Does Prison Overcrowding Loom Again? Predicting the Prison Population in the Czech Republic

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Summary

- The study presents a projection of the prison population in the Czech Republic based on a newly developed simulation model. It also points out the main trends in the criminal justice policy and quantifies their impact on the past growth in the prison population.

- Czech prisons currently house 18,609 sentenced inmates. Unless crime rates and criminal justice policy change, we estimate that by the end of 2016 this number will reach 20,000 and then level off at 20,360 inmates. If the current trends in the crime rates and criminal justice policy continue, the sentenced prison population will steadily grow and will surpass 21,740 by 2024.

- The official prison capacity has already been slightly exceeded. If no measures to alleviate prison overcrowding are taken, the prison capacity will be exceeded by some 2,300 places in the next few years.

- The prison population increased by 54 % between 2003 and 2012 and the prisons became severely overcrowded. The chief cause of this growth was an ever stronger deterrence in practically all its aspects: courts were imposing longer sentences; a higher percentage of defendants were being charged and convicted; greater fraction of offenders were being sentenced to prison; a lower fraction of prisoners were being released on parole.

- The longer sentences implemented by the new Penal Code have themselves increased the prison population by about 2,000 inmates.

- The Czech Republic currently has a prison population that far exceeds (in per capita terms) the prison populations in Western European countries. Building new prisons and maintaining a large prison population is costly. The solution to the prison overcrowding problem should not be limited to the construction of new prisons.

- We recommend that several conceptual changes in the criminal justice policy, aimed at reducing the prison population or crime rates, should be implemented concurrently. Suitable measures include a greater use of fines, forfeitures of property and house arrests, decriminalization of selected less harmful offenses, halting the growth of already long prison sentences, rehabilitation programs, and expanding the crime prevention activities of the police.