



Why Gun-Loving Switzerland Voted to Tighten Restrictions on Firearms

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Editor's Note: This article is part of an ongoing series (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/series/28/gun-control>) on gun policy and the debate over gun control around the world.



A man trains with an air gun on a shooting range in Buren an der Aare, near Bern, Switzerland, Feb. 8, 2011 (AP photo by Frank Jordans).

Switzerland has historically been known as a gun-friendly country due to a tradition of military conscription and the popularity of hunting and other shooting sports. But in May, Swiss voters agreed to tighten the country's gun laws (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/world/europe/switzerland-vote-gun-law-eu.html>) to bring them in line with new European Union antiterrorism legislation that was passed in 2017. Switzerland is not part of the 28-nation bloc, but it is part of the Schengen area, which allows free movement among 26 European countries. In an email interview with WPR, Nora Markwalder, an assistant professor of law and criminology at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, discusses the history of gun rights in Switzerland and why voters there agreed to restrict access to certain types of firearms.

World Politics Review: Why has Switzerland historically maintained loose restrictions on guns? Is there evidence that the high levels of gun ownership in Switzerland are linked to higher crime?

Nora Markwalder: Switzerland has a tradition of gun ownership due to a longstanding requirement that most young male citizens serve in the military. Compulsory military service began in the Swiss cantons long before the establishment of a federal military in the 19th century. Generally, able-bodied young men must complete 18 weeks of military training shortly after they turn 18, followed by two weeks of extra training every year until they reach the age of 30. Active-duty soldiers must keep their service weapons at home during their time of service, and they can acquire their service weapons for private use upon completion of their military service. This system made gun ownership easy from both a practical and legal perspective, and it includes many types of firearms, including semi-automatic weapons. Besides the tradition of mandatory military service, hunting and shooting sports are common in Switzerland.

Despite the high rate of gun ownership, Switzerland has a low crime rate in general and a very low

homicide rate in particular. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (https://dataunodc.un.org/GSH_app), the United States had a homicide rate of five per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017. By comparison, Switzerland's homicide rate was only 0.5, which is low even compared to nearby countries like the Netherlands (0.8) and France (1.3).

Firearms were the most frequently used murder weapon in the 1980s and 1990s, but their involvement has dropped quite remarkably in recent years, and knives are now the most commonly used weapon in homicides. A recent decline in the rate of gun ownership due to military service could be one possible reason for the decline in gun use during homicides. However, some types of homicides are still heavily linked to gun use, such as homicide-suicides, which are very frequent in Switzerland compared to other European countries (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20933346>).

WPR: What led to the recent referendum on tightening Swiss gun laws to align them with the EU?

Markwalder: In the wake of major terrorist attacks in Britain, France and Belgium, the EU changed its gun policies and restricted access (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/25/control-acquisition-possession-weapons/>) to semi-automatic firearms in 2017. Switzerland had to find a way to adapt its gun laws in order to remain compliant with EU regulations while maintaining its traditions of military service and shooting sports. Without compliance with EU regulations, Switzerland would have risked its membership in the Schengen area, which allows free movement among 26 European countries and is the foundation of important security and other cooperation agreements between Switzerland and EU member states.

Accordingly, the Swiss government reached a compromise with the EU, whereby active and retired military personnel, as well as members of shooting clubs, would be exempted from the ban on semi-automatic firearms. Under the compromise, members of shooting clubs need a permit in order to obtain a semi-automatic weapon and must provide documentation of their membership in a shooting club. Weapon collectors are also allowed to possess semi-automatic firearms if they obtain a permit.

The Swiss Shooting Interest Group, a coalition of pro-gun organizations, was unhappy with these changes and decided to challenge them through a referendum. The group's members saw the changes as a diktat from Brussels that interfered with Swiss sovereignty by placing unwanted limits on their right to own guns. They were also afraid that the new legislation would render the exercise of shooting sports impossible in the future. The group was able to gather more than 50,000 signatures, which is the required threshold for a referendum to challenge a law under Switzerland's unique system of direct democracy (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/switzerland-direct-democracy-explained/>).

WPR: How did the referendum pass, and how are the changes going to be implemented in Switzerland?

Markwalder: Swiss voters approved the changes to the country's gun laws by a very comfortable majority

of 63.7 percent. All cantons, with the exception of Italian-speaking Ticino, voted in favor of the proposal. Essentially, the required changes were not perceived to be drastic enough to disrupt Switzerland's military and shooting traditions. A far greater concern for voters was the possibility of removal from the Schengen zone in case of non-compliance with EU regulations. There was also a clear rural-urban divide in the results, where Swiss citizens living in urban areas were more likely to vote in favor of tightening gun laws, whereas in rural areas, where hunting and shooting sports are more common, the proposal had less support.

The implementation of the new regulations is unlikely to present much difficulty, since the changes are only minor. For the issuance of permits and the control of the possession of semi-automatic weapons, the police corps of the different cantons in Switzerland will be responsible. Since certain types of weapons already require a permit, there are already specialized services within the police corps that grant or deny these permits. Thus, few changes will be required on the administrative side in order to implement the new rules.

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