today.

In a relatively short time, crime skyrocketed here, and the government was forced to drastically increase the number of police officers on the streets (Lutsenko and Kharynov, 2024). The futile fight against knives and guns rather promotes their “fashion” among gangs (Lakhani, 2020).

In the British case, increased violent crime is not the only impact. Disarmament, or rather the purchase of guns from civilians, was not cheap. The British Treasury had to spend considerable funds to buy back guns (Chin, 2019).

Australia went through almost the same process in 1997. It went very aggressively to disarm its citizens. The government enforced a very drastic forced sale of guns. In one year, it bought back and destroyed more than 631 000 guns worth 500 million dollars. Of course, the state decided the price of the gun (Ogilvie-White, 2013).

In 2008, the Australian Institute of Criminology released a report that noted a 9 percent drop in homicides and a third drop in armed robberies. At the same time, however, the number of violent assaults increased by 40% and attacks with sexual overtones by 20% (Mann, 2014).

Both countries share the events that triggered these drastic disarmament steps. In the British town of Dunblane in 1996, Thomas Hamilton shot and killed 16 children and one teacher in an elementary school. Six weeks after the Dunblane massacre in 1996, Martin Bryant, an Australian with a violent past, attacked tourists at Tasmania’s Port Arthur Prison with two semiautomatic guns. It left 35 dead and 21 wounded (Malcolm, 2012).

Similar events are often “exploited” to crack down on legal gun ownership. At a time like this, society is very emotional and has a negative attitude towards guns. The EU directive, which was announced right after the Charlie Hebdo shooting, had a similar connection with timing.

It is common knowledge that the United States is a superpower in gun ownership. Most people imagine America as a country of unlimited possibilities, and especially as a country where citizens have easy access to guns. However, each of its states has its own modified laws regarding legally owned guns. Some states are close to Britain in their strictness with regard to guns, while others are, on the contrary, extremely liberal.

However, the United States are also subject to disarmament, the so-called “Gun Free Zones”. “Gun free zones” are zones where the carrying of guns is prohibited. These zones are intended to reduce violent crime by eliminating the presence of a gun. They are intended to prevent the growth of criminal activity and mass shootings in

areas with the occurrence of soft targets, such as hospitals or schools.

The Gun Free Zone Act was proposed by the US Senate in 1990 and passed by then President George H.W. Bush. As evidenced by statistics, this law did not lead to the desired result. According to the Crime Prevention Research Centre, since 1950, just over 1% of mass shootings have occurred in locations that were not considered gun-free zones (Prestigiacomio, 2018).

1.3. USA vs. Israel

The United States and Israel are two completely different countries, but with a very important view on the right to own guns and the consequences associated with it.

The United States sees Israel as an example of a gun policy that satisfies its ideal of a well-trained and heavily armed citizenry (Reich and Powers, 2012). However, there is one major discrepancy, that this is not true at all. Although Israeli citizens are well armed, compared to Americans, their weapons are rigorously controlled and closely monitored by the state (Shamir, 2024). The basic difference between these two countries is their trust in state power.

Israel wants a well-armed society and expects the state to manage things so that only the right people are armed. This means that Israelis are armed not against the state, but by the state for possible defence against external threats, such as terrorist attacks (Abdelnour, 2023).

Americans, on the other hand, perceive the right to own guns essentially as the right to defend themselves from the state and from their own neighbours.

Thus, Israeli citizens trust the state to provide security and perceive a powerful state as synonymous with national security and personal security. While the citizens of the United States do not believe that the state can protect them, nor do they trust the state as such, the state even supports them in this idea with its legislation.

So, while Israel has decided to grant its citizens guns permits as part of a multilayered national security strategy that sees a carefully selected and far more rigorously regulated cadre of armed citizens as one of several lines of defence against terrorist attacks. The United States is not even given the ability to reliably know which Americans are armed or with what.

If we assess the results of both of these arm regulations, we will find that the final results are quite clear and that we can really take an example from Israel's gun policy. For example, here is a comparison of the number of privately owned guns from 2007, where the United States ranks first with the largest number, while Israel ranks as high as 81st. The Czech Republic did not fare nearly as badly in this comparison, ranking 42nd, roughly halfway between Israel and the United States. In 2014, 330 000 legally and illegally held weapons were counted in Israel. In the Czech Republic, there were 883 686 legal and illegal weapons. However, no one can match the United States, where the estimated number of legally and illegally owned by civilians ranges between 270 and 310 million.

The statistic that catches your eye is the number of deaths caused by firearms. Israel had only 99 deaths with a firearm, according to 2023 data. The Czech Republic is almost twice as far as it is from the data of 2023, when we measured a total of 191 deaths by firearm. The United States is once again the worst, with a total of 38 658

guns deaths this year. Of course, the above-mentioned data must be taken into account of the size of the country and the number of inhabitants. Nevertheless, these are alarming numbers, especially for the United States, but also for the Czech Republic, as we see here an example where even lower values can be achieved. If we take into account the fact that the United States is about 445 times larger in area than Israel, but the population density is several times larger than Israel, then it turns out that even after considering the size of both countries, gun deaths in the United States are greater. We get the results by finding the number of deaths caused by firearms in relation to the total population, which tells us the relative (percentage) result: USA, 0.0118% and Israel, 0.0012%. In the Czech Republic, the percentage is around -0.0018% .

In conclusion, after explaining the situation in the selected countries, we can say that after comparing their procedures and comparing their legislation, we can certainly take lessons from both countries. The Czech Republic, although it does not do badly on the world scale of crime and even in the case of weapons possession, certainly has room for improvement.

1.4. Aspects of state security management in the context of legal gun ownership

It follows from the above that debates about state security in the context of firearms ownership are important for several key reasons.

- Crime prevention: There is an argument that legal gun ownership can act as a deterrent against criminals. Knowing that potential victims may be armed can deter attackers from committing crimes (Osorio et al., 2021).
- Protection of individuals and property: Guns can be a key tool for personal defence and property protection. Citizens who own guns have the ability to effectively protect themselves and their families from attack, especially in areas with long police response times (Lott, 2013).
- State security strategy: In some states, civilian gun ownership is part of a broader security strategy that includes the possibility of the civilian population participating in the defence of the state in the event of an external threat. This can include situations ranging from terrorist attacks to military invasions (Graham, 2011).
- Legislative and regulatory frameworks: The discussion of gun ownership also relates to legal aspects and regulations that are essential to ensure that only responsible and qualified individuals own guns. Strict laws and regulations can minimise the risk of gun misuse and increase the overall safety of society (Wintemute, 2010).
- Social and cultural aspects: Different countries have different cultural attitudes and attitudes towards gun ownership. In the Czech Republic, for example, gun ownership has historical roots and is linked to national identity and traditions. Understanding these cultural aspects is important for shaping effective gun policy (Kopel, 2013).
- Psychological and social consequences: Gun ownership can have psychological consequences on people, including feelings of safety and anxiety. It is also important to examine the effect that the presence of guns has on community

relations and social dynamics (Buttrick, 2020).

- Statistical and empirical data: Analysis of available data on gun crime and violence is key to creating an informed debate. Statistical data can provide evidence of the effect of weapons on the security situation, although the interpretation of these data can be complex and varied (Cook and Ludwig, 2004; Fox et al., 2022).

That is why the presented article, in comparison with the legislation in force in the Czech Republic, examines whether legal gun owners in the Czech Republic are a threat or benefit to the security of the state compared to selected EU states, whether legal gun ownership can be considered a positive security factor in certain situations, if it is associated with strict regulation and a responsible approach.

Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis H: Legal gun ownership is not a threat to the security of the Czech Republic in the context of the crime increase associated with the gun ownership.

We clearly assume that the resulting effect on security depends on a combination of legal frameworks, the culture of gun ownership, and effective law enforcement; however, legal gun ownership can be considered one of the important factors of the country's security.

2. Materials and methods

To fulfil the objective of the article, confirm the assumption and to evaluate the hypothesis, we used both qualitative and quantitative research.

Quantitative research is a research approach that focusses on the collection and analysis of numerical data. This type of research is often used to quantify attitudes, opinions, behaviours, and other defined variables and to generalise the results of a larger population of respondents. Quantitative research uses standardised tools, such as questionnaires, surveys, and measurements, that allow the systematic and objective collection of numerical data. Data are analysed using mathematical statistical methods that allow patterns, relationships, and trends to be identified.

In the context of quantitative research, we compared statistical data with the aim of identifying whether legal gun ownership has an effect on the increase in crime in the analysed countries. For comparison, we used relevant and valid statistical data from reputable companies available on web portals.

We also carried out a questionnaire survey with the aim of finding out how safe citizens feel in their country of residence and how they perceive security in other European countries.

A self-constructed questionnaire containing 18 closed questions was prepared. The questionnaire survey itself was carried out in the period of March-April 2024 using the survio.com programme.

A total of 502 respondents participated in the survey and 110 of them are gun license owners.

To evaluate the data obtained, we used the correlation and regression analysis. The data obtained through the comparison of statistical data and the questionnaire survey were further supplemented by qualitative research.

Qualitative research is a research method that focusses on understanding human

behaviour, attitudes, motivations, interactions, and experiences; it is often used to explore new or complex issues where the aim is to gain a deeper understanding than just quantitative data. Qualitative research methods are often open-ended and flexible, allowing researchers to adapt their procedures during research based on new findings. Data are collected through guided interviews, focus groups, observations, documents, or audiovisual materials. These data are usually unstructured or semi-structured. Qualitative data analysis involves the codification, categorisation and identification of patterns and themes. This analysis is often iterative and occurs concurrently with data collection.

Thus, for a more comprehensive view of the issue of gun ownership, an opinion poll was chosen among members of the armed security forces of the Czech Republic and the professional public. This opinion poll was carried out using semi-structured personal interviews in the April-May 2024 period. Each of the semi-structured interviews conducted lasted an average of 30 min and was recorded on a recording device (voice recorder on a mobile phone). Coding was used to evaluate the interview output.

The goal of the opinion polls was to present the opinions of people who come into contact with dangerous criminals and gun licence holders most often and who can have a professionally comprehensive opinion on this issue.

A total of 13 people gave their answers to the opinion poll, they were a member of the Customs Administration, an employee of a security agency acting as a bodyguard, an entrepreneur from the field of arms and ammunition sales, and a total of 10 members of the Police of the Czech Republic, one of them acting as a probation officer to carry out tests of professional competence of applicants for the issuance of a Firearms Licence), and the second plays the role of an instructor in the professional training of police officers.

A total of 10 questions were asked. The first two general questions were to find out what their occupation is and whether they are the firearms licence owner. The following is a list of additional questions:

- 1) Do you meet firearms licence owners when handling guns? If so, at what level is their manipulation?
- 2) In your experience, according to what do firearm licence owners choose their guns?
- 3) How do you assess the access of firearm licence owners in the Czech Republic to guns and ammunition?
- 4) Have you encountered dangerous handling in public/shooting range, if so, can you elaborate?
- 5) Have you found yourself in a situation where you used a gun to protect life, health, or property?
- 6) What do you think about gun ownership in the Czech Republic?
- 7) Are the conditions for obtaining a firearms licence adequate and will they screen the applicant sufficiently?
- 8) Would you tighten the conditions for obtaining a firearms licence?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Analysis of the level of violent crime and the internal security of the country correlation

The table below (**Table 1**) shows, using the crime index and the safety index, the extent to which restrictions in the area of civilian gun ownership can affect the level of violent crime, i.e., the internal security of the country.

Table 1. Internal security of European countries.

Rank	Country	Crime Index	Safety Index
1	France	55.3	44.7
2	Belarus	50.6	49.4
3	Belgium	49.7	50.3
4	Sweden	48.3	51.7
5	United Kingdom	47.8	52.2
6	Italy	47.1	52.9
7	Ukraine	46.8	53.2
8	Ireland	46.8	53.2
9	Greece	46.5	53.5
10	Albania	45.4	54.6
11	Moldova	44.8	55.2
12	Malta	42.7	57.3
13	Bosnia And Herzegovina	41.4	58.6
14	North Macedonia	41.0	59.0
15	Kosovo (Disputed Territory)	40.9	59.1
16	Germany	39.0	61.0
17	Russia	38.9	61.1
18	Serbia	37.6	62.4
19	Latvia	37.3	62.7
20	Bulgaria	36.6	63.4
21	Montenegro	35.8	64.2
22	Spain	35.8	64.2
23	Luxembourg	34.3	65.7
24	Hungary	33.3	66.7
25	Norway	32.9	67.1
26	Lithuania	32.5	67.5
27	Romania	32.3	67.7
28	Portugal	31.2	68.8
29	Slovakia	30.8	69.2
30	Austria	29.4	70.6
31	Poland	29.1	70.9
32	Czech Republic	26.8	73.2
33	Netherlands	26.4	73.6

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank	Country	Crime Index	Safety Index
34	Finland	26.2	73.8
35	Denmark	26.1	73.9
36	Switzerland	26.1	73.9
37	Croatia	25.6	74.4
38	Iceland	25.4	74.6
39	Monaco	23.8	76.2
40	Slovenia	23.6	76.4
41	Estonia	23.6	76.4
42	Isle Of Man	19.6	80.4
43	Andorra	14.1	85.9

Source: Europe: Crime index by country 2024.

We can confirm the strong relationship between these indexes. Using the correlation and regression analysis, we found that there is a very strong indirect correlation between the indexes. In **Table 2** we can see the correlation coefficient value of 0.99993.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient values in dependence on regression statistics.

Regression Statistics	Correlation coefficient
Multiple R	0.99993
R Square	0.99986
Adjusted R Square	0.999857
Standard Error	0.115809
Observations	43

Source: own.

The regression curve in **Figure 1** is decreasing, the higher the safety index, the lower the crime rate.

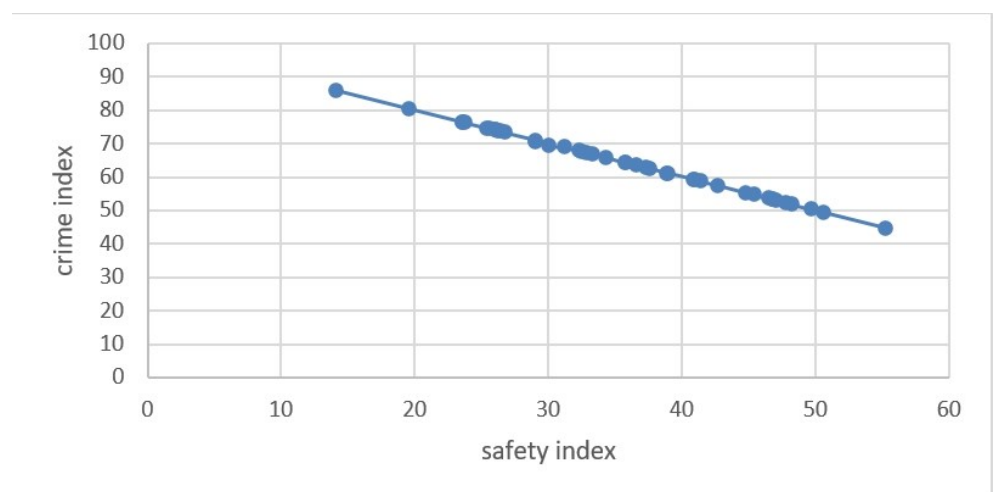


Figure 1. Correlation of crime with the value of the security index (Source: own).

In the middle of 2024, the Czech Republic ranked 12th in the crime rate. Switzerland, Slovenia, Estonia, and Croatia, for example, show a lower level of crime, which are, however, countries that have less restrictive conditions towards civilian gun ownership than the Czech Republic.

The table below (**Table 3**) provides information on the number of guns per 100 inhabitants in European countries. This statistic is supplemented by the number of civilian guns in a particular country, and registered and unregistered guns in a particular country. The limit of the given analysis is that the last available results and statistics stating this are from 2017. Only for some European countries is it possible to find data on the number of guns per 100 inhabitants for the year 2023. These are also listed in the table. However, it should be noted that the number of weapons in the statistics for 2023 has not changed compared to 2017.

Table 3. Guns in Europe.

Country	Civilian guns per 100 people (2017)	Civilian guns per 100 people (2023)	Quantity of civilian guns (2017)	Registered guns (2017)	Unregistered guns (2017)
Serbia	39.1	39	2,719,000	1,186,086	1,532,914
Finland	32.4	32	1,793,000	1,542,396	250,604
Austria	30		2,577,000	837,000	1,740,000
Switzerland	27.6	28	2,332,000	791,719	1,540,281
Sweden	23.1		2,296,000	1,955,478	340,522
Germany	19.6		15,822,000	5,830,000	9,992,000
France	19.6		12,732,000	4,501,235	8,230,765
Greece	17.6		1,920,000	1,010,000	910,000
Italy	14.4		8,609,000	2,000,000	6,609,000
Croatia	13.7		576,000	390,000	186,000
Lithuania	13.6		385,000	127,984	257,016
Czechia	12.5	12.5	1,323,000	806,895	516,105
Russia	12.3		17,620,000	6,600,000	11,020,000
Latvia	10.5		205 000	70,000	135,000
Hungary	10.5		1,023,000	211,300	811,700
Ukraine	9.9		4,396,000	800,000	3,596,000
Denmark	9.9		567,000	340,000	227,000
Estonia	5		65,000	47,000	18,000
England and Wales	4.6		2,731,000	1,870,735	860,265
Netherlands	2.6		442,000	205,347	236,653
Poland	2.5		968,000	380,000	588,000

Source: worldpopulationreview (2024), Wikipedia (2017), Raždik (2021).

Based on descriptive statistics, we can see (**Table 4**) that the average value of registered guns is lower than that of unregistered ones. Therefore, we ask ourselves whether the average numbers of registered and unregistered guns are comparable. Since the sets are independent, we use the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U-test to test the primary null hypothesis at the $\alpha = 0.05$ test significance level: H0: The average number of registered and unregistered guns is comparable. Then H1: The average

number of registered and unregistered guns is not comparable.

To calculate the test, it was necessary that all elements of both samples were marked with sequential numbers from smallest to largest. If the character values are equal, we assign an average ordinal number. We choose the marking of selections so that applies. We denote the sum of the order of character values in the first set by R_1 and in the second set by R_2 .

$$n_1 \geq n_2 \tag{1}$$

Table 4. Numbers of registered and unregistered guns in 2017: Descriptive analysis.

	Registered guns	Unregistered guns
Mean	150,015,119	236,180,119
Standard error	40,772,537	75,512,591
Median	80,689,500	81,170,000
Mode	unavailable	unavailable
Standard deviation	186,843,239	346,042,163
Sample variance	349,103,958,073,836	1,197,551,784,203,840
Kurtosis	2.77	1.55
Skewness	1.88	1.69
Range	655,300,000	1,100,200,000
Minimum	4,700,000	1,800,000
Maximum	660,000,000	1,102,000,000
Sum	3,250,317,500	4,959,782,500
Count	2100	2100

Source: own.

In our case, after rearranging and specifying the order, we get

$$R_1 = 443 \text{ and } R_2 = 459 \tag{2}$$

The ranges of the samples are greater than 10, so it was appropriate to use the approximation with a normal distribution, and we calculated the test statistic according to the relations below.

$$Z = \frac{U_1 - \mu(U_1)}{\sigma(U_1)} \tag{3}$$

where:

$$U_1 = n_1 \times n_2 + \frac{n_1 \times (n_1 + 1)}{2} - R_1 = 229 \tag{4}$$

$$U_2 = n_1 \times n_2 + \frac{n_2 \times (n_2 + 1)}{2} - R_2 = 213 \tag{5}$$

$$\mu(U_1) = \frac{n_1 \times n_2}{2} = 220.5 \tag{6}$$

$$\sigma(U_1) = \sqrt{\frac{n_1 \times n_2 \times (n_1 + n_2 + 1)}{12}} = 39.75 \tag{7}$$

After substituting, we get the following.

$$Z = 0.21 \tag{8}$$

In this case, the area of rejection of the null hypothesis is defined by the respective quantiles of the standardised normal distribution. The critical value for a two-tailed

test is

$$z_{(1 - \alpha/2)} = 1.96 \tag{9}$$

which means that the area of acceptance of H0 is the interval (-1.96; 1.96). Given that the test statistic $Z = 0.21$ lies within this interval, we have no reason to reject the hypothesis that the average numbers of registered and unregistered guns are comparable. Although the difference in sample averages for registered and unregistered guns is greater. They confirmed the hypothesis that it is comparable.

Although it seems that the number of guns is higher in countries with higher restrictions on gun ownership, it must be taken into account that, for example, in Finland these are mainly guns intended for hunting, in Germany they are breakaway shotguns and repeating rifles. In Switzerland, on the contrary, there is a predominance of army rifles that citizens take home after completing their military service.

Another difference is in the perspective of individual security, which is applied in the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Estonia, and Croatia, or collective, which prevails in Switzerland, Finland, and again in Estonia.

To increase the informative value of the above tables, we add **Figure 2** showing the rate of guns in the population and the rate of murders in Europe.

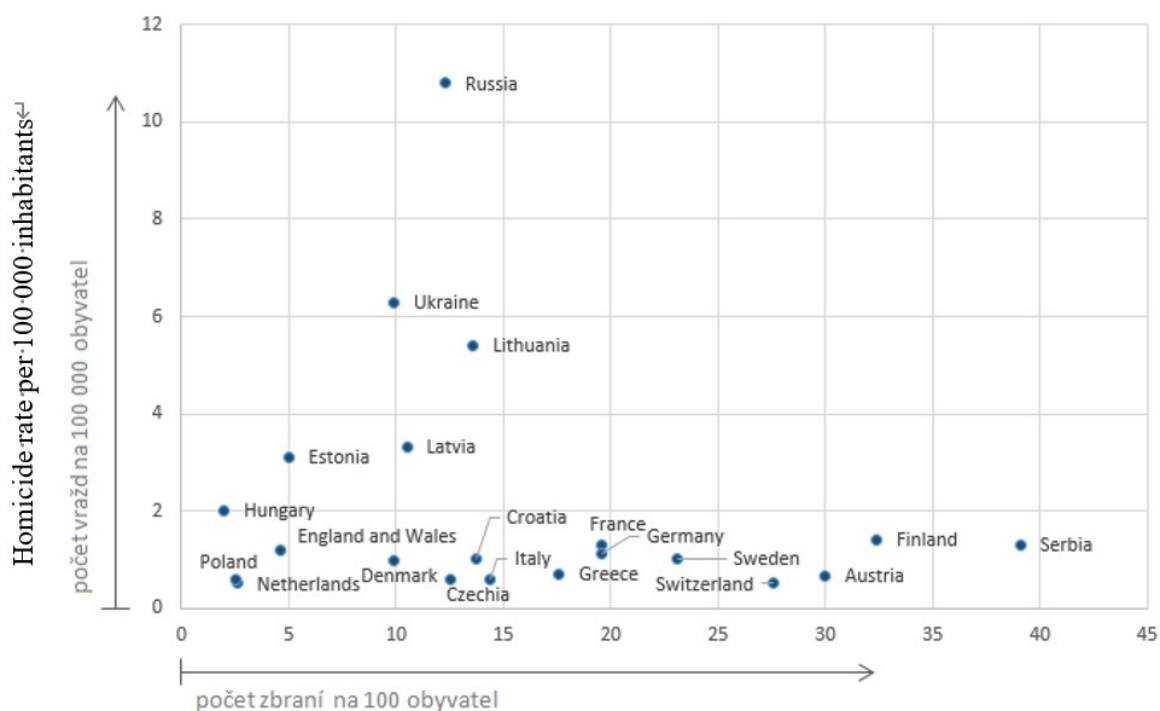


Figure 2. Guns and murder rate in European population.
Gun ownership rate per 100,000 inhabitants.

We further add that the homicide rate in Europe is almost always below 2 murders per 100,000 population, which is a very low homicide rate by any global or historical standard.

As we can see, for example, in Austria there are six times more guns in the population than in England and Wales, but the murder rate is lower in Austria. Similarly, there are twelve times more guns in Switzerland than in the Netherlands, yet both countries have roughly the same rate of murder. However, attempts to prove a causal connection between the number of guns and murders completely fail in Russia.

In Russia, the gun ownership rate is a modest 12 guns per 100 population, roughly half that of Switzerland, yet the country's homicide rate is 10.8 per 100,000 population. What can explain these big differences?

At least in the case of Russia, we cannot blame the high homicide rate on lax gun control laws. Gun ownership requires registration and a licence. Pistols and rifles with shorter barrels are strictly controlled.

Compared to Russia, guns can be obtained more easily in Switzerland, Finland, Serbia, and Austria, although in most cases there are also registration and licencing requirements.

The Czech Republic is the Czech Republic, which has very lax gun laws by European standards. In fact, it is relatively easy to obtain a firearm licence. More than 200,000 of these permits are issued.

In recent years, the Czech Republic has reached the front pages of the media also thanks to efforts to further relax the rules for the gun ownership.

However, the homicide rate in the Czech Republic is one of the lowest in Europe, with fewer than one case per 100,000 inhabitants.

According to the statistics of the Service for Weapons and Security Material, the most cases of gun use in the Czech Republic are suicides of gun licence owners with their own legally held guns. According to the data from the Czech Statistical Office on suicides from the years 2022–2023, the method of suicide by shooting is chosen by men in 21% of cases and by women in only 2% of cases. In cases of misuse and authorised use of guns, the numbers in 2023 are in the order of units. The cases of use of a gun in an extreme emergency or necessary defence. Although abuse cases are not clearly defined, this category can also include cases in which the shooter defended himself with a gun, but his actions were judged to be illegal.

It is evident that the Czech Republic is successfully reducing violent criminal activity committed with guns, acts qualified as the crime of illegal weaponry have stagnated numerically since 2010 and are still around the limit of 400 acts per year. This fact is also supported by the number of guns surrendered during the announced gun amnesties. One would expect that over the years the number of surrendered guns would decrease, but by 2009 it was rather increasing. In 2021, when the gun amnesty was announced for the last time, the number of surrendered weapons decreased to 5877 pieces, which is not an alarming number compared to the total number of guns, but given the fact that these were illegally held guns located without registration in the company on territory of the Czech Republic, this is not a negligible number. This information does not have to directly concern firearms licence owners because it can be committed to a greater extent by people who are not owners of it. This information is very interesting as it points to cases where persons own guns illegally, where the guns are either registered but stolen or lost, or guns that are not registered at all.

It is important to note that although the gun ownership rate in a country may be high, the rate of gun ownership in terms of households may still be low. In such a case, only a small number of citizens own most of the guns. However, this is not a common phenomenon. This unequal situation is more likely in poorer countries, where the costs of gun ownership combined with legislative requirements are high and disproportionate for a large part of the population. Thus, gun ownership remains available only to a relatively few wealthy residents. However, statistics on this topic

are hard to find.

However, few advocates of greater gun control dwell on these details. Apparently, the conclusion that “more guns = more crime” is enough for many, although the numbers obviously do not show many connections.

Thus, it is shown here that a higher number of guns in civilian ownership does not increase the number of murders by these guns. With the value on the *X* axis, which indicates the gun ownership rate per 100 inhabitants, and the *Y* axis, which indicates the homicide rate by guns, we see in **Figure 2** that the average for Europe is a very good 2%. Another knowledge from this figure is that more guns in civilian ownership do not cause more murders. Countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, or Finland, where civilian gun ownership is multiples compared to countries such as Holland, England, and Denmark, show a similar number of guns used to kill.

In this context, the Czech Republic is a much-discussed country, where the death rate by guns is less than 1%. Although foreign research still state that it is very easy to obtain a gun legally in our country, which could be indicated by the data on the continuously increasing number of sold and registered guns, the truth is that the success rate of applicants in professional competence tests is between 60% and 70%. Approximately 30% of applicants fail the theoretical part, approximately 5% to 15% of applicants fail the practical part.

Next, we present a comparison of the development of violent crimes involving guns in relation to the increase in the number of legally owned guns in the Czech Republic. The monitored period was chosen from 2020 to 2023. During this period, the number of gun owners increased from 303,936 to 308,990. In 2021, a total of 305,452 firearm licence owners were registered in the Czech Republic, and 900,556 guns were registered; a year later there was an increase to 307,372 firearm licence owners and 925,717 registered guns, in 2023 there were 308,990 firearm license owners and a total of 959,950 registered guns.

The number of legally held guns therefore increased by 83,694 from 876,256 to 959,950 during the monitored period 2020–2023. During this period, the number of violent crimes committed with guns developed as follows.

- In 2020, 49 violent crimes were committed, including seven with guns.
- In 2021, a total of 43 violent crimes were committed, including four crimes involving guns.
- In 2022, 33 violent crimes were committed, including three with guns.
- In 2023, 29 violent crimes were committed, including two crimes involving guns.

By comparing the development of the number of legally owned guns and the development of committed serious crimes, it can be concluded that even though the number of legally owned guns continues to increase, there is no increase in violent crime related to guns. On the contrary, in this monitored period, a downward trend can be observed in the commission of violent crime with a gun.

3.2. Results of the opinion poll

As we mentioned above, according to official statistics, the Czech Republic is the 12th safest country. In general, Europe is also evaluated as the safest region in the world according to the World Peace Index (GPI). This fact agrees with the responses

of the respondents in the opinion poll (see **Table 5**). In the question Do you feel safe in the Czech Republic? More than 85% of the participants responded positively. The most common cause of the feeling of danger was crime; however, only 5.3% of respondents chose this answer.

Table 5. Do you feel safe in the Czech Republic? (If not, state why).

Response	Response frequency	
Yes	431	
No	Distrust in the Police of the Czech Republic	20
	Big crime	27
	Immigrants	15
	Because of gun owners	9

(Source: own).

Table 6. Subjective feeling of not/safe in individual countries (Source: own).

	Which country in Europe do you think is currently the safest? (frequency of answers)	In which country would you not feel safe at the moment? (frequency of responses)
Czech Republic	226	
Switzerland	121	
None	74	97
Finland	17	
Iceland	7	
Sweden	7	14
Italy	7	20
Germany	5	114
Vatican	6	
Denmark	7	
Estonia	6	
Ireland	10	
Portugal	9	
Turkey		37
Spain		6
France		114
Romania		5
Ukraine		13
Arab states		12
Afghanistan		2
Lithuania		27
Nowhere except the Czech Republic		113
England		7
Belgium		6
Kosovo		2
Austria		13

In response to the question, which country in Europe is the safest? 45% of people chose the Czech Republic (see **Table 6**). In second place is Switzerland, which was chosen by 24% of respondents. It is worth noting that Switzerland is the 8th safest country in the world. On the other hand, respondents cited Germany and France as the most dangerous countries in Europe. Both these states received 114 votes each. It is therefore evident that the perception of security not only in the Czech Republic, but also in other European countries correlates with the results of the internal security statistics of European countries.

We asked firearms license owners ($N = 110$) if they are willing to strengthen the armed forces in the event of a military threat or attack on the state to increase the security of the republic.

A total of 78.2% are willing to participate as a support for the army or as a reinforcement for the Czech Republic and other elements of state protection and defence (**Table 7**).

Table 7. Are you willing to participate as a support for the army or as reinforcements for the Czech Republic and other elements of state protection and defence?

Response	Response frequency
No	24
Yes	86
Army support	
Reinforcements of the Police of the Czech Republic	
Support of other components of the protection and defense of the state	

(Source: own).

In their answers, the respondents unanimously agreed on the question regarding the opinions on guns ownership and the possibility of using them in self-defence in the Czech Republic, when they stated that they were clear in favour of the possibility of gun ownership. At the same time, in several cases, they stated that against some types of attack, there is no other possible effective defence than a gun.

In his article, Southwick (2000) presents the results of research that was conducted on the basis of data from the “National Crime Victimization Study”.

Research has shown that victims who have and use a gun in self-defence suffer less serious injuries and overall, less loss. However, an important factor remains the fact that guns themselves are not dangerous, but in some situations, they can be misused. Fajks (2019) also points to this factor, when he states that, “*The degree of risk associated with the absence of professional training and almost unlimited access to category D guns exceeds the degree of risk associated with a higher wounding potential and a higher firing (ballistic) performance chronologically for categories A, B and C*”.

Through opinion polls, it was possible to analyse the approach of firearm licence owners to gun ownership in the Czech Republic. It turns out that interest in guns continues to grow. The number of crimes committed with a gun has decreased significantly since 2010. Gun owners are taking a more responsible approach to securing their guns, resulting in a decrease in the number of lost or stolen guns.

4. Discussion

The hypothesis that legal gun ownership does not represent a threat to the security of the Czech Republic has been confirmed and can be supported by several key arguments and evidence, which come from our sociological investigation based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of statistical data, questionnaire survey and opinion polls, as well as from national, and international studies and statistics.

According to statistical data from the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, crime committed with legally owned guns is very low. The study states that the number of crimes committed with the use of legally owned guns is only a small fraction of the total crime rate in the Czech Republic. These data suggest that legal gun ownership does not contribute to a significant increase in violent crime.

The security policy of the Czech Republic also includes reports and analyses on the effects of legal gun ownership on internal security. These reports confirm that strict gun laws, including psychological tests and strict background checks, minimise the risk of misuse of legally owned guns.

A study by the Johns Hopkins Centre for Gun Policy and Research examined support for various gun control policies in the US. The results showed that most Americans, including gun owners, support licencing and universal background checks for gun purchases. These policies contribute to safer conditions without infringing on the right to own a firearm.

The Small Arms Survey (2018) provides international data on gun ownership. The study shows that countries with higher rates of legal gun ownership, such as Switzerland and Finland, do not necessarily have higher levels of violent crime. On the contrary, some of these countries have lower levels of violent crime than countries with stricter gun laws.

Lott (2013) argues in his book “More Guns, Less Crime” that higher rates of legal gun ownership can lead to a reduction in violent crime. Lott’s analysis of US data shows that states with higher rates of gun ownership tend to have lower rates of violent crime, suggesting that armed citizens may deter potential criminals.

Research by Kleck and Gertz (1995) examined cases in which victims of a criminal act used guns in self-defence. The study found that the use of guns for self-defence often deters attackers and reduces injuries and damage caused by crimes.

The Czech Republic has some of the strictest gun laws in Europe. Act No. 119/2002 Coll. guns and ammunition set relatively strict conditions for obtaining a firearms licence, including a clean criminal record and passing a very demanding professional qualification test. These conditions ensure that guns can only be owned by responsible and qualified people, minimising the risk of their misuse.

Moreover, as data from the Czech Republic show, the number of crimes committed with legally held guns is very low. According to Czech Republic, these criminal acts constitute only a small fraction of the total crime rate.

Based on the arguments and evidence, it can be claimed that the legal possession of weapons does not pose a threat to the security of the Czech Republic. Strict regulation and control mechanisms ensure that weapons are in the hands of responsible people, minimising the risk of their misuse. In addition, international comparisons and empirical studies suggest that legal gun ownership can even contribute to national

security if it is coupled with a responsible approach and effective law enforcement.

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