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Depoliticisation as a Key Component of Police Reforms in Post-Socialist Countries: The Case of Croatia

Summary

In all post-socialist countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe, community policing is expected to rebuild police legitimacy. The Croatian Community Policing Strategy, launched in 2003, represented the continuation of reforms that were following the socio-political and economic changes in the 1990s. The Croatian Community Policing Strategy originally encompassed six projects. One of them, the Internal democratisation of the police, aimed at adequate positioning of uniformed police, and achieving, in particular, a clear and transparent promotion system, which also means depoliticisation of the police. The main goal of the paper is to analyse the project results in relation to the overall police reform in Croatia and the level of community policing implementation. The analysis included a representative sample of 500 Croatian police officers. Data were collected based on a questionnaire that included relevant sets of indicators of the community policing implementation at the organisation level. The given results show that almost two thirds (73.4%) of respondents perceive the depoliticisation of the Croatian police as weak. Multivariate analysis reveals the differences in the level of overall community policing evaluation in relation to the depoliticisation level.

Keywords: police reform, community policing, depoliticisation, police attitudes, Croatia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the beginning of the 1980s, the public had at its disposal truly little information on the police in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013). The "milicija" (as the police had been called) was shrouded with a veil of secrecy, which enabled them behaviour without any responsibility towards the entire society, however not

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towards the elite that they served. The primary task of the "milicija" in all former socialist countries, including Croatia, was not the protection and safety of citizens, but the security and maintenance of the political system at the time. Nineteen eighty-nine and the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the existence of communist regimes in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and today's post-socialist countries introduced and accepted democratic ideas and significant transition changes (Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013). While substantial political, social and economic transformations were appearing in Europe, in the territory of the Yugoslavia at the time, the war was raging, which made the complex transition reforms in this part of Europe even more demanding and complex (Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013).

Nearly thirty years later, the reforms in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia), as well as Estonia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Russia and Slovakia led to a transformation of the former "milicija", with its role of protecting the regime and mistreating citizens, into modern democratic police (Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013). The processes of depoliticisation, demystification, reduction, decentralisation, professionalisation, and decriminalisation marked the reforms (Meško, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2014). Although the objectives of all reforms in many of the mentioned countries do not fully coincide, it would seem that there is, nevertheless, a standard set of features corresponding with democratic police forces (Meško, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2014), including depoliticisation and democratisation of the police aiming at providing for the responsibility of the police towards citizens. The legitimacy of the police, in this manner, is inextricably associated with public confidence in the police (Jackson, Bradford, Stanko, Hohl, 2011, Bradford, Jackson, 2010, Kwak, San Miguel, Carreon, 2012, Worden, McLean, 2017).

1.1. Police reforms in Croatia

With its independence in the 1990s, Croatia reformed its police as part of sweeping changes at the state level. A continuation of these reforms has been taking place since 2003 as the community policing reform, given that, in Croatia, as well as in numerous other post-socialist countries, precisely this approach seemed the most appropriate one for achieving the standards of modern democratic police forces (Kutnjak Ivković, Cajner Mraović, Borovec, 2016).

Community policing in Croatia consists of six mutually related projects that should guarantee the complete implementation of the community policing model. Thus, the projects are: (1) reform of operative and preventive activities of uniformed police with the introduction of contact police officers who establish quality relations with citizens and especially stakeholders in the area assigned to them; (2) development of crime prevention activities to reduce risk factors of criminal and other deviant behaviour; (3) organisation of prevention in local communities with the establishment of a prevention council as a partnership of all relevant social subjects; (4) reform of public relations with timely and objective reporting on the state of safety; and (6) internal democratisation of the police with the primary objective of depoliticisation of the police (Cajner Mraović, Faber, 2016). The subject of this paper is the stated sixth project.

1.2. Democratisation and depoliticisation of the police

Generally, it could be said that democracy and democratisation of the system of state and public administration, as well as the police, are the dominant topics on the international scene already since the last decade of the previous century (Barber, 2000; Neild, 2001).

The democratisation of the police means a shift in priorities and responsibilities of the police towards the law and citizens (Wiatrowski, 2002; Bayley, 2006; Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013). The modern, democratic police is a public service, so the process of the democratisation of the police includes activities that have the objective of making police operations transparent towards the public and civic bodies that have the right and possibility of holding the police responsible (Greenwood, Huisman, 2004, Ostrom, Parks, Whitaker, Percy, 2005, Kupferberg, 2008, Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013). This process is characteristic for all transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Meško, Fields, Lobnikar and Sotlar, 2013), just as in countries in other parts of the world that are undergoing a transformation of society towards democracy and the rule of law (Sung, 2006, Karatay, 2009, Bangura, 2018).

Although community policing is a police model accepted throughout the world, evaluation researches on the methods and levels of implementation of this model are exceedingly rare (McKee, 2001, Borovec, 2013, Bitaliwo, 2014). Researchers mostly focused on the effectiveness of the community policing model, i.e. on its expected main products, including public confidence in the police, as well as the state, crime trends and structures, and public disorders in a specific geographic area. Such studies have been genuinely abundant over the past two, or even three decades. However, the problem is that they remain mostly limited to countries with stable democracies and the English-speaking area. Croatia lacks studies showing what it is that makes up the successful implementation of the community policing model. All of South-Eastern Europe, i.e. post-socialist countries, lacks such studies. Over the past ten years, the situation is improving in this part of the world as well. However, we receive studies focusing on the mentioned external success indicators for the community policing model (Kovčo Vukadin, Borovec, Ljubin Golub, 2013, Lobnikar, Šuklje, Hozjan, Banutai, 2013, Nemec, Prprović, 2015). Consequently, if the studies do exist, they are very rarely used to evaluate the impact of community policing on internal organisational changes and the organisational development of the police.

Four key components influence police behaviour and police organisational development: service delivery philosophy, professional police culture, the politicisation of the police, and the police–public relationship (Jackson and Lyon, 2002; den Heyer, 2012). Therefore, it is evident that the depoliticisation of the police is essential not only for the democratisation of the police, which is the imperative of modern police forces but also for the entire organisational development of the police. Long-term, it is not possible to have depoliticised and democratic police when it comes to public relations. At the same time, with their internal organisation, the police allow the influences of politics and autocracy, because, within, a non-democratic and politicised police organisation will demotivate police officers from practising democracy when acting externally, i.e. towards citizens.

Regardless of the mentioned deficiency of the studies and the described importance of internal democratisation and depoliticisation of the police, the main goal of the paper is to analyse the level of internal democratisation and depoliticisation of the Croatian police in relation to overall community policing reform in Croatia.

2. METHODS

2.1. Sample

The analysis was conducted on a representative sample of 500 Croatian police officers from all four categories of police administrations in Croatia. The Police Act defines the criteria for the categorisation of police administrations (Official Gazette 34/11, 130/12, 89/14, 151/14, 33/15, 121/16). They include the number of inhabitants, surface area in square kilometres, number of traffic accidents, as well as the number of traffic fatalities. Deriving from these criteria are the tasks that are conducted by the individual police administrations.

2.2. Data collection and analysis methods

For the requirements of this research, data were collected in an anonymous and voluntary survey of police officers. Data were collected based on a questionnaire which included relevant sets of indicators of the community policing implementation at the organisation level: Vision/values, mission; Code of ethics; Leadership and management style; Role of chief executive officers; Role of top command; Role of managers; Role of line officers; Information management; Planning/programme evaluation; Resources; Training; Performance evaluation; Promotions; Honours/awards; Discipline; Structuring the delivery of patrol services. The respondents provided answers based on a Likert scale that included five possibilities: from very poor to excellent. The entire questionnaire contained 31 questions. The data were collected through an anonymous and voluntary survey of police officers in July 2016, following all of the rules of ethics relating to scientific research. The respondents were all police officers who were on duty at the time of surveying and who provided their informed consent to participate in the research.

The survey was conducted by two surveyors who, with each group of respondents, first explained the purpose of the survey and provided them with information whom they could contact afterwards for details on the research. Highlighted to the respondents was that the entry of data from the questionnaires in the electronic database would be conducted in a manner guaranteeing absolute anonymity of respondents, and that, after that, the data would be processed collectively with diverse descriptive and multivariate statistical analyses. Instructions for completing the questionnaire followed, and the questionnaires were distributed to respondents who consented to participate in the research.

As already highlighted, participation in the research was voluntary, and respondents also had the option of withdrawing from completing the questionnaire at any given moment. Police officers who declined to participate in the survey could freely leave the space where the surveying was taking place.

The surveying was anonymous, and labelling respondents in any manner whatsoever was not permitted, which the surveyors pointed out when providing instructions.

While conducting the survey, the surveyors were present in the space where the respondents were completing the questionnaires. However, in no way whatsoever did they influence their answers, and they also took special care that the surveyors themselves did not disrupt respondents when completing the questionnaire. After the respondents had finished

completing the survey questionnaires, they placed them in a box that the surveyors immediately carried out of the facilities of the police station, as had been announced in the introduction.

The SPSS statistical package was utilised for processing data. Given that the objective of the paper was to determine the success predictors of the depoliticisation of the Croatian police, the method of logical regression analysis was used.

3. RESULTS

Before the presentation of the regression analysis results, it should be noted that Cronbach alpha for the entire questionnaire amounts to 0.874, which is a high value and adds dimension when considering the obtained results.

Based on findings from previous research on police reform and depoliticisation (McGarry, 2000, Kovčo Vukadin, Borovec, Ljubin Golub, 2013, Cajner Mraović, Faber, 2016), twelve variables were selected in the regressions analysis model that refer to the evaluation of reforms, confidence in police leadership, police education and human resources management system, as well as interpersonal relations in the police. Given that we are interested in police depoliticisation predictors, those criteria variables describing the perceived level of depoliticisation of the police in Croatia have been used.

All variables were dichotomised in the manner that the first two categories of the Likert scale (1=Very poor and 2=Poor) were treated as category 1=Poor, while the remaining three categories (3=Good, 4=Very good, 5=Excellent) were joined into the new category 2=Good.

Given that a high 35.4% of surveyed police officers assess the depoliticisation of the Croatian police as very poor, and nearly the same amount (38.0%) as poor, and that 17.7% of them consider the depoliticisation of the Croatian police as good, 5.8% as very good and only 1.8% as excellent, while 1.2% of respondents did not answer this question, the dichotomised variable does not have an even distribution: nearly three-fourths of respondents belong to the first category.

Table 1. Logistic regression of the level of depoliticisation in relation to the overall community policing reform evaluation in Croatia

	B	S.E.	P	Exp(B)
Structure and organisation of the police in Croatia today[1]	.184	.339	.587	1.202
Success of police work in Croatia today*	.148	.507	.770	1.160
Professionalisation of the Croatian police*	-1.947	.422	.000	.143
Confidence in the leadership of the police at the level of police station*	-.111	.416	.790	.895
Confidence in the police leadership at the level of police administration	-.287	.411	.485	.750

[1] Reference category = "Poor".

Confidence in the police leadership at the level of the General Police Directorate	-.188	.381	.623	.829
Opportunity for career development in the police	-.020	.317	.949	.980
The MoI Regulation on police titles	-.344	.325	.290	.709
The MoI Regulations on awards and incentives for police work	-.501	.362	.167	.606
Evaluation of police officers' performance	.099	.338	.769	1.104
Quality of police uniform	.223	.292	.445	1.250
Police education	-.782	.375	.037	.458
Satisfaction with being a police officer	.699	.423	.098	2.012
Relations of the police towards the external public – citizens	.702	.431	.103	2.017
Relations of the police towards the internal public – police officers	-1.066	.361	.003	.345
Interpersonal relations in the police organisation at the level of the respondent's police department – an organisational unit	-.149	.361	.679	.861
Interpersonal relations in the Croatian police in general	-.805	.353	.023	.447
The extent to which police officers participate in determining the objectives of policing	-.160	.383	.676	.852
The extent to which police officers participate in the analysis of the police performance	-.560	.382	.142	.571
Constant	1.011	.339	.003	2.749

From the data presented in Table 1, it is clear that there is a statistically significant relationship between depoliticisation of the police on the one hand, and professionalisation of the police, police education system, quality the of relations with the internal public and the quality of interpersonal relationships in the police on the other. The obtained results show that police officers who positively assess the level of realisation of the depoliticisation of the Croatian police, also positively assess the realisation of the implementation of the professionalisation of the Croatian police as one of the objectives of the reform processes conducted up to date. Furthermore, it has been determined that the respondents, i.e. those who positively assess the current level of depoliticisation of the Croatian police, also positively assess the police education system, the quality of relations with its internal public, i.e. police officers, as well as the quality of interpersonal relationships in the Croatian police in general.

By analysing the individual parameters presented in Table 1, we can conclude that, for the positive perception of depoliticisation, the key is the positive perception of the achievement of the goals of professionalisation of the police in reform processes up to date. The said is followed – respectively – by the positive perception of quality relations towards its internal public, i.e. police officers, the positive perception of the state of interpersonal relationships in general in the police, as well as, finally, the positive perception of the police education system.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When considering the obtained results, taken firstly into account should be the fact that nearly three-fourths of police officers who participated in this research assess achievements to date related to the depoliticisation of the Croatian police as being weak, which is undoubtedly surprising and worrying. However, we could suppose that this is, in part, not only the product of the objective assessment of police officers but also partly their subjective feeling of dissatisfaction. The said stems from the results of earlier research (Cajner Mraović, Faber, 2016), about the misbalance between significant positive steps forward that the Croatian police achieved in terms of relations with citizens and significantly more modest developmental steps ahead within the police organisation.

The confirmation of such considerations can be found in the regression analysis results here obtained. Thus, we could be convinced that Croatian police officers associate other, essential characteristics of the police organisation with the depoliticisation of the police. Identified were four police depoliticisation predictors: police professionalisation, informing police officers, interpersonal relationships in the police and the police education system. It is entirely understandable that, where police officers see that the system strives for professionalisation, there is no room for political influence and pressure. Instead, it is expressed through the relationship of the police organisation towards its employees that generates quality interpersonal relations within the organisation in general.

It is interesting to note that relations towards the internal public were shown as a depoliticisation predictor. Not so, however, the relations towards the external public. Our respondents recognise that, in the area of communication towards citizens, significant progress has been achieved. Therefore, we can presuppose that they are even more dissatisfied when this progress is lacking in relations with the internal public, as has already been noted earlier. Numerous studies have recognised the importance of informing police officers about their work motivation and organisational reforms (Marenin, Caparini, 2005, Haas, Van Craen, Skogan, Fleitas, 2015). Similarly, emerging as an essential correlate of the depoliticisation of the police in this study is the quality of interpersonal relations in the police in general, but not at the level of a police station, i.e. the organisational unit to which the respondent belongs.

These are quite significant findings since a drop in the motivation of police officers as a consequence of their dissatisfaction with internal relations may result in low-quality public relations, i.e. relations with citizens. Those mentioned above may be explained with the concepts of internal and external procedural justice. Internal procedural justice pertains to the activities of police leadership that are fair, transparent, equal towards all and understandable. Police officers who feel appreciated by their colleagues, especially by the leadership, will better understand why some decisions were taken at the organisational level, and the likelihood that they are accepted is higher.

External procedural justice implies police officer procedures towards citizens that are just, legal, transparent, understandable and equal for all (Van Craen, Skogan, 2016, Van Craen 2016). Put in question, therefore, is a notionally similar concept, only manifested externally (Van Craen, Skogan, 2016). We can also assume the interrelationship of these concepts because police officers who have experience with internal procedural justice will have an easier time applying external procedural justice. On the contrary, those police officers who do not enjoy the positive experience of internal procedural justice will not feel satisfied with work and

motivated to show external procedural justice (Myhill, Bradford, 2013, Haas, Van Craen, Skogan, Fleitas, 2015, Donner, Maskaly, Fridell, Jennings, 2015.

This research opens up prospects for a future, more extensive research on depoliticisation and democratisation of the state administration system in Croatia. Given that the police are a part of the more comprehensive government system, the police reform cannot be undertaken in isolation from other government agencies (Marenin, 2005). Without precise research, we cannot learn whether and to what extent the low level of depoliticisation of the Croatian police is part of the overall problem of the public administration in Croatia.

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Sažetak

Marko Prpić

Depolitizacija kao ključ policijskih reformi u postsocijalističkim zemljama: primjer Hrvatske

U svim postsocijalističkim zemljama srednje i jugoistočne Europe očekuje se da će policijski rad u zajednici obnoviti legitimitet policije. Strategija policijskog rada u Hrvatskoj pokrenuta 2003. godine predstavljala je nastavak reformi koje su uslijedile nakon društveno-političkih i ekonomskih promjena devedesetih. Strategija Policije u zajednici u Hrvatskoj prvobitno je obuhvaćala šest projekata, a jedan od njih bila je unutarnja demokratizacija policije radi odgovarajućeg pozicioniranja uniformirane policije, posebno jasan i transparentan sustav promicanja – što znači i depolitizaciju policije. Glavni je cilj rada analizirati rezultate spomenutog projekta u odnosu na cjelokupnu policijsku reformu u Hrvatskoj i stupanj provedbe projekata Policije u zajednici. U analizu je uključen reprezentativni uzorak od 500 hrvatskih policijskih službenika. Podaci su prikupljeni na temelju upitnika koji je uključivao relevantne skupove pokazatelja provođenja rada Policije u zajednici na organizacijskoj razini. Rezultati pokazuju da gotovo dvije trećine (73,4 %) ispitanika ocjenjuje depolitizaciju hrvatske policije kao lošu. Multivarijantna analiza otkriva razlike u ukupnoj evaluaciji rada Policije u zajednici u odnosu na razinu depolitizacije.

Ključne riječi: reforma policije, policija u zajednici, depolitizacija, stavovi policijskih službenika, Hrvatska.