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#NeverAgainMSD and the March for Our Lives Movement American Youth for Gun Control

The United States gives citizens the right to own guns and has developed a specific culture of gun presence in everyday life. However, this privilege raises many controversies, and gun-related deaths are one of the most common causes of death in the U.S. Media often report on tragic shootings in the country. Nonetheless, there is still no clear regulation of legal issues in the field of gun control. This text is devoted to the issue of the March for Our Lives (MFOL) social movement created by a group of students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The movement was established in response to a shooting that occurred at the school on February 14, 2018. The massacre caused shock almost all over the United States and gave rise to a series of great demonstrations in favor of gun control, which turned into the March For Our Lives social movement. Why did this movement appeared after the events at the Parkland school, and what was its formation like? Did the term “potential tipping point” in the context of gun control and MFOL come true? What is the balance between the organizers’ assumptions and the actual results? This text analyzes the events of 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and attempts to answer the question about the essence of the March for Our Lives movement.

Keywords: social movement, youth protest, gun culture, gun control, gun rights, firearms, March for Our Lives

Introduction

On March 24, 2022, at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., gun control advocates gathered once again to call on Congress to act on the issue. It was the fourth anniversary of the high-profile March for Our Lives, a march in Washington organized largely by young people for gun control. This time, a group of young men associated with MFOL used a unique way of manifestation. More than 1,000 black corpse bags appeared on the park's grounds, right under the windows of the Capitol. Their arrangement was not accidental. Looking at the installation from above, one could read the inscription *Thoughts and Prayers*.

"Apparently, gun violence itself doesn't force Congress to remember their promises to young people and survivors. So we literally have to spell it out in body bags. #ThoughtsAndPrayers are killing us" (March for Our Lives). Young people have once again vented the bitterness they feel when their peers die, and adults who have the power to protect them cannot use it. The event on the march anniversary shows that problems associated with gun control are still urgent, and the struggle undertaken four years ago does not stop.

What is the reason for the gun culture in the U.S. that it has such a strong impact on the American society? Firearms are an inseparable part of the American culture. The United States is widely known for its attachment to them. In 1791, the United States Congress introduced the right to bear arms by the Second Amendment, sanctioning a privilege that had already long existed. The possession of weapons constituted an integral element of life in the British colonies, which naturally served to defend against the dangers lurking in unknown lands. Later, armed residents of the colony, already as militia units, stood up to fight for the independence of the United States. They are called minutemen because they were ready to use arms at any minute (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *minuteman*). These people faced the British army, as the newly formed country could not afford to create advanced military troops.

Subsequently, the turbulent beginnings of the new republic forced the Americans to arm themselves. From year to year, the number of weapons and shooters increased, especially after the reunification of the states in 1865. At that time, associations and shooting clubs were founded for amateurs and professionals. Naturally, the number of the former prevailed, which attracted the interest of veterans of the Union troops, Colonel William C. Church and General George Wingate. In 1871, they formed the National Rifle Association (NRA) for persons interested in shooting and firearms to train and hone their skills. Gradually, new clubs were established, tournaments were organized, and finally, cooperation with the federal government began, from which surplus weapons and ammunition were purchased (Currie-McGhee 18). Over the years, the NRA strengthened its position to such an extent that it became not only the largest association of shooting enthusiasts in the country but, above all, one of the largest lobbies supporting free access to firearms in the USA.

The main dispute over weapons is between gun rights and gun control advocates. The first group favors gun rights as an element of American freedom, granted by the Founding Fathers. The second group advocates strict regulation of this law to ensure the greatest security for the society. This division also stems from a twofold interpretation of the Second Amendment. The amendment states that "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to

keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (United States Senate, "Constitution of the United States").

Some people think that its first part ("A well regulated Militia") is the most important, so subsequently "militia" would constitute a determinant that only appropriate organs should be armed to protect the American society, and their creation is in the competence of individual states (scientists began to define this opinion as the collective rights theory (Legal Information Institute, "Second Amendment"). Other constitutionalists, even most of them, believe that the right to bear arms is given to all U.S. citizens who have "full legal capacity" (Laidler 118). In this case, the further part of the sentence becomes more essential ("the right of the people to keep and bear Arms"), and such a standpoint is described by researchers as the individual right theory (Legal Information Institute, "Second Amendment").

The openness of the interpretation of the Second Amendment creates controversies in the society, and thus a discussion about the effects of access to firearms and its impact on violence, mass shootings, and suicide rate. In addition, questions arise whether the government is serious enough to keep citizens safe.

It is fundamental to remember that when the Bill of Rights was introduced, the social reality was quite different. The main idea of the Founding Fathers was to give citizens the freedom to decide and express independently. After the conflict with the Crown, the Second Amendment was to guarantee protection from potential tyranny, as the law granted by a newly formed government. After the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the American society armed itself increasingly, and the gun culture of grew from year to year. Weapons were purchased from both foreign and local manufacturers. Gradually, domestic production became an independent source of firearm imports. An example of the American symbol is the Colt revolver, massproduced and bought for many years, created only for protection, not for attack.

Due to westerns, the image of an American cowboy with a revolver, fighting with Indians in the Wild West, became famous. Firearm were sought-after items, especially as the United States began its westward expansion. Since the terrain which the Americans settled was alien to them, it was unavoidable to have at least one revolver or shotgun. The narrative created over the years put weapons on a pedestal as the symbol of freedom, protection, and power. In the decades that followed, the number of guns in the U.S. and crimes associated with them increased. Attempts were made to regulate the right to possess weapons. One of the pioneers in this regard was the state of Kentucky, which already in the early nineteenth century introduced the concealed carry order. Soon afterwards, other state legislatures followed Kentucky's lead by passing laws regulating the freedom to bear arms.

Gun control initiatives in the United States often emerged at the local level. On the other hand, no action was taken for a long time at the federal level. The really important breakthrough came in 1934 when the U.S. Congress passed the National Firearms Act of 1934. It introduced several taxes on the manufacture and transfer of firearms, as well as on their manufacturers and sellers. Four years later, Congress passed the Federal Firearms Act of 1938. It required manufacturers, importers, and dealers of firearms to obtain a federal license for their activities, which remained in the legislation until the end of the twentieth century (Gray, *A Timeline...*).

In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Gun Control Act. It was the first major gun control law after 30 years. The bill prohibited interstate mail-order

sales of guns and ammunition, as well as sales of these products to minors (under the age of 21), drug addicts, and people with mental disabilities. The requirements for holding a license and keeping a register of arms sales were also strengthened (Waxman).

Interestingly, from the perspective of gun control, the 1986 act supported mainly people with guns. The Firearm Owners Protection Act reversed many of the provisions introduced by the Gun Control Act. The obligation to keep a national register of arms sold by traffickers was withdrawn, and the possibility of selling arms by private individuals was facilitated. Licensed sellers were allowed to distribute their goods at gun shows. On the other hand, the possession and transport of machine guns by private individuals were prohibited and the existing restrictions on handguns were maintained (Spitzer 118-119).

The adoption of the so-called Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 was another important step in restricting the access to firearms in the U.S. It introduced a five-day waiting period for the purchase of the weapon, during which the buyer's criminal and mental health background had to be checked. State and local governments were authorized to do so. This bill was to prevent the purchase of guns by unfit people and, in the long run, to establish a federal system that would allow immediate background checks (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Brady Law*).

In later years, the Republican-dominated Congress treated gun control as the less important issue. It was not until 2008 that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the importance of the Second Amendment. The case dates back to the early twenty first century when residents of the District of Columbia decided to file a lawsuit against the unconstitutionality of the Firearms Control Regulations Act of 1976 (prohibiting DC residents from owning firearms – pistols and rifles). Eventually, the case went to the Supreme Court as *District of Columbia v. Heller*. The ruling was unequivocal – the Second Amendment protects the right of individuals (citizens) to keep and bear firearms that are not related to militia service, therefore for their private use (Justia, “*District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008)”).

Two years later, the Supreme Court once again addressed the second point of the Bill of Rights, and issued another ruling that changed the course of the firearms debate in the U.S. In 2010, the Supreme Court heard *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, in which 76-year-old Otis McDonald clashed with the city government over a ban on the possession of guns in Chicago that prevented him from having them to defend himself and his property, even though his home stood in a dangerous neighborhood. The justices ruled in favor of McDonald's opinion, arguing that the Second Amendment right is connected with the Privileges or Immunities Clause (“which forbids the states from abridging the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States” (Duignan)). The Supreme Court dispelled then the doubts left over from the ruling issued two years earlier – namely, respecting the right to keep and bear arms guaranteed by the Second Amendment is also the responsibility of the States, not only the federal government.

This was one of the last major Supreme Court rulings on Second Amendment intentions, along with *Caetano v. Massachusetts* (2016), which extended point two of the Bill of Rights to all weapons, even those that did not exist at the time of the First Amendment List (Volokh). Over the years, the Supreme Court, as the last instance of justice, straightened the paths in the gun debate in the United States. But none of the decisions ended the ongoing dispute so deeply rooted in the U.S. history and

culture. The reality and society have changed, as well as legal systems. The right to bear arms and protection as understood by the Founding Fathers does not coincide with modern standards. However, weapons in the U.S. remained in place, still as an inseparable attribute of this country.

As stated previously, the United States tried to regulate gun laws in diverse ways. At the outset, it should be remembered that in addition to the arrangements at the federal level, each state has the right to decide this issue according to its internal regulations – whether one requires the permit for a gun, whether it can be carried openly or not, whether it should be registered, etc. It happens that state arrangements are milder than federal ones. This, however, does not exempt a citizen from complying with the national law, although it is up to local enforcement agencies to decide which regulations should be treated as references.

The main actors for both sides of the gun control conflict are large organizations. On the side of the free access to weapons, the already mentioned NRA and Gun Owners of America constitute the most powerful structures (GOA, est. 1975). On the gun control side, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (est. 1974 as the National Council to Control Handguns) and Giffords (est. 2013) are the most active organizations. It should also be remembered that the so-called PACs (Political Action Committees), which among others finance politicians who share their views, play a vital role in the debate.

The social preferences regarding the right to bear arms, which fluctuate over the years, are also interesting. For example, in March 2018, under the influence of the Parkland shooting, 67% of respondents supported the tightening of restrictions. By the end of that year, support fell to 61% (Reinhart). At the end of 2021, only 52% of respondents favored stronger restrictions – the lowest result since 2014 with 47% (Brenan). However, one should bear in mind that these tendencies change depending on events – tragic shootings may increase the desire to tighten the law, and any other event may have a contrary impact. This was the case, for example, in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, and a wave of protests swept through America after the death of George Floyd – Americans began to favor weapons and their sales increased (Walsh).

Unfortunately, gun violence and death rates it causes in the U.S. remain high and have been on the rise in recent years. In 2020, nearly 50,000 Americans were killed by guns (an increase of 14% compared to 2019 data). More than half of these cases are suicides, and because of mass shootings (defined as an act in which at least four people are shot, even without any death cases) 513 people were killed that year (Gramlich).

As one can see, the division in American society and serious problems concerning firearms are noticeably clear. For this reason, supporters of gun control organize many initiatives to finally force politicians to make long-awaited changes.

March for Our Lives

One of the largest demonstrations whose slogans and goals demanded stronger gun control in the United States was the March for Our Lives. It was even hailed as one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War (Lopez), started on February 14, 2018, at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Shortly

after 2 p.m. local time (EST), a young man came into the school carrying a bag and backpack. One of the school's employees later testified that he immediately identified the intruder as Nikolas Cruz, a 19-year-old former student of the school. Cruz had been expelled from high school a few months earlier for notorious violations of school rules and acts of aggression.

Immediately after entering one of the school buildings, he triggered a fire alarm to force students and teachers to leave the classrooms, after which he opened fire with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle (Almukhtar). People began to barricade themselves in the rest of the building, some of them outside fled from the school grounds. The massacre lasted 6 minutes and 20 seconds. During this time, seventeen people were killed, and so many were injured. Cruz committed the biggest high school shooting in U.S. history since the 1999 Columbine massacre (15 victims), then fled by blending in with a crowd of students and was eventually arrested just over an hour after the shooting (CBS News, "Florida School Shooting Suspect Hid among Students after Massacre").

The next day, he was charged with seventeen counts of premeditated murder, with no possibility of release on bail. Cruz could expect the life sentence or death penalty sought by the prosecutor's office. In October 2021, he pleaded guilty, but the trial was repeatedly postponed (due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Finally, the process began on July 18, 2022. Nikolas Cruz was formally sentenced to life in prison without parole on November 2, 2022 (Spencer).

It is impossible to imagine the witnessing such a massacre, the fear that must be felt by people hiding from bullets. Such terrible events can certainly cause trauma and a desire to self-isolate. This was not the case for a few strong, young people from the MSD school who decided to try to change the situation concerning the access to weapons, which so drastically changed their lives.

The idea of change emerged the day after the Parkland massacre. At the time, a 17-year-old school survivor Cameron Kasky invited a few friends to his home to share his thoughts and discuss the situation. On that day, he published a post on his Facebook profile, in which he used the hashtag *#NeverAgain* (Witt et al. *How the Survivors...*). The movement took its name from this entry (the initiative is also called the March For Our Lives movement, both names are used alternately). Its goal is to change the law in the United States, namely to tighten the regulation of the access to firearms. Therefore, it is necessary to influence the legislative power, the next goal on the movement's list was to persuade citizens, especially young people, to vote in the 2018 midterm elections.

In addition to Kasky, Alexander Wind, Jaclyn Corin, David Hogg and X González (formerly Emma González) appeared visited Cameron Kasky at his home. All five were at the school during the shooting and quickly began preparing the demonstrations. Each of them immediately starts to agitate in social media for the change of the law and to address many influential politicians. In the meantime, they also organized meetings with young people and representatives in Congress. González appeared at a rally for gun control (Rally to Support Firearm Safety Legislation) in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where she caught the attention of media by addressing politicians and not mincing her words (Witt et al. *Calling B.S.*). The five founders were honored by *Time* magazine, which placed them on its cover in March 2018 (Alter).

Kasky announced the occurring of a march four days after the shooting. He in the media at the time: “March 24th in every single city. We are going to be marching together as students begging for our lives. (...) This is about the adults. We feel neglected and at this point, you’re either with us or against us” (Scanlan). The date was chosen to mourn the dead, as well as to calmly deal with organizational matters.

In compliance with intention of the founders of the Never Again movement, the main demonstration took place in Washington, D.C. The preparations were also joined by the non-profit organization Everytown for Gun Safety, also working for gun control. According to estimates, up to half a million protesters were expected. For this reason, the organizers wanted a march to take place on the grounds of the National Mall, but since it was already reserved for another venture, it was decided to move the event to Pennsylvania Avenue (Cooper).

The idea of the march quickly gained support of not only young people but also many personalities of the world format. Among the first people who financially supported the organizers were George and Amal Clooney, donating \$500,000, Steven Spielberg, Oprah Winfrey (Gonzalez), and the Italian fashion house Gucci (WWD Staff) also showed generosity. Many celebrities marched with the youth on March 24, supporting them on social media.

In the run-up to the main event, the young people of the Never Again movement were involved in other endeavors to support gun control. Among such events was the rally in Fort Lauderdale mentioned before, as well as a boycott of companies cooperating with the National Rifle Association, after their response to the MSD shooting. NRA proposed to arm teachers to prevent such events in the future. Activists have asked companies that maintain relationships with the NRA (e.g., offering additional benefits to members of the association, etc.) to withdraw from them. This action brought the expected effect – at the beginning of March 2018, over a dozen companies cut themselves off from cooperation with the NRA (Gray, *March for Our Lives...*).

The main demonstration called the March For Our Lives took place on March 24, 2018, in Washington, D.C. Protesters gathered in various parts of the city, but the main part of the march took place on Pennsylvania Avenue. The hosts and originators of the event – eyewitnesses of the Parkland shooting – inaugurated the demonstration at noon. The youth was supported by people from the world of show business: Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande, Paul McCartney, Cher, and others.

The activists had several goals. The most important points of the plan that required immediate action were to ban the sales of assault weapons, high-capacity magazines, and bump stocks (a special modification to long weapons that allows to change them from semi-automatic to automatic, causing much faster shooting). Furthermore, closing loopholes in background checks and respecting them equally across the United States, so that unsuitable people could not buy them online or at gun shows, were taken into account. It was also postulated that background checks should be applied to all types of weapons. In addition, it was demanded to raise the age of purchase of weapons from 18 to 21 years, in all states. Bold demands and great hopes, but definitely not easy to push through. However, the youth marched with enthusiasm.

March for Our Lives in Media

A significant role in the whole event, above all its popularity, was played by social media — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Nowadays, they affect the popularity of diverse types of ventures, increasing their range, and thus acting in their favor. On March 24, the MFOL was one of the main topics on the social media. On that day, #*MarchForOurLives* was used on Twitter nearly four million times. It is also worth mentioning that politicians and celebrities had usually dominated in posts about politics (also gun control), published on social networks before the massacre occurred. The situation changed dramatically after February 14, 2018, when young people were the majority of the above-mentioned number of published posts (Deng).

Similarly, the MFOL profile on Facebook (@marchforourlives), which gathered over 300,000 followers, contributed to increasing the popularity of the event. More importantly, Facebook supported the organization of the March, due to the possibility to develop events on the portal to which users can respond. The March for Our Lives — DC Official event organized on March 24, 2018, had more than 46,000 responses “I will participate” and nearly 100,000 “interested” entries (March for our lives — DC official, *Facebook*) were registered, which allowed to connect different people in one matter, potentially increasing the number of participants of the March.

Equally, Snapchat and Instagram contributed to publicity on the day of the March and allowed to publish posts corresponding to the ideas of the founders. Snapchat, popular among young people, permits to show photos and videos, and has a map function where one can locate other users. On 24th March, it allowed to visualize the power of the protests on the map, locating the increased activity of users across the continent (Grothaus).

On Instagram, the March for Our Lives was also very actively promoted by popular celebrities. Many of them, such as Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Selena Gomez, published content related to the March and supporting gun control, which translated into “likes” counted in millions, so the content reached a wide audience. Moreover, on the day of the March, thousands of people used hashtags on this portal related to the event, which emphasized the activity of users and their involvement in the case (Krzaczek).

It is indisputable that the March for Our Lives would not have been able to influence such vast numbers of people united on one issue if social media had not been used. They enabled the organizers to reach millions of people who, even outside the U.S., could follow the event and support it. From Washington, the case grew and gained interest almost all over the world.

Undoubtedly, the March for Our Lives was not only a popular event, but also one of the largest in history. However, the data concerning the number of participants in Washington differs significantly. The MFOL organizers estimated and officially announced the day after the event that over 850,000 people marched in the capital (March For Our Lives, *You showed up!...*). On the other hand, there were no official police reports on the size of the crowds, although the authorities were prepared for half a million people (Reilly). Digital Design & Imaging Service Inc., based on aerial photographs of the event, estimated that there were just over 200,000 people in Washington (CBS News, *How many people attended March for our lives? Crowd in D.C.*

estimated at 200,000). Events of this type are always quite problematic for providing the exact number of participants.

One should also remember about parallel protests under the banner of the March for Our Lives in other cities of the USA and around the world – there were over 830 such events (Langone). It is estimated that more than two million people protested at the same time in the United States alone (Sit), and hundreds or even thousands from around the world should be added to this number, because people also protested in London, Rome, Sydney, Tokyo, etc.

There were many responses to the March for Our Lives. Apart from the involvement of all those who contributed to its creation and those who took part in it, also the media, politicians, and firearms lobby reacted to this event in numerous ways. For example, the NRA, which was repeatedly addressed by protesters, launched attacks to discredit those young people. On YouTube, it posted a video with the eloquent title *A March For Their Lies* about falsehood and an attempt to attack civil liberties (NRATV). Possibly, the NRA felt threatened to see the growing involvement of young people, since it decided to respond to the demonstration in such a bold way.

Leading media outlets in the United States actively published photos, videos, and articles about the March. Materials about the event in the capital, but also from parallel protests in other cities, were reported and regularly updated. Mostly neutral articles were published, informing about the March and commenting on the event in real-time. There were also flattering reports, such as the one in *The New Yorker*, praising the protest in Washington (Talbot). It is especially important that so much attention was paid to the March for Our Lives, because the publicity indicates the impact of the event. After all, from the very beginning, it was the organizers' goal – to hear the voice of young people.

Politicians who were affected by the March also reacted to the event. Some protesters walked near the White House on March 24. Although President Trump devoted his day off to golf (in West Palm Beach, Florida, an hour drive from the MSD), the press office issued a statement praising the attitude of the youth as well as asserting that their safety was “a top priority of the President's (...)” (Ahmed).

The impact that the youth of the Never Again movement managed to achieve with the March for Our Lives, which was the actual goal from the beginning, is clearly visible. That day, the MFOL was on the lips of the whole country. The scream resulting from repressed anger, fear, and grief found an outlet in the common protest of people interested in the same case. Has the movement made any revolutionary changes though?

The Outcome and Regulations

Referring to the main demands for changes in the law, made by activists from the Never Again movement, regulations were changed in Florida. In early March 2018, Rick Scott, the Republican governor of the state, signed Bill 7026, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act. It was passed in the Republican-dominated Senate and accordingly resources to increase safety and mental health assistance in schools were allocated (Yan). Furthermore, the law was tightened – the minimum age for buying weapons was raised from 18 to 21 years, the sale of bump

stocks was banned, a three-day waiting period for purchases with background checks was established, as well as a program for arming selected teachers and hiring school police (Wilson).

It is not just Florida which had one of the weakest gun regulations and enacted new laws. Other states followed this example, and state legislatures signed into law in 2018 sixty-seven new gun safety laws, fourteen of which were signed by Republican governors (Peters).

At the federal level, unfortunately, it was not possible to introduce, for example, a ban on the sale of assault weapons or increase the age for buying weapons in the whole country. However, it was possible to ban the sale and ownership of bump stocks throughout the U.S. (March 2019, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives). An equally important action at the federal level was to urge people to vote in the 2018 elections, which was largely fulfilled by activism during and after the March for Our Lives. In midterm elections, the share of young people (18-29 years old) turned out to be record high, as over 28% of them voted (Circle at Tufts, "28% Of Young People Voted in 2018").

This situation, in turn, directly affected the filling of even a majority of seats in the House of Representatives with Democrats, who are more inclined to act in favor of gun control. In addition, the "Vote them out" agitation contributed to the removal of congressional seats of forty members actively supported by the NRA. Thanks to activists who acted after February 14, tightening gun control in the United States became one of the main slogans of election campaigns in 2018 (Peters).

Again, this worked well – in early 2019, Representatives supporting gun control proposed a bipartisan Background Checks Act (H.R.8). While it promised to be the first gun safety piece within 10 years, and although it was re-proposed in the 117th Congress (2021), it has not been introduced to this day (Congress.gov, "H.R.8 – 117th Congress...").

The March for Our Lives was undoubtedly one of the biggest initiatives of 2018 that was successful. The most important achievement of the Never Again movement and the events it organized was, above all, to prove the strength of the youth. The months following the tragic events of Parkland showed how to turn despair into a force for action. The movement managed to gather thousands of young people, ready to devote their time to the fight for the common good. The MFOL stimulated, captivated, and led students to action, proving that every voice, regardless of age, has strength and meaning, and that young people who can overtake adults with enthusiasm should not be underestimated.

The Movement Aftermath

Did the success connected with the March of the Never Again movement continue? Parkland activists were later involved in gun control actions and other initiatives. In the summer of 2018, the Never Again movement announced the Road to Change, a nationwide tour where activists met with young people to educate, support, register for elections and encourage them to use their rights for changing the future. Within 60 days, activists managed to visit twenty-four states. They met with young people from eighty different communities – mainly those where

gun violence is the most common (March For Our Lives, “Road to Change”). As can be seen from the results of the elections that took place at the end of 2018, this educational rally was also successful. Other rallies were organized, and marches, protests, meetings, discussions were held – all in order to influence the policy toward gun control as much as possible.

Witnesses of the tragedy continued to act, although circumstances were not conducive for mass events for some time (Covid-19 pandemic). However, based on social media activity, young advocates for gun control are still committed – they encouraged people to vote in the 2020 general election, and they also engaged in loud protests after the death of George Floyd, cooperating with the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2019, the MFOL proposed a new action plan – A Peace Plan for a Safer America. It is a wide-ranging six-point plan that uses the acronym CHANGE and proposes several solutions to mitigate gun violence. In the summary of the plan, its authors called on “the next Presidential Administration and Congress” to adopt these proposals to deal with “the national gun violence epidemic” (The Washington Post, “March for Our Lives Peace Plan”).

The plan includes the already known gun control measures (changing the standards applicable to gun ownership, i.e. registering guns, raising the age, banning assault weapons, etc.), but also presents an innovative approach to controlling the lobby behind gun rights (holding it accountable for years of neglect and abuse) or proposes setting the bold goal of reducing gun injuries and deaths by 50% within 10 years (which would save up to 200,000 lives). However, the proposal to establish a new position in the government administration subordinate to the president, which would be focused entirely on the prevention of gun violence, is the most interesting point in this plan (The Washington Post, “March for Our Lives Peace Plan”).

The organization continues to uphold its demands, and the Peace Plan has been taken as a model in individual states. According to an analysis by the Giffords Law Center published in late 2019, the struggle of members of the March for Our Lives since its inception translated into 137 different changes at the local level in favor of gun control (Stockler). In 2020, the Our Power campaign continued the organization’s mission, despite the emerging obstacles, to provide America with greater security and peace. Constantly, although in a changed form, online meetings were held with young people to encourage them to vote in the 2020 elections (The Shorty Awards, “Our Power”).

Due to these meetings, encouraging and offering help with registration for voting, a considerable number of young people were reached. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, a record number of young people entered the November elections – more than half of those under the age of 30 years old who were entitled to vote (52%–55%). This is a significant increase because 45%–48% voted in 2016 (according to the same source of information). Moreover, in the last election, the majority of young people supported Joe Biden (61%), and Donald Trump, who was running for re-election, 37% (Circle at Tufts, “2020 Election Center”).

The attempt to change the federal government and turn attention to the Democratic Party, which is more inclined to address the issue of gun control, is an obvious standpoint. Unfortunately, many of the massacres that took place in the U.S. after

the 2020 election were not prevented. The March For Our Lives was reactivated in June 2022, when after four years the march was again organized in Washington and several other cities. This was in response to frequent attacks and insufficient congressional activity on gun control.

About 50,000 people marched in the capital, which is a huge drop from the 2018 march. Many attendees came in response to the May massacre at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas (19 dead, 17 wounded) and a supermarket in Buffalo, New York (10 killed, 3 wounded). President Joe Biden tweeted his support for the protesters and renewed his appeal to Congress, adding “do something” (Biden).

The future is unpredictable, but looking at the efforts and progress of this small group of frightened teenagers, who quickly became a group of adults leading their revolution, one can think that this activity may turn out to be very effective. Although all expectations have not yet been met, the successes of the teenagers are significant. A positive change, regardless of size, is a step towards a better world — marches, open opposition, or taking even one friend to the elections are all right changes.

One March for Our Lives participant, a 16-year-old MSD student, said: “We understand that this is a marathon and that we’ll be fighting for years. We’re just getting started. Now we have to use our rights as voters to make things change” (Casidy). In other words, this is not the end of the struggle, because many things still have to be changed, but one can hope that the future of the American nation is heading in the right direction.

Conclusions

Gun-related violence continues to be a pressing issue in the American society. It is even difficult to determine how many people were killed and wounded with weapons at the time when this text was written. However, despite the high importance of the problem and its presence in media or political narrative, it has not yet been possible to limit the right to arms.

The origins of the Never Again movement were a textbook example of new social movements — several young people spontaneously organized themselves a few hours after the shooting. Over time, anyone who cared about ending gun violence became a representative of the movement, regardless of whether he or she was a student of the school or simply shared the opinion of the organizers. There was no differentiation in individual roles, no official, elaborate program was created, the people acted spontaneously, in a typical way for new movements, rejecting the classic methods of gradual reforms, and wanting immediate changes in legislation.

The movement was created as a reaction to the social problem — growing violence. It did not have a well-established structure, comprising loosely connected groups of students, to which more people began to join. The MFOL was composed of representatives of many different social groups, overcoming class divisions (political or socioeconomic), and reaching for typical tools of expression of their discontent, namely demonstrations and rallies.

Although the struggle for significant changes brought together people of different gender, race, or class, the participation of young people was its essential element,

especially those people who did not even enter the legal age of adulthood. The conflict arose primarily because of different views on gun rights and gun control, which are largely due to differences between generations.

Free access to firearms and the frequent lack of proper control, which often leads to tragedy, are the issues that have existed in the American society for a long time. However, for most politicians, they can constitute problems which cause some difficulties, so these politicians prefer to ignore them rather than exacerbate the conflict. This approach is the result of the firearms culture characteristic for the United States and differences in the worldviews of politicians and young people.

Contemporary representatives of the American political establishment are people from the baby boomers or Generation X, raised in the second half of the twentieth century, which in many respects was quite different from the present day. Young adults representing Millennials (Generation Y) are still highly underrepresented in the U.S. Congress. We should remember about the requirements for candidates, because to sit in the House of Representatives you one must be over 25 years old, and in the Senate over 30 years old. In political circles, older people, considered more experienced and trustworthy, have a better chance of winning a seat. This is clearly visible on the American political scene, as in the current 117th Congress the percentage of people under 40 years of age is only 7% in the House of Representatives, and 1% in the Senate. Generation X makes up 33% of the House and 20% of the Senate, and baby boomers accordingly 53% and 68% (Schaeffer). Millennials also have to struggle with economic problems, many cannot afford a long and expensive campaign, have less access to funds, often earn less, struggle with even student loan repayments, rising costs of living, etc. All that discourage them from entering the politics. In consequence, underrepresentation of younger generation, and dominance of mature politicians, create inequalities when it comes to opinions and political priorities. Millennials and Generation Z participate in social life differently and look at the world around them differently. They grew up in a different reality, in a dynamically changing society, in greater openness to the world. They have completely different perspectives and knowledge as representatives of the older generations – they pay more attention to mental health, climate crisis, or gun control. Those are not better or worse than usual ones, yet different. All this directly translates into differences that are often irreconcilable between generations. In such a context, the March for Our Lives movement was created.

Young people involved in the MFOL use means characteristic of their generation – social media. This was important because due to the use of platforms that are a huge part of the life of modern youth, it was possible to promote the entire movement as well as to increase its popularity and importance – something so great could not be ignored, and young people broke into the world of adults.

The March for Our Lives was undoubtedly an unforeseen event which turned out to be successful. Was it a breakthrough success? The answer depends on the point of view. First of all, the youth showed their strength and ability to organize, creating a movement, not a momentary spurt. They set an example to others that people should manifest dissatisfaction and desire to change. For example, one of the goals of the MFOL was to ban the sale of bump stocks. A few days after the March, the ATF proposed a change in the law and conducted a public opinion poll. 73% of respondents expressed approval for the idea – it was 13% in 2017 (Nass).

Furthermore, many states adopted amendments to gun control. One of them was Florida, which belonged to the states with the weakest restrictions, and after the massacre in Parkland several amendments were introduced there, including an increase of the age for people buying weapons or an extended waiting time for such persons. In 2018, 67 safety bills were signed – in 14 states by Republican governors (Peters).

Many companies cut themselves off from cooperation with the NRA, as has already been mentioned, due to the MFOL campaign. Thus, part of the reputation and support for this organization was shaken. Another success of the movement was to encourage a record number of young people to vote – 31% in the 18-29 age group (Circle at Tufts, “Election Night 2018...”). In fact, gun control became one of the main topics during the midterm elections in 2018, which in the long run resulted in the deprivation of the mandates of 40 politicians supported by the NRA (Peters).

For some people, the changes to which the movement has contributed will still be insufficient, and for others, they will be a crucial step towards a better tomorrow. Although media hype around the MFOL, and mentions of the March and its organizers appear only sporadically (but they still appear), the initiative will certainly remain in the memory of its participants and the rest of the society. One can even say that this may be one of the greatest achievements of this initiative – an impressive number of supporters who want real changes, and they managed to recreate the event. Although not all postulates were implemented, beneficial changes were introduced.

The problem of unambiguously resolving the issue of access to firearms is extremely difficult in the context of the American history and culture. It is impossible to predict whether there will be changes which could satisfy the majority, both supporters and opponents of gun control. On the other hand, when it comes to violence in schools, the regulation of law is only one of the elements that need to be addressed. It is also necessary to look at institutions, approach of teachers to students, environments in which children grow up, problems among peers, and opportunities of help for young people. Mental health is also an important piece of the puzzle. Violence and aggression can be caused by various factors: alcohol, drug addictions, physical or sexual violence, traumas. Proper help for such people and meticulous control in case of a desire to buy weapons are important steps in the fight for gun control.

The March for Our Lives event was a success because it showed, above all, what young people can do when they do not agree with the usual patterns set by older generations. Activists manifested the enthusiasm and willingness to encroach on the competencies of politicians. They showed the strength of young people, especially in the era of social media whose power they can use to achieve their goals. Moreover, the MFOL has changed the approach and involvement of young people within politics and shaping the future of the nation.

Thanks to the perseverance of activists, it was possible to introduce some changes in legislation, but not on the scale and form expected when marching in Washington. One item on the list can be considered completed – in 2019, the sale and possession of bump stocks were banned throughout the United States. It failed to ban the sale of assault weapons or increase the age of gun purchase nationwide, but some of the postulates, such as improving background checks, waiting time, or increasing

the age, were introduced indirectly, as well as amendments to the law were introduced by 26 states.

Answering the question asked at the beginning of the text: "What is the balance between the organizers' assumptions and the actual results?", it must be said that the assumptions exceeded the real possibilities. In other words, we cannot talk about the failure of the March for Our Lives. Although it was not possible to introduce revolutionary changes, positive results were achieved on various levels. Many young people changed perception of their surroundings and challenges in society. They were involved in the elections, and some legislative changes (both at the state and federal levels), introduced under their pressure, can lead to significant and long-awaited reforms in the availability of firearms in the United States. The analysis of the March for Our Lives movement proves that the young generation can make significant changes and has the right tools to achieve such goals, but this process needs many years of efforts.

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