An international network working towards social justice, state accountability and decarceration

NEWSLETTER No 2, 2017
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Front image: Protesters in front of the Government, Victoriei Place, Bucharest (2 February 2017). Source: wiki commons, by Wintereu - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
I. Editorial

Romania has recently been on the news worldwide, due to the government’s suggestion for a decree to decriminalize corruption. This is in practice a suggestion for decriminalizing state crime and crimes by the powerful, protecting politicians from allegations and prosecutions of corruption. Due to massive protests from the Romanian population, at most half a million people took to the streets, the proposed decree was canceled. This gives us a good example on how standing up, organizing, protesting can lead to concrete results in regard to crimes by the powerful – it is a source of inspiration. The last word is, however, still not said in this case, the government is currently working on other avenues to get their will through.

This February newsletter brings you a most interesting and topical article by Dorina Damsa and Andrada Istrate who offers an insight into the prison policy, and life in and after prison in Romania in relation to the public discussions which arose in the aftermath of the decriminalizing of corruption proposal and the protests against it. Damsa and Istrate also follows up on the topic discussed in the latest newsletters, prison conditions – in earlier issues in the UK and Greenland, in this issue in Romania, and with a focus on life after prisons, which for many involve re-entry within a short period of time.

The resent happenings in Romania are also of vast relevance and interest for our upcoming conference, covering the topic of crimes of the powerful. The call for paper is now out, and can be found on page 9.

The deadline for papers for the 45th European Group Conference Uncovering Harms: States, corporations and organizations as criminals is 30 April 2017. More information about the conference can be found here. The conference will be held in Mytilene in Lesbos on the 31st of August to the 3rd of September 2017.

In solidarity,
Ida and Per
II. ‘The least deserving of us all’: Notes on Romanian Prisoners

By: Dorina Damsa and Andrdada Istrate

Two weeks in office, the newly appointed Romanian government announced an emergency decree pardoning certain prisoners for specific offenses, some related to abuse of power by state officials. This would have resulted in the release of about 2,500 inmates, thus addressing (albeit only partially) one of the structural problems faced by Romanian prisons: overcrowding. The latest survey conducted by the National Administrations of Penitentiaries showed a number of 28,334 prisoners in correctional facilities, while the system has a capacity of 18,778 places, should the standards of the European Committee for the prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and of the European Court for Human Rights be upheld (NAP, 2016). Legal experts, prison administrators, and some journalists noticed that this decree would not solve the overcrowding problem as much as help politicians sentenced for or undergoing investigations for corruption bypass the law.

The night the decree was made public, 10,000 people spontaneously gathered in support of the rule of law under the slogan: “in every democracy, thieves are in prison.” After only the semblance of public debate, prison pardons were entirely forgotten and a new decree that redefined the abuse of power was inconspicuously issued. The latter decree generated a string of protests both against and in support of the government, the largest gathering some 500,000 people all over Romania.

Beyond the legal debates, political controversies, and unprecedented protests generated by this situation, a certain imagery of prisons and prisoners in Romania came to light, at the same time eschewing a real debate about imprisonment and reentry. A public debate regarding punishment, where politicians, journalists, social scientists, penitentiary staff, and lay people expressed their opinions, ensued. Time and time again, comparisons between the money spent on prisoners versus the money spent on orphans or [insert any member of the so-called vulnerable categories] were drawn, with prisoners always portrayed as less deserving. “In
every democracy, thieves are in prison,” all echoed, and, once again, they changed the conversation arguing for hospitals instead of prisons, schools instead of prisons, or anti-corruption measures instead of prisons. Life is elsewhere, as Milan Kundera might posit.

Within a polyphony of views, prisons and prisoners were left aside. However, the majority of prisoners return home, with significantly altered life paths, unable to find decent employment, forced to emigrate, and set on unstable life trajectories. While the conditions of detention, such as overcrowding, food ratios, or facilities have been used as objects of political rhetoric, they represent nonetheless everyday life in prison and remain important aspects of carceral realities. Drawing on findings from a research project conducted at the University of Bucharest and the University of Oslo, titled *The Ethnography of Prisoners’ Transitions*, this short piece discusses several aspects related to imprisonment and reentry in Romania, privileging the subjective meanings attached to prison and reentry by prisoners themselves.

*Prison survival 101*

Matei is a man in his 60, all alone, since both his mother and wife passed away. He says he has no one and nothing to return to upon release. At one point during the interview when I ask again about his family, he begins to cry. He’s happy to be out, though he is concerned about the time when the joy of release will have evaporated. He says he’s happy he’s not a heavy smoker since the addiction would cost him his dignity. Other inmates in his situation (no money, no support) perform all sorts of demeaning tasks in exchange for smokes, from laundering the socks of the more well off prisoners to having to accept debasement. It’s this very inequality that seems to disturb Matei, especially as he recalls doing time back in 1995. The situation was different 20 years ago, he argues. Now it’s the rich who run the prisons and some have a more decent lifestyle in jail than others on the outside. He says he is respected due to his old age, but some of his recollections of the differences between his meals and those of better off prisoners make me think that he feels deeply deprived. When I suggest accompanying him home on the day of his release, he refuses – heavily indebted and with some accommodation troubles, he doesn’t know what awaits him. His main problem is that he’s not sure of how he’s going to make a living. Prisoners are tainted, he says.

At the other end of the financial spectrum, Sami, an Iraqi engineer imprisoned for financial fraud, tries to make sense of his sentence. He says that being locked up is not the punishment, that the punishment is being “locked up with all these people.” These people, he remarks, are not the Romanians he knew and liked – educated, informed, and generally nice – but a new “breed” he has not met in the 20 years he spent in Romania. “Some want to be here, for some, the jungle inside is better than the jungle outside,” he says surprised, “some don’t know what to do when they are out, they thrive in here”. He has an interesting narrative about power in prison (departing from the nitty-gritty: control over the television remote, noise, outside time, food), punishment, time, the torture between court dates, and release. His biggest wish is to get out and help his wife who supported their children and the house and also supported him for the one year he’s been locked up. Except his wife and former employer, nobody knows he
was imprisoned, not even his two children. Shame taints all his social relationships (Extract from Andra Istrate’s fieldnotes, February 24th, 2015)

These two vignettes show some insight into prison life, stressing the importance of strong (family) ties to help carry the weight of incarceration. While serving their sentence, inmates are allowed to receive up to five visits a month, depending on their regime of incarceration. Receiving visits is grounds for differentiation both for parole boards and in the prison hierarchy. Packages and foodstuffs, money, and the ability to associate with the more powerful embed prisoners in the prison hierarchy. In conjunction with this, age seems to make prison experience more harrowing. One inmate says: “I’m 56 and I have diabetes, I can’t return to prison and have a 25 year old bossing me around. [...] Young people today are eager for fame, they’d pump iron for a couple of months and act tough.”

For some, however, prison represents a first instance of seeing and being seen like a citizen. Prison is a chance for prisoners to encounter, possibly for the first time, social workers, therapists or educators. They learn a great deal about their rights as citizens and explore legal possibilities regarding their sentences. In many interviews conducted in prison and after release, we were surprised by the legal knowledge inmates possess: law articles were casually inserted into conversations, comparisons between penal codes were drawn, and countries with more affordable sanctions were chosen as potential destinations. In inmates’ narratives, the prison experience was sometimes understood as a learning experience, an education in terms of knowing people, life, oneself, but also the law.

However, one of the most compelling lessons prisoners invoke refers to others and to society. One prisoner explains: “There is no friendship in prison. Everybody is your friend when you receive foodstuff or packages or money to go to the commissary. I learnt how to not trust people.” Learning not to trust means, at the same time, learning to live outside society. As put by Georg Simmel, “without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate” (1978: 178). In an environment of improbity and deception, the absence of trust is a key aspect of the relation prisoners have with the state and society. In most of their scenarios for life after release, prisoners imagine the state and its institutions as a last resort, should they need help.

The literature on the ‘pains of imprisonment’ represents a useful tool to understand a great deal of the experiences of inmates in Romanian prisons. Most prisoners define their prison experience as a loss and feel that prison has caused them a loss in terms of time, health, family, job, social status, as well as of material goods. Most of the time, their loss shadowed their crimes. As one prisoner recollects: “prison was
time lost in vain. I didn’t deserve to be locked up for my crime. It just wasn’t worth it. I had some great losses: my girlfriend left me, we broke up, we have four children and only two are legally mine. All of them are now in a care home”. For this inmate, release, although imbued with great hope, meant he would be able to get back his children and his life. He did neither and within four months, he was back in prison, proving that some prisons do indeed have revolving doors.

*Freedom + 50 cents*

Once the gates of Jilava-Bucharest Prison open, inmates are sent on their way. Each is given back their IDs and 2.6 RON (less than 50 eurocents) for transportation. Some, however, feel that their punishment has just begun. With less than 50 eurocents, most of the former prisoners embark on a solitary journey. In Romania, there are no state institutions that deal with reentry. There are a few NGOs that deal with vulnerable categories that may provide assistance, but very few prisoners will address them. Moreover, from what we were able to document, most prisoners rarely contact any state institution (such as the National Employment Agency or Payments and Social Services Agency). Rather, most of the former prisoners in our study mobilized the same traditional webs of solidarity as they did in prison.

Family, friends, and former employers are the ones who provide both moral and financial support, especially in the first month of freedom. After former prisoners become more accustomed to their surroundings and their place in the social world of reentry, they will direct their efforts towards becoming employed or financially autonomous. Most participants in our study work without official documentation, at least in the first six months after release. They change at least two jobs during the first year after release and as many work domains.

They hold a precarious position on the labor market and will accept any job offer rather than look for work according to their abilities or competencies. Many complain that they are required to disclose their criminal records, even if not necessary, for instance when applying for a position in a car wash or on a
construction site. They feel stuck in their own stories, with no chance to escape their past mistakes. Possibly as a consequence, a great deal of our participants seriously considers emigration as a possible trajectory. Emigration is imagined as an opportunity for them to experience release just as they imagined it while imprisoned: as a rebirth, a new beginning, a chance to start over.

By way of conclusion

While, the conditions of imprisonment in Romania have finally been raised in political and public debate, they remain mere rhetorical devices, used to promote other agendas. Moreover, politicians have given little thought to reentry and the ensuing challenges. Public opinion has also deemed prisoners as the least deserving of us all. There is little data on the situation of former prisoners, casting some doubt on the applicability and practical effectiveness of reintegration programs. Meanwhile, former prisoners are sent on their way with no more than 50 eurocent, often towards nowhere.

Note: The Ethnography of Prisoners Transitions Research Project inspired a short-film directed by Camelia Popa, ‘2 lei 60’. The trailer is available here.

References

Links:
- Link 1 ‘a string of protests’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anctzZiP_uY
- Link 2 ‘the ethnography of prisoner transitions’ http://www.reentry.eu/en/
- Link 3 ‘they feel stuck in their stories’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zESnyKjSDR4
- Link 4: trailer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsVTyuBtv00

Dorina Damsa (dorina.damsa@jus.uio.no) studied human rights at the Faculty of Law, University of Oslo. She worked as a researcher at the Norwegian Center for Human Rights, focusing on the criminalization of homelessness in Oslo; at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, in a project exploring the experiences of foreign nationals in Norwegian prisons; and she is now part of the Nordic Branding project.

Andrada Istrate (andrada.istrate@gmail.com) studied sociology at the University of Bucharest and sociology and social anthropology at Central European University, Budapest. For the past years, she has researched the Romanian gambling scene, with a particular interest in forms of professionalization among poker players. She is currently working on her PhD dissertation about the Romanian pyramid schemes of the 1990s, focusing on how people produce and circulate new notions of time, person, hope, value, money and morality.
III. Call for papers: The European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control 45th Annual Conference

Uncovering Harms: States, corporations and organizations as criminals

31 August – 3 September, Mytilene, Lesbos, Greece

In recent years the international academic community has made an effort to define and uncover harms by states, corporations and organizations. This effort is stemming from the point of view of protecting human rights and preventing social harms. These acts include loss of life, physical or other harm, and loss of property. The need for addressing harms by states, corporations and organizations is connected both with the need for appropriate orientation of formal criminal policy (law, police, administration of justice) and for the awareness of citizens, consumers, workers and social movements.

A root of the problem, the criminal-induced partnership between state, corporate capital, and organizations, does not lead to easy answers for a future “better” political management of the state. This raises issues of the advocacy of the public interest and universal human rights; it highlights the concept of social harm, and sets democracy and the collective as the dominant principles. This complex is the contemporary reality, and a criminology that takes a position upon this ought to highlight a broader social awareness and action for social change.

We welcome papers on the themes below which reflect the general values and Principals of the European Group. Please forward short abstracts of 150-300 words to the relevant stream coordinators by 30th of April 2017.

For all general enquiries please contact Stratos Georgoulas at: s.georgoulas@soc.aegean.gr. For questions about the European Group, please contact the EG coordinator Ida Nafstad at: europeangroupcoordinator@gmail.com
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<td><strong>Crimes of the Powerful Working Group Stream</strong></td>
<td>Samantha Fletcher <a href="mailto:samantha.fletcher@staffs.ac.uk">samantha.fletcher@staffs.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Uncovering and examining harmful state-corporate relationships&lt;br&gt;Utilising Green/Eco-critical criminology to expose the crimes and harms of the powerful&lt;br&gt;Accountability in organisational, state and/or corporate crimes and harms&lt;br&gt;Unmasking the crimes and harms of the powerful: new trajectories, developments, challenges and methodological concerns&lt;br&gt;Activism, protest and resistance endeavours seeking to reveal the crimes and harms of the powerful&lt;br&gt;<em>Special section</em>: This year we are seeking to have a special section within this stream dedicated to considering the current trajectories and developments in Turkey and we would particularly welcome papers to form a panel or specific stream related to the crimes and harms of the powerful in Turkey.</td>
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<td><strong>Post-crash policing: developments and implications</strong></td>
<td>G. Papanicolaou <a href="mailto:g.papanicolaou@tees.ac.uk">g.papanicolaou@tees.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Post-crash intensification of coercion and surveillance&lt;br&gt;Policing the crisis in the European South: developments and comparisons&lt;br&gt;Capitalism, pacification and post-crash policing&lt;br&gt;Containing the police counterattack: problems and prospects for police accountability&lt;br&gt;Citizens, activists, communities, movements: possibilities for resistance and alternative political programmes</td>
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<td><strong>Social harm/Zemiology</strong></td>
<td>Constantinos Pantazis <a href="mailto:C.Pantazis@bristol.ac.uk">C.Pantazis@bristol.ac.uk</a>, Simon Pemberton <a href="mailto:S.Pemberton.1@bham.ac.uk">S.Pemberton.1@bham.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>More to come</td>
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<td><strong>Fear and looting in the periphery: Approaching global crime and harm in (and from) the south(s)</strong></td>
<td>Alejandro Forero <a href="mailto:aleforero@ub.edu">aleforero@ub.edu</a>, David J. Farr <a href="mailto:djf@unizar.es">djf@unizar.es</a>, Ignasi Bernat <a href="mailto:ignasi.bernat@udg.edu">ignasi.bernat@udg.edu</a></td>
<td>More to come</td>
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<td><strong>Prison, Punishment and Detention Working Group Stream</strong></td>
<td>Victoria Canning <a href="mailto:Victoria.Canning@open.ac.uk">Victoria.Canning@open.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Resistance to control and prison&lt;br&gt;Immigration detention and forced removal&lt;br&gt;Prison and surveillance&lt;br&gt;Surveillance outside the prison&lt;br&gt;Racism, Islamophobia and incarceration&lt;br&gt;Semi-penal institutions&lt;br&gt;Punishment and structural violence&lt;br&gt;Gendered Violence in Prison</td>
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IV. Justice, Power and Resistance

*The Journal of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control*

**Volunteers needed**

Justice, Power and Resistance – Journal Subscription and Distribution Coordinators needed

To help manage the production of the Journal we need two volunteers:

**A Subscription Co-ordinator** to manage the Journal’s subscriptions, ensuring all requests are responded to, subscribers invoiced, payments recorded and the subscription list kept up to date. This person could be based anywhere as long as they have internet access.

**A Distribution Co-ordinator** to ensure that the Journal is distributed to all subscribers. Initially we anticipate this will be one person and **UK-based**. This role will involve taking delivery of all the copies of each edition, packing them into envelopes and using the subscription list provided by the Subs co-ordinator to address the envelopes and post the journals out. All the costs of postage and packaging will be reimbursed by EG Press (in advance if necessary).

For further details or to volunteer please get in touch with David (D.G.Scott@ljmu.ac.uk); Emma (bell.emma@neuf.fr) or John (jimmoore911@outlook.com)

**Justice, Power and Resistance – Reviewers wanted**

Future editions of the Journal will have, we hope, a lively and vibrant review section. However, this needs you, the members of the European Group, to contribute reviews. We are looking for a diverse range which will include the traditional academic book review but will also hopefully include reviews of a wider range of cultural events – films, fiction, poetry, plays, festivals etc. From 500 to 1550 words (possibly longer for review essays on more than one thing), these should be critical, engaging and informative.
If you are interested in writing a review, please contact the review editor – John Moore (jmmoore911@outlook.com) in the first instance to discuss your ideas and proposed review. We will try and get you copies of any books you particularly want to review. Also, if group members who have recently published material would like it to be reviewed, please let us know and we will see what we can do.

Don’t be shy – your Journal needs you!

Justice, Power and Resistance – activist contributions wanted

We are keen to publish accounts of activism from members in our new journal. These pieces can be short (1,000 to 1,500 words). The aim is to keep members of the Group informed about activist activities and the issues they are concerned with in the hope of forging new support networks. The European Group has a long history of connection to such activities and these links ought to be reflected in our journal.

If you are interested in submitting an account, please contact David (D.G.Scott@ljmu.ac.uk), Emma (bell.emma@neuf.fr) or John (jmmoore911@outlook.com)

Justice, Power and Resistance – Proof Readers wanted

We are looking for Group Members to volunteer to proof-read papers prior to the production of our journal. This is not intended to be part of the review process – that should have already been completed – but a final attempt to spot any spelling or grammatical errors. It is also a chance to read the papers before publication.

We will need you to keep to deadlines, so if you volunteer to be on our panel please be prepared to say no to any requests you are unable to turn around within the required timescale.

Hopefully, if we get a good panel of people, the task will not be too onerous.

For further details or to volunteer please get in touch with David (D.G.Scott@ljmu.ac.uk), Emma (bell.emma@neuf.fr) or John (jmmoore911@outlook.com)
V. News from Europe and Around the World

UK

The Centre for Social and Criminological Research welcomes you to attend:

**Visions of War and Terror**

A seminar on collective violence

Monday 20 March 2017 (3-5pm)

Committee Room 2 (Hendon Town Hall)

THE BURROUGHS, LONDON NW4 4AX

**Speakers:**

**Professor Eamonn Carrabine** (Essex University), Co-Editor of ‘Crime, Media and Culture’

**Professor Sandra Walklate** (University of Liverpool), Editor of the ‘British Journal of Criminology’

Chair: **Professor Vincenzo Ruggiero**, Department of Criminology and Sociology, CSCR
Please feel free to contribute to this newsletter by sending any information that you think might be of interest to the Group to Ida/Per at: europeangroupcoordinator@gmail.com

Also feel free to contribute with discussions or comments on the published material in the newsletter

Please submit before the 25th of each month if you wish to have it included in the following month’s newsletter. Please provide a web link (wherever possible).

If you want to subscribe to the newsletter, do not hesitate to send a mail to europeangroupcoordinator@gmail.com