European Prison Worker?[*]

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Introduction/Research Problem: The diversity of the European countries is not only reflected in their distinct history and culture, but also in the organisation of prison systems, aims of punishment, size and conditions within prisons, characteristics of prison populations, and the structure of the prison staff. *Objectives*: The paper aims to present the development of punishment and prison services in Europe and highlight similarities and differences between European prison systems. *Methods*: Delineation of the historical development of prisons in European countries is based on a literature review, while a comparative method was used to highlight similarities and differences in the organisation of prison systems. *Results*: The organisation, structure, and characteristics of prison staff in European countries are complex and diverse. The Council of Europe, CPT, and ECHR provided strong foundations for the future development of "European penology", however distinct historical, cultural and legal development in European countries present a counterweight for possible uniform development of prison services across Europe. *Conclusion*: Universal standards for protecting human rights in prisons must be adopted by European countries and respected in practice, but every other aspect of the implementation of prison sentences should be individually tailored to the specific needs of an individual country, including the organisation of the prison service.

KEYWORDS: prison workers / Europe / diversity / development

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One of the main characteristics of Europe is its diversity, which is not reflected only in history and culture, but also in the organization of criminal justice systems. Differences between prison systems of European countries reflected in the aims of punishment, size and conditions within prisons, characteristics of prison populations, and the structure of the prison staff are profound (Aebi & Cocco, 2024; Dűnkel, 2017; Flander & Meško, 2016; Krajewski, 2014; Lappi-Seppälä, 2011). Regardless of the prison architecture, type of regime, and treatment orientation within the prison itself, the relationship between a prison organization and prison workers is mutual (Lambert et al., 2021), as the prison environment influences the well-being of employees, while prison workers enable the day-to-day running of prisons.

Prison workers, first as prison guards, have been present in different forms of "modern" correctional institutions since the 17th century. However, only in the 19th century, did the first formal training for prison workers emerge in Europe; penological schools for prison guards were opened in Belgium, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy (Sellin, 1934). In the 1870s two international congresses confirmed the crucial role of theoretical and practical training for prison workers (Schade, 1986). Despite the independent development of training for prison workers and managing prisons in Europe, which to a certain degree persist even today, after the Second World War standards were agreed upon, to which European countries adhere [or at least try to]; non-member states of the Council of Europe present an obvious exception. The common penological and human rights standards that are in force in all European prison systems are the result of activities of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), and Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe that are recognized as the primary institutions, which rulings and recommendations guide (or at least influence) the development of penology (including recommendations for selection and training of prison workers) and penal policy in European countries (Snacken & van Zyl Smit, 2013). While the minimum common standards for operating prisons were adopted by European states, making them the most progressive countries in the field of implementation of prison sentences in the world, the question remains whether we can speak of European prison workers.

Despite the above-mentioned standards that are mostly implemented in the national legislations and practices of European countries, these are general in nature. Consequently, significant differences occur between countries in the fields of penal policy, structure of the prison system, treatment of prisoners, etc. The development of penal policies goes beyond the scope of this work, but it has to be highlighted that differences between countries exist, which range from relatively mild (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Slovenia) to harsh penal policies (e.g., Central and Eastern European countries) (Dünkel et al., 2022; Flander et al., 2023; Hacin

et al., 2022; Lappi-Seppälä, 2011), which among others affect the treatment of prisoners, as well as the composition of the prison staff. At first glance, in most European countries the structure of the prison staff follows the classic division to managerial staff, prison officers, and treatment workers, however, the structure is much more complex, as authorities, work responsibilities, and even the level of training required, differs significantly. For example, the training of prison workers varies in length and form (i.e., curriculum); penological academies are operating in several European countries (e.g., Poland), while shorter versions of training are implemented in others (e.g., Slovenia) (European Penitentiary Training Academies Network, 2023).

Custodial staff (i.e., prison officers and other staff responsible for safety and security) is the largest group of prison workers in all European prison systems; on average they have presented more than 60% of all the prison staff from 2000 to 2023 (see SPACE I reports; Aebi & Cocco, 2024). It can be argued that this particular group of prison workers is the most similar among European countries, as their primary task is providing safety and security in prisons. However, differences can be seen in the level of hierarchical/militaristic nature of the service, involvement in the treatment programmes, perception of their role, etc. While prison officer service presents a hierarchical uniformized service, for which conservativism and subculture are characteristics, the levels of rigidness and military organization vary between the countries, ranging from the purely militaristic nature of the service that can be found in Russia and some other Eastern European countries to less militaristic [resembling more to police and treatment] services that can be found in Finland, Netherlands, etc. (Molleman & van der Broek, 2014; Omel'chenko et al., 2024; Symkovych, 2018). The organization of the service is also reflected in prison officers' role in the treatment programmes and perception of their role in prison. While more punitive countries restrict the role of prison officers to [solely] security-related tasks, other European countries are more flexible, as prison officers help with the implementation of the treatment programmes for prisoners or are directly involved in them (e.g., Norway, Slovenia) (Arnold et al., 2024; Meško et al., 2022).

With the rise of rehabilitative ideas, new types of prison workers appeared at the beginning of the 20th century. While there are different groups (e.g., psychologists, pedagogues, social workers, etc.), they can all be designated as treatment workers (Antonio & Price, 2021). Also, workshop staff should be mentioned, which can be [with some reservation] categorized as treatment workers, as teaching prisoners new work skills and enhancing their working habits is an integral part of the rehabilitation process. In contrast, to the proportion of prison officers, which is relatively similar, the percentage of treatment workers and workshop staff varies significantly among European countries; on average treatment workers and workshop staff have presented approximately 6% and 4% of all the prison staff from 2000 to 2023 (see SPACE I reports; Aebi & Cocco,

2024). The lowest percentages were detected in Greece, Italy, and Ireland, and the highest in Scandinavian countries, Slovenia, Serbia, Switzerland, and Czechia. However, one must not make a hasty conclusion that countries with a higher percentage of treatment workers and workshop staff are also more treatment-focused, as approximately half of the European countries outsource services to other governmental organisations, NGOs, and private companies (Aebi & Cocco, 2024; Daems & Vander Beken, 2018; Meško et al., 2022).

Managerial staff have traditionally presented a bridge between prison policy (i.e., aims of punishment) and its implementation in practice. Differences in the organization of the prison system in European countries have a profound influence on management. First, differences can be observed in the command structure, as the leadership style is strongly dependent on whether managers are in the role of officers ([para]militaristic approach) or directors (civilian approach). The former is usually more commanding and rigid while the latter is more democratic in nature and practice. The architectural design of prisons also presents an important factor that dictates the type of leadership. Small prisons characterized by treatment-oriented countries (e.g., Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and also Slovenia) enable managers to take a more dynamic and personal approach to governing, including a direct approach in dealing with prisoners, to which they start to present an actual present authority, and not some distant power holders. The same can be observed with prison workers, as they see their leaders with them "in the trenches" (Brookes et al., 2008; Keena et al., 2022). Also, the involvement of politics in the appointment of senior managers influences their leadership and professionalism greatly.

Diversity was always present in the development of Europe as countries jealously guarded their cultural heritage, despite attempts in recent history for unification of the continent (e.g., the European Union). Consequently, it would be illusionary to expect that criminal justice (prison) systems would be any different. As it was demonstrated, the organisation, structure, and characteristics of prison staff in European countries are complex and diverse, as well as their responsibilities and tasks. While the Council of Europe, CPT, and ECHR provided strong foundations for the future development of "European penology", the differences in historical, cultural, legal and even situational development in European countries present a counterweight for possible uniformed development of prison services across Europe in the future. Even if we disregard the effects of the cultural environment and distinct development of criminal justice in European countries, the specific characteristics of the prison population (e.g., the size and composition of the prison population, percentage of foreign prisoners, number of drug addicts, number of dangerous prisoners, etc.) demand different work approaches (i.e., treatment) from the prison staff. Differences among countries also present a great opportunity for researchers to determine "what works" in individual cultural environments by conducting comparative research, and maybe

even more importantly not to make hasty generalisations in the sense that "nothing works" with dire consequences (see Martinson, 1974). Simply put, while universal standards for protecting human rights in prisons must be adopted by European countries and respected in practice, every other aspect of the implementation of prison sentences should be individually tailored to the specific needs of an individual country, including the organisation of the prison service. As all penal cultures are local (Tonry, 2007), the structure and organisation of the prison service and staff are the results of penal policy, in which historical and cultural values of individual society are reflected.

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