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Session: Enforcement of sentences and releases from prison: which challenge(s)? which lasting solution(s)?

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Reducing Prison Population through Sentences Enforcement: The Experience of Lithuania

1. Introduction and Context

Over the past fifteen years, Lithuania has progressively moved towards a more individualised and rehabilitation-oriented approach, with greater emphasis on reducing reoffending and supporting the successful reintegration of offenders into society. However, the reduction in Lithuania's prison population cannot be attributed solely to changes in the sentence enforcement system. Lithuania's criminal policy has also undergone significant changes, increasingly providing for the application of non-custodial measures. These have included, among other measures, partial postponement of the execution of imprisonment sentences, the expanded use of alternative sanctions for less serious offences, the decriminalisation of certain offences, and a comprehensive reform of sentencing regulation. Currently, approximately 80% of offenders receive alternatives to imprisonment, compared with 65% a decade ago.

Taken together, these measures illustrate that, to a large extent, the size of the prison population is shaped by decisions taken earlier in the criminal justice process. Nevertheless, once a sentence is imposed, the way it is enforced, and how people are prepared for release, all have an important impact on the effectiveness and sustainability of the correctional system, including its ability to address prison overcrowding.

2. Changes in the Prison System

An important development in Lithuania's sentence enforcement policy has been a shift from a traditional custodial approach towards individualised sentence enforcement. The focus has moved from simply serving a custodial sentence to systematically identifying each prisoner's risks and needs and addressing them through individualised interventions from the outset, while also providing broader opportunities for conditional release. This approach aims to reduce reoffending and support a safe and sustainable return to the community, while also contributing to more effective management of the prison population. This shift required not only legislative changes, but also new approaches to case management, risk assessment and rehabilitation. The main changes within correctional facilities involve:

- **Reintegration Process Reform:** A risk and needs assessment system was introduced to develop individualised reintegration plans, allowing better-tailored interventions.

- **Team-Based Work and Case Management:** The approach shifted from individual rehabilitation to team-based work grounded in dynamic security and case management. Work and psychological intervention teams were established, case manager positions were introduced (especially for offenders with addiction problems), and social skills programmes were implemented.
- **Dynamic Supervision:** Correctional staff increasingly interact directly with prisoners, identify and address problems at an early stage, prepare them for release, monitor behaviour, and help prevent illegal activities.
- **Specialised TOG Unit:** Drawing on Norway's experience, this specialised unit was established to work with high-risk repeat offenders, providing more focused and intensive interventions.
- **The Halfway House System:** Halfway houses provide a gradual transition from imprisonment to community life with support and supervision. Results are encouraging, as only around 9% of residents are returned to semi-open facilities due to violations.
- **Expansion of Parole Opportunities:** Lithuania significantly expanded the role of Parole Commissions in the application of conditional release. For prisoners convicted of offences committed through negligence, juveniles, and prisoners sentenced to up to four years of imprisonment, conditional release may be granted directly by the Parole Commission, without separate court approval. In this context, Lithuania has also centralized its parole decision-making under a single National Parole Commission, providing a more unified and consistent approach across the correctional system.
- **Automatic Parole Mechanism:** This mechanism was introduced for certain low-risk offenders convicted of less serious offences who have served three quarters of their sentence. For example, a prisoner sentenced to eight years of imprisonment who does not fall within any of the statutory exclusions and is assessed as presenting a low risk of criminal behaviour must be conditionally released after serving three quarters of the sentence, that is, after six years. No separate decision by the Parole Commission or the court is required. Following release, the prisoner would be subject to electronic monitoring. The mechanism is subject to statutory safeguards and does not apply to persons convicted of very serious offences, certain categories of serious offences, also to prisoners assessed as posing a high risk who have not demonstrated sufficient progress in reducing that risk.

3. **Development of the Probation System**

- The wider use of community-based measures has been supported by the **introduction of electronic monitoring in probation**, which enables more effective supervision of offenders while allowing them to remain in the community. At the same time, electronic monitoring is complemented by individual and group work with persons under probation, aimed at developing their capacity to live without offending, as well as social assistance in addressing personal and social problems, social skills training, the promotion of positive engagement, psychological support and other similar measures.

- **Criminal Behaviour Risk Assessment** and **Individualised Case Planning:** The probation system was strengthened through the introduction of these tools, making it possible to better assess individual circumstances, risks, and needs to tailor supervision accordingly.
- **Involvement of Civil Society:** Associations and volunteers have been involved in the reintegration process, complementing the work of probation services with additional community support.

As a result, the role of probation has gradually moved beyond simply monitoring compliance, it increasingly combines supervision, risk management, rehabilitation, and support.

4. **Conclusion and Results**

These measures were not introduced as isolated solutions but formed part of a broader shift towards individualised sentence enforcement, greater use of community-based measures, and better preparation for release. The results demonstrate the following:

- The proportion of released offenders granted parole has increased significantly – from around **20%** in the past to approximately **48%** today.
- The prison population has more than halved over the years: from approximately **9500** prisoners in 2013, to around **7000** in 2016, **5500** in 2020, and approximately **4500 today**.

Ultimately, a lasting solution is not simply about releasing more people, it requires a combination of effective alternatives, individualised enforcement, preparation for release, and appropriate community supervision. The goal is a system that uses imprisonment where necessary, provides effective alternatives where appropriate, and gives people a realistic opportunity to successfully return to society.