

Irrationality, *Liminality* and the Demand for Illicit Firearms in the Balkans and the North Caucasus

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Abstract Most conventional approaches to the study of arms trafficking are grounded on the assumption that people are rational and always seek the most cost-effective means to achieve a goal. This article discusses the illicit firearms markets in the Balkans and the North Caucasus—the regions in which trafficking of illicit firearms has been flourishing since the early 1990s. By studying the demand side of this illicit market, it provides some possible explanations as to why numerous arms reduction measures have had limited results. It argues that cultural attitudes, socio-political complexity and emotions could explain much of the “irrational” behavior of those demanding weapons in these regions. The article contributes to the scholarly debate on the applicability of the rational choice theory-inspired arms reduction policies in highly textured sociocultural contexts. It is an effort to construct multifaceted conceptualization of human choice that focuses not only on the functionality of firearms but also on their symbolic and situational meaning.

Keywords Balkans · Bounded rationality · Chechnya · Illicit firearms · Liminality · Rational choice theory · SALW

Small Arms, Big Problems

In the twenty first century, trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW)¹ is a truly global phenomenon. In 2012, Argentina’s ex-President Carlos Menem has been sentenced

¹SALW are a subcategory of conventional weapons and range from pistols and rifles to mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and man-portable air defense systems, or MANPADS. A widely used UN definition of small arms includes revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, submachine guns, and light machine guns. Light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held underbarrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable antitank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of antitank and anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of less than 100 mm caliber (Stohl and Hoogendoorn 2010). Firearms—rifles, shotguns, side arms, sub-machine guns, machine gun and heavy machine guns—are the most numerous, the only type of small arms for which registration data is widely available.

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to 7 years in prison for illegally selling weapons to Ecuador and Croatia in the 1990s. His government smuggled 6500 weapons to both countries, which were under arms embargoes at the time (BBC 2013). In 2002, West African gun smugglers persuaded the Nicaraguan government to sell them 3000 assault rifles and 2.5 million rounds of ammunition by pretending to be brokering the deal on behalf of the Panamanian Police. Instead, the illegal goods were sold to the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia, an international terrorist organization (Stohl 2004). During that same year, traffickers acquired 5000 AK-47 s from Yugoslavian army stocks and moved them from Serbia to Liberia under the guise of a legal transaction with Nigeria. One of the planes used in this shipment came from Ukraine and made a refueling stop in Libya (ibid). Similarly, a former Soviet military translator of Ukrainian origin, Viktor Bout, had made fortunes from arms trafficking operations in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Bout-owned air transport companies were delivering weapons from Eastern Europe to conflict-torn countries such as Liberia and Angola. Arrested in Thailand in 2010 and extradited to the United States, he stood trial on arms trafficking and terrorism charges (intend to smuggle arms to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) (USDOJ 2010). Bout was convicted to 25 years of imprisonment (BBC 2011). Incidents such as these make the illicit trade in SALW one of the most profitable illicit markets.²

Estimates of the black market trade in SALW range from USD 1 to 10 billion a year (Stohl and Hogendoom 2010; Kinsella 2006). There are at least 875 million combined civilian, law enforcement and military firearms in the world (Small Arms Survey 2012). Around 200 million belong to state militaries and 26 million to law enforcement agencies. The majority of firearms, however—roughly two-thirds—are in the hands of violent non-state actors and civilians. Although significant amounts of SALW end up in the hands of warlords, insurgents and organized crime groups, civilian ownership of firearms, has been the fastest-growing category; as consumers buy more guns and as former military weapons gradually shift into civilian hands (Stohl and Hogendoom 2010; Small Arms Survey 2012). The 2006 estimates point out that about 59 % of all firearms are legally held by civilians (Small Arms Survey 2009).

Most conventional approaches to the study of arms trafficking are rooted in rational choice theory (RCT) that is grounded on the assumption that people are “rational” and “interest driven” and that they strive to maximize personal advantage. RCT-driven policies adopted by national governments and international organizations seem to have produced limited results regardless of colossal money investments into curbing SALW proliferation. One way of explaining little progress in SALW reduction is that the dynamics of arms trafficking in certain contexts may not solely depend on formal authority and formal rules but also on cultural attitudes and emotions of those who sell and buy SALW. The dynamics of arms trafficking from this perspective does not always make sense in terms of “rational” efficiency; on the

² Small arms are the weapons of choice around the globe because they are cheap, widely available, lethal, durable, simple to use, portable and concealable. The AK-47 family of assault rifles is currently produced in some 29 countries and cost as little as USD 200 new. Anecdotal data suggest that a used AK-47 could now be purchased for the price of a chicken in some African countries (Stohl and Hogendoom 2010).

Arms trafficking is an illegal act of supplying a party with weapons or ammunitions. Arms maybe smuggled domestically and enter illicit circulation through distribution, theft, leakage or divergence, pilferage and resale (UNODA 2007). Alternatively, firearms may be smuggled via the so-called “ant trade”—numerous shipments of small numbers of firearms transferred from abroad by a small unauthorized end user (Small Arms Survey 2013). Arms trafficking also occurs under supervision of corrupt officials, brokers or outsiders who simply seek profit. A state, or a major party, may deliberately organize firearms trafficking for a state’s own good in violation of arms embargos.

contrary, it often occurs because of less material and sometimes rather “absurd” motives. Presdee (2000) explains that in a society where emotions—including pride, anger, fear, love and hate—stand against the rational and material world, “those without wealth are left only with the world of emotions to express their hurts, their injustices and their identity.” Consequently, their actions often appear “irrational” or against “common sense.” The situational crime prevention (SCP), the RCT-based criminal opportunity reduction approach, may not be applicable to highly textured socio-cultural contexts or when dealing with products such as arms.

This article aims to elaborate on the “rationality” of the market and the actors—particularly on the demand side—as well as to examine whether economic models are attentive to the impact of culturally-enriched and socially-embedded factors. Driven by these goals, the article studies the impact of three factors on the demand for SALW, which drives this illicit market. These factors are: *patriotism* (a system of values, in which love for, or devotion to, one’s country and civic virtue glorifies arms possession), *conflict mentality* (a feeling of fear, insecurity, distrust that people often gain in the aftermath of durable conflicts and prolonged socio-economic distress) and *gun culture* (illustrating pride in and passion about possession and/or use of arms).

We have selected two conflict/post-conflict regions, in which these factors may play a significant role, making deterrence approaches and SCP policies difficult to implement without close consideration of socio-cultural, political and historical specificities. The two case studies are the Balkan region, with emphasis on Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (thereafter Bosnia), and the North Caucasus, with emphasis on Chechnya and Dagestan. In these areas the illicit firearms market has been flourishing since the early 1990s, and in both regions, culture, history and socio-political complexity could potentially explain the “irrational” behavior of those demanding weapons.

In the following, we provide an overview of the measures undertaken by governments and international organizations to reduce illicit firearms ownership in the two regions, and then we explain why many of these measures have failed. We have primarily focused on studying the demand side of the illicit market in SALW. This has been done for several reasons. First, most national and international arms control initiatives of the last three decades have been largely oriented toward reducing the supply of illicit firearms, leaving the demand for illicit firearms a marginalized area in research and policymaking. Second, whereas disrupting supply only tackles the problem of illegal firearms transactions by attempting to stop illegal trafficking or seizing guns before they enter the black market, disrupting the demand side of arms trafficking promises a much more sustainable response to trafficking in firearms—the one that leaves arms traffickers with a few or even no customers to sell guns to.

The analysis is based on open source intelligence, mainly on systematic literature and newspapers reviews as well as on the analysis of policy documents. In particular, we have studied news media accounts from various countries and in different languages starting from the late 1980s until 2013. We have studied large-scale value surveys conducted by reputable organizations in the respective regions (e.g., World Values Survey; Small Arms Survey; UNDP; Safeworld). Moreover, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with offenders involved in regional arms deals, and with six law enforcement officials from the respective regions.

It is important to note that while various sources have been utilized to write this article, our interview approach was not systematic. Therefore, although the findings presented in this article are partially rooted in empirical research undertaken between 2007 and 2013, we consider this article to be primarily theoretical because of the overall paucity in the literature

and the limited number of cases available.³ While further research in this area is much welcome, we hope that our modest findings will contribute to the scholarly debate on the importance of cultural attitudes, socio-political complexity and emotions in understanding black markets in general and the illicit firearms market in the select regions in particular.

Rationality, Liminal Experiences and Human Choices

Boundaries of Rationality

According to the RCT, those who sell and buy illicit firearms carefully weigh the costs, benefits and risks before committing a crime. The rationalization process includes the immediate need for a criminal gain, the risk of apprehension, the severity of punishment if caught and the (potential) value of the criminal enterprise. Along this line of reasoning, black market entrepreneurs will desist from selling firearms and those on the demand side will stop purchasing them if they believe that their actions would no longer benefit them, or if the cost associated with those actions is too high. Such logic leads to the conclusion that increasing punishment and reducing opportunities will deter people from trafficking, selling, buying and possessing illicit firearms. For example, a combination of an improvement in the security environment, a reduction in ethnic conflict, severe and swift punishment, better legislation and an increase in law enforcement capacity will lead to decrease in arms trafficking as well as demand for illicit firearms. This narrow top-down approach, however, does not necessarily acknowledge that values, passions and emotions associated with various cultural, social and political factors may also affect human decision-making processes.

The debate on decision-making goes back to the early twentieth century. Rationality, for instance, has been recognized as perhaps the major theme in Max Weber's works. Weber's usage of "rationality" and "rationalization" is one of the ways to differentiate between decision-making processes rooted in interests and those driven by values (Weber 1976 [1921]). Half a century later, Becker (1976) and his followers (Eide 1994, 1999) heavily criticized the inability of ultra-positivist economic research, the one that often considers norms as static and identical among individuals, to grasp norm-guided rational behavior. According to this author (1976: 5), "[s]ince economists generally have had little to contribute [...] to the understanding of how preferences are formed, preferences are assumed not to change substantially over time, nor be very different between wealthy and poor persons, or even between persons in different societies and culture."

Maintaining that rationality of individuals is limited by the information they have and the time-pressure they may experience when making the decision, they may lack cognitive skills and resources to arrive at the optimal solution. In that case, offenders stick to "satisficing" and not to maximization. Throughout the years, the concept of *bounded rationality* (also known as "bounded self-interest") firmly established itself in the sociology literature to account for the type of "rationally" that may take different forms depending on a person's social contexts and perceptions of the risk, effort and reward entailed in crime. Today, most explanatory approaches to the study of arms take a sociological-institutionalist approach (Eyre and Suchman 1996; Khakee and Florquin 2003) and a large part of contemporary research on peace and

³ There is likelihood that claims, expressly stated or implied in the article, with a reference to certain suspects' involvement in a criminal act were later dismissed from charges. To overcome potential problems with regards to libel, no person mentioned in the context of alleged offence in this article should be considered guilty unless there is a formal guilty court verdict. Most criminal cases have been provided to illustrate the arguments of the theoretical framework based on a *de facto* presumption of guilt. These cases, however, are not always supported by a *de jure* sentence that is the only legal condition to validate the involvement of a suspect in offence.

conflict develops a political economy perspective that stresses the political nature of the market (Strazzari and Kamphuis 2012). However, although ideas of bounded rationality in general relate to two aspects, one part arising from cognitive limitations and the other from extremes in emotional arousal, in reality it appears that not enough attention has been given to the role of emotions and the power of situations and/or events in influencing human behavior.

Liminal Periods and Liminal *Personae*

The last decades of the previous century saw the emergence of the so-called school of *cultural criminology*, that focuses on a dichotomy of “interests” (rational behavior) and “passions/emotions” (impulsive actions) (e.g., Hayward 2007; Holbrook and Hirschman 1986; Williams and Burns 1994; Wood 1998). According to this school, emotional factors are often so powerful that they seem to make various modes of rational decision making inconceivable.⁴ The feeling of “getting away with it,” the excitement of the act of doing wrong itself, of living on the edge of law and order, are emotions that many seek out in the daily performances of peoples’ lives. These scholars have argued that emotions have transgressed the rules of rationality, and consumer culture has cultivated a desire for immediate, rather than delayed, gratification (Hayward 2007; Presdee 2000). According to Presdee (2000), those without wealth are left only with the world of emotions to express their hurts, their injustices and their identity. Range, anger, excitement, pride, fear and hatred therefore should be considered as commonplace characteristics in the performance of crime, including illicit arms trafficking.

In particular, people going through a *liminal period* seem increasingly separated from prevailing normative values. Originating from anthropological research of the early twentieth century, *liminality* refers to a stage of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during rituals. The notion of a liminal period was first introduced by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his exposition of the *rites de passage*. For van Gennep, a rite de passage consists of three stages: the separation, or detachment of a subject from its stabilized environment; the margin, which is an ambiguous state for the subject; and the aggregation, in which the passage has completed and the subject has crossed the threshold into a new fixed, stabilized state.

During the liminal stage, participants, i.e., *liminal personae*, “stand at the threshold” between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and the “new way” (van Gennep 1960). Turner (1967) describes the state of liminal personae as “dissolved” during the liminal period. Liminal personae are neither located in the departed stage nor in the arrived-at point. As having departed but not yet arrived, liminal personae (also called “transitional-beings”) are “at once no longer classified and not yet classified [...] neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere.”

Diverting from its originally narrow sense, liminality has both spatial and temporal dimensions, and can be applied to a variety of subjects: individuals, larger groups and the whole of society. During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes, once taken for granted, may be thrown into doubt (Horvath et al. 2009). Liminal experiences can last a moment, a period or they can have life-span duration. Wars and (ethnic) conflicts, enduring political instability, prolonged economic crises as well as incomplete modernization processes have all been recognized to have the possibility to result in “permanent liminality,” when the transitional character of social life endures.

So having acknowledged the importance of bounded rationality, liminality and emotions, this paper aims at understanding the ongoing demand for SALW in the Balkans and the North

⁴ See for example, Hayward 2007; Kaufman 1998; Simpson 2000.

Caucasus and the rejections to give-up ones guns. Should we search for multiple “registers of rationality”—those that take cultural space, context, time, passion and emotions into consideration in order to better explain why the market has been flourishing in the select region even a decade after the conflicts ended? This article engages in the analysis of the non-economic nature of the illicit market in SALW in two post-conflict regions: the Balkans and North Caucasus.⁵ It is followed by a discussion of the (in)effectiveness of firearms reduction initiatives introduced in the regions.

The Illicit Arms Trade in the Balkans

The increase in arms trafficking in the Balkans is closely related to the wars in Yugoslavia (SFRY) that took place during the 1990s. Not only did the wars leave massive quantities of weapons outside of government control, they also led to feelings of distrust, insecurity and fear. Before its breakdown, Yugoslavia maintained one of the largest armies in Europe. The Yugoslav policy was to engage the entire population in armed resistance, armament production and civil defense. For decades, Yugoslavia was spending a large share of its annual GDP on production of weapons and the arms industry was one of its most flourishing economic sectors (Kauer 2007: 82). In fact, about 90 % of the arms were produced domestically as a result of Josip Broz Tito’s doctrine of self-sufficiency and nonalignment (Bromley 2007: 4).

As the wars in Yugoslavia started, one of the international community’s first reactions was the arms embargo, imposed on all six Yugoslav republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (including Kosovo and Vojvodina) and Slovenia in 1992. This seemed to have little effect on Serbia, which maintained the control of the Yugoslav Army, but the embargo badly hit the defense forces of Bosnia and Kosovo. Some have argued that during the late 1980s Bosnia and Kosovo stood at the opposite poles of a hypothetical continuum illustrating SALW presence in the region; however, research shows that in order to push forward for their independence, both Bosnia and Kosovo had to engage in alliances with foreign state and non-state actors for the importation of weapons. Although about 60 % of the arms production was taking place in Serbia, and the rest mainly in Bosnia and about 55 % of the armories of the former Yugoslavia were located in Bosnia, owing to its mountainous terrain, the problem was that many of these factories and armories were under Serbian control (Bromley 2007: 4). During the war they were the main targets of the warring parties, and, later on, of NATO air strikes (Kauer 2007: 82). Research conducted in Kosovo in the 1990s also emphasized the lack of access to firearms in the province because most Kosovo Albanians were de facto no longer serving in the Yugoslav army nor in territorial militias.

The Arms Embargo and Bosnia-Herzegovina’s SALW Market

In 1992 the Bosnian government lobbied to have the UN embargo lifted. This, however, was opposed by the UK, Russia and France. The US congress passed two resolutions calling for the lifting of the embargo but both were vetoed by US President Bill Clinton for fear of creating a rift

⁵ The two cases have been selected for the analysis because they have the potential to show similarities and highlight common lessons for national and international post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Both republics have experienced protracted conflicts that have left a legacy of societal grievances characterized by a hemorrhage of political and military institutions, economic decay and open access to illicit firearms. Not only did the events take place in the same general time frame, but they both also involved ethnic minorities seeking a degree of autonomy or independence from relatively non-democratic and dictatorial regimes via violent ways. An arm trafficking has been an increasingly salient issue in both cases.

between the US and the aforementioned countries. So organized crime became a necessity for the survival of the Bosnian state. Weapons smuggling was crucial to the war effort, and the “government” of the Bosniak region was reliant on organized criminals to fight the war. As the war progressed, Bosnian Serbs received military supplies from Serbia, while Bosnian Croats received help from Croatia. The majority of the groups supplying weapons to Bosniaks came from Islamic countries, especially Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Saudi Arabia (Wiebes 2006; Aldrich 2002; Mincheva and Gurr 2010).

Between only May 1994 and January 1996, Iran supplied the Bosniaks with about 5000 t of arms and ammunition (Anastasijevic 2006). In fact, one of the largest contingents of weapons that ever entered the Balkan region was in 1994–1995. It was shipped from Iran to Bosnia through Croatia, as a part of a secret US program helping the Bosnian Army. There are allegations that the U.S. used both “black” C-130 transports and back channels to help Bosnia smuggle weapons (Aldrich 2002).

One of the most controversial cases that illustrates the dependency of the Bosnian government on outside aid for weapons is linked to the name of a Sudanese national, Elfatih Hassanein, the founder of the Third World Relief Agency (TWRA) in Bosnia in 1987. According to Western officials, the purpose of the organization was the rebirth of Islam in Eastern Europe. In 1995, the bank accounts of the TWRA showed that 350 USD million flowed from the governments of Muslim countries and radical Islamic movements into Bosnia in support of the war.⁶ Terrorists are also believed to have used the relief agency to donate money to the Bosnian government, including Osama Bin Laden and Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman—a radical Egyptian convicted of planning terrorist bombings in New York and linked to the group that carried out the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 (Mincheva and Gurr 2010). The agency first came to the attention of Western intelligence in 1992, when transport planes began arriving in Slovenia from the Sudanese capital of Khartoum. The cargo was marked as humanitarian aid, but in fact contained 120 t of assault rifles, mortars, mines and ammunition coming from surplus stocks of Soviet weapons (Pomfret 1996). Then in 1993, the German police discovered a weapons deal being negotiated by Bosnian Muslims, Turkish arms dealers and the TWRA (Pomfret 1996). At the same time, the Bosnian government awarded the TWRA with a gold medal for its relief work.

Throughout the past two decades, actors with diverse profiles—from state officials to common people—have been involved in the arms trade in Bosnia. Going back to the early 1990s, the first weapon smuggling channels appear to have been set up by the head of the KOS (Counter-Intelligence Service), Aleksandar Vasiljevic, a Bosnian Serb (CSD 2004). He allegedly made an agreement with the Bosnian Defense Minister, Deli Mustafic, a Bosniak, who in 1991 was personally involved in arms smuggling from Vienna to Sarajevo (Wiebes 2006: 180), not to interfere with the shipment of weapons from Serbia through Bosnia to the Serbian-held territories in Croatia. In return, “the secret service deflected some of the weapons to the Bosnian-Muslim army-in-the-making” (CSD 2004: 47). There are also documents indicating that when these shipments were noticed, many Western countries took no action, which led to furthering of the institutional ambivalence toward SAWL smuggling in the region (Aldrich 2002; Mincheva and Gurr 2010).

The Kosovo Conflict

Research indicates that rates of illegal weapons ownership in Kosovo already far exceeded the rate of registered weapons in 1989 and, throughout the tumultuous 1990s, events in neighboring countries resulted in the influx of more illegal arms into Kosovo (UNDP 2011). The 1998–1999 conflict further contributed to SAWL problem in Kosovo; it left both the Albanian

⁶ The details of the case were provided by Austrian investigators working on this case.

majority and the Serb minority suspicious of security providers (Saferworld 2009). Kosovo was an autonomous province within Serbia,⁷ rather than a semi-autonomous republic. The reserves of the Kosovo Territorial Defence had been taken away after 1981 and weapons supplies were limited. Thus, as a means to achieve their secessionist goal, ethnic Albanians relied heavily on weapons illegally trafficked from abroad, especially from neighboring Albania (Zaborskiy 2007; Quin 2003; JIR 1999).

For 45 years Albania was under the communist regime of Enver Hoxha (1944–1985). The Albanian leader too placed emphasis on weapon supplies and a powerful army. After the fall of communism, large amounts of weapons remained in circulation in Albania. The most dramatic event was the looting of more than 550,000 small arms, 839 million rounds of ammunition, and 16 million explosive devices from army stockpiles, in a desperate response to the 1997 failed pyramid savings scheme in which many Albanians lost all their savings (Khakee and Florquin 2003; Zaborskiy 2007). More specifically, following the March 1997 looting, at least 38,000 hand-guns, 226,000 Kalashnikovs, 25,000 machine-guns, 2400 anti-tank rocket launchers, 3,500,000 hand grenades and 3600 t of explosives, disappeared and partly reappeared during the Kosovo conflict (Michaletos 2006; Anastasijevic 2006). Most ended up in the hands of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (Zaborskiy 2007; Quin 2003). Several specialized training camps for the KLA are thought to have existed in Albania (in the cities of Fushe Kruje and Bajram Curri) during the 1990s (JIR 1999). These cities, particularly the border towns of Bajram Curri and Tropoje in north Albania, also served as the main “illegal arms bazaars” for local arms traders and KLA supporters (Zaborskiy 2007).

The former Prime Minister Fatos Nano was accused of supplying weapons to the KLA as well. Although he formally denied the allegations and officially acknowledged Kosovo to be a part of Serbia, Nano stated that it was morally defensible to assist the KLA at that time (Zaborskiy 2007). Paradoxically, in addition to Albania (Chinese-manufactured and low-cost assault rifles), Serbia (Yugoslavian manufactured and expensive pistols) was another supplier of weapons to Kosovo (Khakee and Florquin 2003; JIR 1999). In 2001, some of these weapons were transported to Macedonia. Placed in coffins, they were frequently transported on horses via the uncontrolled mountain region between Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Some ended up in the hands of ethnic Albanian nationalists (e.g., ANA and NLA) closely linked to the KLA (Arsovska 2008).

In addition to the availability of weapons, these post-communist countries also had a vast network of people previously working for the countries’ military services, the secret security services and the police. These actors were well connected and had the “know-how” of arms trading. After the fall of communism many lost their state jobs due to the reduced size of the army, police and secret security services. The abolition of the Albanian secret service Sigurimi in 1991 left around 10,000 agents unemployed. In Bosnia, around 50,000 people who were directly or indirectly employed by arms factories also lost their jobs.

Illicit Arms and Security in the North Caucasus

Similarly to many states in the Balkans, the increase in illicit firearms in the North Caucasus is connected to the First Chechen War (1994–1996) and the Second Chechen War (1999–2009).⁸

⁷ The post-World War II Yugoslav constitution established the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija within the Yugoslav constituent republic of Serbia

⁸ The dates of the Second Chechen War include the following periods: the battle phase (1999–2000) and the insurgency phase (2000–2009).

Large arsenals of SALW and explosives were accumulated in Chechnya and the wider North Caucasus. Although the conflict in Chechnya is considered settled, at least officially, violence and problems related to the illicit circulation of firearms hitting Chechnya and neighboring republics remain salient. Presence of armed groups in the North Caucasus, judged by publicized arrests of insurgents and seizures of firearms and ammunition, makes the trade in illegal firearms a more visible activity.

The First Chechen War and Weapons Proliferation

Following the disintegration of the USSR in December 1991 and the declaration of independence of Chechnya by the All-National Congress of the Chechen People headed by Dzhokar Dudayev, many Chechen organized crime gangs (OCGs) operating in Moscow returned to Chechnya and joined the rising Chechen separatist movement. A great deal of criminal proceeds accumulated by the Chechen OCGs in Moscow⁹ was also transferred to Chechnya in support of the Chechen cause in the First Chechen War. Whereas many of financial resources to support the Chechen movement in the First Russo-Chechen War came from outside of the republic, weapons and ammunition were primarily obtained domestically in Chechnya and neighboring republics.

The biggest supplier of weapons in Chechnya was the army that, by all estimations, delivered up to half of the weapons in illicit circulation in the North Caucasus. In the early 1990s, Russian troops left behind large quantities of SALW during their withdrawal from Chechnya, which they were unable (or perhaps unwilling) to protect. Whilst these stockpiles of arms did not end up in the ends of rebel forces immediately, they fuelled criminality and low-scale violence in the region ahead of the conflict that began in 1994. Furthermore, some of these “free-floating” arms found their way toward conflict-stricken areas that had already erupted elsewhere in the Caucasus (Matveeva and Hiscock 2003).

Under the circumstances of the withdrawal of the Russian troops and the overall environment of impunity and chaos, Dudayev and his supporters had easy access to Soviet arms depots located in the republic. Moreover, Major-General Dudayev, the first Chechen general in the Soviet Army, was well-informed about the quantity and the location of weapons stored in Chechnya. According to Russian sources, the Dudayev-led militants obtained 42,000 pieces of SALW from the Grozny KGB stockpiles in September 1991, including 28,000 AK-47, 200,000 hand grenades and over 13.5 million rounds of ammunition (Prokofyev 1999).

In addition to having almost unlimited access to Soviet weapons in Chechnya¹⁰, there was an important pipeline of firearms from Georgia to Chechnya. Illicit arms traveled first from Tbilisi to Akhmeta, then through the Pankisi Gorge into the mountains and from there to Chechnya via mountain footpaths (Demetriou 2002: 36). Some SALW were also brought into Chechnya from Abkhazia by the Chechen soldiers who were conscripted there during the Abkhaz-Georgian War (Monetchikov 2001). Shamil Basayev, one of the leaders of the Chechen movement during the Second Chechen War, for example, was one of such soldiers.

⁹ The Chechens were well-represented in the Soviet-era organized crime. Their early activities included extortion and robbery of small traders, racketeering of larger enterprises and profiting from the sales of goods and services in the black market (Shelley et al 2005: 68).

¹⁰ Before the disintegration of the USSR in December 1991 and following the Declaration of Independence of Chechnya (President's Degree as of 1 November 1991), the Chechen government declared on 26 November 1991 that all military equipment stationed in Chechnya belonged to the Chechen Republic and could not be removed. Bislan Gantamirov, for instance, the leader of the Grozny KGB raid, was never prosecuted for arms theft. On the contrary, he became the mayor of Grozny in 1991 and the Prime Minister of Chechnya in 1992.

As the First Chechen War escalated, the Dudayev separatist movement still lacked arms supplies. In 1992, Dudayev ordered the production of the Chechen submachine gun, Borz,¹¹ at the Krasnyi Molot plant in Grozny. The Chechen-manufactured Borz is one of the firearms that was produced and reconfigured in Chechnya. The Borz was initially a close-copy of the Armenian K6-92, which itself was loosely a modification of the Soviet PPS submachine gun. According to one of the employees of Krasnyi Molot, there were only several hundred pieces of that model from 1992 to 1999 (Dudayev 2004). All later models were manufactured at underground workshops and households. Given its low costs, less than USD 100 per gun, the Borz was in wide use among civilians. As it was not very popular among professional combatants,¹² members of the Chechen resistance used to trade these guns for food, alcohol or other necessities with civilians.

The net result of the firearms theft and production in Chechnya was the failure of the Russian authorities to restrict the circulation of illicit arms in Chechnya and achieve any progress in resolving the Russo-Chechen conflict. Due to a unique interplay of state failures caused by the post-communist transition, the access to arms has rarely been restricted in Chechnya. According to the Russian sources, the Chechen forces held 45,000 weapons of all kinds (Anthony 1998). Other sources suggested there were more than 60,000 SALW and more than 2 million of ammunition located in Chechnya during the First Chechen War (Monetchikov 2001). Plentiful supplies of arms and military equipment available to the Chechen rebel groups allowed them to deploy large-scale hostilities that followed during the Second Chechen War.

The Solidification of the Black Market in SALW in the North Caucasus

Regardless of (or due to) the Kremlin's arms embargo on Chechnya and the tough control maintained by the 16,000 troops from the Russian Interior Ministry deployed around the external borders of Chechnya during the Second Chechen War, a black market in SALW, unmatched, at least for the scale of the Caucasus, was nevertheless preserved. In addition to weapons available from domestic sources, weapons were provided by those promoting global jihad during the Second Chechen War (Cornell 2003; Shelley et al. 2005). Allegedly, there was a connection between Chechnya and Islamic extremists sympathizing with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Following the Moscow Theatre Siege in 2002, the Al Jazeera broadcasted Bin Laden's message, in which he highlighted the international dimension of the Chechen resistance. "If you were distressed by the killing of your nationals in Moscow, remember ours in Chechnya," he warned about the prominence that the Chechen gained among fundamentalist Islamic militants (BBC 2002). The Taliban, when it was in power, was the only government to recognize Chechnya's independence. According to Cornell (2003: 179), the financial resources of Chechen insurgents were provided by Islamic charities from the Gulf region. The latter also allegedly provided "access to sophisticated weaponry and supplies and have been able to gain influence at the expense of original centers of Chechen resistance—the secular and nationalist forces led by Maskhadov and his allies" (ibid).

¹¹ "Borz" is the Chechen word for "wolf". This name is chosen because of the special position of a wolf on the coat of arms of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

¹² A series of defeats in winter-spring 1995 made Dudayev change the tactics. Whereas initially Dudayev preferred the combating strategy, in which federal forces were attacked at a short distance. At a later stage, Dudayev realized that his fighters would have an advantage if they would attack unexpectedly from the mountains. The shift in the strategy made AK-47 the weapon of choice. The Borz is a short-range gun.

The history of radical Islam, the presence of which had never been very strong in the region,¹³ goes back to 1995 when the first generation of foreign militants led by Emir Khattab arrived in Chechnya to assist the fight of Chechen's against the federal forces. Khattab-led foreign fighters provided invaluable assistance to the outgunned Chechen resistance, having established connections between the Basayev-led Chechen resistance movement and terrorist organizations outside Chechnya. Foreign fighters brought considerable manpower as well as provided financial support, firearms and ammunition (Shelley et al. 2005: 70).

For many years Basayev and al-Khattab headed the most radical regiments of the pro-independence movement such as the Islamic International Brigade (IIB). The IIB's most notorious attack was the 2004-raid of a school in Beslan that left 331 dead, over half of whom were children. During the Beslan school hostage, Basayev-led Chechen militants employed armed procured from the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) arms depot in Ingushetia during the 2004 raid in Nazran. A video featuring the Chechen commander and his militants stealing 700 assault rifles, over 800 guns and about a million units of ammunition of various calibers was sent in an email attachment to the Russian law enforcement (News.ru 2004).

As the Second Chechen War progressed, Chechnya was losing the leading position in the black market in SALW. In the mid-1990s, Dagestan's town of Khasavyurt, a predominantly Chechens Akhins area on the Chechen border, turned into the center of arms proliferation in the North Caucasus (Kisriev 2003: 6–7). Ingushetia, Chechnya's other neighbor, became an important locale for illicit firearms as well. A powerful rebel group headed by Ali Taziyeu (aka Magas), Emir of the Ingush jamaat,¹⁴ was allegedly the one responsible for arms supplies for the IIB. Magas is an ethnic Ingush who was raised in Grozny. He participated in the First Chechen War, after which he returned to Ingushetia and entered the police force. Having being promoted to the Ingush Interior Ministry Policy forces, where he attained the rank of Captain, Magas was the key figure in arranging arms transfers coming to Chechnya through Ingushetia (RIA 2013a). His contacts in the Ingush police were invaluable for the success of the Nazran raid that has already been mentioned (Kamenskiy 2004). In one of Taziyeu-led operations, in which he was responsible for the arm transfer from Turkey to Chechnya in July 2006, Basayev was lethally injured while inspecting the consignment in the village of Ekazhevo in Ingushetia. Although some interpretations suggest that Basayev's death was an accident, Russian officials claimed that the explosion was the result of a special targeted killing operation (Sanin and Shteinbukh 2011).

Against the background of destruction, poverty and massive violence, the Second Chechen War led toward Chechnya's transformation into an area controlled by armed formations, organized criminal networks and solitary bandits, all of which had unrestricted access to arms. Although it is difficult to make any conclusion about the amount of illicit arms available to civilians, the case of the North Caucasus seems to be the illustration of the situation, in which practically anyone with interest to acquire firearms had an opportunity to do so. The conflict in Chechnya is currently considered resolved (at least from the official perspective). Chechnya is run by Ramzan Kadyrov, a leader known for his allegiance to Moscow. In reality, violence continues not only in Chechnya but also in other republics of the North Caucasus. The Kavkazsky Uzel independent regional news agency recorded 378 insurgency-related deaths

¹³ The kind of Islam indigenous to the North Caucasus is Sufism.

¹⁴ Jamaat (also djamaat) is a term used to refer to a community united by a universal conviction that is often religious in nature. The term became widely used in Chechnya back in the 1990s following the formation of militarized groups under the leadership of Sheikh Fathi, an ethnic Chechen from Jordan. In recent years, jamaats acquired noticeable societal recognition and popularity as religion-based organizations in other republics of the North Caucasus. The term, however, may be used without the religious connotation in this context. In Dagestan, for example, the term is widely used in everyday life to refer to communities and kinship groups.

and 307 people wounded in Dagestan in 2010, 134 deaths and 192 wounded in Ingushetia, and 127 dead and 123 wounded in Chechnya (Parfitt 2011). Spikes of violence definitely highlight much more deep-seated problems related to the circulation of illicit weapons.

Efforts to Control Illicit Firearms and Their Limitations

After 2000, Bosnia and Kosovo witnessed a number of weapons amnesties and collection initiatives (both voluntary and forced) to address the high rates of illicit weapons ownership among civilians. These initiatives were introduced in May 2001, the same time the UN Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms was adopted. The Protocol stipulates measures that include the criminalization of the illicit manufacturing of or trafficking in firearms and the strengthening of capacities to detect and investigate illicit transfers in the context of transnational organized crime. These initiatives brought the topic of illicit firearms high on political agendas of many countries. As a consequence, the EU, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) put forward a number of anti-arms trafficking initiatives.

In Kosovo, for example, a range of approaches was employed to address illicit small arms ownership. Among these are: ad hoc intelligence-led “search and seize” operations undertaken by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), a NATO-led international Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the Kosovo Police Service (KPS; now KP); the Illicit Small Arms Control Project (ISAC) undertaken by the UNDP; and weapons collection, destruction, and amnesty programs led by KFOR/UNMIK. Similar initiatives have been taking place in Bosnia as well: for example, “Operation Harvest” (1998–2006) implemented by SFOR and local authorities (from 2005 EUFOR) was focusing on a combination of forced disarmament and “search and seize” actions, and voluntary collections.

In addition, some of the surplus weapons owned by the national armies of the Western Balkan states were destroyed as a part of U.S.-sponsored programs. Overall, during the early 2000s, there have been several major weapons destruction programs in several countries in the Balkan region, including Albania (230,000 weapons and 18 million rounds of ammunition), Bulgaria (77,516 sub-machine guns), and Serbia (51,000 small arms and light weapons) (SEESAC 2006). In Kosovo, about 665 SALW were collected under the KFOR 1-month amnesty period in 2001, and in 2003, 155 weapons were collected under the UNDP (Japan, Canada and UNDP) Illicit Small Arms Control Project (Saferworld 2009). In Kosovo, KFOR and UNMIK have collected only about 25,000 illegally held weapons between June 1999 and 2002 (Quin 2003: 6).

There have been some improvements on the legislative front as well. The communist laws on possession of firearms were replaced by tougher ones (Anastasijevic 2006). The Kosovo government approved the new Law on Weapons in August 2009. This Law regulates the conditions for natural persons and legal entities to acquire, possess, carry, store, produce, repair, disable, trade, buy, sell, trace, transport, import, and ship weapons within Kosovo and export abroad. Licenses to possess a weapon no longer automatically include a license to carry it, and the possession of automatic weapons and explosives can now bring serious jail time to the offender.

Moreover, a new Division of Small Arms was established under the Department for Public Security in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo. Then the newly established Kosovo SALW Control Commission chaired by the Prime Minister was tasked to implement the Kosovo SALW Control and Collection Strategy. In 2007, the UNDP also proposed to work on the evaluation and implementation of the Kosovo Small Arms Control Initiative (UNDP

2011). With the help of the UNDP, Bosnia too established a National SALW Commission and worked with the UNDP on its implementation. In 2012, the UNDP together with the OSCE, the EU and other major organizations drafted “The Strategy” (2013–2016), a comprehensive document aimed at enhancing the efficiency of all stakeholders in the area of SALW control in Bosnia.

In order to reduce the circulation of illicit firearms in the North Caucasus, the end of the Second Chechen War was followed by a large-scale campaign of weapons amnesties and firearms confiscation initiatives (voluntary as well as forced). Weapons amnesty initiatives launched almost in all republics of the North Caucasus Federal District¹⁵ were initially arranged on a reimbursable basis. Funding for weapons amnesties were provided from the state budget backed-up by federal funding.

Social adaptation of former combatants and weapons amenities were the two building blocks of the post-conflict reconstruction. The first was designed to help militants who wish to return to peaceful life reintegrate into society. The creation of amnesty commissions both in several republics in the North Caucasus were used for disarmament purposes that provided incentives for ex-combatants to hand in their weapons and/or would share the whereabouts of rebels’ hidden weapons repositories.

Weapons amnesties and confiscation campaigns were performed in most republics in the North Caucasus starting from the mid-2000s. These programs are still integrated in agendas of the post-conflict reconstruction of the entire region and focus on the illicit, civilian possession of weapons in the North Caucasus, and on voluntary weapons collection initiatives targeted at such illicit civilian possession. Some of these programs offered reimbursements for collected SALW. Firearms confiscation initiatives did not provide any financial incentives for citizens to hand in guns. Instead, weapons and ammunition were appropriated from civilians with consequent criminal prosecution on charges of Art. 222 “illegal arms possession” of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (CCRF).

Although not without some success in the fight against firearms trafficking in both regions, the RCT-inspired policies have had a number of limitations. For example, in cases of weapons collection campaigns, they resulted not in people handing in illegal weapons but changing the way they store them. This trend may, of course, bring about a decrease in “impulse” or accidental use of weapons, but will most likely have negative long-term consequences for the post-conflict reconstruction agenda. Also the cash for weapons (buy-back programs) have been seen as ineffective and with negative consequences. One informant noted, “Payback programs are positive because you motivate people, but you stimulate illegal activities for people to sell and buy arms” (Saferworld 2009: 8).

In Albania: “[...] weapons collectors [were] noting that people were not simply hiding guns under their beds, but in more ingenious or awkward-to-reach places” (Saferworld 2009). In fact, from 2003 to 2006, “Operation Harvest” in Bosnia yielded about 15,151 SALW, while the estimated number in circulation is around 500,000. Over time, a decreasing instead of increasing number of weapons was handed in (Saferworld 2009). Other countries in the Balkan region have experienced a similar situation. Although between 2003 and mid-2007 approximately 20,000 weapons were destroyed in Macedonia, according to the Macedonian Ministry of Interior and the UNDP, more than 15 % of Macedonia’s 2 million inhabitants (about 330,000 people) still possess weapons; 170,000 of these possess weapons illegally (Arsovska 2008).

¹⁵ The North Caucasus Federal District was established by the President decree on 19 January 2010 and includes the following administrative units: Republic of Dagestan, Republic of Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Stavropolskiy krai, and the Chechen Republic.

In the context of the North Caucasus, discoveries of hidden arms caches with hideouts with weapons have been one of the problems to arms reduction initiatives. In a single year of 2006, the law enforcement bodies of Kabardino-Balkaria seized ten grenade launchers, one machine gun, 19 automatic rifles, 20 pistols and revolvers, more than 20,000 pieces of ammunition, 220 grenades, over 22 kg of explosives and 150 TNT blocks (RIA 2006). In 2010, police officers discovered two caches of weapons in Dagestan's capital of Makhachkala. One of them was a 200-l plastic barrel with 9000 cartridges, 20 grenades, five TNT blocks, 5000 cartridges and several grenade launchers buried at a meter-depth under the ground (RIA 2010). In May 2013, the Russian police said they found two weapons hideouts and 12 arms caches (RIA 2013b). Following this discovery, allegedly the largest seizure in the last decade, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation ordered a batch of ground penetrating radars for the North Caucasus to search for hidden caches with weapons and ammunition more effectively.

Recent statistics indicate that many weapons remain in domestic circulation in the Balkans too. For example, surveys suggest that ethnic Albanians still keep firearms in their household; thus black arms markets exist to satisfy the needs of local customers (Zaborskiy 2007; Saferworld 2009). Small Arms Survey (Khakee and Florquin 2003; UNDP 2011) estimated that there are between 330,000 and 460,000 SALW in Kosovo, some 300,000 of them unlicensed. Also, the perception among 58 % of the population surveyed (1200 respondents) by the Association for Democratic Initiative was that people in Kosovo possessed weapons at home and that almost two thirds of weapons in their possession are illegal (Haziri 2003). The UN Small Arms Survey indicated that 19 % of the population in Bosnia still posses SALW as well; 16 % of 500,000 households possess these weapons illegally (Saferworld 2009).

Discussion

In the sections below we focus on three factors that may shed some light on the continuity of the demand for illicit firearms and help to explain some of the reasons behind the impeded success of RCT-inspired initiatives.

“Conflict Mentality”: Fear and Social Trauma

In many conflict-prone regions and regions with a long and intense history of armed fighting, a liminal stage of armed violence becomes “fixed”, making arms possession become a way of life. When conflicts and armed violence take a more permanent character, the so-called “conflict mentality” emerges. By using this concept, we refer to a condition of fear and social trauma, both of which are expected outcomes of one being exposed, directly or indirectly, to prolonged periods of violence, fighting and instability. The decade-long war campaign in the Balkans (1991–2001)¹⁶ is to be considered a liminal period that left many people feeling insecure, distrustful, disoriented and afraid of state institutions as well as people in general. Experience from the Balkan region indicates that the predominant demand factor for weapons possession is precisely the continued perception of insecurity. Due to a turbulent history, one of wars and invasions, many Balkan people do not trust their governments and do not feel confident about the ability of state institutions in providing peace and order (Saferworld 2009; Cvetkovic 2006). Historically, the state was intruding in people's lives, so institutional forms

¹⁶ Also historically, most Balkan countries have been under the occupation of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries and under a strict communist rule for about 45 years. Thus this conflict mentality and distrust in state institutions, in general, predates the post-communist regional wars.

of justice remain distrusted and highly questioned (Arsovska and Verduyn 2008; Valinas and Arsovska 2008). Dukajin Gorani, director of the Human Rights Center at Prishtina University in Kosovo, explains: “It is commendable that KFOR is trying to collect weapons, but it is an impossible task. Kosovars have learned from the Kosovo Liberation Army that you get international attention if you have a gun. In our lifetime the rule of law has never achieved anything, only guns have provided a measure of justice. So you stick to your gun.”

According to a survey with 1200 respondents conducted by the Association for Democratic Initiative, trust in state institutions like the police, judiciary, official army, paramilitaries, is extremely low among the different ethnic groups, particularly among ethnic Albanians (Haziri 2003: 15–16). Despite some recent skepticism among people in Kosovo and Bosnia as regards the power of weapons to bring safety, focus groups and informant interviews suggest that this skepticism may not mean that people in Kosovo or Bosnia are prepared to give up their firearms just because the war is over. Recurring riots, sparked by frustration and anger, decade long lawlessness, growing criminal-political ties and the disappearance of money, made many ethnic Albanians suspicious of their government’s ability to protect them. As one informant noted: “there is an increase in people’s awareness that they should not own firearms, but the security situation is as it is,” so people appear less able to feel safe without them (Saferworld 2009).

In a similar vein, following the disintegration of the USSR, the Caucasus has been plagued with violent conflicts, which have added to the general feeling of insecurity and instability. Given that some of the conflicts have only recently been resolved and some still remain active or “frozen”, even people who were not directly involved in conflicts have had their lives blighted by fighting. Extended violence over ethnic identity, territory and survival created a sense that weapons are needed. In proximity to places where conflicts remain unresolved every escalation or fear of conflict escalation may lead to new waves of SALW proliferation.

The spread of *zachinstki*, special operations aimed to check people’s residence permits and identify participants of illegal armed formations that received harsh criticism by human rights organizations and independent journalists who documented patterns of abduction, detention, disappearances, collective punishment, extrajudicial executions and the systematic use of torture by both Russian and Chechen authorities, created a socially-embedded feeling of distrust and alienation from state institutions and the military among civilians. *Zachistki* became emblematic of a new way of “mentality” among Chechens grounded on a permanent sense of fear of *zachistki* as a collective action against insurgents but also average citizens. As Emil Pain, sociologist and the former Russian government advisor, commented, “[...] many grew to accept the massive violation of the rules of war as the necessary cost of cleaning up ‘terrorist concentrations’” (Gilligan 2010: 54). In the opinion of Ramazan Abdulatipov, the current President of Dagestan, “[o]ne of the consequences of the government and law enforcement’s poor functioning is the region’s extreme circulation of weapons. Firstly, people are not protected by the government and are trying to protect themselves. Secondly, much of the Caucasian population in recent years acquired experience in conflicts, including the one in combat” (Vavarin 2005).

Patriotism: Pride and Duty

Earlier we mentioned that most Yugoslav republics and autonomous provinces were very distrustful of politicians representing superior republics/countries, for example Serbia. Therefore, in order to achieve their goals and push for independence various political actors and emerging paramilitary groups were appealing to the patriotic sentiment. With the introduction of political pluralism at the beginning of the 1990s, new political establishments

needed a base or ideology, which would provide their legitimacy and justify the politics of their parties. Everyone seems to have found solution in nationalism and “re-traditionalization,” promoting the pre-socialist past of many Balkan countries as the source of inspiration. This involved the creation and reinforcement of historical myths about Balkan warriors that moved the Balkan countries toward prosperity only through wars (Cvetkovic 2006).

Criminal-political ties were then quickly established because selling and buying guns was closely linked to ethnic survival, national pride and national duty. Arms dealers, often called “patriotic bandits”, were proud to supply the paramilitary structures in their countries as well as their co-patriots with highly needed weapons. By appealing to the patriotic sentiment, many arms traffickers received support and were respected by the wider population as their activities were seen as deeds for the right cause. Weapons were thus glorified as tools for independence and freedom, and were closely linked to the regional rise in nationalism and patriotism.

In Kosovo, the KLA and its supporters were in great need of weapons during the 1998 conflict. Princ Dobrosi, a Kosovo-Albanian, was allegedly a leader of Albanian organized crime group that controlled the northern path of the heroin trade’s “Balkans route.” He was caught in Norway, and in 1994 he was sentenced to prison for heroin trafficking. In January 1997, he escaped from the Ullersmo prison in Oslo and moved to the Czech Republic. In 1999, Dobrosi was arrested in Prague. In his apartment a Croatian machine-pistol, a Chinese telescopic rifle with a silencer, a Czech handgun and a banknote counter were found. For several months a joint operation (codenamed Cage) between Czech, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish police targeted Dobrosi’s network. A note by the Czech special services (BIS) stated that part of the drug money that Dobrosi earned in the Czech Republic went toward buying arms for the KLA. And when the Czechs decided to extradite Dobrosi, the Norwegian police chose to take him back to Oslo in a private plane as “it would be too dangerous to transport him on a commercial flight due to his close links with the UCK [KLA].” However, Dobrosi was respected by many of his co-patriots in Kosovo, particularly former KLA fighters. After his release from prison in 2005, he was sent back to Kosovo where he continued to provide help and funds to KLA veterans that were left jobless after the conflict ended.¹⁷

Likewise, in July 1998, the special anti-mafia unit of the Italian carabinieri, launched operation “Africa.” Heroin, cocaine and arms was transported by networks linking Italy, France, Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Slovakia, Albania, Kosovo, Turkey and Egypt. The cocaine came from Spain and sophisticated arms were destined for the KLA. Agim Gashi, the alleged leader, was arrested just as he was buying 200 automatic rifles. Gashi had ties with politicians in Kosovo. He lived in a luxury villa on the outskirts of Milan, nevertheless as a good “patriotic bandit” he did not forget his country. “When war broke out in Kosovo”, Carlos De Donno, commander of the carabinieri intelligence unit, remarked, “Kosovar criminals planted in Italy suddenly took an interest in arms trafficking. Up till then they only trafficked in drugs.” The Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported that Gashi “supplied his brothers in Kosovo with Kalashnikov rifles, bazookas, and hand grenades. He controlled the heroin market, and at least part of the billions he made from it was used to buy weapons for the ‘resistance’ movement of the Albanian Kosovo community.” According to telephone tapings Gashi was in talks with arms dealers from Bulgaria, Romania and Albania to buy automatic weapons, rocket launchers and grenades. According to local sources, Gashi was the type of criminal “who would do everything for his country.” He was sentenced in Milan in 1999, but the story of this arms trafficker created another myth about the struggles of Albanian heroes that “sacrificed” their lives for the independence of their country.

¹⁷ Interview conducted in Prishtina, July 2008.

Although the North Caucasus has been closely associated with Islamic resistance and global terrorism since the Second Chechen War, the pan-Caucasian sentiment remains equally important and guided most of the struggle of the Chechen resistance during the First Chechen War. The proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus in October 2007 by Dokka Umarov, its first Emir, reaffirms the pan-Caucasian idea, having proclaimed the territories of current Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Adygea, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and parts of Krasnodarsky Krai and Karachai-Cherkessia to be its *vilayets*, i.e., provinces. Moreover, the pan-Caucasian (and the Islamist movements) in the North Caucasus have always been closely connected to jamaats. Basayev, for instance, spent years developing ties to the independent jamaats in order to bring them under his command in the united North Caucasian front (McGregor 2006). A jamaat is a form of communal organization that enables the pursuit of an Islamic lifestyle. Jamaats possess religious and cultural, as well as economic and political powers. The decay of the law enforcement and the judiciary to respond to organized crime in the 1990s could have made people in the North Caucasus return to the traditional principles of social organization and community safety, including arms ownership. Back in that period, jamaats assumed a critical communal security role. In the current post-conflict reconstruction period, they also play a vital state-building and security role, which has come into conflict with Moscow-appointed leaders and the police. In order to be able to perform these functions successfully, the leaders of jamaats militarized throughout the 1990s and continue managing the circulation of illicit arms via traditional arrangements within and among jamaats.

Given the dense web of close (often descent-based) social relationships established among jamaat members, many people in the North Caucasus acquire weapons only because they see it as a communal duty, which they, as members of a jamaat, have to fulfill, declaring allegiance and readiness to participate in any actions that the membership might involve (Kisriev 2003). In connection to this, “there is a general belief that weapons can be obtained quickly if the need arises,” writes Matveeva and Hiscock (2003: 4), “[w]hile there is no physical black market, a virtual one exists: if one wants to buy a gun, the message is spread by word of mouth, until a gun appears.” The circulation of illicit weapons is an indigenous practice that is embedded into the structure of jamaats.

“Gun Culture”: Honor, Passion and Masculinity

We have avoided much of the debate about what culture is and how to measure it largely because of the limited scope of this article. We have only focused on the so-called “gun culture,” a system of values or cultural elements, “preferences” and “attitudes”, that favor possession and/or use of arms among certain social groups or communities. “Gun culture is the cultural acceptance of gun ownership in situations where the principal motivation or justification for it is not for utilitarian or economic reasons but because their society has a set of values and norms that deem it acceptable behavior. A simple example would be when a man carries a gun, primarily not for hunting or for protection, but because his ‘culture’ interprets his behavior as a sign of masculinity and status” (SEESAC 2006: 1). Societies or communities for which gun culture is characteristic have the widespread acceptance of possession of modern firearms or traditional cold weapons.

The most severe consequences of the presence of the gun culture such as spikes of homicide and other types of violence have been recorded in regions where people go through liminal periods characterized by confusion and lack of order. During the rapid post-communist change and the uncertain modernization processes of the 1990s, many people in the Balkans and the North Caucasus were left between tradition and modernity, in a liminal stage of disorientation.

One of the ways that people used to resist this feeling of confusion was to find broader cultural paradigms that could normalize their life situations. For example, being “tough” is a culturally appropriate way to do this because toughness situates behavior in a historical context of wars and the fight for independence. Being considered tough can legitimize men’s independence, strong-mindedness, strength of will, vigilance and willingness to stand up against “enemies.” Fighting “fire with fire” seems to have become the quintessential mark of being a man (or even a woman) in the Balkans and the North Caucasus. An individual’s skills in using a weapon can also earn him or her respect and a better position in society (Cvetkovic 2006).

The positive image of weapons possession is an integral part of the concept of honor in traditional Albanian culture. For example, the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini sets up the rules upon which the traditional Albanian culture is based, primarily focusing on the concept of honor. The influence of the Kanun among ethnic Albanians has been enormous during the last six centuries. The Kanun has been described as an expression of the de facto autonomy of the northern Albanian clans during the Ottoman Empire. The Kanun articles regulated every aspect of the social lives of the Albanians. The laws also place enormous emphasis on the importance of firearms. Male honor is closely linked to the possession of firearms and the courage to use them. A Southern Albanian proverb says, “You can kill an Albanian, but you cannot make him give up his gun.” In Albania there is a cultural belief that a man who is disarmed also loses his honor, and would prefer death to a loss of honor (SEESAC 2006: 7).¹⁸ Traditionally, the gun culture is also linked to Tito’s doctrine of self-sufficiency, which made the arms industry one of the most flourishing economic sectors in the former Yugoslavia (Kauer 2007: 82).

Similarly to the Balkan region, there is a romantic attachment to arms as objects of great symbolic and cultural value. “Guns are often fired into the air in celebration at weddings or births, which is often considered a confirmation of the existence of ‘gun culture’” (Matveeva and Hiscock 2003). Faced with anti-Soviet resistance in the North Caucasus in the first half of the 1920s, a thorough forced disarmament campaign unfolded in the region. Back then, it took the Soviet regime almost a decade to achieve any progress in disarming the population in the North Caucasus (often due to exceptionally tough measures) (Chentsov 2009). “It seems that for the mountain peoples, tradition in all aspects of life was more powerful than the harshest control measures the Soviet system could come up with” (Kisriev 2003: 5).

Global mass communications and the media have also contributed significantly toward the positive image of guns and the sustainability of “gun cultures” (McGrew et al. 1992). What is unique about the last few decades is the way in which “identity” as well as status differences are generated and maintained via “lifestyle.” Through TV programs, movies, and music the mass media have contributed to cultural globalism, as well as the spread of “gun culture.” Namely, the “cultivation theory” defines media as a learning process; we all learn how to behave in certain situations, and we learn about the expectations that go with a given role in society. The media are continually offering pictures of life and models of behavior in advance of actual experience (McQuail 2005). McLuhan, who has studied the notion of liminal beings through the media theory, refers to objects of technology as extensions of the human body. Today the tendency to ascribe personal characteristics and create our identity through objects we buy is quite common. One blatant example, described by Cvetkovic (2006), is the MTV “Pimp My Ride” show, where young persons whose car has been “pimped” often comment that the new style adds up to their personality, or changes it, or simply brings it to another level.

¹⁸ Proverbs also represent guns as a means of social and national identity: “The Albanian is not born of a womb, but of a [rifle’s] trigger” (from Albania) and “an Albanian loves his rifle as much as [he loves] his wife” (from Albania).

This case of media-promoted creation of personal identities, or at least of some important personal traits, through external objects can certainly explain some aspects of gun-related behavior in the Balkan societies. In Yugoslavia, the role of the army, its legitimization and symbolic meaning was, among other means, created and perpetuated by the media for years. Numerous TV series and films, some involving high profile foreign actors promoted some sort of gun culture, within a collective framework, e.g., popular struggle against fascism or for freedom (Cvetkovic 2006).

Conclusion

Due to a unique interplay of administrative and law enforcement failures, the number of illicit firearms in military and civilian possession in the North Caucasus and the Balkan regions reached unprecedented levels during the 1990s. Guns were readily available in these regions and the demand for weapons was very high. Some of the major conflicts ended by the early 2000s, but the resolution did not drastically decrease the demand for illicit firearms. Despite various disarmament efforts done in both the Balkan region and the North Caucasus, the problem related to illicit firearms remains unresolved. Although a greater degree of control was introduced to SALW ownership during the post-conflict reconstruction period in both regions, the general populace still holds on to their weapons.

We have studied some of the reasons behind the ongoing demand for weapons in the Balkans and in the North Caucasus and tried to explain the overall lack of willingness of the local population to give up their arms. We have elaborated on the concepts “bounded rationality” and “liminality”—developed across social sciences to account for the gaps in positivist models of rationality—arguing that the textured, cultural and subjective experiences of those that demand firearms are important to understand human decision-making processes. In particular, we have focused on the role of socio-cultural attitudes, mentality and emotions in shaping human decisions to strive to possess firearms.

We argue that the concept of a liminal situation could be applied to entire societies that are going through a crisis or a “collapse of order” (Thomassen 2006). Events such as the wars in the Balkans and the North Caucasus in the 1990s can thus be considered liminal, as they result in the complete collapse of order and led to significant socio-cultural changes. Having lasted for a decade, they laid down the favorable conditions for the creation of what we claim to be “conflict mentality,” “gun culture” and “patriotism”—the three factors that influenced the continuity of the demand for firearms after the official resolution of conflicts. Our research indicates that guns are not only functional tools used for protection and hunting but they also have deeper symbolic meanings to people. They can be symbols of masculinity that serve to define gender roles, and can also evoke a number of emotions in people, such as pride, love and fear.

In line with Turner’s arguments, however, even if liminality lasts for a substantial period of time, at the end, all liminality must eventually dissolve, for it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist eternally without some sort of structure or authority to stabilize it (Homas 1979). People cannot live for too long in a state of fear, insecurity, social trauma and intense emotions. The social structure will eventually provide comfort to distrustful people and will lead to stability and trust. Yet the existence of a liminal period must be acknowledged by policy makers that propose top-down RCT-inspired firearms-reduction programs in specific regions. Researchers and policy makers should consider expanding the rational choice perspective to include the role of “irrational” factors such as cultural attitudes, socio-political complexity and emotions.

Finally, we do not claim that all SALW transfers are so thick with meaning; many do resemble market transactions grounded on cost-and-benefit calculations. Therefore in many cases the

market forces are not to be ignored: the saturation of the SALW market in the two regions combined with the continuity of RCT-driven SALW market reduction measures may eventually weaken the demand for illicit weapons. Also the people may eventually overcome the liminal period in which they are currently stuck and which makes many feel insecure even when there is no eminent danger. What this article strongly recommends is that arms-reduction programs should equally take into consideration culturally-enriched and socially-embedded factors that may have an impact on the illicit market in firearms such as those discussed in this article.

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