
Prisoner Rehabilitation in Some Central and Eastern European Countries

This special issue of the Journal of Criminal Justice and Security is dedicated to the subject of prisoner rehabilitation in five countries from the Central and Eastern Europe. These countries are Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. These countries were selected as they belong to the same geographical area and also share some important similarities in terms of recent history. The countries have been considered as belonging to the Communist block until the beginning of the 1990s. Starting from a specific socio-political perspective this special issue can be considered as a Foucaultian attempt to test the common belief that the level of democracy in a given country can be estimated by looking at the prison conditions and prisoner treatment. In this endeavour a special emphasis was placed on the prisoner rehabilitation as an important dimension of the prisoner's treatment. Although prisoner's rehabilitation concept can be defined in a number of different ways in the context of this special issue, it was agreed to understand it as all the strategies, tactics, techniques etc. that aim at changing offending behaviour and reducing recidivism after imprisonment.

In order to facilitate some degree of comparison between the five countries a general questionnaire was developed to cover the most important aspects of rehabilitation work in prison. This tool included items like historical development, prisoner's treatment, intake procedure, programs, sentence planning, contact with the outside world, complaining procedures, after-care and so on. The role of these items was mainly benchmarking. In addition, the authors were encouraged to address these issues from their personal and professional perspective.

As a matter of comparative observations it is worth mentioning that prisons were 'born' in this part of the world as in other geographical areas at the beginning of the XIX Century as an expression of humanizing the punishment system and peeling off the punishment from the human body. Most of the prisons were created initially by transforming nunneries or castles and therefore the prison atmosphere was dominated by discipline and austerity. In Hungary for instance the first time a prison like punishment was mentioned during the King Stephen (1000-1038) ruling in the context of punishing those „eating meat on Friday”

In most of the countries in this issue prison theory and practice was at its most at the beginning of the last century when new correctional tactics such as progressive system, conditional release, societies of patronage and so on were included in the criminal codes or enforcement laws. A lot of attention used to be paid to the prisoner's moral education and literacy. After the World War Two it seems that the moral education was replaced by the notion of „work” which became central to

the re-education process. The general ideology was that work will make offenders better. The need for recovery after the war and also the Communist regime might also played a role in raising the importance of work among prison techniques.

Although they all used to belong to the Communist family the prison experience was quite different from one country to another. For example it was striking to observe that in some countries criminological or sociological research was almost abolished but in others it was really encouraged. For instance, in Logatec prison (Slovenia) between 1967 and 1971 an experiment took place in order to assess the impact of the socio-therapeutic model on the prison environment of subsequent reoffending. It was demonstrated that only 20% of the prisoners included in the experimental group reoffended after release comparing with the Slovenian average which was 60% at the time of the study.

The intake procedure is more or less similar to all the countries covered here. The prisoner is first sent to a „preparatory unit“ where he/she is assessed from the psychological, social and medical point of view. After the assessment he/she is allocated to a prison regime depending mainly on the length of the prison sentence and criminal history. None of the countries involved in this issue has a comprehensive instrument for initial assessment of risk of reoffending, risk of harm or risk of escape. The need for such an instrument was mentioned in almost all the articles in the context of prisoner classification. The process of prison classification is more a bureaucratic one and has very little in common with the rehabilitation activities.

Most of the rehabilitation activities delivered during the prison sentence are education, vocational training, work, prison leave and therapeutic programs. In most cases the participation to these activities is voluntary but prisoners are motivated to engage with them by sometimes a very sophisticated system of privileges and benefits. An interesting example comes from Croatia where the court could pass a measure to undertake „substance abuse treatment“ within the framework of the prison sentence. In the Croatian prison system substitution therapy with Methadone and Subutex is also available.

The main difficulties expressed by the authors of these articles in terms of prison or prisoner rehabilitation are to do with the stability of prison policy, staff and resources allocated to the treatment. Overcrowding is also an important issue in some of the countries covered in this special issue. The development of non-custodial sanctions and probation service was also mentioned as a potential solution to this problem. Unfortunately no country reported any special reliable arrangements for after-care and therefore prison interventions remain with no continuity and prisoners find themselves with no real support for employment, accommodation and so on. Although according to the law special institutions should provide after-care (see Serbia for example), most of the time local NGO's are providing different forms of help and guidance to the ex-inmates.

As a general remark it can be said that especially after 1990 there is constant concern with the international standards. Prison systems are now under the authority of the Ministry of Justice and are closer and closer to the local communities. One good example is the exercise of the transparency undertaken by the prison systems in this region. Ombudsman, NGO's and volunteers are now invited to visit prison

establishments and make sure that prisons are not places for torture, inhumane or degrading treatment. It is not sure yet whether emphasising rehabilitation work in prison increased the chances for safe return of prisoner into community but that are solid proves that this trend improved prison social atmosphere and prison-staff relationship.

This special issue of the journal is not meant to be a thorough comparative overview of the prisoner rehabilitation in Central and Eastern Europe but rather an overview of a part of penological thought in South Eastern Europe.

We wish you all a good and inspiring reading.

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Guest Editors