



16 December 2015

Statement of the Grand Committee 5/2015 on the Commission's proposal to amend the Firearms Directive COM (2015)750

To the Council of State

Preliminary and procedural remarks

(Omitted from the translation)

The Government's report

(The summary of the Government's report U 21/2015, containing a summary of the Commission proposal and the Government's assessment and opinion, has been omitted from the translation.)

The Grand Committee's assessment

General remarks

The Defence Committee, the Agriculture and Forestry Committee and the Administration Committee have examined the Commission's proposal in depth and have submitted their opinions to the Grand Committee. This Statement of the Grand Committee is the normative point of departure for the actions of Finnish representatives to the EU institutions (Decision of Parliament HE 318/1994).

The Grand Committee observes that the Commission's proposal to amend the Firearms Directive intends to improve internal security within the Union. According to the Commission, the terrorist attacks and shooting incidents experienced in Paris and elsewhere form the background to the proposal. The Committee supports the objective of improving internal security. However, bearing in mind the opinions of the sector committees, the Grand Committee considers that the proposal in its current form does not promote its objective in an optimum manner. The Grand Committee agrees with the sector committees' criticism of the proposal and adds only certain complementary observations concerning Finland's objectives in the negotiations.

Underlying principles

Like the Government and the sector committees, the Grand Committee attached great importance to common EU action to combat organised crime and terrorism. Correspondingly, the Committee attaches importance to effective action against the flow of illegal arms in Europe and supports the objective of diminishing the inflow of illegal firearms from third countries and generally into the hands of criminals.

The Grand Committee agrees with the Administration Committee that EU regulation should pay more attention to the trade in illegal arms and the role of brokers. As noted by the Administration Committee, illegal arms brokers and the illegal trade in arms from past and current crisis areas are the prime sources for illicit purposes. The Grand Committee also considers that there is a need for better EU regulation of online commerce in arms and that attention should be paid to countering the risk of firearms being produced, e.g., through 3D printing.

Like the Government, the Grand Committee supports EU action to enhance the control of firearms and to harmonise member states' firearms legislation as a means to enhance internal security in the EU. The Committee also supports actions directed at cross-border security threats. However, any

new regulations should conform to 'better regulation' standards of appropriateness, proportionality, impact assessment and consistency with existing EU law and take note of the different standards of existing national regulation and national conditions. These standards should, in the view of the Committee, be applied when working on the proposed directive.

National special issues

The Commission's proposal contains several elements that can be supported as improvements to the Directive, subject to the conditions mentioned in the Government report (enhanced cooperation of public authorities, clearer definitions). Nonetheless, the Grand Committee shares the sector committees' concern that the proposed restrictions on acquiring and possessing firearms would impact negatively on Finnish voluntary defence training, hunting, sports shooting and weapons collecting.

The proposal does not take sufficient note of differences in how member states have implemented the current Directive. As noted by the Administration Committee, Finland has created a strict, but functional system for the safe and controlled practice of sports shooting, reservists' voluntary training, hunting and weapons collecting, which fulfils the objectives of the Directive better than the latest proposal. The Agriculture and Forestry Committee observes that the proposals would increase the administrative burden and costs for citizens.

The Grand Committee agrees with the sector committees that Finland's biggest problem with the proposal is that it fails to take note of Finland's specific needs relating to the role given to volunteer defence and reservist organisations within our country's defence strategy.

Finnish security interests

The Grand Committee observes that the proposal would ban individuals from acquiring and possessing semi-automatic firearms for civilian use which resemble weapons with automatic mechanisms, even when deactivated. The Grand Committee agrees with the Defence Committee that this would have a severely negative impact on national defence, as it would undermine the ability to arrange volunteer defence activities.

As noted by the Defence Committee, universal conscription is a vital part of Finland's defence strategy. Universal conscription has massive political and popular support and the support of the conscripts themselves. Finland's wartime military strength is set at 230.000 men and women since 2015. Over 95 percent of this force is reservists. It is universal conscription and a well-trained reserve that make it possible to defend our country's large territory. In addition, Finland maintains a large contingent of reservists in a so-called secondary reserve that is outside of wartime formations and whose training is organised by volunteer defence organisations.

The Grand Committee notes, referring to the Defence Committee's opinion that reservists' military skills are maintained through refresher exercises arranged by the armed forces, the training courses provided by the National Defence Training Association of Finland ([MPK](#)) and volunteer training at the reservists' own initiative. It would not be possible to maintain the skills, combat readiness and marksmanship of a force of 230.000 men and women, even with a much larger volume of Finnish Defence Forces-arranged military refresher exercises. It is essential that the armed forces' exercises can be complemented with MPK courses and volunteer exercises. The Committee stresses that volunteer defence work and related firearms activities are regulated by Act of Parliament and supervised by a government-appointed board. Volunteer defence work cannot in any way be compared to regular social volunteerism.

The Grand Committee observes that approving the Commission's proposal as it now stands would put an end to the reservist activity described above, which supports Finland's defence capability. The Committee notes that marksmanship is an important part of the reserve's operative ability.

The Grand Committee is of the opinion that such a result would be unacceptable to Finland. An outcome that effectively weakens our national defence would be neither a proportionate nor an appropriate means to achieve the proposal's objective of enhancing the EU's internal security.

The Grand Committee supports the Government's objective of either removing the ban in question or getting a national derogation to permit government-regulated shooting activities related to maintaining our national defence capability, e.g., through reservist activity. The Committee agrees with the Government that members of government-supervised and authorised organisations should continue to be able to acquire and possess A-class firearms for purposes related to national defence.

The Grand Committee stresses the importance of active lobbying. The Directive will be approved by qualified majority and its wording will evolve through compromise. Finland alone cannot prevent the Directive or place conditions on its entry into force. It is essential that Finland finds support in other member states and is active in promoting the national interest on all relevant fora.

As the proposal is subject to the regular legislative procedure, it is essential that Finnish views are communicated effectively at the European Parliament. It should be made clear that Finland does not wish to hamper the objectives of the Directive in situations where there is need for sterner regulation; Finland only seeks an exception for its own national defence, which is subject to unique conditions. Naturally, Finland should also support any initiatives from other member states that would address the other negative effects of the Directive mentioned above.

The Grand Committee emphasises that Finland needs to convince its partners that maintaining the current level of reserve activity, and recognising in the Directive the underlying special circumstances, is genuinely vital for Finland's defence and security. It should also be communicated that the derogation sought by Finland will not jeopardise the objectives of the Directive, as the currently existing strict regulation has proven itself effective in preventing arms from coming into the wrong hands.

The Grand Committee's statement

The Grand Committee states

that it agrees with the Government's position.

Helsinki 16 December 2015

(The statement was adopted unanimously. List of participating members omitted from the translation.)