

PRISON CONDITIONS MONITORING INDEX: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

DIMITAR MARKOV*

ABSTRACT

Imprisonment is the heaviest sanction and the most aggressive intervention of the state in the personal lives of offenders (Markov and Doichinova, 2015). Because of that and the high risk of human rights to be violated, prisons are consistently under monitoring by national and international bodies. Over the years, numerous deficiencies in the prison conditions have been identified in Bulgaria with important repercussions on prisoners' chances to re-integrate in society (*idem*, p. 7). In this paper, we describe the Prison Conditions Monitoring Index (PCMI), an instrument built upon the existing approaches and tools, but which takes a step forward by providing a less critical, but a more constructive and reflective vision on prisons' problematic aspects, helping thus prison administrations to identify problems and find solutions.

Keywords: *human rights, prisons, monitoring tools, PCMI, Bulgaria.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an innovative prison monitoring tool aimed to provide “a more operational and managerial perspective” than the already-existing instruments, which are rather critical and hostile toward prison administrations (Markov and Doichinova, 2015, p. 8). This Prison Conditions Monitoring Index (PCMI) was developed in the framework of the project “Re-socialisation of Offenders in the European Union: Enhancing the Role of the Civil Society”, implemented by the Center for the Study of Democracy with the financial support of the Criminal Justice Programme of the European Union. It is composed of five indicators: living conditions; social work, free time and contacts with the outside world; security and safety; employment; and healthcare, each with its own set of

* Senior analyst, Center for the Study of Democracy, 5 Alexander Zhendov Street, Sofia 1113, Bulgaria. E-mail: dimitar.markov@online.bg



specific sub-indicators drawn from European and international prison standards (*idem*). The primary information on these indicators is collected at the level of individual prisons. The data is then processed by applying special formulas to generate the value of each sub-indicator. The final result allows for comparisons between facilities and thus makes possible to highlight similarities and dissimilarities on all before-mentioned aspects related to prison conditions¹. The index can be used as basis for “designing and implementing informed penitentiary policies” as well as for “identifying and monitoring trends through time” (*idem*).

In Bulgaria, the PCMI has undergone two rounds of pilot implementation. During the first round, which covered the year 2014, the index was applied in nine prisons in Bulgaria, but also in Germany, Lithuania and Spain. The results were published in 2015 in the report “Prison Conditions Monitoring Index: Methodology and Pilot Results”. The present paper builds upon this report adding to it the results of the second round of implementation, which covered the year 2015, encompassing a total of ten prisons, all of them in Bulgaria.

RESULTS

Prison conditions

The indicator assessing the living conditions consists of 21 sub-indicators, including living area, occupancy, number of inmates per cell, heating, ventilation, toilets, cold and hot water, alarm system, bath/shower, toiletries and cleaning materials, alternative menus, facility to obtain goods, natural light, fresh air, see-through windows, clothes and shoes, bedding, complaints, and access to the prison management.

In 2014, the score of this indicator ranged from 3.7 in Burgas Prison to 8.4 in Boychinovtsi Prison; in-between was a cluster of prisons with close but low scores (see Figure 1). In 2015, as a result of some completed construction and repair works and some effective measures to decrease overcrowding, the scores increased to some extent in most of the prisons, but in general remained rather low. The most significant increase was registered in Stara Zagora Prison (from 4.4 to 5.7). Interesting, the only decrease was recorded in Boychinovtsi Prison. However, even if it was a considerable, one-point decrease, this prison remained on top with regard to living conditions in Bulgarian prisons, in 2015. The explanation for the high score of this particular facility can be found in the fact that it is a juvenile prison, which, as a rule, needs to meet additional standards. In all of the other prisons, conditions remain significantly below what is considered acceptable by

¹ For more information about the Prison Conditions Monitoring Index, its indicators and sub-indicators, and how they were constructed, please see: MARKOV, D. DOICHINOVA, M. (2015). *Prison Conditions Monitoring Index: Methodology and Pilot Results*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy. RETRIVED FROM: www.csd.bg/fileSrc.php?id=22285

international standards, with none of the prisons getting even close to the maximum score of 10.

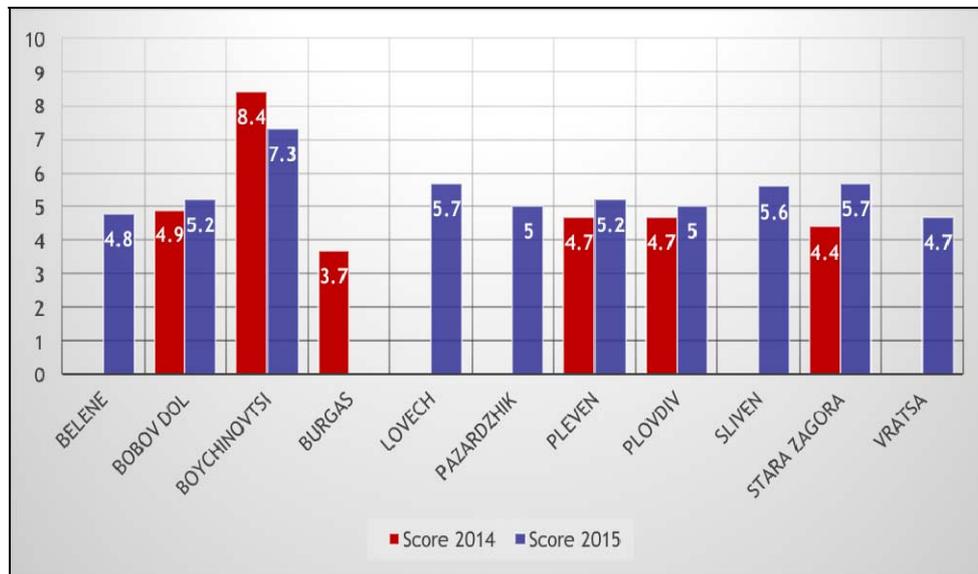


Figure 1: PCMI pilot implementation results: living conditions (2014, 2015).

Source: Prison Conditions Monitoring Index

Social work, free time and contacts with the outside world

The indicator assessing social work, free time and contacts with the outside world consists of 20 sub-indicators, including number of social workers, education and training capacity, time locked in the cell, home leave, correspondence, phone calls, regular and intimate visits, adaptation programmes for new inmates, programmes before release, time in the open, access to sport facilities, library, access to current legislation, legal literature, newspapers, computers, internet, television etc.

The scores on this indicator were comparable to those recorded on prison conditions index. As such, Burgas Prison got again the minimum score in 2014, while the Boychinovtsi Prison reached the maximum. In Bobov Dol, Plovdiv, Pleven and Stara Zagora Prisons, the scores fluctuated around the value of 5. In 2015, the scores increased in three prisons: Boychinovtsi (the highest increase), Pleven and Plovdiv, and decreased in other two: Bobov Dol and Stara Zagora (see Figure 2). As a whole, most prisons remain far away from the minimum standards in terms of social work, free time and contacts with the outside world. The main reason for this is the insufficient personnel, which results in an inadequately high number of inmates assigned to one social worker. Other deficiencies contributing

to the low scores of most prisons are the lack of appropriate adaptation programs before release and the insufficient education and training opportunities available to inmates.

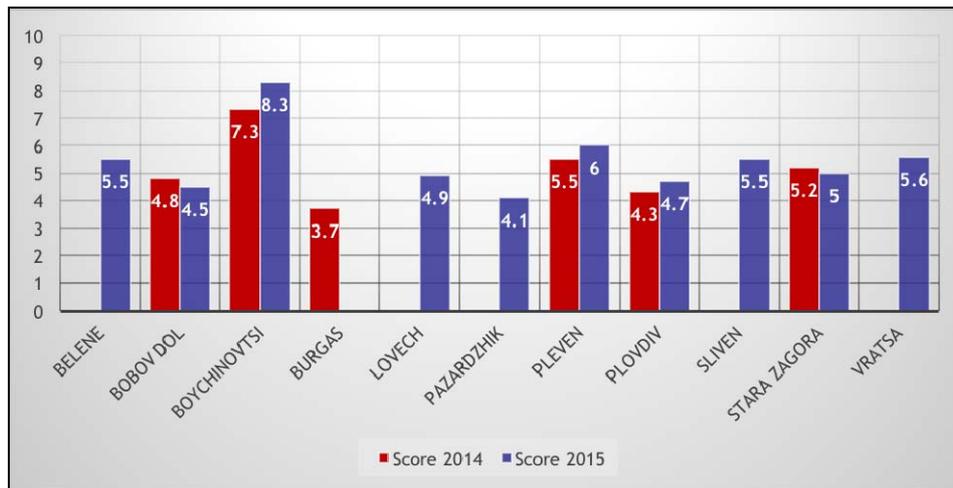


Figure 2: PCMI pilot implementation results: social work, free time and contacts with the outside world (2014, 2015).

Source: Prison Conditions Monitoring Index

Security and safety

The indicator assessing security and safety consists of 16 sub-indicators, including guards, violations, suicides, injuries, self-injuries, escapes, video control, fire protection system etc. As shown in Figure 3, in both years, the indicator had the highest scores among all five categories of indicators. In 2014, the minimum score was recorded in Pleven Prison (6.9), while the highest was attained by Plovdiv Prison (8.3). Except for Burgas Prison, all the other prisons got scores around 8. In 2015, the most significant increases were recorded in Boychinovtsi Prison (from 8.1 to 8.9) as well as in Pleven Prison (from 6.9 to 7.8). Scores were similar in Bobov Dol Prison, and slightly decreased in Plovdiv and Stara Zagora Prisons.

The high scores of most prisons under this indicator is the result of the investments of the government in prison security. Factors contributing to this results are the installation of video control systems in most of the prisons, the decreased number of escapes and suicides and the relatively adequate (although still not sufficient) number of guards.

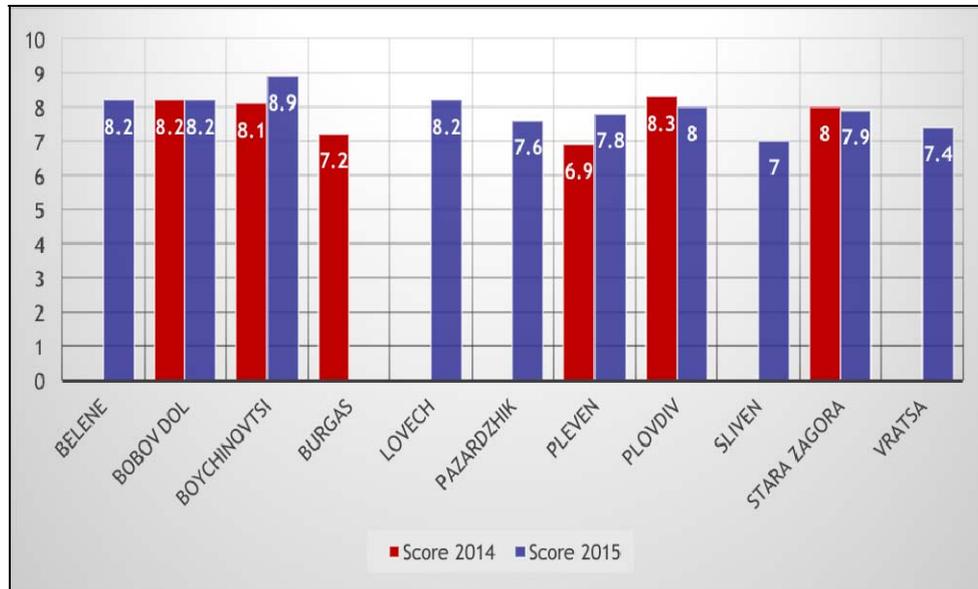


Figure 3: PCMI pilot implementation results: security and safety (2014, 2015).

Source: Prison Conditions Monitoring Index

Employment

The indicator assessing employment consists of 12 sub-indicators, including employment capacity, choice of job, job opportunities for inmates with disabilities, salary, social security, professional qualification and vocational training, allowances for unemployed inmates, applicability of labour laws to work in prison (working time, days off, occupational safety) etc. While – as shown before – the safety and security indicator had the highest scores, the employment indicator placed at the other extreme recording the lowest scores (see Figure 4). Only three prisons barely got scores above 3: Boychinovtsi Prison in 2014, Plovdiv and Pleven Prisons in 2015. However, Boychinovtsi Prison’ score dropped at almost half in 2015, reaching the minimum value. For the other two prisons, the scores went up in 2015 – moderately in Plovdiv (from 2.7 to 3.1) and more significantly in Pleven (from 2.3 to 3.4).

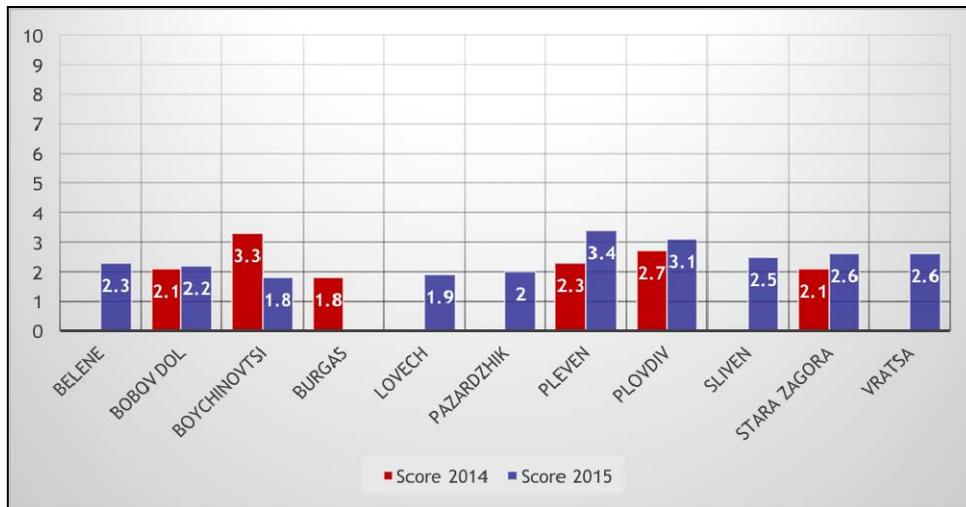


Figure 4: PCMI pilot implementation results: employment (2014, 2015).

Source: Prison Conditions Monitoring Index

Scores gravitating around or getting even below 3 indicate a very serious problem needing urgent measures. The results confirm the long-lasting problems with the provision of job opportunities to inmates. In many prisons, jobs are available for less than 10 per cent of the inmates. Factors contributing to these results are the inability of the government to encourage private companies to hire prisoners or to outsource specific activities to be performed in the prisons. There are no incentives for businesses in this direction, and the government is not capable of providing jobs either. The problem is getting even worse having in mind the still existing rules allowing prisoners, who work, to decrease the duration of their sentences. These provisions, combined with the insufficient availability of jobs, may lead to cases of discrimination of those who wish to work, but are not able to. Another factor, contributing to these results, is the lack of any compensation mechanism for inmates, for whom the prison administration could not provide jobs. This can also be seen as a form of discrimination, because outside prisons people in the same situation can receive unemployment compensations for a certain period of time.

Healthcare

The indicator assessing healthcare consists of 23 sub-indicators, including health insurance, general medical practitioners, nurses, dentists, psychologists, permission to see a doctor of prisoners' own choice, inpatient treatment, medical examinations, infectious diseases, voluntary HIV testing, premises for isolating prisoners suspected of infectious or contagious conditions, visits by a general medical practitioner to inmates in solitary confinement, inspection of the food,

water, hygiene, cleanliness, sanitation, heating, lighting and ventilation, prevention (syringes for drug users, substitute programmes for drug users, condoms) etc. The scores of the indicator were in general moderate both in 2014 and 2015. The highest score was attained by Pleven Prison in 2014, followed by Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Boychinovtsi, and Bobov Dol Prisons; Burgas Prison obtained once again the minimum score (see Figure 5). In 2015, the scores increased in two prisons: Bobov Dol and Boychinovtsi, the latter recording the most substantial rise, from 6.2 to 7.4. The scores of the other three prison for which comparisons were possible decreased; Plovdiv Prison had the most significant drop, from 6.6 to 5.

These results show that healthcare in Bulgarian prisons is close to acceptable, although almost all facilities remain below the score of 7. Main problems contributing to these results are the insufficient number of medical staff, inadequate medical facilities in some prisons and the insufficient prevention measures for drug users. On the positive side, the spread of infectious diseases is not higher compared to the situation outside prisons, medical examination upon entry is always performed and there is regular inspection of the hygiene.

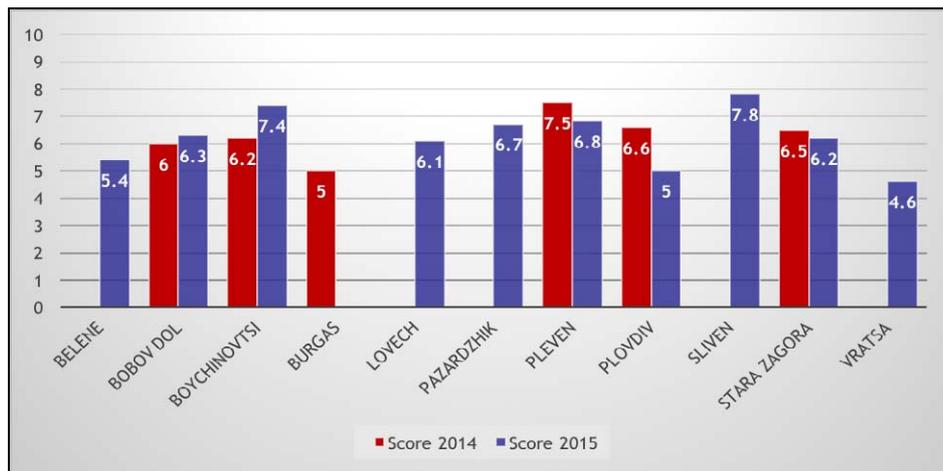


Figure 5: PCMI pilot implementation results: healthcare (2014, 2015).

Source: Prison Conditions Monitoring Index

CONCLUSIONS

The PCMI is a useful monitoring tool that highlights the most problematic aspects of prison conditions. First, it documents whether specific shortcomings are characteristic to a particular prison or are an attribute of the whole prison system. Second, it shows in which prisons the conditions are alarmingly poor and in need

of urgent intervention (those with scores below 3), in which facilities the conditions are relatively better but still unacceptable (those with scores between 3 and 7), and where the conditions are generally acceptable but there is still room for improvements (those with score between 7 and 10). Third, it allows to monitor how the same prison scores in different periods of times and thus assess the actual impact of the measures implemented during this period. In this way, it helps prison administration to identify “the critical areas in need to reform” (*ibid*, p. 84), and to design and implement informed remedies.

REFERENCES

- MARKOV, D. DOICHINOVA, M. (2015). *Prison Conditions Monitoring Index: Methodology and Pilot Results*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy. RETRIVED FROM: www.csd.bg/fileSrc.php?id=22285