

Prisoners and Prison Leavers in Lithuania: why are there so many?

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There is no shortage of neglected minority groups in our present era. Every society has its share of disabled people, LGBTQ communities, racial and cultural minorities, the homeless and many others. All of the groups I have mentioned are more or less treated better with time and many have started to be seen more positively by members of “mainstream society”. However, there is one marginalized group that does not receive enough attention and concern from either the government or society. This group consists of prisoners and prison leavers.

According to the Council of Europe, the rate of imprisonment in Europe fell by 6.6% between 2016 and 2018. This is due in large part to the adoption of alternative methods of punishment as well as cost-cutting by governments. Although, there are countries, such as Iceland, Italy and the Netherlands, where the incarceration rate grew during the same period. Still, there are countries which maintain particularly high imprisonment rates. The top three of these countries are Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The country next on that list is Lithuania, where, as of October 1, 2019, there were 6,175 people in custody. This number is relatively large for a country with a population of less than 3 million. In fact, Lithuania has the highest rate of incarceration of any member country in the European Union. Lithuania’s rate of prisoners per 100,000 of its population stood at 235 as of 2018, more than twice the European median.

In general, attitudes within Lithuanian society toward this neglected minority range from indifference to rejection, meaning that the average Lithuanian has neither interest in nor sympathy for the people who are now or at one time were incarcerated. One might consider those who work with prisoners or former prisoners to be more sympathetic, but the fact is that not all those charged with this minority wish to see them return to society. In general, ordinary Lithuanians are concerned about their and their family’s safety and to most people prisoners are not part of that picture. There is a belief that a society will be safer while a felon is in custody. It is thought that these people need to be isolated with no further ties to society.

During my preparation for this conference on this topic, I interviewed several people: a former prisoner, a social work study program student, a person who works with inmates and a psychologist.

When I asked these people if they considered prisoners as a part of society, all of them answered yes, except the former prisoner. He insisted that prisoners do not feel like a part of “mainstream society”. At this point there can be seen a contradiction of opinions between the marginalized group representative and people of the “mainstream society”.

The reality of imprisonment seems to be that it is the easiest but the least effective way to punish a person who has committed a crime. This is due to several reasons, such as that many prisoners become unmotivated and lose their purpose in life. When a person is jailed, they think that it is the end of their lives, that they are ruined forever, and that there will be nothing for

them to return to after they finished serving their sentence. The other reason is that during all those years in prison, inmates lose many basic social and other skills needed to survive in a modern, rapidly changing society. In the majority of cases, inmates experience depression. One more reason is that, even when reform of the prisoner is the desired outcome, in the majority of cases imprisonment does not change a person's behavior or attitude. Many prisoners have strong attitudes and hardened personalities, also many bad habits and behaviors posing enormous challenges for social workers and psychologists.

The former prisoner Vlad, whom I interviewed, had been incarcerated for some 30 years. He is now 56 years old. The experiences he shared with me are hard to imagine for an ordinary person. According to Vlad, in most cases, prisoners are disillusioned; they have the attitude that after prison there is no more life left for them. As a consequence, their motivation to strive toward some goal, to improve themselves or to learn a skill drops significantly and they soon get into "bad stuff" even while inside prison. Only a small number of prisoners show any willingness to try to change.

I asked Vlad if there were people working on his behalf during his time in prison. He said yes, there are social workers and psychologists who work with prisoners, but not all of them are good at their job. Some lack human understanding, and some display feelings of superiority toward the prisoners and look down on them as if they were slaves. He stressed that prisoners lack basic human communication and interaction.

When a convict leaves prison there are plenty of obstacles waiting not only for the prison leaver, but also for society as a whole. First of all, there are problems of housing and employment. Without these two basic needs there is a danger that the prison leaver becomes homeless, a condition that can lead to alcohol or drug addiction (re-addiction), or even a return to a life of crime. Vlad stated that there are many prison leavers who do not want to go back to using drugs but the absence of either family support or official assistance weakens the ex-prisoner, who starts looking for shelter in a slum where they know someone, where there are other ex-prisoners, drug addicts and the story begins to repeat itself.

Vlad shared with me a short story from his life. When he was still incarcerated in reformatory, his mother died. He did not know that because no one bothered to tell him. Meanwhile, his stepfather sold the apartment where his mother had been living. It was only after Vlad was released from reformatory, that he found out about his mother's death and that he no longer had a home to return to. His home became a street, with no roof, no money, no food, no documents except the note from the prison. He broke down, fell apart and started using drugs again. This led him to return to crime and to prison.

I asked the following question from all my interviewees: "In your opinion, what do prisoners and prison leavers need or lack the most?" The answers I got were all very similar: Prisoners lack preparation to come back to "normal life". In Lithuania there are so-called "correction homes" where prisoners stay in order to get ready for "normal life". But there are not enough of these facilities although there is a big demand to have them in more and different locations. Also, prisoners need more interaction with different kinds of people, not only with the prison guards and psychologists because prisoners have negative attitudes towards psychologists. Many feel the psychologists do not understand the prisoners. Prison leavers have a need for

communities which would help them to become part of society. In addition, it is important for prison leavers to obtain additional education and assistance in finding a job.

In order to improve this poor situation with people in custody and prison leavers, drastic steps have to be taken. First of all, society has to change its attitude towards this marginalized group and help them to feel socially included. Also, there is a need from the government to have more employees, such as social workers and psychologists, working with inmates towards their improvement, to help them to change their attitudes and lifestyle. Further, the situation would change if prisoners were not isolated but counted as a part of society and were to receive help not only from social workers and psychologists but also from ordinary people willing to help voluntarily. And additionally, it is important to prepare prisoners for life outside, providing them with education before their release. In other words, there is a need to have more correction houses where social and educational help could be provided for the released inmates.

Without a serious commitment on the part of society to provide help for prison leavers, Lithuania's high rate of incarceration is unlikely to change.