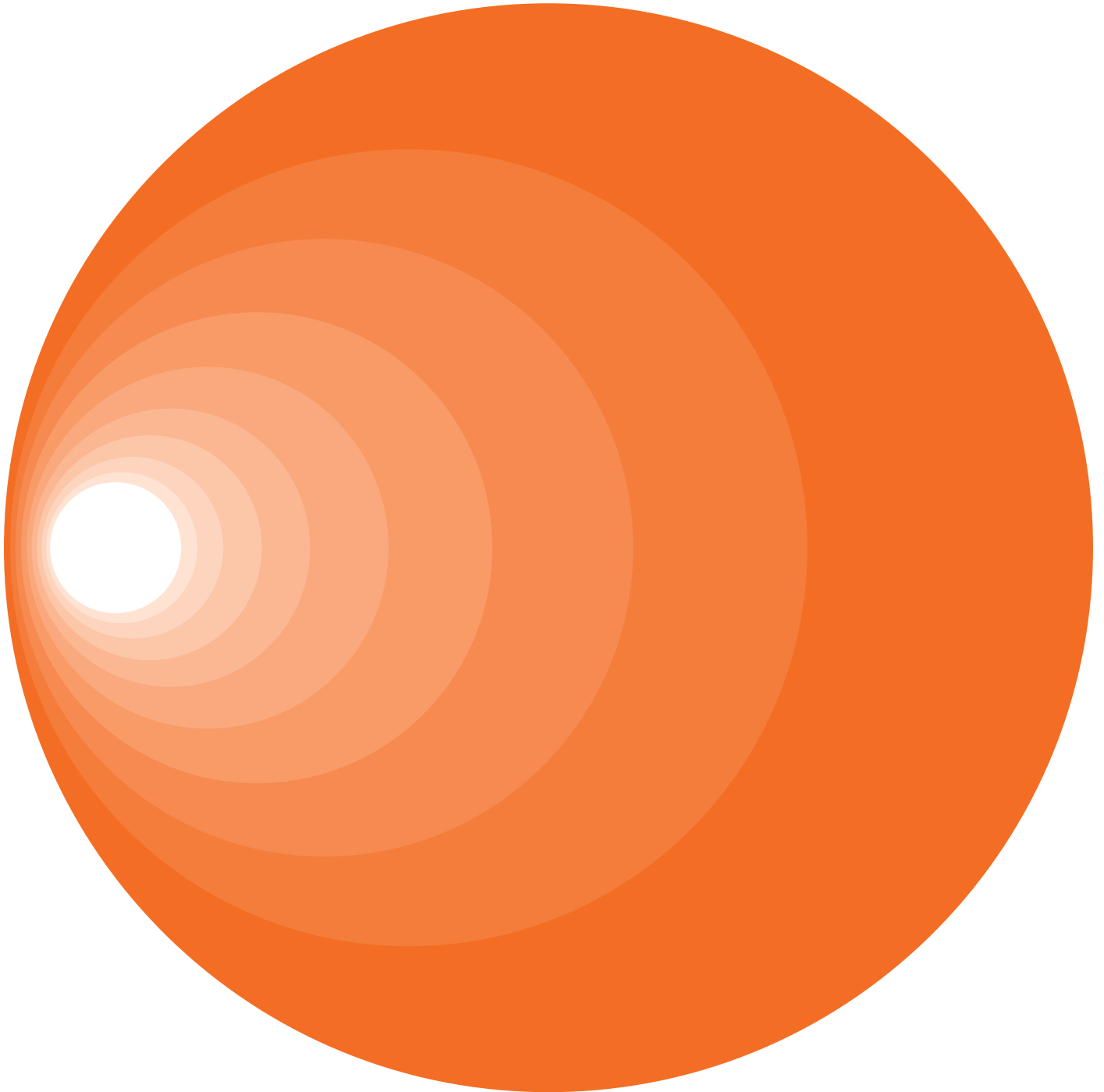




Funded by the
European Union



Regional Cooperation Council



**ARMED VIOLENCE VICTIM SUPPORT
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS:
BRIEF OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This publication presents an abridged version of the research conducted by SEESAC between May and September 2024, in collaboration with the Victimology Society of Serbia. The information in the report is based on the legal framework at the time the research was completed. This brief Overview integrates data and analysis from the research, supplemented by data from the Armed Violence Monitor and relevant literature on armed violence, victims' rights and services for both direct and indirect victims. Preliminary policy recommendations, formulated through a comprehensive desk review and initial empirical research, are presented at the end of this document.

The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) is a joint initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), funded by the European Union (EU), aimed at strengthening jurisdiction-level and regional capacities to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, thus contributing to enhanced stability, security, and development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe.

This publication was produced with the financial assistance of the EU, through the *Support for Enhancing the Fight Against Illegal Possession, Misuse, and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans* project funded via the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II).

For further information contact:

Head of SEESAC

Bulevar Zorana Đinđića 64

11000 Belgrade, Serbia

Tel: +381 11 415 5300

www.seesac.org

Editor: Vesna Cipruš

Copy editing: Irena Žnidaršić Trbojević

Design and layout: Methodis Consulting

ISBN-978-86-7728-402-2

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Acknowledgements

The qualitative analysis is based on valuable insights from experts and victim support specialists across various Western Balkans institutions including legal experts, psychologists, social workers, and victim support professionals from both public institutions and civil society organisations. We extend special thanks to SEESAC consultants from the Victimology Society of Serbia: Dr. Sanja Čopić, Dr. Mirjana Dokmanović, Jasmina Nikolić, Milica Luković Radaković, and Mirela Osmanović, who prepared the preliminary report based on expert analysis of data obtained from six Western Balkan jurisdictions, as well as their associates who worked on data collection in the jurisdictions covered by this research: Valmora Gogo, Dajana Dobrozi, Gentiana Murati, Maja Raičević, and Prof. Dr. Nataša Peovska. The analysis also significantly benefited from substantive inputs and insights of other SEESAC team members, namely: Alain Lapon, Juliana Buzi, Dragan Božanić, Tatjana Višacki, and Violeta Gaši.



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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AVMP | Armed Violence Monitor Platform

CoE | Council of Europe

CSOs | Civil society organisations

EU | European Union

ITI | International Tracing Instrument

OSCE | Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

RCC | Regional Cooperation Council

SALW | Small Arms and Light Weapons

SEESAC | South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons

PoA | Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW

UNDP | United Nations Development Programme

UN | United Nations

VDS | Victimology Society of Serbia (Viktimološko društvo Srbije)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication presents key findings from the research conducted by SEESAC in collaboration with the Victimology Society of Serbia, covering six jurisdictions in the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Carried out between May and September 2024, the research focuses on a critical, yet underexplored area: support services for victims of armed violence outside of an armed conflict context. This represents the first attempt to gain insights into the main characteristics of such services in the Western Balkans region.²

Globally, as well as regionally, armed violence continues to be a significant challenge, affecting societal wellbeing and human development. Data from SEESAC's [Armed Violence Monitoring Platform](#) show stark gender disparities in the Western Balkans. Men are disproportionately affected by armed violence, consistently comprising the majority of both victims and perpetrators. In 2024 alone, men represented 80% of all victims in cases in which sex was specified, accounting for the vast majority of deaths by firearms. They also dominate in injury cases, reflecting greater exposure to severe physical harm. Threat-related incidents reveal a different dynamic: while men still lead, women face a disproportionately high share of firearm threats relative to their overall representation. Men accounted for 98% of perpetrators in firearm-related incidents, a proportion that has remained stable over time, whereas women comprised 20% of victims and only 2% of perpetrators. The scale of the firearm-related violence is stark across the region: in 2024, 113 people were killed, 358 injured, and 387 threatened in firearm incidents. Armed violence predominantly impacts young adults between 19 and 35 years of age.

Domestic violence accounted for the highest number of deaths across all contexts, disproportionately affecting women. Between 2019 and 2024, firearm incidents occurring in domestic settings rose steadily, increasing by 81%. During the same period, the number of victims grew by 85%. Firearm-related incidents involving intimate partners doubled, and women accounted for 98% of all victims in the cases recorded. Thus, although domestic violence incidents involving firearms were far fewer than those in criminal contexts, public disputes, or undetermined shootings, they resulted in the highest

1 For the United Nations Development Programme, references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). For the European Union, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

2 The publication integrates data and analysis from the original study, supplemented by insights from the Armed Violence Monitor and current academic literature. The legal framework information included reflects the status at the time of the study's completion. Note that the majority of the text in this Overview was taken over from SEESAC's unpublished research study *Western Balkans Armed Violence Victim Support Analysis*, conducted through the Victimology Society of Serbia. Quotations in the following footnotes were taken verbatim: 7, 8, 22-24, 36, 38-40, 43, 47, 55, 56, 62-65.



number of fatalities, making domestic violence the most lethal context for women when firearms were involved.³

Data point to the need for interventions to address the issue of armed violence, while ensuring access to appropriate services for its victims. Notwithstanding the significant strides made by the Western Balkans jurisdictions in strengthening Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) control and countering armed violence, the issue of victims' support services has yet to be addressed in a systematic and comprehensive way.

Victims of violent crimes, including firearm-related violence, are entitled to receive support that meets their diverse needs, not just those related to prosecution. Historically, public and policy focus was predominantly on sentencing the offender.⁴ More recently, there has been a growing recognition among policymakers that comprehensive victim support is essential to a fair and effective justice system.

A number of international and regional legal instruments regulate the support for victims of violence. Notably, the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power and Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (the Victims' Rights Directive) provide a foundational understanding of the victims' rights. These instruments stipulate that support services should be accessible to victims before, during, and for an appropriate period after criminal proceedings, regardless of formal reporting or legal status. These services should be victim-centred, well-targeted and integrated, avoiding risk of re-victimisation, secondary victimisation, intimidation, threats, or potential retaliation. According to the Victims' Rights Directive, victim support services should pay particular attention to the specific needs of victims who have suffered considerable harm due to the severity of the crime. This requirement is particularly pertinent in view of the severe consequences of armed violence for all directly and indirectly affected victims.

Raising awareness of victims' rights is crucial, especially among professionals in institutions and services not typically associated with victim support. Police and legal services play a significant role in shaping victims' perceptions of available support, particularly in the aftermath of a crime. Since they are viewed as a single system, a negative experience with one part, such as law enforcement, can lead to disengagement from other support services.

While there is a clear commitment to victim support in the six Western Balkans jurisdictions included in this research, achieving full alignment with international and EU standards remains an ongoing process that requires specific attention. Victims of firearm-related incidents in the Western Balkans generally hold the same legal status as victims of other offences, which can lead to gaps in appropriate protection. An inconsistent legal definition of 'victim', not fully aligned with the EU Victims' Rights Directive, still persists across the region, failing to fully encompass indirect victims, such as immediate family members and dependents, as defined by international standards.⁵ Furthermore, the existing regional SALW control framework includes only limited reference to victims and lacks explicit mention

³ SEESAC (2025). Firearm incidents in the context of domestic violence – Western Balkans, 2019–2024. Available at: [IN_FOCUS_Domestic_violence_Western_Balkans_2019-2024_w.pdf](#)

⁴ It is important to acknowledge that offenders should be afforded opportunities for rehabilitation as a means of preventing recidivism. However, the issue of rehabilitation falls outside the scope of this overview.

⁵ While the Victims' Rights Directive is not legally binding for non-member states, alignment with the EU acquis, which includes this directive, is a condition for the EU membership.



of the need for dedicated services for those affected by armed violence. Given that security sector personnel are most often the first to intervene in firearm-related incidents, it is crucial that SALW control policies and practices integrate victim rights considerations to ensure timely and adequate information provision, as well as prevention of re-victimisation and secondary victimisation.

Current victim support services in the region are provided by a diverse array of public institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs), and independent agencies. Several critical challenges impede the adequate provision of support to firearm victims. These include the scarcity of services specifically tailored to the unique needs of armed violence victims, the fragmented nature of existing victim support systems, and inconsistent data collection specific to this form of violence. Financial constraints present a significant barrier, especially for CSO service providers, as they are often heavily dependent on precarious, project-based funding.⁶ Furthermore, CSOs are seldom included in consultations on policy making related to SALW control and victim support services.

To enhance both the availability and quality of firearm victim support, a set of recommendations is provided at the end of this publication. There is a need to update the existing legal and policy frameworks to fully align with international standards. This includes adopting a comprehensive definition of 'victim' that encompasses both direct and indirect victims, ensuring consistent terminology, and establishing a clear legal obligation for authorities to facilitate referrals to victim support services.

Furthermore, it is crucial to implement sustained and accessible training and capacity-building programmes for professionals across all relevant sectors, starting with the police, who are often the first point of contact for victims, but also healthcare providers, justice sector professionals and relevant CSOs. These programmes should enhance mandated responders' and service providers' understanding of victims' rights and equip them with the appropriate skills to assess and address the unique needs of firearm violence victims and their families.

It is vital to develop robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks alongside systematic, disaggregated data collection on direct and indirect victims of firearm-related violence.

Finally, fostering regional cooperation among Western Balkans jurisdictions is crucial for sharing best practices and leveraging the existing security sector networks to facilitate and accelerate alignment with international standards for victim support.

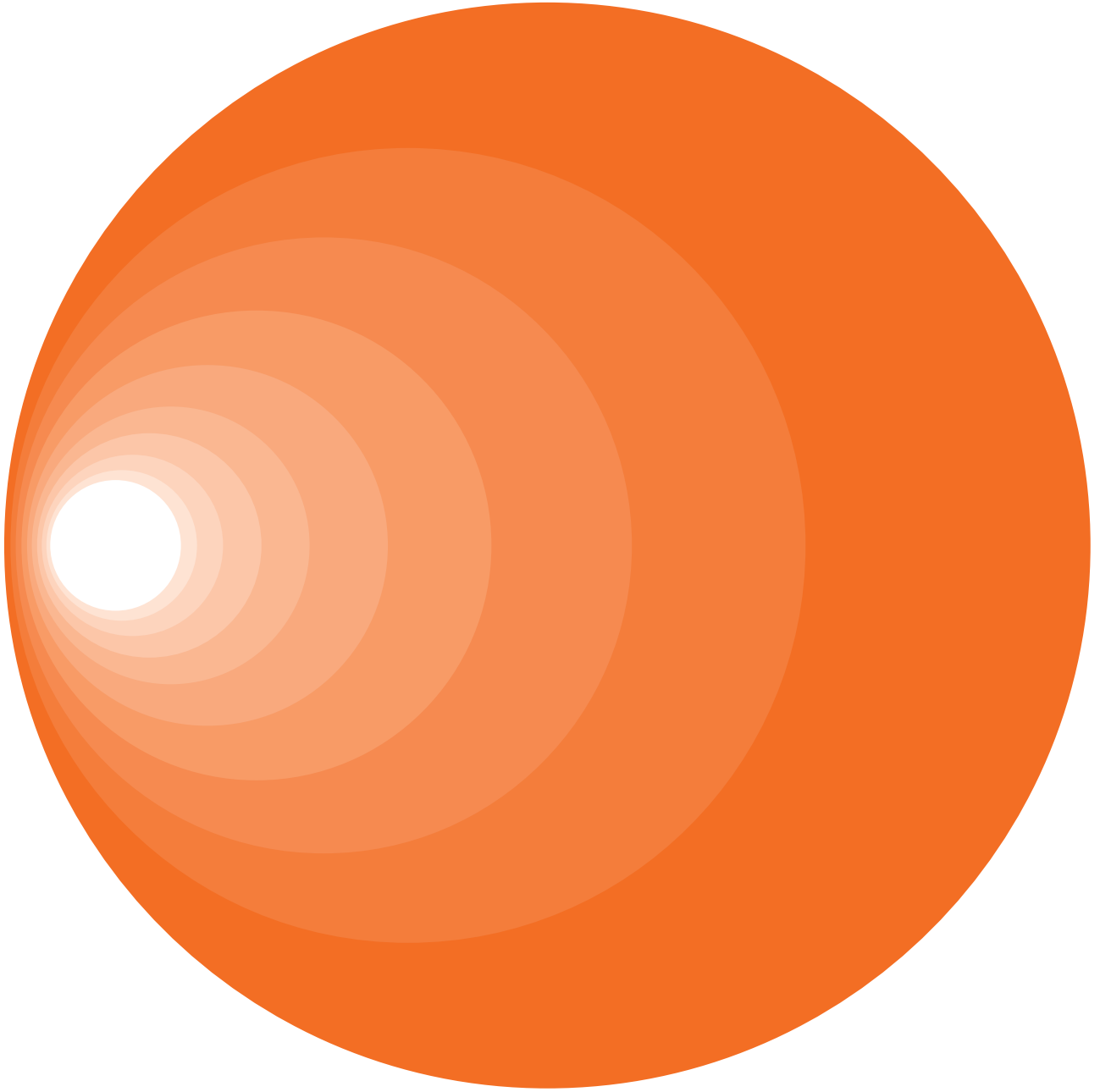
By proactively updating legal frameworks, strengthening institutional capacities, advocating for sustainable funding for service providers, ensuring access to specialised training, and fostering inter-agency and regional collaboration, the Western Balkans jurisdictions will be well-positioned to progressively establish a more comprehensive, victim-centred, and trauma-informed support system for all individuals affected by armed violence that is fully aligned with the EU Victims' Rights Directive.

This Overview begins with an **Introduction** that outlines the distinct characteristics and impacts of armed violence. It presents recent data from the Western Balkans, emphasising the relevance and timeliness of research focused on support for victims of armed violence. **Chapter Two** outlines the international normative framework relevant to victims' support, including key EU directives. It also

⁶ More on the role of CSOs and issues related to the sustainability of victims' services provided by CSOs see Nikolić-Ristanović, V., Čopić, S., Nikolić, J., Šaćiri, B. (2018) *Podrška žrtvama u izabranim državama Balkana: Komparativna perspektiva*. Beograd: Viktimološko društvo Srbije (*Support for Victims in Selected Balkan States: A Comparative Perspective*. Belgrade: Victimology Society of Serbia. Executive Summary available in English). Access at: [Podrska_Zrtvama_Analiza.indd](#)



provides a brief overview of the international and regional SALW control frameworks, assessing the extent to which they incorporate victims' support aspects. **Chapter Three** explores the related legal framework within the Western Balkans jurisdictions, highlighting gaps in alignment with international standards. **Chapter Four** presents indicative findings from empirical research conducted across the six Western Balkans jurisdictions, pointing to key issues related to victim support as perceived by service providers. **Chapter Five** summarises the main challenges in service provision. Finally, **Chapter Six** offers a set of actionable recommendations derived from the research findings and an additional review of current literature.



INTRODUCTION



1. INTRODUCTION

Armed violence can be defined as the intentional, threatened or actual use of arms to inflict death or injury. It can take many forms, ranging from political to criminal to interpersonal violence, and appears in a wide range of contexts. Crucially, it extends beyond physical harm to include psychosocial harm and its pervasive negative impact on development.⁷

As a multifaceted phenomenon, armed violence has profound impacts not only in situations of armed conflict but also in contexts of organised and petty crime, intimate partner and family-related violence, gang violence and other forms of interpersonal violence – often occurring within otherwise peaceful societies. The impact of SALW misuse is devastating to victims, their families and their communities. When improperly stored, SALW can put at risk children and others who come into contact with them. When widely misused in a particular area, they can cause significant damage to the lives, livelihoods and health of individuals, families and communities and can create a pervasive environment of fear and insecurity that hinders wellbeing and sustainable human development.⁸

As duty-bearers, jurisdictions are obliged under international legal frameworks to implement preventative measures and provide comprehensive support to survivors, their families, and all those affected by armed violence. A fundamental aspect of this support is the victim's right to confidential, free-of-charge victim support services, accessible before, during, and for an appropriate time after criminal proceedings, regardless of formal reporting or legal status. These services should be geographically accessible and extend to indirect victims, such as family members, including children. They are critical for enabling victims to access their rights, including receiving immediate medical assistance, appropriate psychological support, and obtaining information or referrals to other specialised services, such as safe accommodation when needed and tailored support for vulnerable victims.⁹

To provide an initial overview of existing victim support services in Western Balkan jurisdictions including Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, SEESAC, in collaboration with the Victimology Society of Serbia (Viktimološko društvo Srbije – VDS), conducted a research marking the first attempt at a regional analysis of this kind.¹⁰ The primary aim of the empirical research was to understand the current state of available support mechanisms

⁷ Report of the UN Secretary General. *Promoting development through the reduction and prevention of armed violence*. New York, 2009

⁸ United Nations Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) (2015). *International Small Arms Control Standard. National regulation of civilian access to small arms and light weapons*.

⁹ A comprehensive list of all services that should be available according to the international standards is provided in Chapter Two.

¹⁰ Research on services for victims of armed violence is globally scarce, including within the EU. While VDS conducted a comparative analysis of legal frameworks in five jurisdictions in 2018 (Ristanovic-Nikolic, V. *Support for Victims in Selected Balkan States: A Comparative Perspective*), this SEESAC-commissioned study is the first to combine an overview of legal



and identify existing gaps, thereby laying the groundwork for evidence-based recommendations to strengthen victim support services. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire distributed to public institutions, independent agencies, and selected CSOs. The survey achieved a response rate of over 41%, resulting in a final sample of 182 entities. Of these, 58% were public institutions.

The data collected was analysed to formulate the findings. Note that the empirical data presented in this brief overview should not be considered conclusive due to uneven response rates from institutions and CSOs across the six jurisdictions. Although not definitive, the data provide indicative insights which, along with a comprehensive review of relevant literature, have informed the recommendations presented at the end of the overview.

1.1. The Unique Impact of Armed Violence

The devastating and widespread lethal and non-lethal consequences of firearm-related incidents distinguish the experience of victims of armed violence. Non-fatal firearm injuries can cause significant and lasting damage to individuals' physical health and livelihoods. The presence and availability of firearms are well-recognised risk factors for domestic violence.¹¹

When a person experiences a violent crime - such as firearm-related violence – it is of pivotal importance to meet his or her diverse needs, not just those related to prosecution outcomes. This is especially important given that not all cases can be prosecuted, for reasons such as the offender being deceased, at large, or a minor. In addition, many cases end up unreported. According to the recent research of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, victims refrain from reporting due to fear of not being believed, because of lack of trust in police or justice institutions and fear of retaliation or further victimisation.¹² Empirical data on a sample of over 110,000 respondents show that particular victim groups, such as women victims of intimate partner violence rarely report violence to the police, with 13.9 % of victims of physical violence or threats, or sexual violence by any perpetrator during their lifetime reporting to the police.¹³ According to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) survey on violence against women, the percentage of women reporting violence is even lower in the South East Europe.¹⁴ The OSCE survey documented that even following the most serious incidents of physical and/or sexual violence, the police were not informed in the majority of cases. Furthermore, victims are considerably more likely to report their most serious incidents when these are committed by a non-partner rather than by an intimate partner. Violence committed by current partners is the most likely to go unreported, and this is particularly true when it comes to

frameworks with an empirical analysis of the availability and quality of victim support services specifically within the Western Balkans.

¹¹ The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) in Article 51 obliges State Parties to assess lethality risk, considering if the perpetrator possesses or has access to firearms, which increases homicide risk.

¹² EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2024). *Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions*. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/stepping-response-victims-crime>

¹³ EU gender-based violence survey (2024) as quoted in the publication by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights - *Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions*. Note that data from the survey include various form of violence. However, they are relevant, particularly in the context of underreporting threats involving firearms.

¹⁴ OSCE. (2019). *OSCE-led survey on violence against women: Main report*. The OSCE survey was implemented in 2018 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Moldova³ and Ukraine. For more details see: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237>



threats with firearms. In rare cases when women resort to use of firearms in the context of intimate partner violence, there is often a history of domestic abuse by their partner.¹⁵

Historically, public and policy attention focused heavily on sentencing the offender. However, there is a growing recognition that victims require a broad range of assistance, and that a comprehensive victim support is essential to a fair and effective justice system.¹⁶

While the impact of armed violence is unique and particularly severe, it is important to bear in mind that victims are not a homogenous group. The impact of crime varies significantly depending on factors such as age, gender, health and social status, the existence of supporting networks in victims' family and community, as well as their prior interactions with security and justice systems. Therefore, well-designed services must reflect these varied experiences, personal circumstances and characteristics that require coordinated efforts across multiple agencies. One-size-fits-all approaches often fall short, leaving critical needs unresolved and hindering victims' recovery.¹⁷

Raising awareness of victims' needs, especially among services not traditionally perceived as part of victim support, is therefore crucial. Police and legal services play a significant role in shaping victims' perceptions. Often viewed as a single system, a negative experience with one part of the system, such as law enforcement, can lead to disengagement from other support services. This underscores the importance of integrated, seamless service delivery to avoid secondary victimisation and ensure a cohesive, compassionate response, particularly for victims of firearm-related crimes.¹⁸

Armed violence consequences are distinctly gendered: women and children are frequently victims, while men comprise the majority of perpetrators and those killed or wounded by firearms.¹⁹ The widespread fear and insecurity stemming from firearm incidents, particularly mass shootings in public spaces and schools, widespread domestic violence, homicide, femicide, or attempted murders involving firearms, profoundly undermine wellbeing of people and communities.

1.2. Armed Violence: Security and Development Challenge

Globally, the costs and effects of armed violence are significantly greater in non-conflict than in conflict settings.²⁰ Economically, the welfare costs of armed violence are substantial, adversely impacting economic activities and development, estimated to represent approximately 1.63 percent of global GDP.²¹ Armed violence exacerbates insecurity within communities and is intrinsically linked to poverty, underdevelopment and inequalities, including unequal access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Moreover, it is often stated as the main reason for individuals to arm themselves for self-defense and property protection.

¹⁵ De Schutter, A. (2023). *Family gun violence in the European Union*. Flemish Peace Institute. [2023/12/PROJECT_INSIGHT_-_Family_Gun_Violence_DEF_REV.pdf](#)

¹⁶ Ellard, R. & Campbell E. (2020). *Improving support for victims of crime: Key practice insights*, Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ SEESAC (2024). *In Focus Armed Violence Monitor – Victims of firearms incidents in the Western Balkans*. Available at: https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/in-focus-armed-violence-monitors_1/In-Focus-Armed-Violence-Monitor-on-Victims-of-Firearm-.pdf

²⁰ United Nations. *A New Era for Conflict and Violence*. New York, 2020. Available at: *A New Era of Conflict and Violence*

²¹ *Ibid.*



Official data related to armed violence usually do not include the non-fatal consequences of firearm misuse, although the impact of this type of violence goes well beyond the loss of life. Besides physical harm often resulting in life changing injuries, negative effects on the psyche of survivors, as well as on their family members include pain, suffering, acute stress disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, fear, shame, anger, aggression and other consequences that are particularly long-term and devastating if survivors or witnesses are minors.²²

Victims can also feel these effects when a firearm is used to threaten. Moreover, it is widely documented that even the presence of a firearm represents a threat and/or psychological violence to family members, spouses or partners and makes the home less safe.²³ Presence and availability of firearms are also risk factors related to mass shootings, and firearm misuse within a family context increases the risk of fatal outcomes, particularly femicide.²⁴

Regionally, armed violence continues to be a significant challenge, affecting societal well-being and human development. [Armed Violence Monitoring Platform](#) (AVMP) data reveals that men are disproportionately affected by armed violence, comprising the majority of both victims and perpetrators. Armed violence predominantly impacts young adults between 19 and 35 years of age.

According to *In Focus Armed Violence Monitor*, 1,071 victims were recorded across 819 firearm incidents in 2022, underscoring the widespread and critical nature of this challenge in the Western Balkans.²⁵ In terms of geographical distribution, Kosovo emerged as the most affected area with 343 victims, representing approximately one-third of the total. Following Kosovo, Albania reported 202 victims, Bosnia and Herzegovina 178 victims, and Serbia 160 victims.²⁶

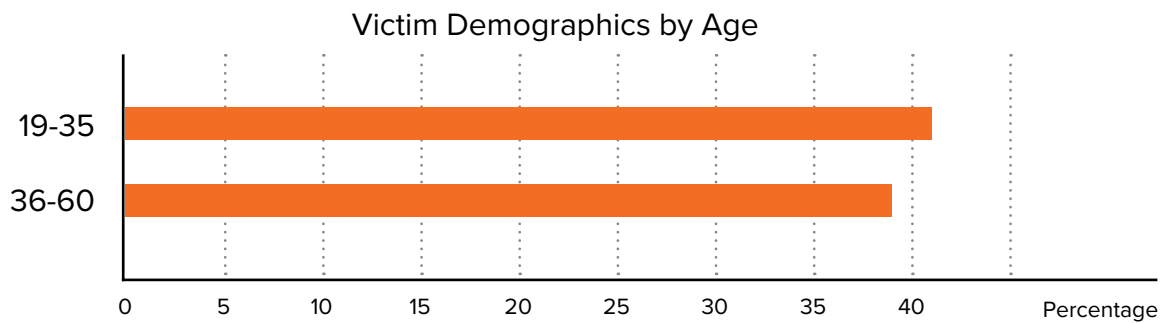
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- 22 Guay, S., Beaulieu-Prévost, D., Sader, J., Marchand, A. (2019). *A systematic literature review of early posttraumatic interventions for victims of violent crime*. Aggression and violent behavior; Andrews, B., Brewin, C. R., Rose, S., Kirk, M. (2000). *Predicting PTSD symptoms in victims of violent crime: the role of shame, anger, and childhood abuse*. Journal of Abnormal Psychology; Brewin, C. R., Andrews, B., Rose, S., Kirk, M. (1999). *Acute stress disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder in victims of violent crime*. American Journal of Psychiatry, as quoted in the unpublished research study *Western Balkans Armed Violence Victim Support Analysis, SEESAC, 2004*
- 23 Kivisto AJ, Porter M (2020). Firearm use increases risk of multiple victims in domestic homicides. Journal of the American Academy Psychiatry Law; Zeoli, A.M., Bonomi, A. (2015). Pretty in Pink? Firearm Hazards for Domestic Violence Victims. Women's Health Issues; Spasić, D. V. (2020). Kontrola vatrenog oružja i rodno zasnovano nasilje: link koji nedostaje? (Firearms Control and Gender-Based Violence: A missing link?. Teme; Unijat, J. (2006). Lako oružje—težak problem u Srbiji. (Light Weapons – Difficult Problem in Serbia). Bezbednost Zapadnog Balkana; Halilović, M. (2015). *Preživjele govore: Osvrt na odgovore krivičnog sistema na nasilje u porodici u Bosni i Hercegovini*. (Survivors Speak: A Review of the Criminal Justice System's Responses to Domestic Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Atlantska inicijativa: Udruženje za promicanje euroatlantskih integracija BiH; Čopić et al. (2022). Vodič za mapiranje potreba žrtava, procenu rizika i zaštitu od nasilja u porodici. Beograd: Viktimološko društvo Srbije, as quoted in the unpublished research study *Western Balkans Armed Violence Victim Support Analysis, SEESAC, 2004*
- 24 Pavlov, T. & Lacmanović, V. (2023). *Karakteristike i prevencija slučajeva femicida–suicida počinjenih vatrenim oružjem u intimnom partnerskom odnosu*. (Characteristics and Prevention of Femicide-Suicide Cases Committed with Firearms in Intimate Partner Relationships). Belgrade, UNDP; Topalović, M. & Kolarski, Lj. (2024). *Kada dom postane bojište – femicid i nacionalna bezbednost Republike Srbije (When Home Becomes a Battlefield – Femicide and National Security of the Republic of Serbia)*. Politika nacionalne bezbednosti; Čopić, S., Dokmanović, M. (2022) *A snapshot of illicit firearm-trafficking and gun violence in Serbia*. In: *Pulling the Trigger: Gun Violence in Europe*. Flemish Peace Institute, Brussels; Geller, L.B., Booty, M., Crifasi, C.K. (2021) *The role of domestic violence in fatal mass shootings in the United States, 2014–2019*. Inj. Epidemiology; SEESAC (2024). *Firearms incidents in South East Europe 2023*. Available at: https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/Armed-Violence-Firearm-Incidents-in-SEE-2023_AVMP_-Infographic.pdf; SEESAC (2024). *In Focus Armed Violence Monitor – Victims of firearms incidents in the Western Balkans*. Available at: https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/in-focus-armed-violence-monitors_1/In-Focus-Armed-Violence-Monitor-on-Victims-of-Firearm-.pdf, as quoted in the unpublished research study *Western Balkans Armed Violence Victim Support Analysis, SEESAC, 2004*
- 25 SEESAC (2024). *In Focus Armed Violence Monitor – Victims of firearms incidents in the Western Balkans*. https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/in-focus-armed-violence-monitors_1/In-Focus-Armed-Violence-Monitor-on-Victims-of-Firearm-.pdf
- 26 *Ibid.*



Handguns were the most frequently used type of weapon, accounting for 37% of all victims. Additionally, one-third of firearm-related victims were involved in incidents where the weapons were illegally possessed. Most victims were reported in urban areas, with the exception of accidental or celebratory shootings and hunting-related incidents, which were more prevalent in rural settings.²⁷

Age-wise, armed violence predominantly impacted young adults, with 41% of the victims aged between 19 and 35, followed by those aged 36 and 60 at 39%. This indicates that the likelihood of falling victim to armed violence peaks in early adulthood and decreases with age for both sexes.²⁸

Graph 1: Victims by age – two dominant groups in the Western Balkans region:



The outcomes of these violent incidents were varied, ranging from threats to fatalities. A significant 42% of the victims experienced threats, nearly 30% sustained injuries, and 12% resulted in fatalities. Notably, the fatality rate was slightly higher for women (13%) compared to men (12%), pointing to a gender disparity in the severity of outcomes, especially in the context of domestic violence. Men were more likely to be injured in the context of interpersonal violence (34%) compared to women (12%), while women were more frequently threatened (60%) than men (35%), however noting that this type of incident might be seriously underreported.²⁹ Public disputes were the most common type of incident, affecting 345 victims.³⁰

In the criminal context, 293 victims were documented from 218 incidents, with men again being the majority (74%). However, this context saw a relatively higher proportion of women victims (26%) compared to other contexts. Bosnia and Herzegovina reported the highest number of victims (88), followed by Kosovo (74) and Albania (67). This context also saw a high prevalence of threats, with 72% of the victims, including a disproportionate number of women. Most of these incidents occurred in urban areas, affecting 220 victims.³¹

Domestic violence incidents presented stark gender disparities. Out of 97 such incidents, there were 120 victims, with women comprising the majority (79 women versus 41 men). Kosovo (38 victims) and Albania (31 victims) reported the highest numbers. Domestic violence incidents in 2022 resulted in the

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ EU gender-based violence survey (2024) as quoted in the publication by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights - *Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions*. Also, SEESAC (2025): *The misuse of firearms in domestic violence in the Western Balkans: Key trends and main concerns* (unpublished study)

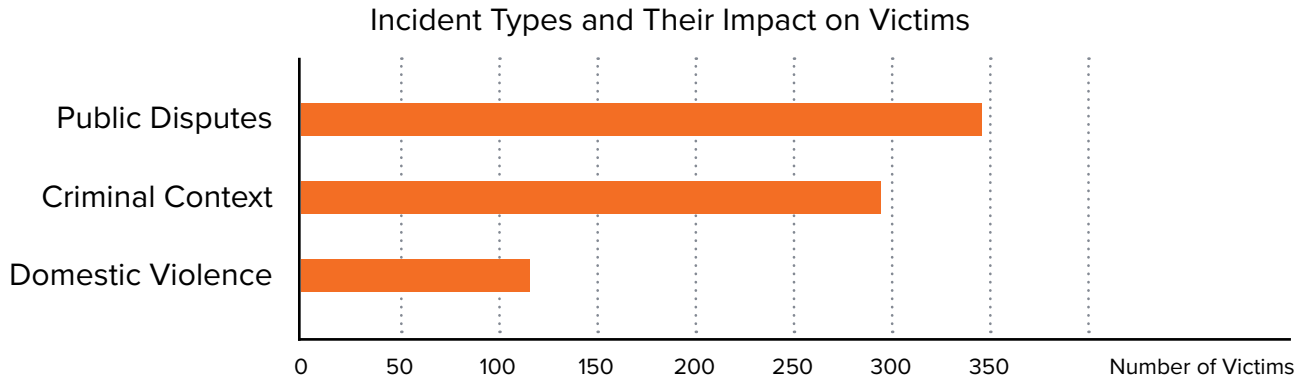
³⁰ SEESAC (2022): *Small Arms Control – The Case for Gender Mainstreaming*. UNDP Global Policy Network Brief.

³¹ *Ibid.*



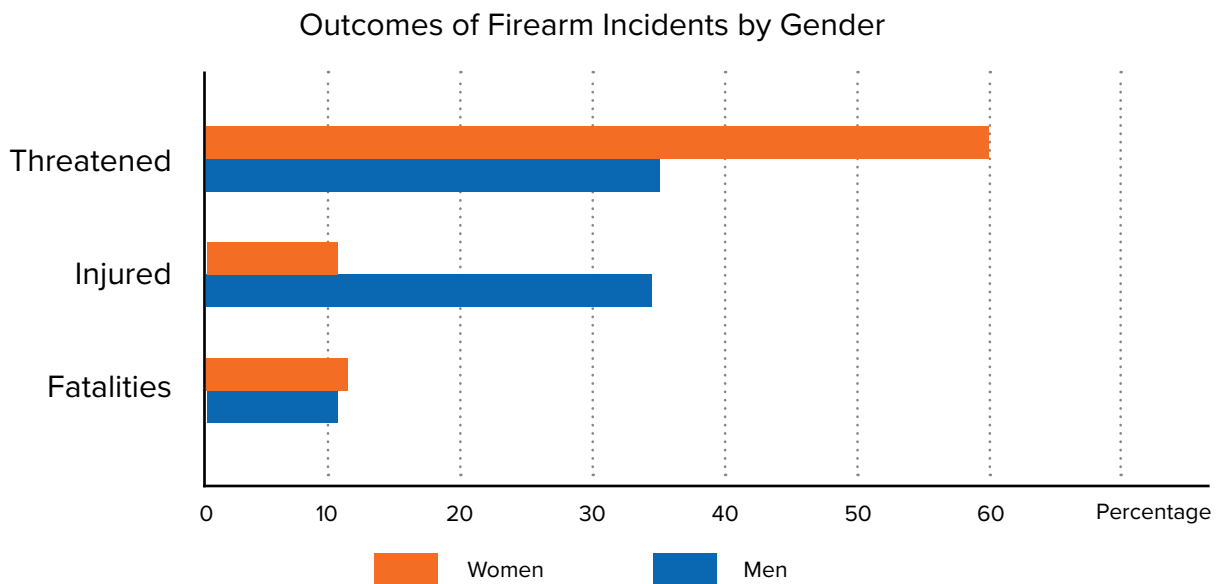
highest number of deaths across all contexts, with 18 women and 10 men killed.³² Women were also predominantly threatened with firearms in this context (34 women compared to 11 men).

Graph 2: Number of victims according to the type of firearm-related incident in the Western Balkans region:



Mass shooting incidents in Montenegro in 2022 and Serbia in 2023 added further gravity to the situation related to armed violence in the region. In Montenegro, a public shooting resulted in ten fatalities, including two boys, four men, and four women, and six injuries. In Serbia, a mass shooting at an elementary school in the capital city resulted in ten fatalities, including eight girls, one boy, and an adult man, a school warden, with six persons injured. Another shooting in a rural setting resulted in nine fatalities, comprising eight men and one woman, and 13 persons were injured.

Graph 3: Regional overview of victims disaggregated by sex:



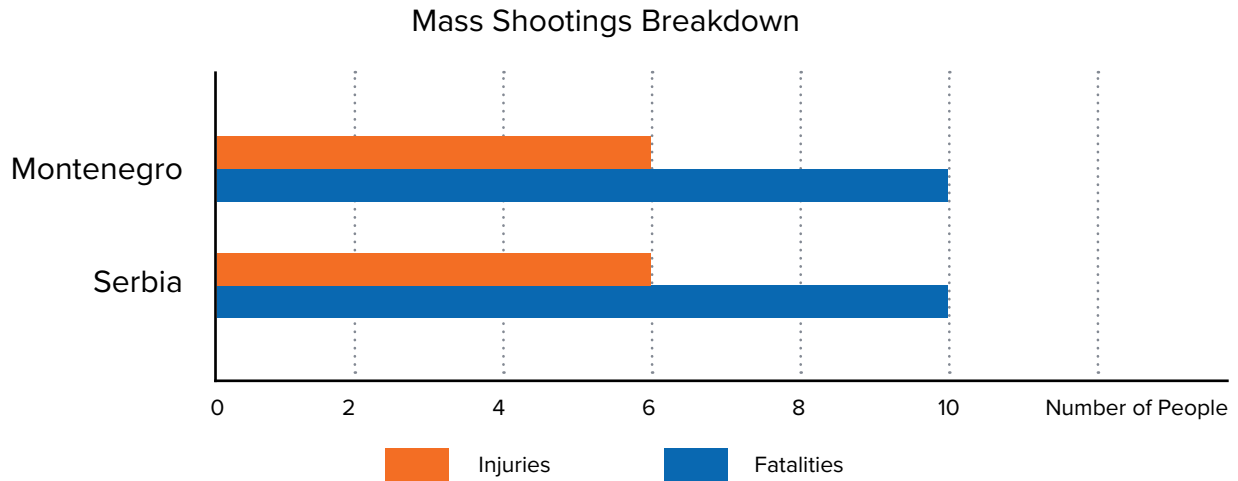
Undetermined shootings accounted for 155 victims, predominantly affecting men (94%). Most victims in these incidents were either injured (61) or not injured (31), with the relationships between victims

³² It is important to note that in cases of domestic violence, men were not necessarily killed by their female partners, but often by other male family members. This is highlighted in SEESAC's unpublished 2025 study, *The Misuse of Firearms in Domestic Violence in the Western Balkans: Key Trends and Main Concerns*.



and perpetrators remaining largely unknown. Incidents with undetermined motives primarily involved handguns and occurred in urban areas, with streets being the most common location.³³

Graph 4: Ratio of fatalities and injured victims in mass shootings recorded in the period 2022-2023:



AVMP data for 2024 reveals that men accounted for 80% of all victims where the sex was specified, accounting for the vast majority of deaths. Men also dominate injury cases, reflecting their greater exposure to severe physical harm. Threat-related incidents show a different pattern: while men remain the majority in absolute numbers, women face a disproportionately high share of firearm threats compared to their overall representation.

Perpetrators are overwhelmingly male, 98%, a percentage that has remained stable over time. Women comprised 20% of victims but only 2% of perpetrators. The scale of firearm-related violence remained stark across the region: in 2024 alone, 113 people were killed, 358 injured, and 397 threatened in firearm incidents. The table below provides a detailed breakdown³⁴:

Table 1: Firearm incidents recorded in the period 2019-2024:

Gender	Death	Suicide	Threat	Injury	No injury	N/A	Total
Men	91	42	181	275	169	41	799
Women	22	5	108	32	14	27	208
N/A	0	0	108	51	22	14	195
Total	113	47	397	358	205	82	1202

³³ *Ibid.*

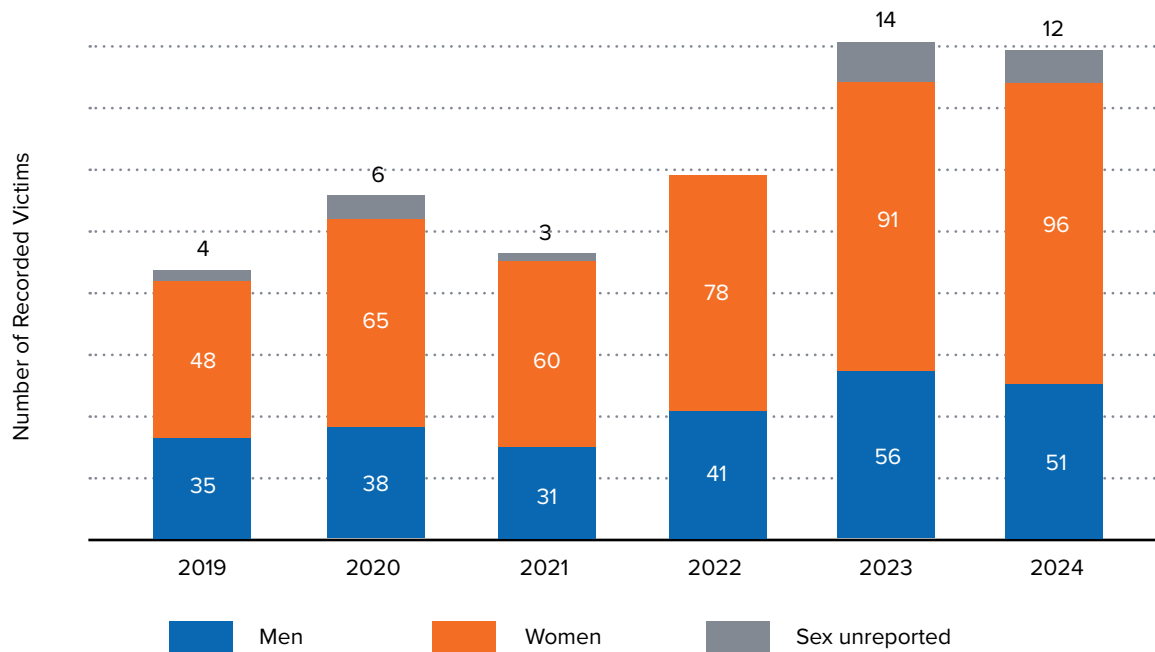
³⁴ As per AVMP categorization, victim refers to any individual directly affected by a firearm incident, including those who have been threatened, injured or killed as a result of the use of a firearm. Victims also include individuals who were present at a scene when a firearm was discharged but did not sustain a gunshot injury. Additionally, victims include individuals who were at a scene where a firearm was present but not actively used, recognising that its presence alone can have an impact. Furthermore, individuals whose firearms were stolen are also considered victims. In such cases, the outcome is recorded as “Not applicable.”



Women are disproportionately impacted in domestic violence cases. Although these cases represent a relatively small share of overall firearm-related incidents, the lethality for women is significantly higher. An overview of AVMP data for the period 2019 to 2024 shows that firearms played a devastating role in intimate partner violence: 25% of women affected by domestic violence were killed with a firearm, while 6% of women were injured and nearly half were threatened with firearms. Ten percent experienced a firearm being discharged without injury, while 27% faced situations where a firearm was present but not used - a chilling reminder of coercive control.

Among perpetrators of firearm-related intimate partner violence, 97% were men, with 77% of cases involving current partners and 18% former partners. Out of all perpetrators, 7% had a history of domestic violence, and 3% were law enforcement personnel (12 officers, 10 men and two women). All recorded murder-suicide cases were committed by men against women.

Graph 5: Victims of firearm incidents in the context of domestic violence 2019-2024³⁵



The data underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address the complex and multifaceted issue of armed violence and the need for the appropriate services for the victims.

While the Western Balkans jurisdictions have made the significant strides in strengthening SALW control and countering armed violence, the issue of victims' support services has yet to be addressed in a systematic and holistic way. The path to comprehensive firearms violence victims' support is still ahead, and international standards related to victims' rights are yet to be reached.³⁶

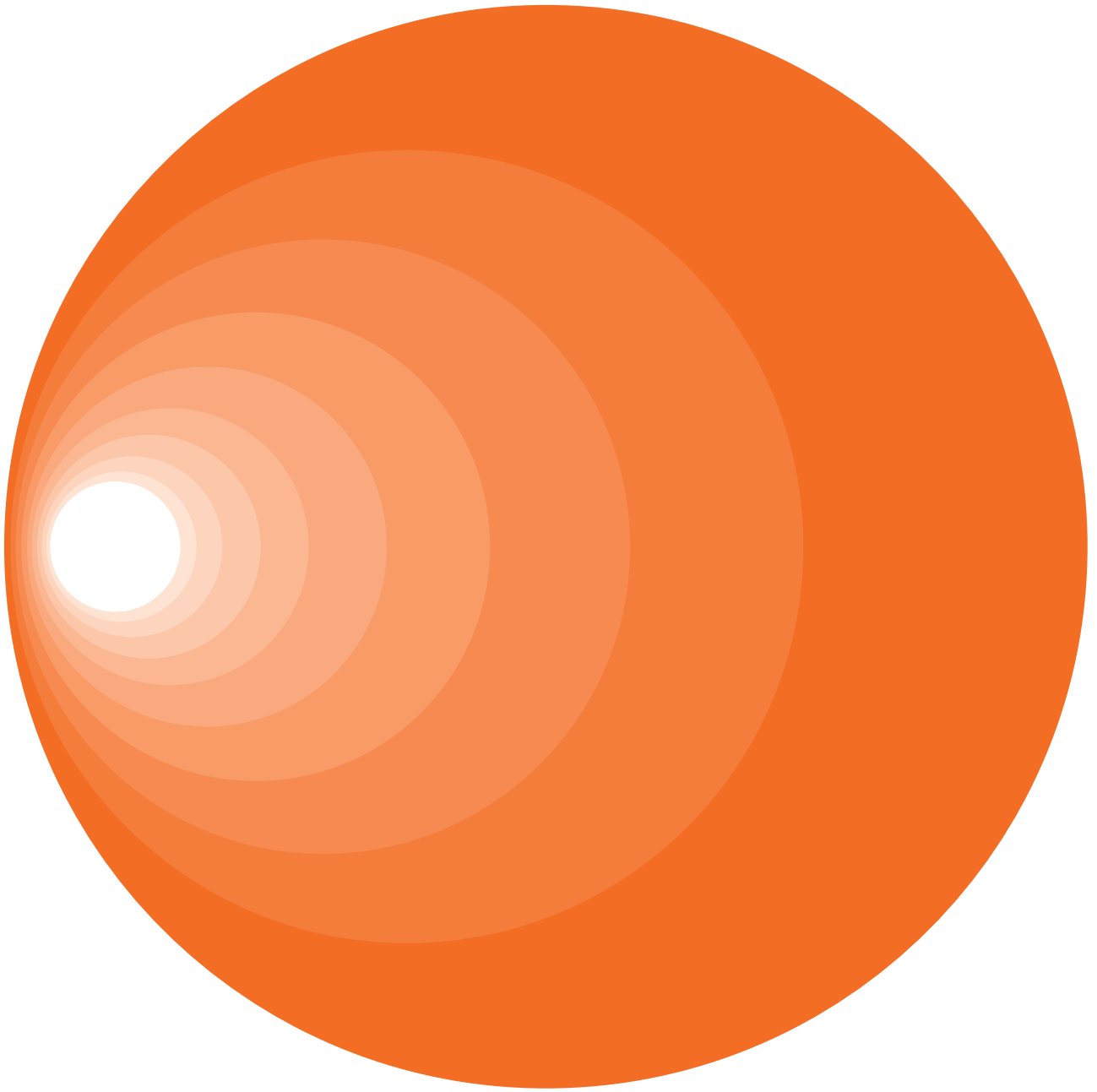
³⁵ SEESAC (2025). *Firearm incidents in the context of domestic violence – Western Balkans, 2019–2024*. Available at: [IN_FOCUS_Domestic_violence_Western_Balkans_2019-2024_w.pdf](#)

³⁶ According to Krüsselmann et al., higher availability of firearms has been connected to higher rates of interpersonal violence in studies that have focused mainly on the United States or used aggregated international data to study firearm violence. Empirical research exclusively using European data is still lacking (Krüsselmann K, Aarten P, Liem M (2021) *Firearms and violence in Europe—A systematic review*).



Supporting victims of firearm incidents is not merely a formal obligation; it is a vital step toward fostering a healthier and more responsible society. Providing comprehensive support helps victims recover and rebuild their lives, thereby contributing to the overall well-being of the communities and reinforcing trust in the justice system and the rule of law, thus improving the overall citizen security. Notwithstanding the fact that support services for victims of armed violence represent a crucial component of enhancing community safety, this topic is unexplored in the Western Balkans and is also underexplored across Europe and globally. With this in mind, SEESAC collaborated with VDS to conduct the first regional research on support services for victims of firearm-related violence.³⁷

³⁷ VDS conducted a regional comparative study including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with the support of the World Bank; however, it was focused on victims' rights in general: Ristanovic-Nikolic, V. (2018). *Support for Victims in Selected Balkan States: A Comparative Perspective* (Podrška žrtvama u izabranim državama Balkana: Komparativna perspektiva)



INTERNATIONAL
NORMATIVE
FRAMEWORK



2. INTERNATIONAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

International bodies acknowledge particularly severe risks and effects of firearm-related incidents. The UN Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) highlighted in 2015 the need for adequate regulatory mechanisms that consider the unique impacts of armed violence on victims, their families, and communities. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights further emphasised the negative impact of firearm misuse, including non-fatal injuries, on a wide array of human rights in his 2016 Report.³⁸ The Commissioner specifically noted that armed violence constitutes violations of the right to life, security, and physical integrity, as well as the rights to liberty and protection from torture.

Given the unique nature and severity of both the lethal and non-lethal consequences of firearm-related acts, the position of victims of armed violence is distinct from that of victims of non-armed violence. Therefore, support services for victims of firearm-related violence should be specifically tailored to their needs and vulnerabilities, covering the period before, during, and for an appropriate duration after the incident and related criminal proceedings.

2.1. Victims' Rights Framework

During the 1980s and 1990s, the international community made significant efforts in raising awareness about the rights and protection of crime victims, including victims of firearms. The adoption of numerous international documents in this period has established standards for the treatment and protection of victims, recognising their rights and providing guarantees for their protection. The principles related to victims' rights have been defined by the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power adopted in 1985 (hereinafter – the Declaration).³⁹

The Declaration defines 'victims' as "persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power." (Article A.1). Under this Declaration, a person may be considered a victim, regardless of whether the perpetrator is identified, apprehended,

³⁸ *Human rights and the regulation of civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms* - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 15 April 2016, A/HRC/32/21

³⁹ UN General Assembly resolution 40/34 Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, of 29 November 1985, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-basic-principles-justice-victims-crime-and-abuse>.



prosecuted or convicted and regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The term ‘victim’ also includes, where appropriate, “the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimisation.” (Article A.2).

The Declaration is not legally binding and represents a set of guidelines and principles aimed at encouraging the UN Member States to adopt measures to ensure access to justice and support for victims of crime and abuse of power, regardless of their age, sex, race or any other personal characteristics. While not legally binding, the Declaration has been influential in shaping policies and practices related to victim rights and support.

In addition to the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power numerous international and regional documents are relevant to the protection of crime victims, including victims of firearm-related violence.

From the UN perspective, it is important to mention the concept of Citizen Security, which focuses on ensuring people’s safety from crime and violence while upholding human rights. It prioritises prevention, protection, and support for vulnerable groups and victims of violence, including those affected by firearms.⁴⁰

The UN recognises that armed violence, especially involving firearms, significantly undermines public safety, development, and human rights. Initiatives to tackle this often involve:

- SALW control and arms regulation (e.g., the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW, Arms Trade Treaty)
- Community-based violence prevention
- Law enforcement reform
- Victim assistance and support.⁴¹

Legally binding instruments

UN:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** (1979) and related General Recommendations, representing authoritative interpretations by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, clarifying the obligations of State Parties under the Convention - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>
- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, protecting rights of all individuals under 18 years of age - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-sale-children-child>

⁴⁰ Report of the UN Secretary-General: *Strengthening security sector reform*. New York, March 2022 (Available at: [2022_280_english.pdf](#))

⁴¹ More information on SALW-related policy and legal frameworks and inclusion of victims’ rights perspective is provided in Chapter Two.



- **UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime** and the related Protocols, including the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) – <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/untoc.html> and https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica//organised-crime/07-88185_Ebook.pdf

Council of Europe (CoE):

- **Convention on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings** (2005) - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-display&treatyid=197>
- **CoE Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse - ‘the Lanzarote Convention’** (2007) - [CETS 201 - Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-display&treatyid=197)
- **Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence - ‘the Istanbul Convention’** (2011) - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-display&treatyid=210>

EU (legally binding for the EU Member States)⁴²:

- **Council Directive 2004/80/EC** of 29 April 2004 relating to compensation to crime victims
[Directive - 2004/80 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- **Directive 2011/93/EU** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA
[Directive - 2011/93 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- **Directive 2011/93/EU** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on the European protection order - enhancing protection and support for victims of crime across Member States.
[Directive - 2011/99 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- **Directive 2012/29/EU** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 - establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (Victims’ Rights Directive)
[Directive - 2012/29 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- **Directive (EU) 2017/541** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA
[Directive - 2017/541 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- **Directive (EU) 2024/1385** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence
[Directive - EU - 2024/1385 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

⁴² The EU Directives are legally binding instruments in the EU, obliging Member States to achieve a particular result, though they are free to choose how to do so. They are not legally binding for Western Balkan jurisdictions, which are in various stages of the EU accession process. However, an important part of the process is harmonisation of legal frameworks with the EU, meaning that in the future, when the accession process is successful, these directives will become legally binding.



- **Directive (EU) 2024/1712** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims
[Directive - EU - 2024/1712 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

Instruments that are not legally binding (but with significant normative influence)

As previously mentioned, the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power is of pivotal importance and has great normative influence, although it is not legally binding for the UN State Parties. Other legal instruments of relevance include:

CoE⁴³:

- Recommendation of the CoE Committee of Ministers No. R (85) 11 on the Position of Victims in Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure (1985) - <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016804dcca>
- Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers No. R (87) 21 on Assistance to Victims and Prevention of Victimisation (1987) - <https://rm.coe.int/16805afa5c>
- Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers No. R (97) 13 on Witness Intimidation and the Right of Defense (1997) - <https://rm.coe.int/1680a6dafc>
- Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers No. R (2006) 8 on Assistance to Victims of Crime (2006) - [Rec\(2006\)8](#)

EU:

- EU Strategy on Victims' Rights (2020-2025), adopted by the European Commission on 24 June 2020⁴⁴ - https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/criminal-justice/protecting-victims-rights/eu-strategy-victims-rights-2020-2025_en

2.2. Description of Victims' Rights as Outlined in the Key Regional Legal Instruments

The Istanbul Convention is a particularly significant regional legally binding instrument for the Western Balkans jurisdictions, concerning gender-based violence and domestic violence, where firearms are often misused. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have ratified the Convention without reservations, while Serbia has ratified it with two reservations. Kosovo, although not member of the CoE, has given the Convention direct effect through a constitutional amendment.⁴⁵

⁴³ Recommendations from the CoE Committee of Ministers are soft law instruments. They provide guidance and encourage jurisdictions to adopt certain policies or practices, but they are not legally binding treaties themselves.

⁴⁴ This EU strategy is a policy document outlining goals and actions. While it sets the framework for future legislative initiatives (like directives or regulations, which are binding), the strategy document itself is not legally binding for the EU Member States.

⁴⁵ Albania ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013, Montenegro in 2014, and North Macedonia in 2018. Serbia ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2013 with reservations on Article 30, paragraph 2 (regarding compensation to victims), and Article 44, paragraphs 1(e) and 4 (regarding jurisdiction to implement measures when the offense is committed by a person outside Serbia). Kosovo has not ratified the Istanbul Convention as it is not a member of the CoE, which is a prerequisite for ratification. However, Kosovo's National Assembly adopted an amendment to its Constitution in 2020, giving direct effect to the Istanbul Convention. This means the convention is directly incorporated into Kosovo's legal framework and takes precedence in cases of conflict with domestic law.



Although the Istanbul Convention does not specifically address armed violence victims, Article 51 obliges State Parties to assess lethality risk, considering if the perpetrator possesses or has access to firearms, which increases homicide risk. It mandates safety planning for victims and coordinated safety and support.

In addition to addressing domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention encompasses a wide range of serious offenses including forced marriage, stalking, psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence such as rape, female genital mutilation, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, sexual harassment, and crimes committed in the name of 'honour', all of which can include using firearms.

The term 'victim' in the Convention refers to any natural person who is subject to violence against women or domestic violence.

While only women and girls can be victims of violence against women, victims of domestic violence may include men and women as well as children. Under the Istanbul Convention, victims have the right to access specialised services, as well as more general support services, to meet their needs for recovery. These general measures should include, when necessary, services such as legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, healthcare, social services, training, and assistance in finding employment (Article 20). Specialist support services are related to shelters, telephone helplines, rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres. Specialist services should be accessible to all women victims of violence and their children. Child witnesses are given special protection and support, such as age-appropriate psychosocial counselling (Article 26).

Article 56 of the Istanbul Convention obliges State Parties to take the necessary legislative and other measures to assist and/or support victims at all stages of investigation and judicial proceedings, in particular providing measures for their protection, as well as protection of their families and witnesses, from intimidation, retaliation, and repeated victimisation. These measures include providing victims with appropriate support services to ensure that their rights and interests are duly represented and taken into account.

The CoE Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Article 12) and the CoE Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Article 14) obligate Member States to provide assistance for victims' physical, psychological, and social recovery. However, neither convention specifically addresses victims of armed violence and crime.

While ratified CoE instruments are legally binding for the jurisdictions/ duty-bearers, EU directives are not. However, they are considered highly important due to the aspirations of all Western Balkans jurisdictions to join the EU and the need to harmonise their legal frameworks with the EU Acquis as part of the accession process.

The Victims' Rights Directive (EU Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012) marks a significant step in establishing minimum standards for the rights, support, and protection of victims of crime across the EU. This Directive is applicable to all crime victims without discrimination. It is relevant to all criminal proceedings taking place in an EU Member State,



regardless of the time and location of the crime.⁴⁶ The aim of the Victims' Rights Directive is to ensure that crime victims receive necessary information, support, and protection, while also facilitating their active participation in criminal proceedings. It emphasises an individualised approach to providing information and support services, considering the victim's specific needs, personal situation, and the severity of the offence.

The main elements of the Victims' Rights Directive are:

Recognition and Respect: Victims must be recognised and treated with respect and dignity.

Protection: Measures must be in place to protect victims from intimidation, retaliation, and further harm during criminal investigations and court proceedings.

Support: Victims should receive immediate and long-term physical, psychological, and practical assistance, such as translation, to ensure that the victim can understand and be understood.

Access to Justice: Victims must be informed of their rights and be able to participate in criminal proceedings.

Compensation and Restoration: Victims should have access to financial compensation and restorative justice options.

The Directive also requires the EU Member States to provide appropriate training for officials who interact with victims.

The Victims' Rights Directive recognises both direct and indirect victims of crime.

A direct victim is "a natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, psychological, or emotional harm, or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offense". Indirect victims are "family members of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offense and who have suffered harm as a result of that person's death". 'Family members' refers to the spouse, the person living with the victim in a committed intimate relationship, in a joint household and on a stable and continuous basis, relatives in direct line, siblings, and dependants of the victim.

All victim support services must be confidential, appropriate, free of charge, and available to victims before, during, and for a certain period after criminal proceedings. (Article 8). Victims should have access to these services regardless of whether they formally reported the crime, i.e., independently of the legal status of the specific case. Besides, the EU Member States must ensure that victims

⁴⁶ In 2002, the EU adopted a Framework Decision establishing minimum rights for victims of crime – a legally binding instrument that marked progress compared to the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power. However, evaluations conducted in 2004 and 2009 revealed that no Member State fully complied with its provisions. In response, the Framework Decision was replaced in 2022 by the Victims' Rights Directive, which introduced more robust and comprehensive standards, offering stronger legal protections for victims across the EU (paraphrased from *Victims' protection: International law, national legislations and practice – Book of abstracts* from the Fifth Annual Conference of the Victimology Society of Serbia, November 2014. The Victims' Rights Directive applies to all EU Member States except Denmark. Denmark has an opt-out from certain areas of EU justice and home affairs legislation, including this Directive.



are supported in accordance with their right to equal treatment, as guaranteed by Article 20 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.⁴⁷

According to the Victims' Rights Directive, victims' rights are divided into three main categories:

1. The right to information and support⁴⁸,
2. The right to participate in criminal proceedings, and
3. The right to protection.

This legal act places special emphasis on the right of victims to information, which is crucial for exercising other rights. Article 4 stipulates that victims have the right to receive information from the first point of contact with a competent authority.⁴⁹

The Victims' Rights Directive stipulates that Member States should take measures to ensure that specialised forms of support are available to victims. These services may be established as autonomous entities or integrated within broader victim support services. Both general and specialised support services can operate as public services or through CSOs, including the contributions of both employees and volunteers.

Article 9 defines the minimum support provisions that victim services should provide to victims. These provisions encompass:

- Information on victims' rights, including details concerning specialist support services
- Information about, or direct referral to, any relevant specialist support services
- Emotional support and psychological assistance
- Counselling related to financial and other practical matters
- Advice concerning the risks and prevention of secondary victimisation, re-victimisation, intimidation, and retaliation.

According to Article 9.2, victim support services should pay particular attention to the specific needs of victims who have suffered considerable harm due to the severity of the crime. Article 9.3 further specifies that specialised support services, as a minimum, should include shelters or other secure accommodations for victims facing an immediate risk of re-victimisation, secondary victimisation, intimidation, or retaliation. Furthermore, these services must offer tailored support, including trauma support and counselling for victims with specific needs arising from the nature of the crime or their relationship with the perpetrator, such as victims of sexual violence, gender-based violence, and intimate partner violence.

Finally, the Victims' Rights Directive instructs EU Member States to establish procedures for limiting the number of family members who may benefit from the rights stipulated in this Directive, while

⁴⁷ European Parliament, the Council and European Commission (2012), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, OJ 2012 C 326 (available at: Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union)

⁴⁸ For victims of firearm incidents who are wounded, immediate medical support is related to managing the wound, especially because firearm wounds are often life-threatening.

⁴⁹ Besides this information related to support services, from their first contact with a competent authority, victims have the right to be informed on their rights related to criminal or other judicial proceedings, the right to an interpreter, the rights to compensation, availability of legal aid, existing restorative programs, possibilities for filing complaints if their rights are not respected, special protection measures if the person becomes a victim in another EU Member State, and costs of the legal proceedings.



taking into account the individual circumstances of each case. It also requires determining which family members are to be prioritised in exercising these rights.⁵⁰

While the EU framework for protecting victims' rights is considered robust, civil society continues to advocate for further improvements and revisions of the existing legal framework. According to a 2023 report compiled for Victim Support Europe, "significant gaps remain in the full and effective implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive". Many Member States still fall short of meeting their obligations. Victims often face serious challenges: they do not receive information in a clear and accessible manner, and appropriate support services are frequently unavailable. As a result, many victims are left without the assistance they need to recover, and remain vulnerable to re-victimisation and lack adequate protection from further harm during their interactions with the justice system.⁵¹

Having in mind the need to monitor and further improve the system for upholding victims' rights, the EU has adopted the **Strategy on Victims' Rights** for the period 2020-2025, which sets out a number of actions for the Commission, EU Member States and civil society.⁵²

The Strategy is based on five priorities:

1. Effective communication with victims and a safe environment for victims to report crime
2. Improving support and protection for the most vulnerable victims
3. Facilitating victims' access to compensation
4. Strengthening cooperation and coordination among all relevant actors, and
5. Strengthening the international dimension of victims' rights.

The EU Strategy on Victims' Rights emphasises that victims' difficulties in accessing justice are primarily due to a lack of information, insufficient support, and inadequate protection. They are often exposed to secondary victimisation during criminal proceedings and when claiming compensation.⁵³ Thus, the Strategy stresses that special attention must be paid to victims with specific needs of protection from the risks of secondary, repeat victimisation, intimidation and retaliation, such as victims of gender-based violence, child victims, victims with disabilities, elderly victims, victims of hate crime, victims of terrorism, and victims of trafficking in human beings.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Considering that some victims of crime are more vulnerable than others because of their personal characteristics, the nature of the crime suffered or their circumstances, the EU has adopted instruments that respond to the specific needs of victims: victims of human trafficking, Child-victims of sexual exploitation (the Directive Against Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children), and victims of terrorism (the Counter-Terrorism Directive).

⁵¹ L. Altan, L.Meindre Chautrand, A. Blondé, S. Baudouin-Naneix. Victim Support Europe – VSE (2023). *Victims of Crime – Model Provisions Paper: VSE's vision for a revised victims' rights directive*.

⁵² European Commission. EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025). Brussels, 24 June 2020, COM (2020) 258 final (available at: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0258)

⁵³ See J. Milquet (2019). *Strengthening Victims' Rights: From Compensation to Reparation – For a new EU Victims' rights strategy 2020-2025*. Report of the Special Adviser J. Milquet to the President of the European Commission.

⁵⁴ Notably, the 2022 Evaluation of the Victims' Rights Directive does not include a comprehensive review of the implementation of the Directive by the Member States from the perspective of victims of armed violence. According to the evaluation (direct quote), EU Member States had to transpose the Directive into their national legal systems by 16 November 2015.... As of the date of publication of the Commission's report on the implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive, most Member States had not completely transposed the Directive. Due to the progress made since the adoption of the Report, the Commission has progressively closed almost all infringement proceedings for incomplete transposition of the Directive. Nonetheless, a key issue that emerges from the analysis of the report on the implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive is the interpretation of certain terms and the lack of sufficiently clear criteria for minimum standards. Although clearly defined in the Directive, the definitions of 'victim' and 'family member' have been interpreted differently in a number of Member States...This results in very different interpretations of what constitutes 'quality' information, support and access across Member States. The evaluation study highlighted the lack of criteria as an issue for Articles 3 (understand and be understood), 4 (receive information), 8 (access to support services) and 9 (victim support services). (available at: [swd_2022_179_evaluation_rep_en.pdf](https://www.ec.europa.eu/justice/eu-victims-rights/evaluation-reports/2022-179-evaluation-rep_en.pdf))



Based on the international and regional legal instruments, **the basic rights of crime victims, including armed violence victims** should encompass:

- The right to be recognised and acknowledged as a victim
- The right to access to justice and fair treatment
- The right to be informed about their rights, status in criminal or other judicial proceedings, and available assistance and support
- The right to be heard at appropriate stages of the criminal procedure, with respect for their personality, dignity, and protection of their physical and psychological integrity
- The right to assistance and support before, during, and after criminal proceedings, regardless of the criminal or other judicial proceedings, including receiving information, emotional support, and referrals to general and specialised victim services
- The right to urgent action, avoiding unnecessary delays in the proceedings
- The right to protection from harassment, intimidation, threats, attacks, and re-victimisation or secondary victimisation
- The right to compensation.

Example of tailored support for firearm violence victims based on Victims’ Rights Approach

Table 2: Tailored support for victims - examples

Type of support (note that whatever type of support is provided, it should be done in respectful, sensitive and non-discriminatory manner)	Description of action (note that the list of actions is not exhaustive, and it should be defined on case-by-case basis)
Crisis Phase and Immediate Support (first few days/weeks)	
Immediate Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Medical and psychological first aid at the scene or hospital (if at the scene, the priority is to assess the risk of further assault and avoid danger for those assisting the victim(s) and for the victim(s) themselves - Rapid individual needs assessment (nature and circumstances of the crime, victim’s personal characteristics, relationship with the offender) - Emergency safety measures (e.g., restraining orders, safe housing) - Clear and understandable information about rights and services (generalist and specialist services)
Ongoing Holistic Recovery (Weeks to Months)	
Psychological and Medical Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trauma-focused therapy - Physical rehabilitation and pain management (in case of physical injury) - Mental health support for victims and their families



Practical and Financial Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help with paperwork, insurance, and social benefits - Emergency financial aid and long-term compensation support - Assistance with daily tasks and transportation as required
Legal Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legal aid and accompaniment through criminal proceedings - Victim protection during court proceedings (e.g. facilitating video testimony, privacy protection) - Ensure victim's right to be informed, heard, and to review decisions
Peer Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to a support group for victims of violent crime to connect with others who understand her/his experience
Coordination and Special Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated case management for service coordination - Appropriate support for children, elderly, people with disabilities, or victims marginalised due to some other personal characteristics
Long-Term Resilience and Empowerment (Months to Years)	
Follow-up Mental Health Support	Ongoing access to therapy as needed for sustained well-being
Community Reintegration	Support in gradually re-engaging with public life, potentially through guided exposures or confidence-building activities
Personal Engagement and Advocacy Opportunities	Offer opportunities to participate in victim advocacy or community violence prevention activities if victim is open/ willing to do so.

2.3. The SALW Control Framework

The SALW control framework makes limited references to victims of armed violence.

The **UN Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition** (Firearms Protocol)⁵⁵ provides a policy framework for jurisdictions to control and regulate arms flows, prevent their diversion into the illegal circuit, facilitate the investigation and prosecution of related offenses without hindering legitimate transfers. However, it does not address issues related to victims of armed violence.

The **UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW** (PoA),⁵⁶ a globally agreed framework for activities to control the negative consequences of SALW, mentions the issue of victims in its Preamble. The reference addresses the importance of the PoA by recognising the devastating consequences of the illicit trade of SALW on victims of armed conflicts, including children.

⁵⁵ UN General Assembly resolution 55/255 (available at: [0141176e.doc](#))

⁵⁶ UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, UN Document A/CONF.192/15 (available at: [unpoa-prog-of-action.pdf](#))



The **Outcome Document of the Fourth Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the PoA and its International Tracing Instrument (ITI)**⁵⁷ from June 2024⁵⁸ outlines that the full and effective implementation of the PoA and ITI “benefits from ensuring the inclusion, participation and perspectives of victims and survivors affected by armed violence and illicit SALW and the organisations representing them” (para 42). The Conference Outcome Document recognises the linkages between armed violence associated with illicit SALW and the health of women, men, girls and boys, constituting a public health concern. Addressing the mental health impacts of firearm-related violence requires strategies and programmes aimed at prevention, while also providing comprehensive social safety nets for victims (para. 134). Therefore, the Outcome Document calls for establishing or strengthening assistance programmes for victims, survivors, and others affected by armed violence in the context of the illicit trade of SALW (para 206).

The **EU Strategy Against Illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons and their Ammunition** (2018) builds upon the UN PoA. However, it does not address the need for support to victims of armed violence.⁵⁹

This is also the case with the **Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of SALW and their ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024** (the Roadmap).⁶⁰ The Western Balkans jurisdictions subscribe to the Roadmap’s goals to significantly reduce the supply, demand and misuse of firearms through increased awareness, education, outreach and advocacy. The Roadmap recognises the high level of firearm misuse, particularly in the context of various forms of gender-based violence (Goal 4). Additionally, the Roadmap aims to increase awareness among young men about the dangers of firearm misuse, as they are disproportionately represented among both perpetrators and victims of firearm-related incidents.

The Roadmap 2025-2030 has been endorsed at the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs in October 2024. The newly endorsed document outlines in the baseline related to Goal #4 “limited awareness of the needed support for victims of armed violence” thus making reference to the issue of support for the victims of armed violence.⁶¹

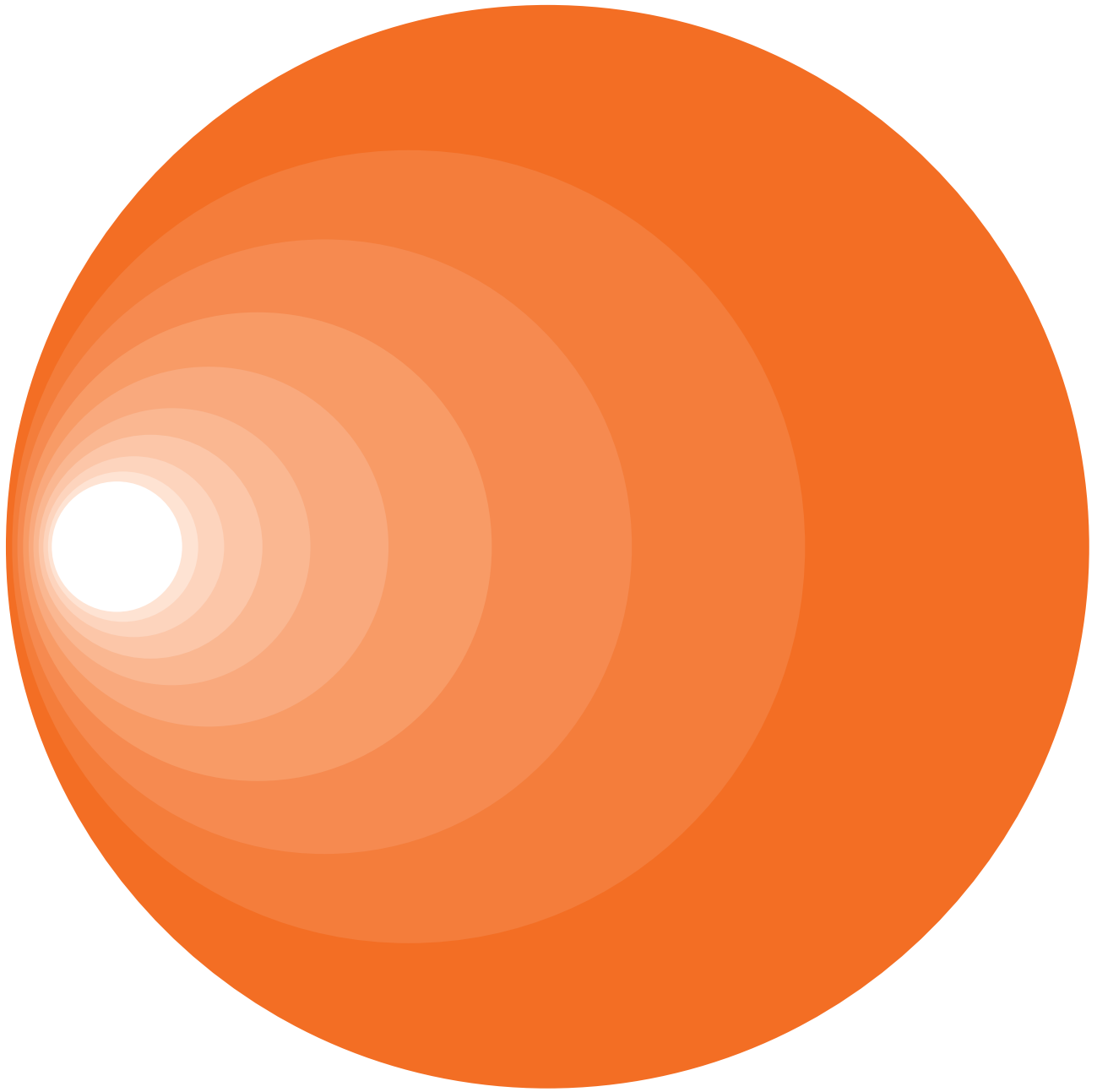
⁵⁷ In 2005, the UN Member States adopted the International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons (International Tracing Instrument – ITI), which requires jurisdictions to ensure that weapons are properly marked and that records are kept. General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/81.

⁵⁸ UN General Assembly. Report of the fourth UN Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, 5 July 2024, A/CONF.192/2024/RC/3

⁵⁹ Council of the European Union Conclusions on the Adoption of an EU Strategy Against Illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons & Their Ammunition, No. 13581/18, Brussels, 19 November 2018, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13581-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

⁶⁰ Available at: <https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/publications-salw-control-roadmap/Regional-Roadmap-for-a-sustainable-solution-to-the.pdf>

⁶¹ Available at: [Roadmap ENG](#)



SNAPSHOT OF LEGAL
FRAMEWORKS IN WESTERN
BALKANS JURISDICTIONS



3. SNAPSHOT OF LEGAL FRAMEWORKS IN WESTERN BALKANS JURISDICTIONS

Across the six Western Balkan jurisdictions examined - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia - the legal definition of ‘victim’ reveals both commonalities and distinct jurisdiction-specific approaches. While a shared understanding often revolves around harm suffered due to a criminal offense, the differences in terminology, scope, and application highlight the diverse legal landscapes of the region.

3.1. The Legal Definition of the Term ‘Victim’ – Common Characteristics

A common element observed across all jurisdictions is the recognition that a victim is an individual who has endured harm as a direct result of a criminal act. This harm is broadly understood to include physical, psychological, emotional, and economic suffering. In some jurisdictions, the historically prevalent term ‘injured party’ is often used rather than the term ‘victim’. While some jurisdictions are transitioning towards ‘victim’, ‘injured party’ has historically been the primary term, often defined as someone whose personal or property rights were violated or endangered by a criminal offense.

A consistent development regarding the specific articulation of ‘victim’ within legislation can be observed. These definitions typically identify victims as individuals exposed to various forms of abuse, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence. Beyond the immediate individual, the concept of a victim frequently extends to include indirect victims, such as family members or dependants, particularly when a criminal offense results in the death of a person. Furthermore, the vulnerability of children is often acknowledged, leading to specific definitions of ‘child victims’ in several jurisdictions, usually designating individuals under 18 years of age who have suffered harm.

The broader concepts of ‘victimisation’ and ‘re-victimisation’ also appear in various legal frameworks. ‘Victimisation’ refers to unfavorable treatment or adverse consequences, especially in the context of discrimination or reporting such incidents. ‘Re-victimisation’ or ‘secondary victimisation’ addresses the additional harm a victim might experience either from subsequent related offenses or through their engagement with the criminal justice system itself.



3.2. Jurisdiction-Specific Approaches

- **Albania:** The term ‘victim’ has been introduced in Criminal Code,⁶² to align with EU legal standards. However, a general definition of ‘victim’ is absent from Albania’s primary criminal codes. Instead, the Law on Protection from Discrimination (Law No. 10 221 dated 4/2/2010 On Protection from Discrimination, as amended by the Law No. 124/2020) identifies victims indirectly through the definitions of specific discriminatory acts, while explicitly defining ‘victimisation’. The Law on Measures against Violence in Family Relations (Law No. 47/2018 on some addenda and amendments to Law No. 9669, dated 18/12/2006) offers a specific definition of a ‘victim’ within the context of domestic violence, encompassing violations of physical, moral, psychological, sexual, social, and economic integrity. The Criminal Justice for Children Code (Law No. 37/2017) defines ‘child victim’ and also addresses ‘re-victimisation’ and ‘secondary/repeated victimisation’.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Due to its complex constitutional structure, Bosnia and Herzegovina operates with four distinct legal systems. The term ‘injured party’ remains prevalent in criminal procedure legislation. The Law of Criminal Procedure of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina No. 3/2003, 32/2003 – corr., 36/2003, 26/2004, 63/2004, 13/2005, 48/2005, 46/2006, 29/2007, 53/2007, 58/2008, 12/2009, 16/2009, 53/2009 – other law, 93/2009, 72/2013 and 65/2018), the Law of Criminal Procedure of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina No. 35/03), the Law of Criminal Procedure of the Republika Srpska (Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska, No. 53/2012, 91/2017, 66/2018 and 15/2021), and the Law of Criminal Procedure of the Brcko District (“Official Gazette of Brcko District” No.34/13, 27/14, 3/19, 16/20, 3/24 and 14/24 use the same definition of the term ‘injured party’ as “a person whose personal or property right was violated or endangered by a criminal offence”. This description indicates that the term ‘injured party’ includes the notion of a victim, both direct and indirect, and may be considered as a synonym for the term ‘victim’. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s domestic violence law defines ‘victim’ specifically as any family member exposed to such violence. ‘Victimisation’ is also defined as a form of discrimination in gender equality and anti-discrimination laws.
- **Kosovo:** Kosovo’s legal framework provides definitions of ‘victim’ in multiple laws. The Criminal Procedure Code (Code No. 04/L-123, 2012) uses the combined term ‘injured party or victim’, therefore leaving some ambiguity regarding their distinct rights and positions. The Law on Crime Victim Compensation (Law No. 05-L/036, 2015) exclusively uses ‘crime victim,’ aligning its definition with the Criminal Procedure Code but expanding it for compensation purposes to include family members or dependants. The Criminal Code defines a ‘vulnerable victim’ based on age, physical/mental disability, and relationship to the offender. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, Violence against Women and Gender-Based Violence (Law No.08/L-185, 2023) uses several related terms, including ‘victim,’ ‘vulnerable victim,’ ‘survivor,’ and ‘protected party’.

⁶² The 2017 amended Criminal Procedure Code (Law No. 7905, dated 21/03/1995, as amended by Law No. 35/2017) and the Criminal Code (Law No. 35/2020 On an Amendment to Law No. 7895, dated 27/01/1995, Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania) replaced the term ‘harmed by a criminal offense’ by the term ‘victim of criminal offense’ to harmonise the terminology with the *Acquis Communautaire*.



- **Montenegro:** In Montenegro, the term ‘victim’ is defined differently in the Criminal Code (Official Gazette No. 70/2003, 13/2004, 47/2006 and Official Gazette No. 40/2008, 25/2010, 32/2011, 40/2013 and 56/2013, 014/15, 042/15, 058/15, 044/17, 049/17, 003/20) and the Law on the Compensation to Victims of Crimes of Violence (Official Gazette No. 035/15), while the Criminal Procedure Code (Official Gazette No. 57/2009, 49/2010, 47/2014, 002/15, 035/15, 058/15, 028/18 – Constitutional Court Decision, 116/20 – Constitutional Court Decision) employs the term ‘injured party’. The Criminal Code defines a victim as someone experiencing physical or mental pain, property damage, or human rights violations due to an unlawful act. The Law on the Compensation to Victims of Crimes of Violence offers a broader definition, including individuals suffering death, serious bodily injury, or severe mental/physical health damage from violent crimes, even if not directly targeted, or while intervening to prevent a crime or assist others. The Criminal Procedure Code defines ‘injured party’ as a person whose personal or property right was violated or endangered by a criminal offence.
- **North Macedonia:** North Macedonia’s legislation provides definitions of ‘victim’ in several laws. The Criminal Procedure Code (Official Gazette No. 150/2010) explicitly distinguishes between ‘victim’ and ‘injured party’. A ‘victim of a criminal offense’ is comprehensively defined as any individual suffering damage, including physical or mental injuries, emotional suffering, property loss, or other rights violations resulting from a criminal offense. A similar definition is found in the Criminal Code (Official Gazette No. 80/99, 4/2002, 43/2003, 19/2004, 81/2005, 60/06, 73/06, 7/08, 139/08, 114/09, 51/11, 135/11, 185/11, 142/12, 166/12, 55/13, 82/13, 14/14, 27/14, 28/14, 115/14, 132/14, 248/2018) for ‘a crime victim’. The Criminal Code also recognises vulnerable categories of people such as minors, endangered victims (those at risk due to providing statements), and especially vulnerable victims (due to age, disability, crime consequences, social/cultural history, or the behaviour of the defendant/associates). The term ‘injured party’ in the Criminal Procedure Code refers to individuals whose personal or property rights were violated or endangered and who participate in criminal proceedings for prosecution or property claims. The Law on Witness Protection (Official Gazette No. 38/05) includes a specific definition for a ‘victim who appears in capacity of a witness’, and the Law on Justice for Children (Official Gazette No. No. 87/2023) defines a ‘child victim’ as any minor under 18 suffering harm from a criminal act.
- **Serbia:** Serbia’s legislative framework uses the term ‘victim’ but does not provide a general definition. In the Criminal Code (Official Gazette No. 85/05, 88/05 – corrigendum, 107/05 – corrigendum, 72/09, 111/09, 121/12, 104/13, 108) when the term ‘victim’ is used, it generally refers to direct victims. The Criminal Procedure Code (Official Gazette No. 72/2011, 101/2011, 121/2012, 32/2013, 45/2013, 55/2014, 35/2019, 27/2021 - Constitutional Court decision and 62/2021 - Constitutional Court decision) defines ‘injured party’ as a person whose personal or property right has been violated or endangered by a criminal act. This definition of ‘injured party’ is also used in the Law on Juvenile Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles (Official Gazette No. 85/2005). The Law on the Execution of Criminal Sanctions (Official Gazette No. 55/2014, 35/2019) uses ‘victim’ in one article related to informing victims of certain offenses, implying direct victims. While the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence (Official Gazette No. 94/2016 and 10/2023 - other law) recognises the term ‘victim,’ it does not define it. Similarly, the Law on Social Protection (Official Gazette No. 24/2011 and 117/2022 - Constitutional Court decision) uses the term ‘victim’ in relation to users of social protection services, such as victims



of human trafficking, abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, and self-neglect, primarily referring to direct victims of specific forms of victimisation.

3.3. Rights of Armed Violence Victims: Initial Gap Scan

A common feature across all six jurisdictions is the lack of specific provisions or a distinct position for victims within the criminal procedure codes or related legislation. Victims of offenses committed with firearms generally have the same status and rights as victims of other types of offenses. While the broader victim rights frameworks apply to them by default, legislation rarely addresses their unique needs for support services.

The analysis of legal and policy frameworks across six jurisdictions reveals significant commonalities as well as specific distinctions regarding identified gaps concerning rights victims of armed violence.

3.3.1. Common Characteristics Identified Across the Region

A critical gap across all six jurisdictions is the lack of a specific position or tailored provisions for victims of criminal offenses committed with a firearm in criminal procedure. In general, relevant legislation across six jurisdictions makes no specific reference to the specific needs of victims of armed violence. Consequently, there is no legislative requirement to establish or improve support services specifically tailored to the needs of armed violence victims, both direct and indirect. This indicates that the existing legal frameworks are not comprehensive enough to support providing adequate assistance to victims of armed violence and fall short of aligning with the Victims' Rights Directive.

A common feature is the inconsistency in the legal definition of the term 'victim' when compared to international and regional instruments, notably the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power and the Victims' Rights Directive. These definitions often fail to fully include family members, dependants, or other persons who are indirect crime victims.

Another shared characteristic is the limited or absent duty of responsible authorities to advise crime victims on the risks and prevention against secondary and repeated victimisation, intimidation, and potential retaliation. Similarly, the right of a victim to access support services, especially specialised services like secure accommodation for those at risk of re-victimisation, is often limited or not fully enshrined in criminal procedure legislation. This includes the absence of explicit requirements for support services to be available before, during, and for an appropriate time after criminal proceedings.

Crucially, firearms-related legislation and policies across all jurisdictions do not address any issues related to the rights of victims of armed violence or the provision of associated support services.

3.3.2. Jurisdiction-Specific Considerations

While the overarching gaps are similar, legislation of each jurisdiction presents particular features:



• **Serbia:**

- The criminal and criminal proceeding legislation use ‘victim’ without defining it, leading to ambiguity regarding its precise legal meaning.
- The National Strategy for the Realisation of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Criminal Offenses (2020–2025) defines ‘victim’ in line with the EU Directive but lacks a specific reference to the needs for support for victims of firearm-related incidents.
- Legislation does not include the obligation of authorities to inform victims on available support services or advise on risks of secondary victimisation, intimidation, and retaliation. This omission also applies to ‘particularly vulnerable witnesses’ and ‘protected witnesses’.
- There are no general legal obligations on specific authorities to provide support to crime victims or inform them about available services, regardless of whether the crime was reported.

• **North Macedonia:**

- Definitions of ‘victim of crime’ in the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code do not fully align with international standards, omitting indirect victims.
- The Criminal Procedure Code prescribes a limited scope of support services, and authorities are not obliged to inform victims about specialist support, alternative accommodation, or risks of re-victimisation.
- The rights of the injured party in the Criminal Procedure Code do not include the right to support or to be informed about available services.
- The legislation does not consider the right of crime victims to access support before and after criminal proceedings.

• **Montenegro:**

- The definition of ‘victim’ in the Criminal Code does not align with international definitions, as it omits victims of substantial impairment of fundamental rights and indirect victims.
- The Criminal Procedure Code’s use of ‘injured party’ is narrow and not aligned with international instruments.
- The Law on the Compensation to Victims of Crimes of Violence lacks the inclusion of indirect victims.
- The Code of Criminal Procedure does not contain any provision for the right of crime victims (injured parties) to access support services, with the Law on Domestic Violence Protection being the only exception.

• **Kosovo:**

- The definition of ‘victim’ in the Criminal Procedure Code is not entirely in line with international standards, as it omits dependants.
- The inconsistent use of ‘victim’ and ‘injured party’ in relevant legislation can lead to ambiguity in their positions and rights.
- The legislation does not explicitly require support services to be tailored to the specific vulnerability of direct and indirect victims of armed violence.



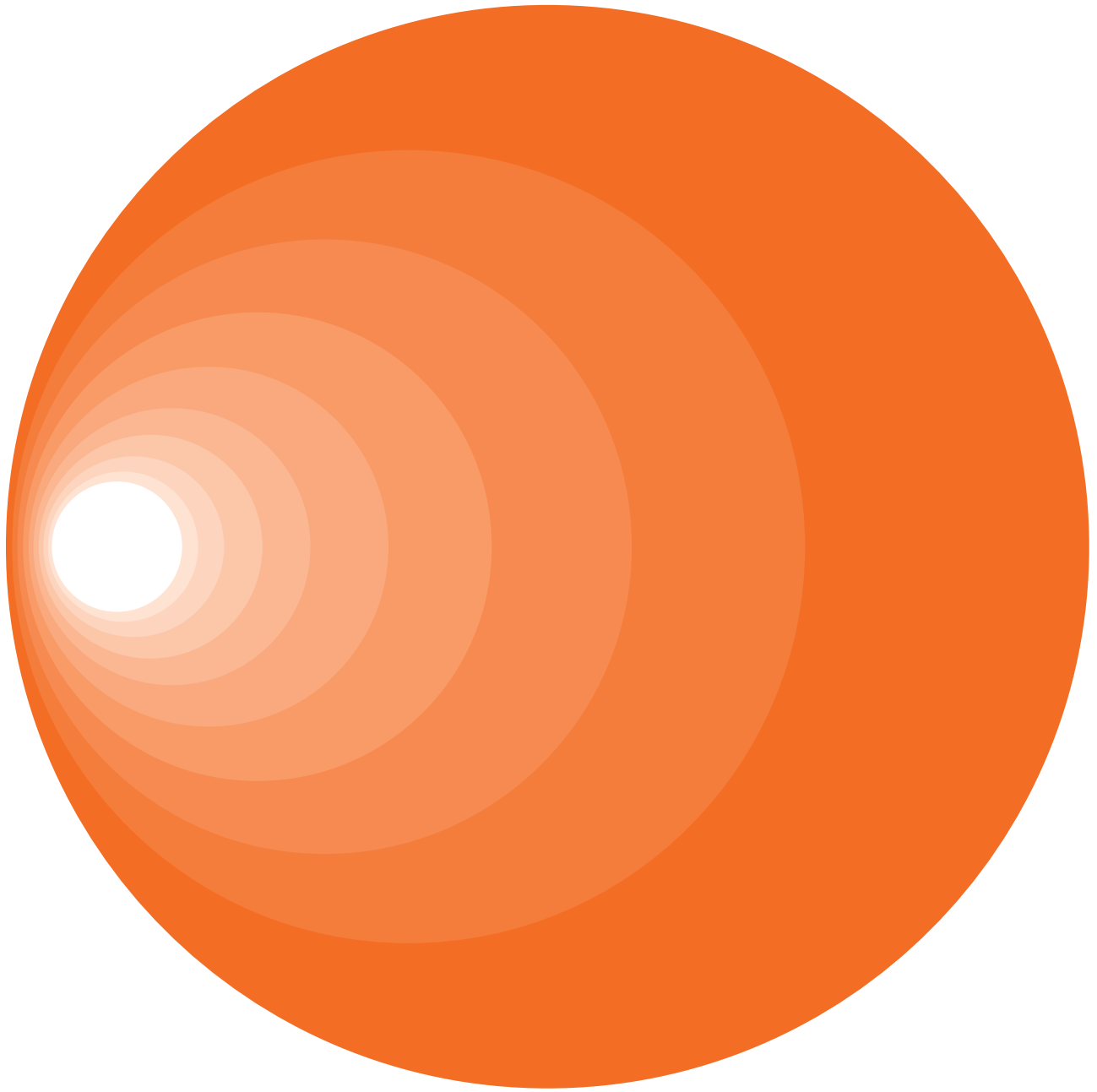
- The Criminal Procedure Code's requirement to conduct proceedings based on specific needs and circumstances of the offense implies that the severity of firearm offenses should be considered in the provision of support.

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:**

- The definition of 'victim' in the criminal proceedings legislation is not included, which is not in line with international standards.
- The criminal proceeding legislation uses the term 'injured party', with this definition being narrower than international standards.
- Laws generally do not define duties for government bodies to provide or finance support services for crime victims, or to provide them based on equal treatment.
- Family members are not considered injured parties despite potential harm.

- **Albania:**

- The Criminal Procedure Code and Criminal Code lack a general definition of the term 'victim'.
- Definitions in specific laws, such as the Law on Measures against Violence in Family Relations and Criminal Justice for Children Code, are not fully aligned with international standards because they do not include indirect victims.
- Legislation lacks the duty of authorities to ensure victims are supported in a manner that respects their right to equal treatment.
- While specific offenses (human trafficking, sexual violence, domestic violence) provide rights to general and specialist services, including alternative accommodation, this is not a general right applicable to other firearm-related violence victims.



EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS INTO
VICTIM SUPPORT SERVICES
ACROSS THE WESTERN BALKANS



4. EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS INTO VICTIM SUPPORT SERVICES ACROSS THE WESTERN BALKANS

To develop an overview of existing victim support services and mechanisms for crime victims - particularly those affected by firearm-related incidents - across six Western Balkan jurisdictions, SEESAC conducted research through VDS. This included a desk review of relevant legal frameworks, an analysis of current literature on victims' needs and services, and the first empirical assessment of support services for victims of crime. The aim was to gain insight into the level and quality of support available to victims of armed violence.

The empirical research had two main objectives: 1) to understand the current state of available support mechanisms and services for crime victims in general, and victims of firearm-related violence in particular, and 2) to identify gaps in the existing victim support mechanisms in order to develop recommendations for improving victim support in general and support to victims of armed violence in particular. In order to achieve these goals, the data on the existing victim support services provided by the authorities⁶³, independent agencies⁶⁴ and CSOs were collected through a survey questionnaire.

The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions, and consisted of two main parts: 1) Data on victim support services (e.g., mission, contact details, legal status, capacities, data recording, etc.), and 2) Information on assistance and support to victims (e.g., target groups in terms of personal characteristics and forms of victimisation, location and geographical scope of the services provided, forms of victim support, ways of providing victims support, specificities of support and assistance to victims of firearm-related incidents if any).

To better understand how supporting mechanisms for victims of firearm-related incidents function in practice, respondents were asked to describe at least one case of violence or other form of victimisation involving firearms and how they provided assistance and support to the victims. In the final part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate how they perceive the biggest challenges in providing support to victims of firearm incidents, their cooperation with external entities to enhance services, and their views on possible enhancements in support to victims and potential improvements in their work and capacities in this field. At the very end, respondents were given space to provide their additional comments and suggestions, and to refer to other organisations and institutions that provide victim support in their jurisdiction to be included in the survey.

⁶³ Authority primarily refers to the executive and judicial branches in the surveyed jurisdictions, such as courts, prosecutors' offices, and legal aid services.

⁶⁴ An independent agency refers to the protector of citizens (ombudsman institutions).



The sampling process included compiling a comprehensive list of relevant organisations that provide support to victims, including those affected by armed violence. This was done in two ways:

- a) Using existing resources including literature and databases of victim support services, and
- b) Leveraging local contacts with assistance of the contact persons in each jurisdiction.

An initial sample was then defined⁶⁵ and subsequently expanded during data collection by using the snow-ball method to include in the mapping as many relevant services as possible.

Based on the initial list of potential respondents and subsequent additions during data collection, cover letters for participation in the survey were sent to 435 organisations, including:

- 234 authorities (53.8%)
- 13 independent agencies (3%)
- 178 civil society organisations (40.9%)

In total, 189 questionnaires were completed, with 182 of them being valid⁶⁶. The final sample consisted of 182 entities, including public authorities, independent agencies, and CSOs. The response rate was 41.8%. The composition of the respondents:

- 106 authorities (58.2%)
- 2 independent agencies (1.1%)
- 74 civil society organisations (40.7%)

It is important to note that women's organisations represent the most significant portion of CSOs in the sample. Additionally, in one jurisdiction, public institutions did not provide information, and in four jurisdictions, independent institutions did not respond to the survey.

The empirical data presented here are indicative and should not be considered conclusive due to the uneven response rates from institutions and CSOs across the six jurisdictions. Notwithstanding the sample bias, the findings are indicative of general trends and distinct characteristics within observed areas of victim support.

4.1. Victim Support Service Providers: Status, Mission, and Capacities

Across the six jurisdictions, victim support is provided by a diverse mix of CSOs, public institutions (such as courts and prosecutors' offices), and independent agencies like Ombudsperson offices. CSOs generally focus on advocacy, protecting victims' rights, and direct assistance, particularly for vulnerable groups like women and children. Authorities primarily concentrate on enforcing the rule of law and ensuring access to justice. Independent agencies, like the Ombudsman in Albania or the Protector of Citizens in Serbia, focus on human rights protection and strengthening the rule of law. In Kosovo, surveyed CSOs emphasise empowering victims by catering to their practical needs, providing social assistance, and facilitating long-term reintegration. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Witness Support Departments provide specialised psychological support to witnesses throughout legal proceedings.

⁶⁵ An initial list of potential respondents for each jurisdiction was shared and discussed with SEESAC prior to starting data collection.

⁶⁶ In total, seven questionnaires were not valid: five from Serbia, one from Kosovo and one from Albania.



Collecting and recording data on victims and victim support services: Most service providers across all jurisdictions maintain databases to record information on victims and the support provided, including sex, nationality, and service type. However, exceptions exist, with some surveyed authorities and CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia reporting perceived gaps in systemic data collection.

Victim support and assistance – main target groups: Victim support services are broadly accessible to all victims regardless of gender and other personal characteristics. However, the majority of CSOs surveyed specialise in assisting women, girls, and children affected by violence. Most providers support victims of all age groups. While domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking are commonly addressed, specialised support also exists for other specific groups. For instance, one organisation in Albania focuses on boys up to 14, and some CSOs in North Macedonia provide assistance to marginalised groups like sex workers and the homeless.

Informing victims about available support: Across all six jurisdictions surveyed, information dissemination largely relies on printed materials, websites, and social media. Albania also uses local community meetings for information sharing. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a good practice of including witness support notifications with court summons, while, according to CSOs surveyed, Kosovo emphasises social media as the primary channel.

Providing victim support: Direct contact and telephone support are the most common methods of assistance provided to victims, supplemented by email and social media. Services are generally provided free of charge. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one CSO reported offering home visits, which is unique among the organisations surveyed.

Geographical scope of victim support services: Across all six jurisdictions, support services are generally available either throughout the entire jurisdiction or within specific smaller regions. Serbia stands out with a majority of providers (65.4%) offering nationwide services, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regional support is more prevalent.

Cooperation with other services to improve victim support: Extensive cooperation is a common feature, with most providers reporting existing collaboration with police, prosecutors' offices, courts, social work centres, CSOs, and healthcare institutions.

Reporting to other institutions and organisations: A majority of service providers regularly report their activities to their donors or designated public institutions. CSOs typically report to project funders, while authorities submit reports to higher judicial bodies and ministries of justice. A notable example is Albania's Ombudsman, whose reports are used to contribute to the improvement of legal regulations. Serbia's Protector of Citizens submits annual reports directly to the National Assembly.

Capacities of victim support providers

There is a notable difference between the public institutions and CSOs surveyed, both in terms of staff and available funds. CSOs typically rely on project-limited donor funding, which contributes to lack of sustainability of services. In some jurisdictions, a mixed funding approach is applied, whereby certain essential services provided by CSOs are funded through a combination of government and donor funding.



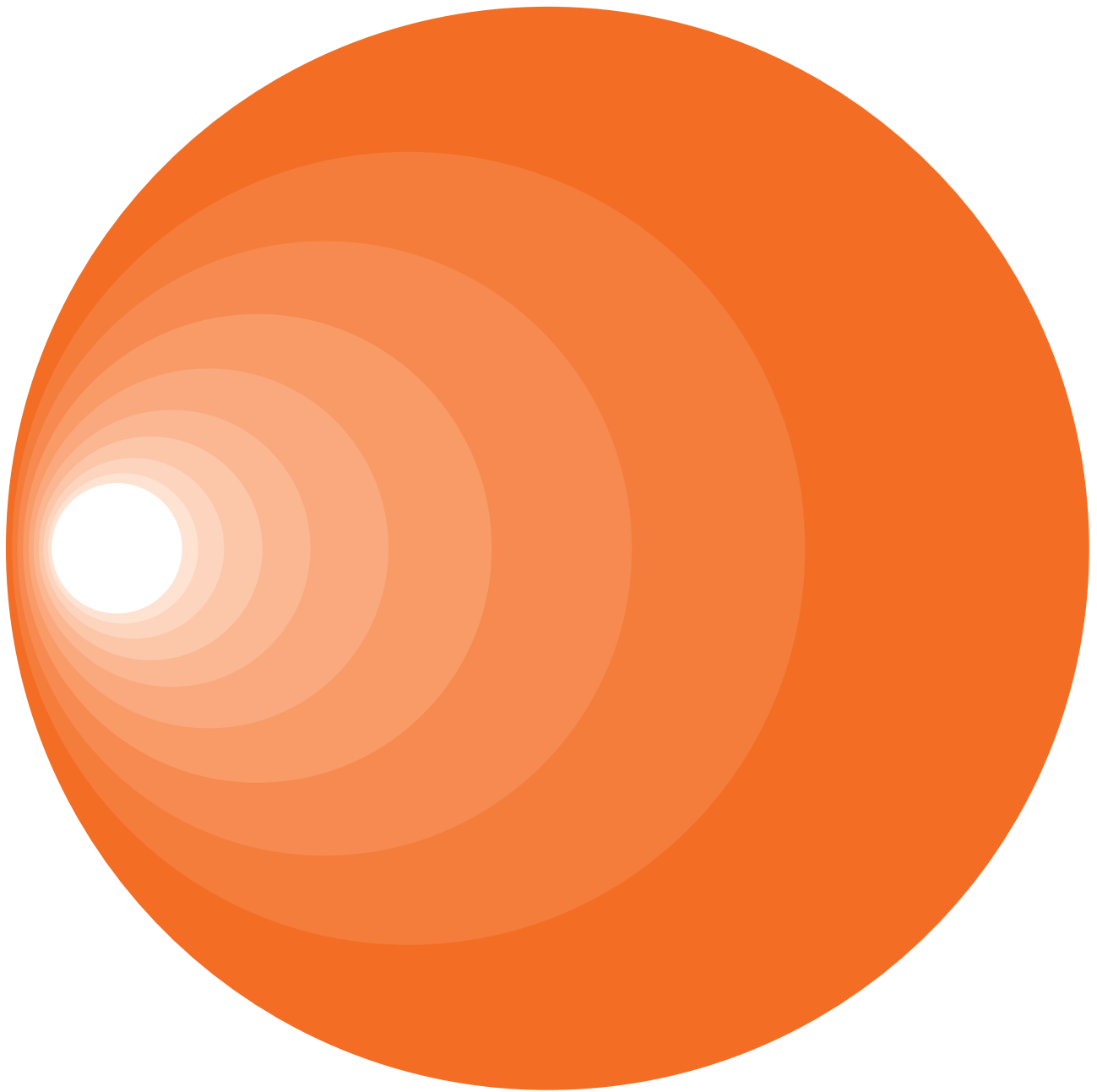
Human resources: The human resources dedicated to victim support across the region consistently include lawyers, psychologists, and social workers as the dominant professions. Authorities often have larger staff, while CSOs typically operate with smaller teams.

Financial resources: Financial sustainability varies significantly among organisations surveyed. Authorities are almost exclusively funded by the government budgets. CSOs, on the other hand, heavily depend on foreign funds, grants, and donations for their projects. Some CSOs receive partial government funding, particularly for essential services like safe houses and SOS hotlines. CSOs in Kosovo also rely on philanthropic donations and membership fees, a practice also shared by one surveyed CSO in North Macedonia.

4.2. A Snapshot of Crime Victim Support in 2023

The number of victims in 2023 varied considerably with caseloads ranging from under 50 to 500.

Support to victims of firearm-related incidents: Direct support for victims of firearm-related incidents is generally perceived as limited. Victims most often seek psychological and emotional support, legal assistance, and information about their rights. The duration of support varies from one-time assistance to long-term support. The majority of surveyed providers did not observe specific patterns for firearm-related violence victims compared to other victims. However, some notable specificities emerged: survey participants from Albania highlighted a lack of long-term shelters, Bosnia and Herzegovina noted visible emotional and behavioral differences in witnesses of war crimes, and Montenegro pointed to persisting fear of firearms. Surveyed organisations in Serbia perceived a sense of endangered safety among victims and a need for continuous support and empowerment for survivors.



CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN
PROVIDING SUPPORT TO VICTIMS OF
FIREARM-RELATED VIOLENCE



5. CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN PROVIDING SUPPORT TO VICTIMS OF FIREARM-RELATED VIOLENCE

The provision of comprehensive support to persons affected by armed violence across six jurisdictions presents a complex array of challenges and opportunities for improvement, especially in the area of SALW control-related policies and legislation, given the existing regional network of security institutions facilitated by SEESAC.

While a clear commitment to victim support exists, the attempts to align these services with relevant EU legislation, notably the Victims' Rights Directive and international standards remain a continuous process. This alignment is frequently impeded by systemic gaps, resource limitations, and still underdeveloped specialisation in addressing the distinct needs of armed violence victims. The empirical data, though only indicative due to varying levels of participation from institutions and CSOs in the regional survey, highlight key areas where improvements are essential to ensure victims receive appropriate and timely assistance.

A primary challenge observed across six jurisdictions is the **limited availability of tailored support for victims of firearm-related incidents**. While general victim support services are commonly accessible, assistance specifically designed for the profound trauma and unique needs of armed violence survivors often remains scarce, according to survey findings. Many service-providers report assisting a relatively small number of such victims. This suggests potential shortcomings in dedicated outreach, identification protocols, or a comprehensive understanding of the specific psychological, physical, and legal complexities inherent in firearm victimisation. Such a generalised approach to victim services risks overlooking the nuanced requirements of individuals affected by armed violence, potentially leading to inadequate or misaligned support.

Challenges in comprehensive data collection and reporting hinder the development of evidence-based policies and targeted interventions. While most service providers maintain databases, the specificity of data pertaining to armed violence victims might lack all the information required. A comprehensive understanding of the prevalence, characteristics, and prolonged impacts of armed violence, coupled with an evaluation of current support mechanisms, is paramount for aligning jurisdictions' responses with EU legislation and international standards.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ SEESAC-supported mechanism for gathering data on firearms through the AVMP is an important resource with a wealth of information on firearms-related incidents. However, to date, information on support for victims of firearm-related violence is rarely mentioned, mainly because it is not available.



A challenge is also related to the **limitations in access to capacity building among victim support professionals**, especially related to long-term psychological impacts and the potential for re-traumatisation of victims during legal proceedings. This is underscored by the general observation from most service providers surveyed that they do not perceive unique patterns or distinct support requests from armed violence victims compared to those affected by other forms of violence. This lack of perceived specificity suggests a potential gap in identifying and addressing the unique needs stemming from the heightened fear, profound insecurity, and complex grief frequently associated with firearm incidents. While legal experts, psychologists, and social workers constitute the core of victim support teams, there appears to be limited specialised training or expertise in addressing armed violence trauma.

Furthermore, **resource constraints** pose a substantial barrier to adequate victim support. Public institutions are predominantly funded by central or local government budgets, while CSOs, which frequently offer the most direct and holistic support, are heavily reliant on precarious foreign funds, grants, and donations. This project-based funding model often restricts the sustainability and long-term planning of specialised programs for armed violence victims. The absence of stable, dedicated funding streams specifically allocated for victims' services impedes the establishment of robust, enduring support systems, including specialised therapeutic interventions and secure accommodations tailored for victims facing severe security risks.

Beyond these overarching issues, survey respondents highlighted several specific challenges, categorised as follows:

Challenges related to firearms control: Some challenges stem from the mechanisms governing firearms control. Findings of the empirical research point to the perception of insufficiently strict legislation concerning firearm possession and the need for enhanced processes and tools for issuing firearms permits, often failing to consult relevant systems that flag emergency measures, security concerns, or previous domestic violence reports. The need for improved cooperation among stakeholders responsible for issuing permits and other institutions that may hold key information (such as centres for social work) is also highlighted, as well as the importance of regular checks on how weapons are stored once permit has been issued. There is a need to ensure that the criteria for issuing a license are monitored, and if they are not met, the license should be revoked. There is generally the perception that there is insufficient information and awareness among citizens regarding the responsibilities associated with owning and carrying firearms.

Challenges related to victim support: Beyond general resource and specialisation issues, several specific challenges related to victim support were noted in the survey findings. These include a lack of comprehensive systemic and continuous victim support, indicating a fragmented approach to long-term assistance. Victims are often insufficiently informed about existing victim support services, hindering timely access to appropriate assistance.

Challenges related to gender-based and domestic violence: There is insufficient exchange of information among competent institutions in cases of femicide, compounding the issue of a general absence of analysis of institutional actions in femicide cases. This lack of thorough review and inter-institutional communication compromises efforts to prevent future incidents and learn from past responses. In the context of domestic violence, specific shortcomings in risk assessment persist. The presence of weapons is often not adequately considered a high-risk factor for violence, significantly



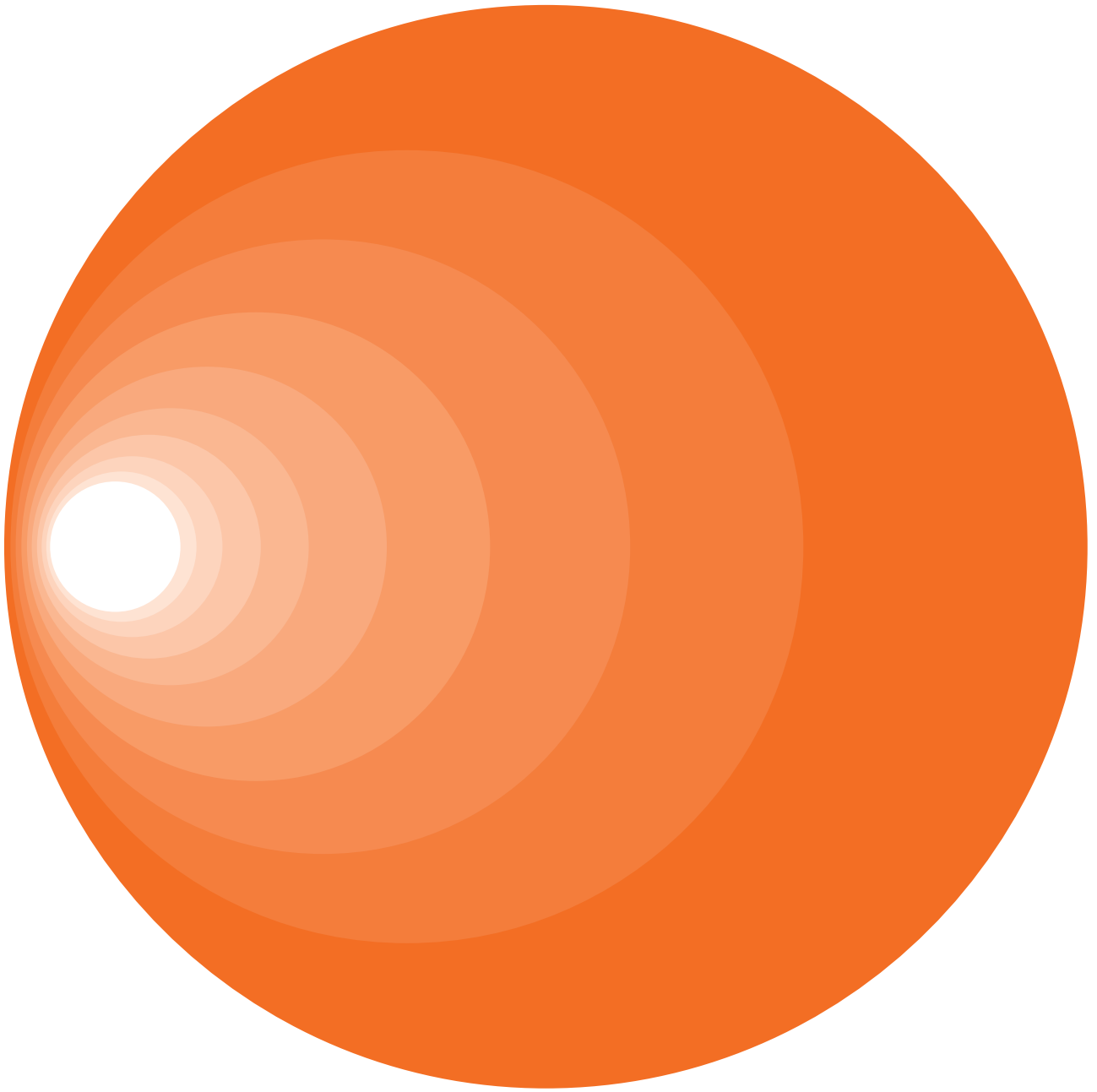
underestimating the potential for lethal outcomes. Furthermore, the failure to include victims in the risk assessment process and in the creation of individual protection plans undermines a victim-centred approach and potentially compromises their safety.

Challenges related to investigative and judicial proceedings: The legal process presents numerous difficulties for victims, including challenges in gathering evidence during the investigation, which can impede the pursuit of justice. A significant concern is potential exposure to secondary victimisation during the procedure, exacerbated by practices such as the examination of a victim multiple times. The prolonged nature of criminal proceedings can further exhaust victims, making it difficult to empower them to endure until the end of the process.

Challenges related to compensation and mitigation of consequences of firearm-related incidents: A critical gap exists in the area of financial redress for victims. There is a general lack of funds for compensation for victims of firearm use. While this remains a widespread challenge, North Macedonia's current process of establishing a compensation fund is highlighted as a good practice example, suggesting a pathway for other jurisdictions to explore.

Despite these significant hurdles, there are numerous promising initiatives and **perspectives for improvement**. Already existing cooperation among various actors, including law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, social work centres, and CSOs focusing on victim support, forms a robust foundation for a coordinated victim support system. Strengthening these mechanisms and fostering greater inter-institutional communication, particularly in complex cases involving armed violence, can facilitate more seamless and comprehensive support for victims. The increasing recognition of the need for psychological and emotional support, alongside legal assistance, represents a positive step towards establishing appropriate services for victims and aligning with the relevant international and regional legal frameworks.

Moreover, drawing upon the experiences of CSOs that specialise in specific forms of victim support can provide valuable insights for developing targeted approaches to armed violence victims.



RECOMMENDATIONS



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on a desk review of current literature on victims' rights, an overview of legal frameworks in six Western Balkans jurisdictions, and indicative findings from the first attempt to conduct regional empirical research through a survey of armed violence victim support services, recommendations for improving legislation, policy and practice have been developed. To address the identified challenges, a strategic approach outlining actions recommended to the authorities of Western Balkans jurisdictions should include the following:

Policy and legal harmonisation:

- 1. Update legal and policy frameworks:** Conduct a thorough review and revision of relevant legal frameworks in each jurisdiction to align victim support services with international standards, ensuring the inclusion of provisions specifically addressing victims of armed violence. This should involve drafting amendments to incorporate a comprehensive definition of 'victim' that covers both direct and indirect victims, ensuring consistent terminology, and clarifying the duty of authorities to provide information and access to support services. Include armed violence victim's right to information and service provision in SALW-related legal and policy frameworks.
- 2. Align victim support services with the international standards:** Develop geographically accessible, confidential, and free-of-charge support services for victims. As a minimum, these services should include immediate medical assistance, information provision, psychological support, legal aid, and referrals to the appropriate specialised services, ensuring comprehensive and continuous support before, during, and after criminal proceedings.

In more detail, policy and legal frameworks focusing on victim support should be developed to ensure that:

- Legal frameworks include the appropriate definition of 'victim' in line with the international recommendations and the Victims' Rights Directive
- The competent authorities have a legal obligation to facilitate the referrals of victims to victim support services.
- The competent authorities have a legal duty to advise victims of crime on the risks and prevention against secondary victimisation and re-victimisation, intimidation, and potential retaliation, taking into account the specific vulnerability and needs of victims of offenses committed by a firearm.
- The relevant legislation includes the duty of the jurisdiction to ensure that general and specialist support services are free of charge, available, and accessible to all victims of crime based on



equal treatment, in line with the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power and the Victims' Rights Directive

- The support to victims of crime is available and accessible to indirect victims (victims' family members and dependants, e.g. children) in accordance with their needs and the degree of harm suffered as a result of the violent act involving firearms committed against the victim.
- A proactive approach towards victims is used, both direct and indirect victims, including prompt provision of information on victim support services at the time of reporting a crime (contact details and ways of addressing services, including courts, prosecution offices, social welfare services, and CSO service providers).
- The participation and perspectives of victims affected by armed violence and the organisations representing them, including CSOs, are integrated into the consultation processes for developing jurisdiction-level and regional SALW-control policies.

Central role of the police

3. Strengthen the victim-centred approach of police in providing support and protection:⁶⁸

Police play a central role in safeguarding victims' rights. To ensure victims feel supported when reporting violent crimes, police authorities should adopt a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach. Police officers must be well-informed about victims' rights and equipped to respond to their needs with sensitivity and professionalism. Enhancing police accessibility, cross-institutional cooperation, and referral mechanisms is essential to building trust and ensuring timely, coordinated support for victims. In more detail, this should include:

- Safe and accessible reporting channels - Victims must feel secure when reporting crimes. This includes enabling third-party reporting through trusted intermediaries such as CSO staff or social workers, particularly for vulnerable groups.
- Effective communication and supportive environment - Police officers should be trained to communicate with sensitivity, ensuring that victims are listened to, respected, and treated with dignity. Interviews should be conducted in safe, private, and non-intimidating settings.
- Integrated referral systems - Police should collaborate closely with victim support services, including medical, psychological, and social care providers. Clear referral pathways must be established so that victims are promptly connected to appropriate assistance.
- Procedures should be in place to ensure that victims are fully informed of their rights and available support services at every stage of the process. Victims of firearm-related crimes may be in shock and unable to process information immediately after the incident. It is essential to communicate information about support services in multiple formats - spoken, written, and repeat as necessary - to ensure they receive and understand the assistance available.

Capacity building for service providers

4. Organise capacity building and training: Ensure access to training and capacity-building programs for law enforcement, judicial officers, healthcare providers, and CSOs focusing on victim support to enhance their understanding of armed violence victims' rights and effective

⁶⁸ Note that due to the specific and pivotal role of the police one recommendation is dedicated to its role and capacity needs. It is based on wide-ranging empirical research of victims' needs conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights titled *Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions*. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/stepping-response-victims-crime>



support mechanisms. This should contribute to well-coordinated and informed responses across sectors and ensure alignment with the Victims' Rights Directive.

In more detail, capacity building activities should focus on:

- Enhancing knowledge and understanding of employees in institutions and organisations that come into contact with armed violence victims, especially focusing on those who are most often the first point of contact. Educate them about the rights of the victims to prevent policy-practice gap.
- Strengthening the capacities of employees in institutions and organisations that come into contact with victims of firearm-related incidents to appropriately assess and address victims' needs and enable them to provide referrals and continuous support.
- Ensuring that employees in institutions and organisations that come into contact with victims of firearm-related incidents understand the types of support that should be available to the indirect victims (most often the families of those killed or injured in firearm-related incidents).

Visibility and awareness raising

Continuous efforts to raise public awareness, combat stigma, and advocate for policy reforms that prioritise victim-centered approaches are indispensable. To that point it is key to:

- 5. Increase the visibility of institutions and organisations working with victims of armed violence:** Ensure that relevant institutions and service-providers are visible and that the wider public and victims themselves have the information about victims' rights and availability of services. Sharing such information should contribute to improved cooperation and information sharing among key stakeholders. As a minimum, visibility should be ensured by publishing relevant information on the websites of authorities, international organisations, and CSOs.
- 6. Conduct awareness and advocacy campaigns:** Implement public awareness and advocacy campaigns to highlight the importance of supporting armed violence victims, inform the public about the availability of support services, and emphasise the role of communities in fostering a safer environment. These campaigns should aim to reduce stigma, encourage reporting, and ensure victims are aware of their rights and available resources. Messages should be tailored for different audiences and repeated over time. They should be concise, brief, and limited in number, supported by stories and statistics. While stories should be powerful and engaging, they must be shared in a way that safeguards the privacy and dignity of both direct and indirect victims. Various media, materials and activities should be used to send messages reinforced by each other.⁶⁹

Institutional learning and knowledge exchange

- 7. Ensure regular monitoring and evaluation:** Develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the impact of implemented strategies and ensure continuous improvement. This should involve systematic and appropriately disaggregated data collection, regular reviews, and stakeholder consultations to adapt strategies and incorporate lessons learned as appropriate.

⁶⁹ SALW Awareness Support Pack recommendations – SASP II, SEESAC 2005



In more detail, monitoring, evaluation and learning should include:

- Establishing robust and comprehensive systems for data gathering on direct and indirect victims of firearm-related violence.
- Ensuring that data are disaggregated by sex and age, and that an appropriate gender analysis is conducted to inform policy and practice.
- Maximise use of data gathered by firearms focal points, which are centres of excellence and include key information about victims.
- Supporting exchange of key data and information across sectors to increase security and improved support for direct and indirect victims of firearm-related violence.
- Including both quantitative and qualitative data gathering to enable learning and constant improvements in policy and practice related to firearm victim support.
- Developing case studies and conducting interviews with injured victims or families of those killed with firearms to assess the availability of victim support networks and mechanisms in practice.
- In data gathering and presentation, ensure that sensitivities are taken into account to avoid putting victims and their privacy in danger of re-victimisation and secondary victimisation.

8. Strengthen evidence-based policy making: In addition to improved data gathering and networking of government and non-government actors involved in upholding victims' rights and providing timely and adequate services it is essential to consult CSO service providers related to SALW control policies and victim support services in order to improve prevention and protection of victims.

9. Participate in regional cooperation and partnership building: Foster regional cooperation among Western Balkans jurisdictions to share best practices, lessons learned and develop unified strategies to support firearms-related violence victims. Use the existing regional networks of security sector institutions to share lessons learned and accelerate processes of alignment with key international standards on victims' rights. Establish partnerships with international organisations, including international and local CSOs, to leverage resources and expertise.

In conclusion, ensuring that victims of armed violence receive appropriate support requires a concerted effort to address the existing gaps in legal frameworks, addressing needs for specialisation, more reliable resource allocation, regular and consistent disaggregated data collection, comprehensive risk assessments and tailored support, legal proceedings that take into account specific vulnerabilities of armed violence victims and appropriate access to compensation funds.

By strengthening institutional capacities, securing sustainable funding for service providers, ensuring access to specialised training, and fostering robust inter-sectoral and regional collaboration, the Western Balkans jurisdictions can progressively establish a more comprehensive, victim-centred, and trauma-informed support system for all individuals affected by armed violence, aligned with international and EU victim support standards.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Armed violence: Armed violence is the intentional, threatened or actual use of arms to inflict death or injury. It can take many forms, ranging from political to criminal to interpersonal violence, and appears in a wide range of contexts. Crucially, it extends beyond physical harm to include psychosocial harm and its pervasive negative impact on development.⁷⁰

[\(Promoting development through the reduction and prevention of armed violence: report of the UN Secretary-General\)](#)

Compensation: Under the Compensation Directive, Crime victims in the EU should be entitled to fair and appropriate compensation for the injuries they have suffered, regardless of where in the European Community the crime was committed' (point 6 of the Preamble to the Directive). If an offender, by committing a violent crime, calls victims' rights into question or fails to compensate, victims can legitimately expect that their legal community will defend their rights to justice in criminal proceedings and that the government will have the duty to compensate them in place of the offender. (J. Milquet (2019). *Strengthening Victims' Rights: From Compensation to Reparation – For a new EU Victims' rights strategy 2020-2025*. Report of the Special Adviser J. Milquet to the President of the European Commission.)

Direct victim: A direct victim is "a natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, psychological, or emotional harm, or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offense." (Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the EU Council of 25 October 2012)

Family members: 'Family members' refers to the spouse, the person living with the victim in a committed intimate relationship, in a joint household and on a stable and continuous basis, the relatives in direct line, the siblings, and the dependants of the victim. (Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012)

Firearm crime: This term specifically refers to criminal activities involving the use of firearms, such as armed robbery, illegal possession of firearms, and firearm-related homicides. It emphasises the illegal aspect of the incidents. [\(Annual Gun Violence Data | Centre for Gun Violence Solutions\)](#)

Human-rights based approach to criminal justice: Rights based approach starts from the assumption that victims of crimes against the person have a right to justice and that criminal justice serves to 'right' the wrong done to victims. Therefore, victims are not asking for help on the basis of their vulnerability

⁷⁰ It is important to note that various jurisdictions have different definitions which depends on the varying emphasis jurisdictions place on different aspects of firearm-related incidents, whether focusing on the violence itself or the criminality involved. In the Western Balkans, armed violence is often linked to the high prevalence of civilian-held firearms and the legacy of conflicts in the region.



or needs but rather demanding their rights and the jurisdiction as duty-bearer should take seriously its duty to protect human rights of the individuals living on its territory.

(J. Milquet (2019). *Strengthening Victims' Rights: From Compensation to Reparation – For a new EU Victims' rights strategy 2020-2025*. Report of the Special Adviser J. Milquet to the President of the European Commission.)

Indirect victim: Indirect victims are “family members of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offense and who have suffered harm as a result of that person’s death”. ‘Family members’ refers to the spouse, the person living with the victim in a committed intimate relationship, in a joint household and on a stable and continuous basis, the relatives in direct line, the siblings, and the dependants of the victim.

(Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the EU Council of 25 October 2012)

Victim of crime (including armed violence-related crime): Victims are “persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power.” (Article A.1). Under this Declaration, a person may be considered a victim, regardless of whether the perpetrator is identified, apprehended, prosecuted or convicted and regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The term ‘victim’ also includes, where appropriate, “the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimisation.”

(Article A.2). (UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power)

Victim-centred approach: A victim-centred approach puts the rights and dignity of victims, including their well-being and safety, at the forefront of all efforts... It refers to a systematic way of engaging with victim(s)... It requires the empathetic, individualised, holistic delivery of continuous and reliable services in a non-judgmental and non-discriminatory manner. The priority is creating an enabling environment in which victims can speak to someone they can trust, safely and confidentially, that they will be listened to and heard, feel supported and empowered, and that they can express their needs and wishes. Victims must be fully informed at every stage of the process... and to have the opportunity to provide consent before any action is taken on their behalf, giving them back as much control and sense of personal agency as is feasible. They must be protected from stigmatisation, discrimination, retaliation and re-traumatisation.

([Victims' Rights First | United Nations](#))

Victimisation: The process of becoming a victim which refers to the immediate attack and all direct consequences and impacts of it.

([RAA_Saxony_Hate_Crime_Victim_Support_in_Europe_2016_m.pdf](#))

Secondary victimisation: Secondary victimisation occurs when the victim suffers further harm not as a direct result of the criminal act but due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with the victim; for example, through inappropriate and repetitive questioning of the victim. The presence of the offender during judicial procedures can also cause secondary victimisation. The risk is exacerbated depending on how closely, if at all, police and judicial authorities and support services cooperate and coordinate when dealing with a victim during various stages of the criminal justice process.

(*Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions*. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/stepping-response-victims-crime>)



Specialised services for victims: Such services include, at a minimum, access to safe accommodation and tailored psychosocial support. Shelters or other forms of secure housing must be made available when there is an immediate risk of re-victimisation, intimidation, or retaliation. Psychosocial support should be provided when an assessment identifies specific needs arising from the nature of the violence or the victim’s relationship with the perpetrator – particularly in cases involving sexual violence, gender-based violence, or intimate partner violence. In such cases, support should include trauma-informed care and professional counseling.

(Paraphrased from: *Support for Victims in Selected Balkan States: A Comparative Perspective*. Belgrade: Victimology Society of Serbia - [Podrska_Zrtvama_Analiza.indd](#))

Repeated victimisation (re-victimisation): Situation when the same person suffers from more than one criminal incident over a specific period of time.

(European Institute for Gender Equality Glossary - [repeat victimisation | European Institute for Gender Equality](#))

Third party reporting: Third-party reporting allows victims, family members or witnesses to inform an appropriately trained third party – such as CSOs – about a crime. This ‘third party’ can then, with the victim’s consent, report the crime to the police without victims having to get in direct contact with the police themselves, thus facilitating victims’ access to support, protection and justice. Third-party reporting is distinct from third parties representing victims in criminal proceedings.

(*Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA’s findings on challenges and solutions*. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/stepping-response-victims-crime>)



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Additional links:

[Annual Gun Violence Data | Center for Gun Violence Solutions](#)

[Briefing - Revision of the Victims' Rights Directive](#)

[Data on Guns and Accidental Deaths in the U.S.](#)

[European Network on Victims' Rights](#)

[Standard Reports | Gun Violence Archive](#)

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[Victims Rights First | United Nations](#)

[Victims' rights - by country | European e-Justice Portal](#)

[Victim Support Europe](#)