

Measuring Prison Climate in Slovenia: Overview of the Results through the Decades*

Eva Bertok¹ 

This paper presents measuring prison climate in Slovenia, as well as its importance, rationale, historical significance, and methodological challenges. In it, prison climate dimensions of all 14 prisons under the Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia will be presented, some discrepancies delineated, and potential reasons for lower rates will be examined.

KEYWORDS: Slovenian prisons / social climate in prison

Introduction

As presented in a chapter about Ig prison (Bertok, 2024), Slovenia has relatively low imprisonment rates that are slowly rising; newest research (Fair & Walmsley, 2024, pp. 11–14) reports 85 prisoners per 100.000 inhabitants, which is still well below the rates of the rest of Southern, Central and Eastern European countries, but much higher than reported rates in the past decades (58 in 2000, 64 in 2010, 68 in 2015). Conditions in Slovenian prisons are also monitored by evaluating the social climate in prisons. Past measurements of social climate were conducted in 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000 (Brinc, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2001), 2005 (Brglez et al., 2006), 2010 (Brinc & Petrovec, 2011) and 2017 (Plesničar et al., 2019), which is rare even on a global level.

Moos's questionnaire has been preserved in its original form in Slovenian research from 1980 until the last wave of surveying in 2017. However, there were

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¹ Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana, Slovenia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3757-2849>

Correspondence: Eva Bertok, Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana, Poljanski nasip 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia. Email: eva.bertok@inst-krim.si

proposals for changes and updating, some of which were well-founded since the questionnaire is long and repetitive in some parts. The researchers found that, nevertheless, the questions in their original form still gave a good enough picture of the prison climate that allowed planning changes and improvements (Plesničar et al., 2019, p. 12). The strongest argument for utilising the same questionnaire was the possibility of a more accurate comparison with past results, thus negating a frequent comment of the prison administration that past (usually very good) results in some prisons could not be compared with newer ones. What has changed (legislation, social system, etc.) may be a lot to be considered, but the comparison was still possible with the same questionnaire.

Petrovec (Plesničar et al., 2019, p. 13) also notes that the results were informally backed up by what the staff told in their briefings with what was once called "Criminal Sanctions Enforcement Service" (Služba za izvrševanje kazenskih sankcij, today's Prison Administration), that is – the picture that the staff gave of the individual prison matched the picture given by the analysis.

The justification of the staff in prisons where poor conditions were assessed was connected to low incomes, too much work with what they called "problematic" people, and occasionally also to feelings of subordination of certain jobs compared to others (Plesničar et al., 2017, p. 15).

Researchers also comment on how they were first more restrained in evaluating the assessment of the conditions given by convicted adults and minors since their appraisal could be significantly affected by the dissatisfaction already experienced during criminal proceedings. However, they have learned over time that the evaluations were sufficiently objective and that most of what was written could be relied upon (Plesničar et al., 2019, p. 15).

The dimensions of the social climate (for more on this topic, please refer to the paper in this publication, made by dr. Darja Tadić) that prisoners and staff assessed were: ANG – Engagement; POM – Help and support; OIZ – Openness of expression; AVT – Autonomy; PUS – Practical orientation; ROP – Solving personal problems; ROR – Order and organisation; JAS – Clarity and lastly, NAD – Control. Presented are the graphs that show the fluctuation of each dimension through time – and it should be noted that in some instances the measurements were conducted from 1980 onwards - newer prisons were understandably not included in the earlier studies, so pay special attention in the graphs to the year of each survey and the lowest and highest number of respondents in each establishment, marked by N_{\min} and N_{\max} .

In most prisons surveyed from the eighties onwards, the climate rates declined over time; Brinc (2001) attributes this to changes in supervisory policies or rehabilitation policy. In many ways, the period after 1980 is marked as the "golden" age of Slovenian social therapy, which positively influenced measured social climate.

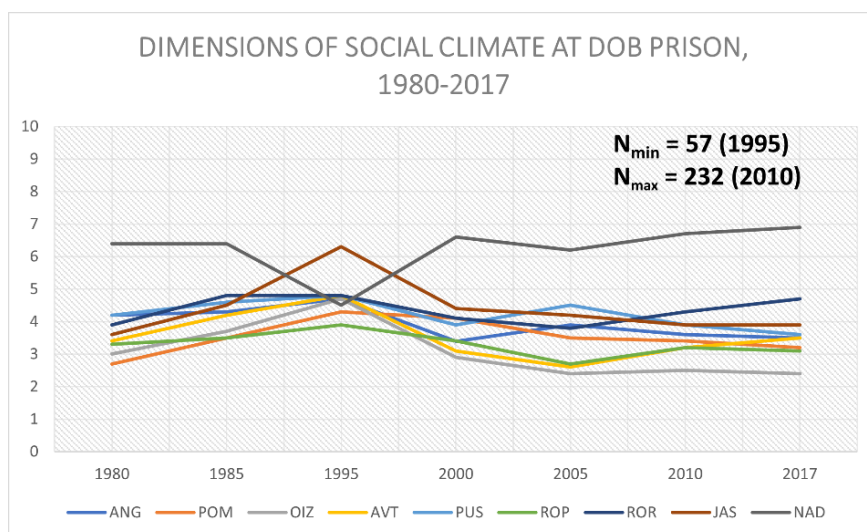
According to Brinc (2001), we were the closest to the ideal of punishment and execution of prison sentences in the year 2000, which saw improved accommodation and sanitary standards, as well as new rights and benefits for prisoners, and those rights and benefits were being monitored by the Human Rights Ombudsman. Moreover, prison staff saw working conditions and wages improving, and newly formed (that is, formed after 1991) and independent Prison Administration had strengthened its control over prisons (Brinc, 2001).

If we look more thoroughly – from 2010 to 2017 (or, as a matter of fact, from 1980 to 2017) negative changes prevail in the assessment averages made by prisoners at Dob Prison (Graph 1) across all social climate components, excluding two: Autonomy and Order and organisation, while the component of Clarity averaged almost the same.

Negative were also the changes in the *staff* assessment of the climate (Graph 2), bar the components of Practical orientation and Control, where the observed averages of staff grades were higher in 2017.

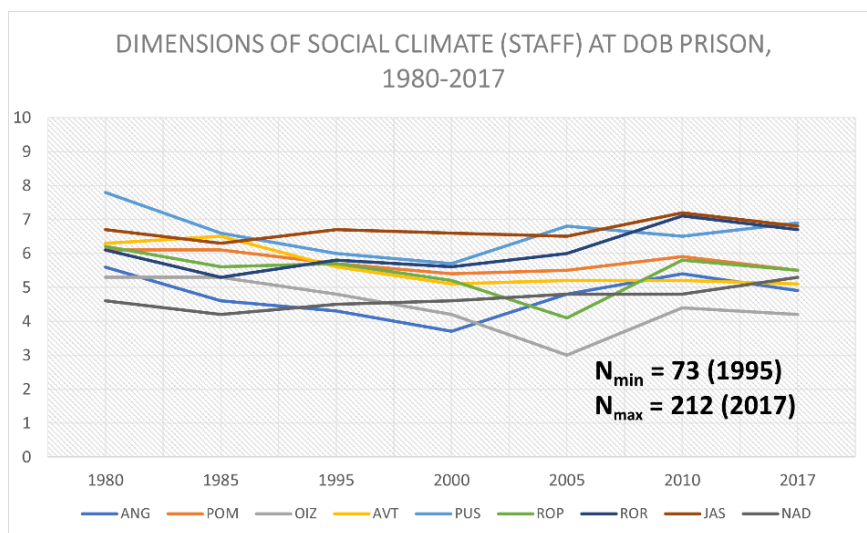
Graph 1

Prison climate components average at Dob prison, prisoners, 1980–2017

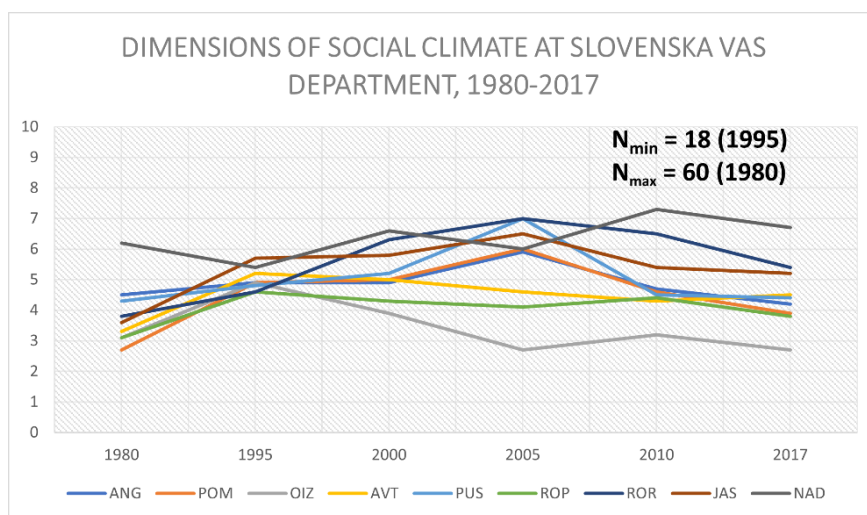


Graph 2

Prison climate components average at Dob prison, staff, 1980–2017

**Graph 3**

Prison climate components average at Slovenska vas semi-open department, prisoners, 1980–2017

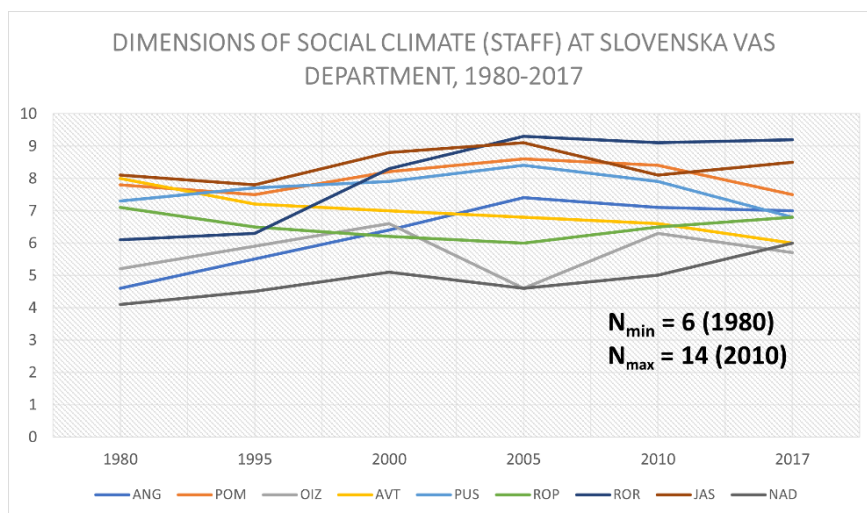


In Slovenska vas semi-open department, a branch of Dob Prison, all changes observed between 2010–2017 were negative bar Autonomy (Graph 3). From 1980 onwards, however, we can see a positive trend in Autonomy and Solving personal

problems; Order and organisation averages in 2017 were also relatively higher than in 1980, culminating in 2005. The averages of *staff* grades of climate there (Graph 4), except for Solving personal problems, Order and organisation and Clarity (of the program), were negative in 2010–2017 but have improved slightly over the whole observed period of 1980–2017.

Graph 4

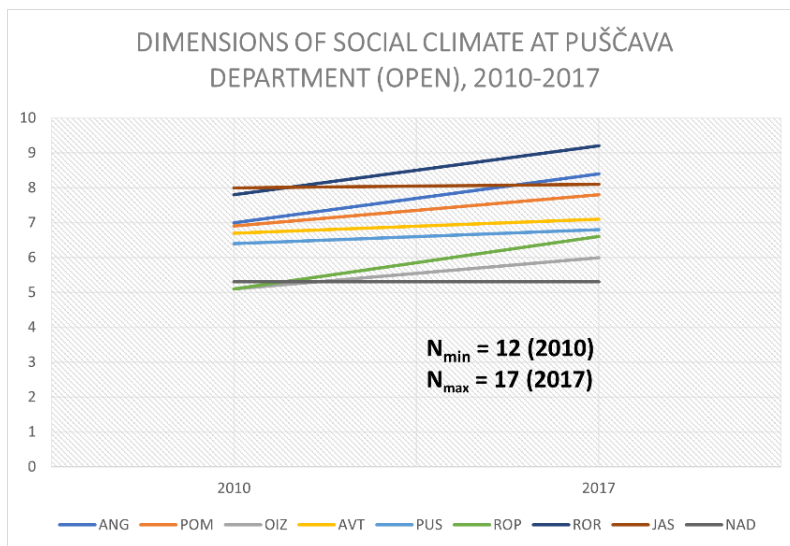
Prison climate components average at Slovenska vas semi-open department, staff, 1980–2017



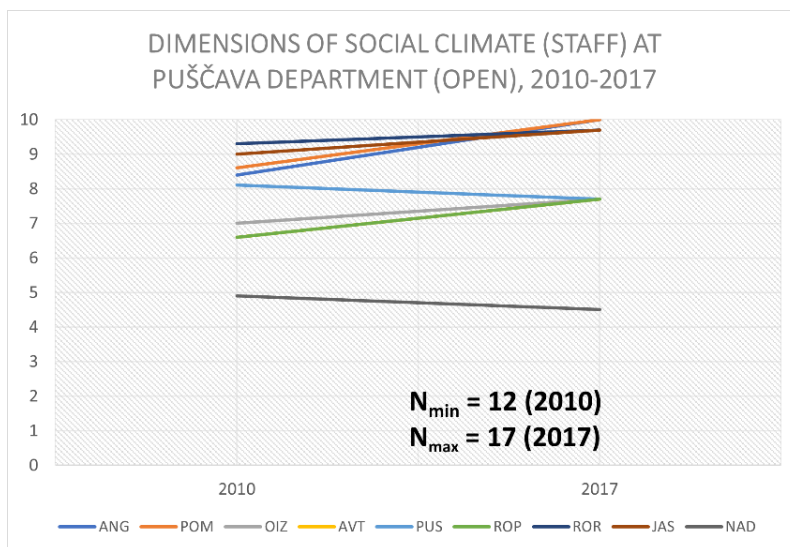
In another branch of Dob Prison, Puščava Open Department, the survey was conducted only in 2010 and 2017 (Graphs 5 and 6). All the changes in the social climate components were positive, although they were just barely in some cases (Graph 5). Puščava *staff* also reported more favourable averages in 2017 besides Practical orientation, where the changes were negative (Graph 6). Here, you can see the difference in the assessment of Control in an open department (where the averages are low, meaning that the prisoners and staff assess the control positively) and in large closed prisons like Dob (where the averages in the Control component are high, signalling bad appraisal).

Graph 5

Prison climate components average at Puščava open department, prisoners, 2010–2017

**Graph 6**

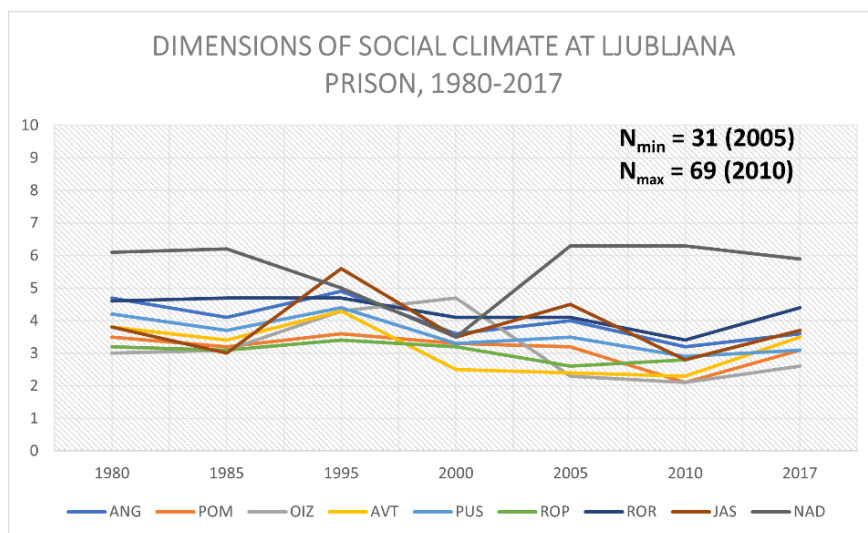
Prison climate components average at Puščava department, staff, 2010–2017



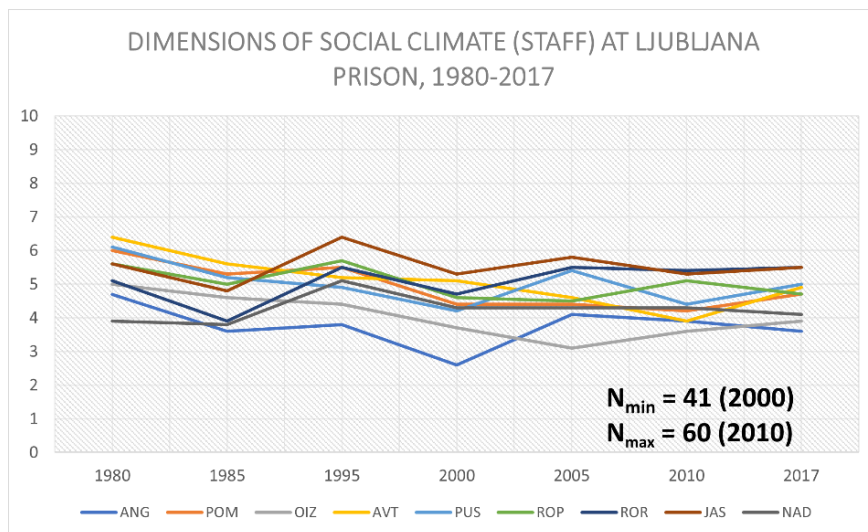
In the Ljubljana Prison, positive changes prevail (Graph 7), and the same can also be said for *staff* appraisal (Graph 8), barring Engagement, Solving personal problems and Control components.

Graph 7

Prison climate components average at Ljubljana prison, prisoners, 1980–2017

**Graph 8**

Prison climate components average at Ljubljana prison, staff, 1980–2017

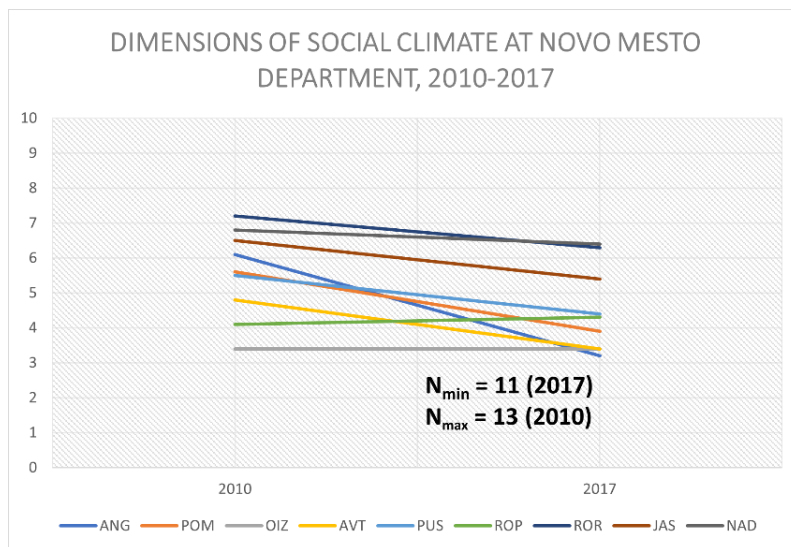


Novo Mesto Prison, a branch of Ljubljana prison where the survey was conducted only in 2010 and 2017, saw negative changes in the assessment, the only exception

being the component of Solving personal problems (Graph 9). On average, *staff* deemed the climate as more positive in 2017 across all components (Graph 10).

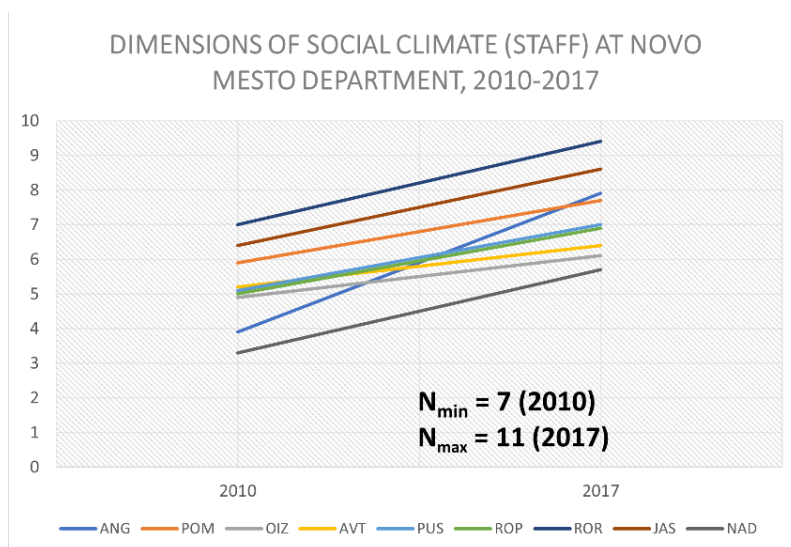
Graph 9

Prison climate components average at Novo Mesto Prison, prisoners, 2010–2017



Graph 10

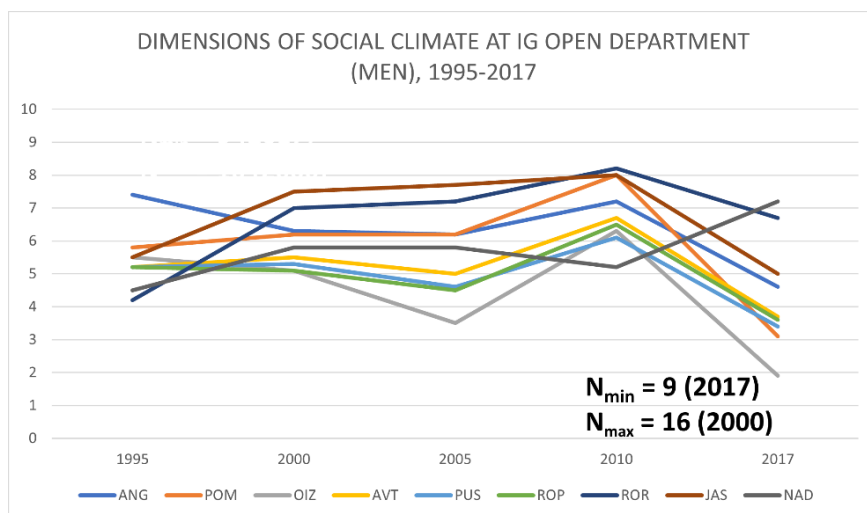
Prison climate components average at Novo Mesto Prison, staff, 2010–2017



In the second branch of Ljubljana Prison, Ig Open Department, negative changes were prevalent, especially in the Control component, where there was a considerable jump in the average – from just above 5 in 2010 to above 7 in 2017, signalling an increase in controlling behaviour of staff, which is harmful to the climate (Graph 11).

Graph 11

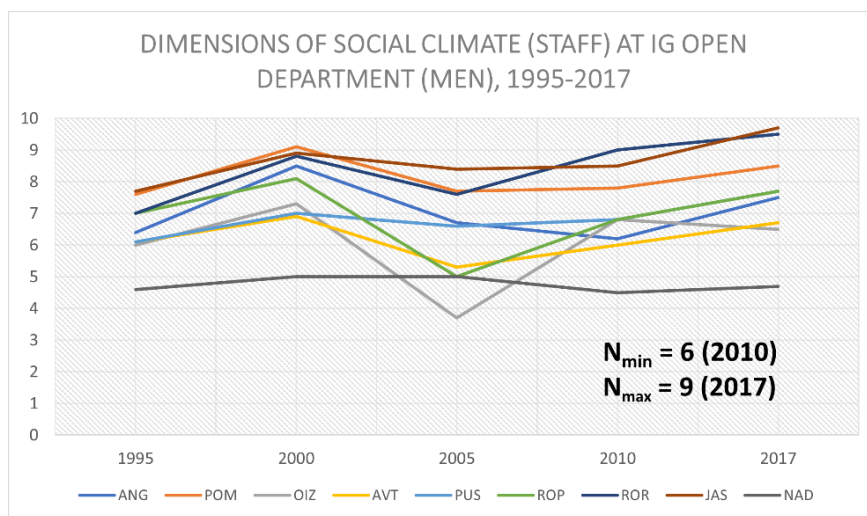
Prison climate components average at Ig open department, prisoners, 1995–2017



A matter of concern is also Openness of expression, where averages plummeted from a good 6 in 2010 to below 2 in 2017. In contrast, *staff* ratings (Graph 12) in the open department showed higher averages in grades, with only one exception: Openness of expression, where the averages were lower. Interestingly, their appraisal of the Control did not change through the observed period and was relatively low (unsurprisingly for open prison).

Graph 12

Prison climate components average at Ig open department, staff, 1995–2017

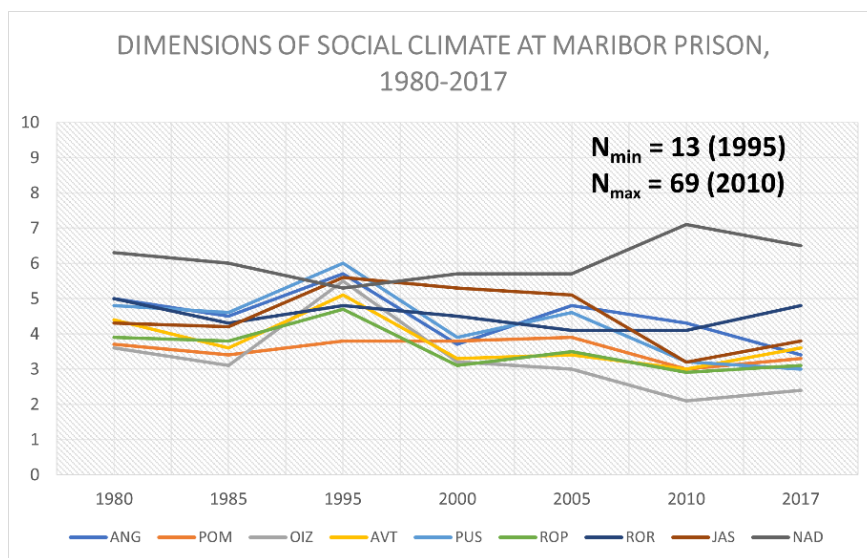


Positive changes were also apparent in the Maribor Prison in 2010–2017, except for Practical direction (Graph 13). From 1980, the changes are less favourable; there was a considerable positive jump in the climate, measured in 1995; that spike was just temporary and resulted in a significant drop in 2000 measurement; from then onwards, positive trends were observed in most components.

The *staff* at the Maribor Prison also, on average, assessed the climate more favourably in 2017, compared to 2010, except for the Control component (Graph 14). However, from 1980, their appraisal on average became much more negative.

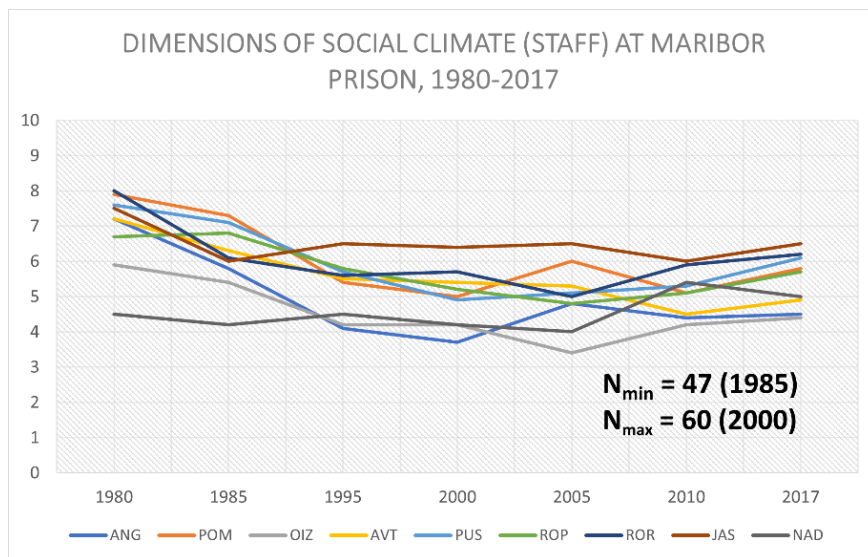
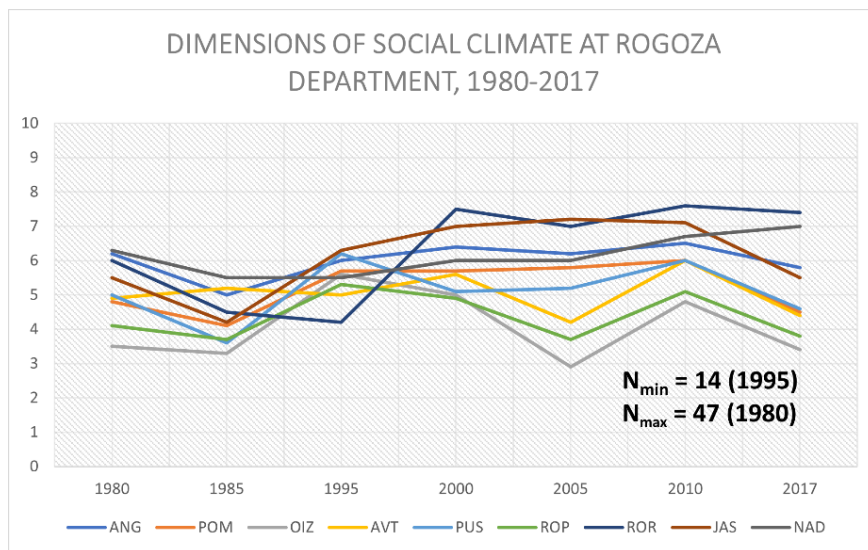
Graph 13

Prison climate components average at Maribor prison, prisoners, 1980–2017



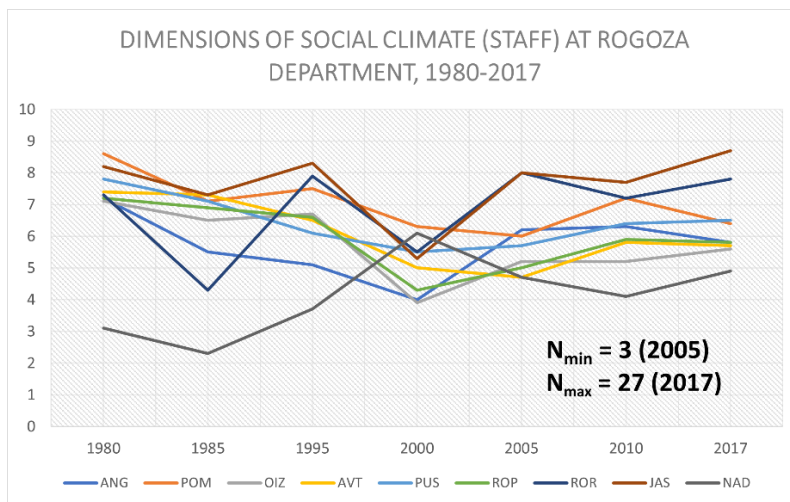
In the Rogoza Open Department, negative changes were present in all social atmosphere components (Graphs 15 and 16). A slightly less pessimistic grade was delivered by *the staff* of Rogoza (Graph 16), who, on average, reported less favourably, but in the case of Openness of expression, Autonomy, Order and organisation, the changes were positive.

If we look at the whole observed period 1980–2017, only Clarity and Order and discipline were assessed more positively at the end; moreover, the Control component was assessed very positively on average with a score of 3 (meaning low controlling behaviour, which was partly substantiated by the relatively low score of prisoners – 6) culminated in an average of 6 (double the average!) in 2000 and dropped to just below 5 in 2017 (Graph 15).

Graph 14*Prison climate components average at Maribor prison, staff, 1980–2017***Graph 15***Prison climate components average at Rogoza open department, prisoners, 1980–2017*

Graph 16

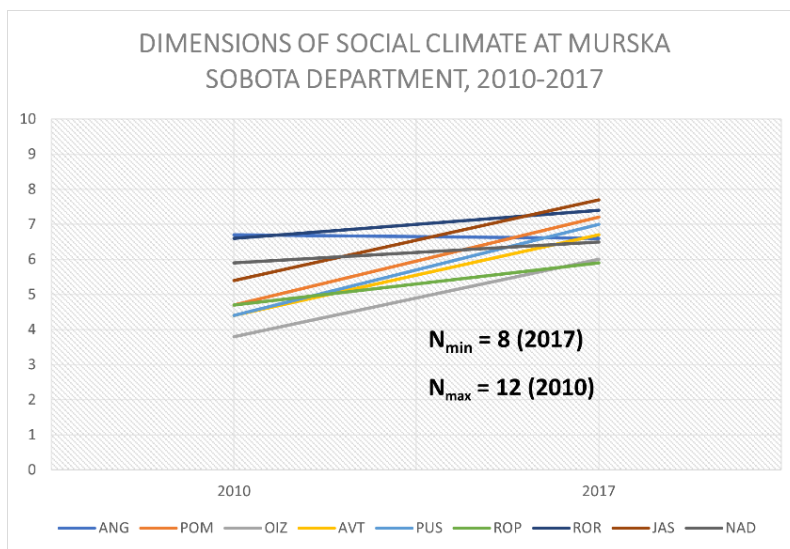
Prison climate components average at Rogoza open department, staff, 1980–2017



In the Department of Murska Sobota, the second branch of Maribor Prison, there was a negative change observed only in the scope of Engagement; all others were, on average, graded more positively (Graph 17); quite contrary, *staff* in the department assessed, on average, all of the components less favourably except Engagement and Order and organisation (Graph 18).

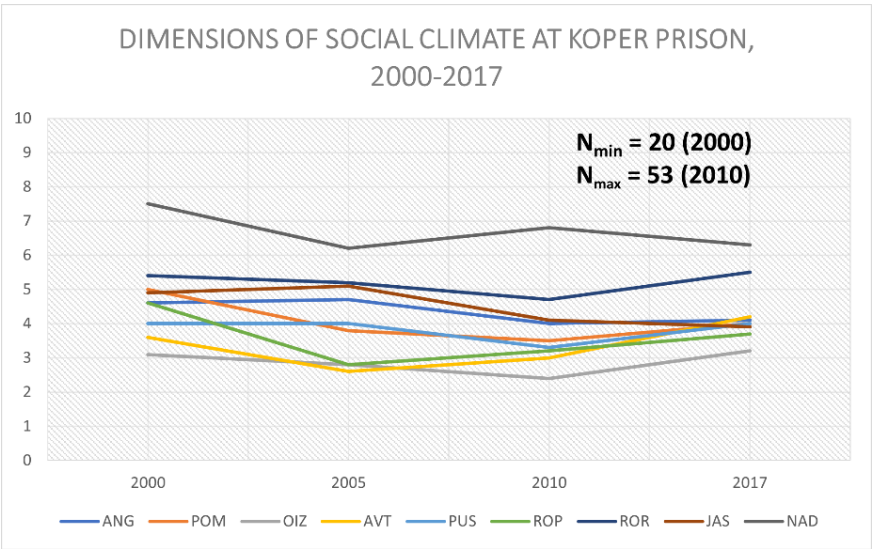
Graph 17

Prison climate components average at Murska Sobota Prison, prisoners, 2010–2017



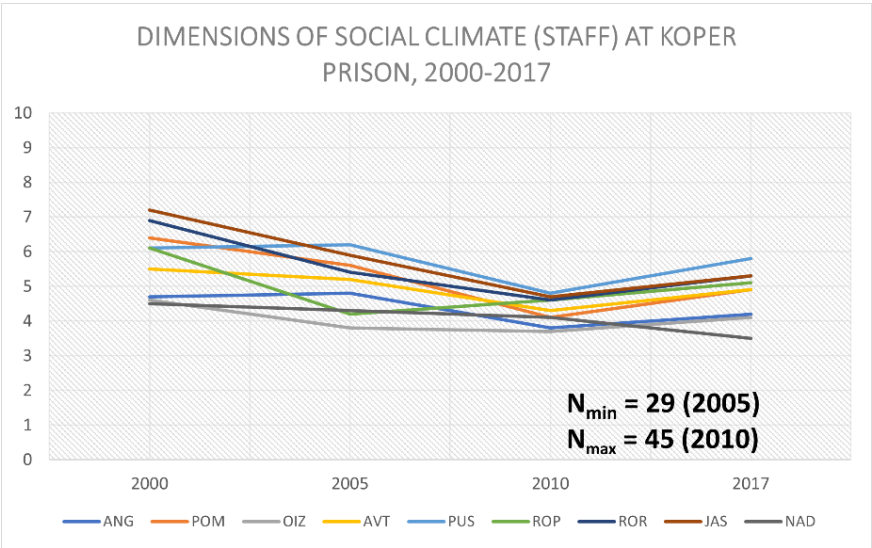
Graph 19

Prison climate components average at Koper Prison, prisoners, 2000–2017



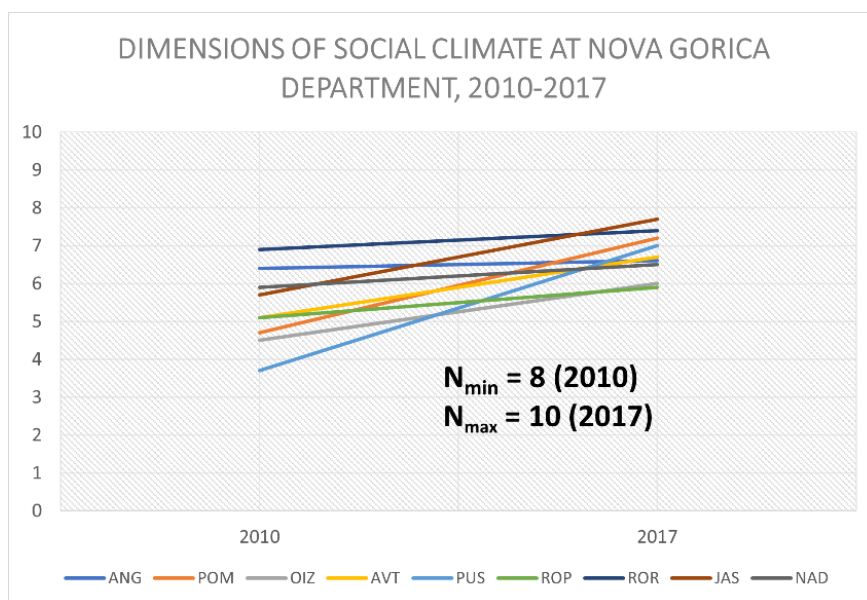
Graph 20

Prison climate components average at Koper Prison, staff, 2000–2017



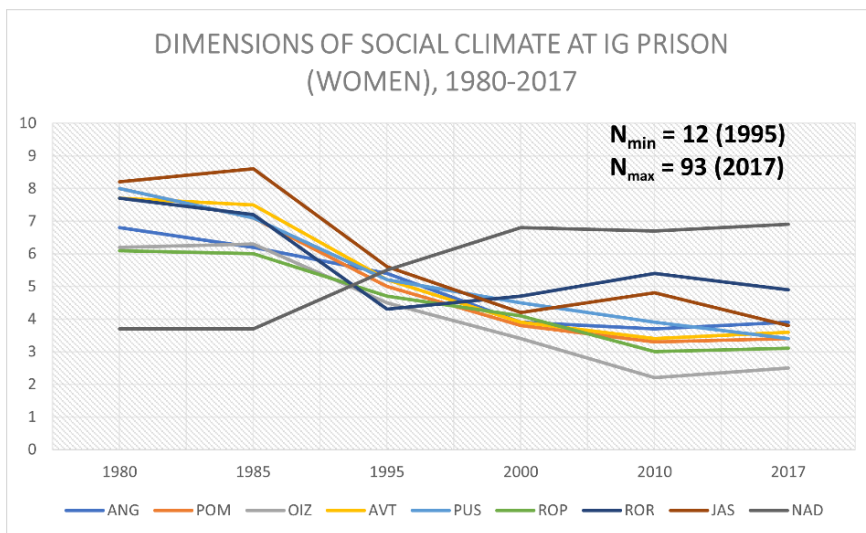
On the contrary, the *staff* there, on average, assessed the climate more negatively than seven years beforehand, the only exceptions being the components of Autonomy, Order and organisation and Control with positive changes (Graph 22).

Prison climate components average at Nova Gorica department, prisoners, 2010–2017

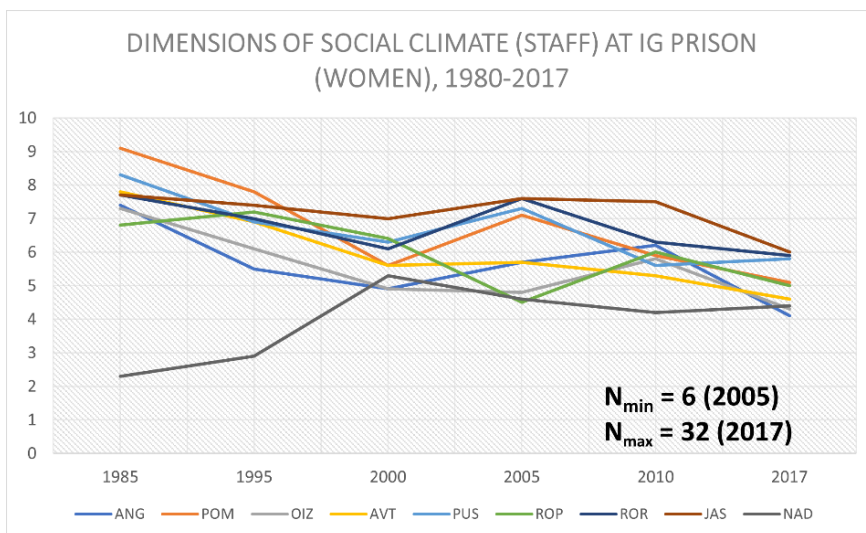


Graph 23

Prison climate components average at Ig prison, prisoners, 1980–2017

**Graph 24**

Prison climate components average at Ig prison, staff, 1980–2017

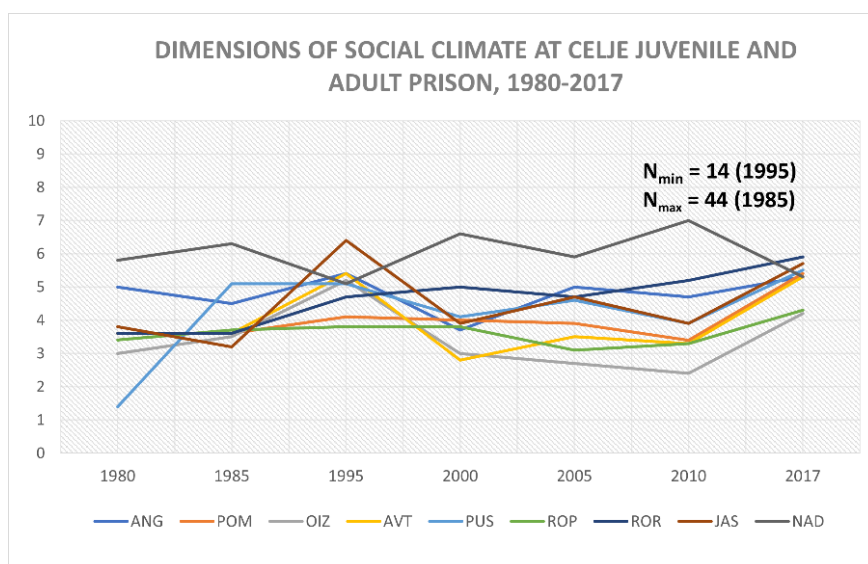


In the Celje Juvenile and Adult Prison, positive changes have been observed in all components of the social climate, as expressed by young inmates there. *Staff*: negative changes prevail, the only exception being the Practical orientation,

Solving personal problems, and program Clarity, while the Openness of expression is, on average, assessed similarly as before.

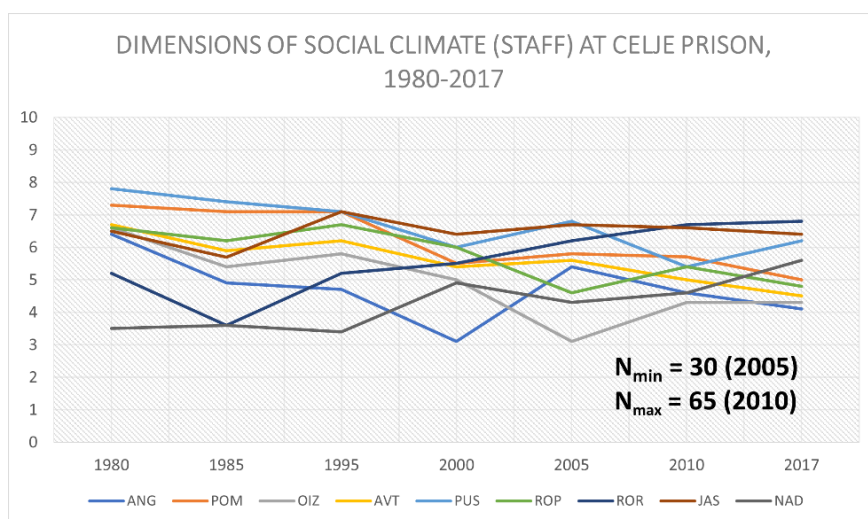
Graph 25

Prison climate components average at Celje juvenile and adult prison, prisoners, 1980–2017



Graph 26

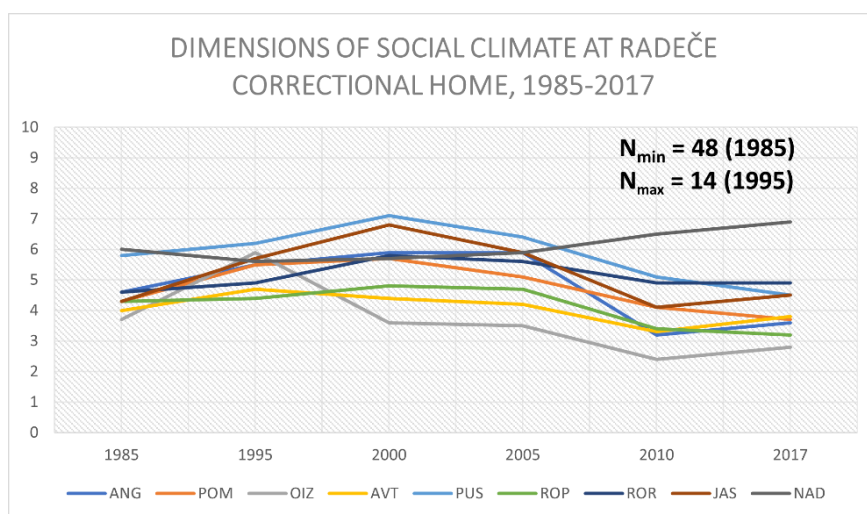
Prison climate components average at Celje juvenile and adult prison, staff, 1980–2017



In the Radeče re-education home, most of the changes are positive, with the exception of Help and support, Practical orientation, Solving personal problems and Control. At the same time, the assessment for the components of Order and organisation was similar to the previous one. *Staff* there also assessed more favourably between 2010–2017 all dimensions except Engagement and Control. When observing the whole period from 1985 onwards, the averages were slightly lower, and the Control component have risen from between 4 and 5 to 6, which marks significantly more controlling behaviour, as assessed by staff.

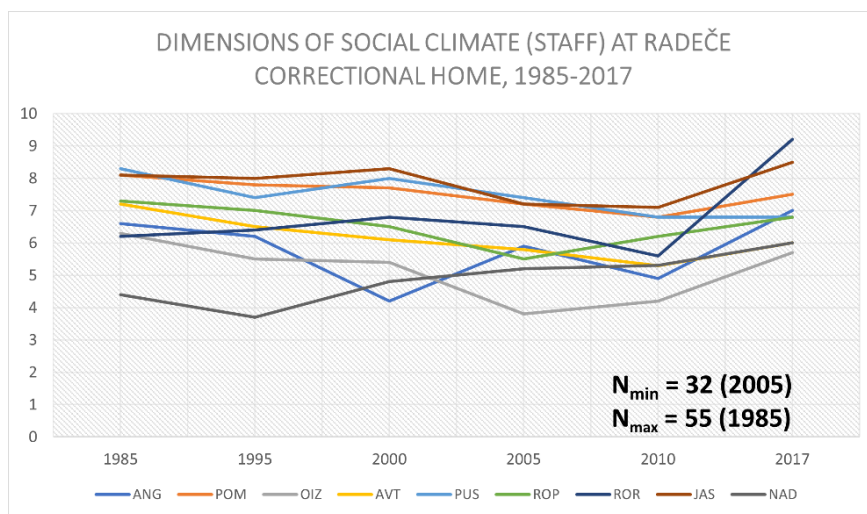
Graph 27

Prison climate components average at Radeče re-education home, juveniles, 1985–2017



Graph 28

Prison climate components average at Radeče re-education home, staff, 1985–2017



To summarise – the results offer us an insight on how the atmosphere appraisal fluctuated in different prisons in Slovenia, but even more importantly, it serves as a discussion point on how it is possible to achieve better (or worse) prison atmosphere even when the majority of conditions, including prison administration is the same.

The present short introduction to the topic of the social climate in Slovenian prisons is focused primarily on the results of the surveys through time and less on why the (sometimes sudden changes) in the measured climate happened. That question is better suited for each prison's (former) management. As mentioned, Brinc (2001) attributes this to changes in supervisory policies or rehabilitation policy; for instance, Ig prison saw the change from no monitoring via cameras in the eighties to cameras pointing at each entrance not even twenty years later. First was the result of the "socio-therapeutic approach", which was based on the idea that open prison should be an option for all prisoners. This concept was introduced in other Slovenian prisons but had varied results. Petrovec (2015) concludes that the staff were reluctant to relinquish their power and authority, the cornerstone of the prisons' traditional (t.i. hierarchical) structure. Nevertheless, when the socio-therapeutic approach was implemented, it positively affected both staff and prisoners (Petrovec, 2015).

In conclusion, according to Brinc (2001), we have already reached the zenith, that is, we have already reached the closest to the ideal of punishment and execution of prison sentences in the year 2000, and are seeing rights and benefits

for the prisoners and staff to be in decline. Our research mission is to help establish new guidelines and improve the prisons.

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