

Slovenia as a Bridge Between Western and Eastern European Criminology

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This article examines how Slovenia's strategic position and post-socialist transformation have positioned it as a bridge between Western and Eastern European criminology. Drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship, Council of Europe statistics, and policy developments since independence in 1991, the analysis traces convergence and divergence patterns across six criminal justice domains: juvenile justice, penal policy and imprisonment, probation, organized crime, victims' rights, and policing. The argument is threefold. First, Slovenia demonstrates meaningful convergence with Western European standards, particularly through diversionary youth justice, restrained imprisonment rates, and institutionalized probation services. Second, distinctive contexts—notably geographic position within transnational illicit markets and post-socialist institutional legacies—continue to shape specific challenges in organized crime control and public trust. Third, hybrid solutions that adapt Western models to local traditions have been central to Slovenia's reform trajectory. The delayed yet rapid establishment of probation services exemplifies how late adopters can achieve swift, effective modernization by learning from neighbours while maintaining institutional coherence. Slovenia thus offers a laboratory of reform where the dynamics of convergence, the persistence of context, and the value of hybridization remain especially visible, providing policy lessons for European criminal justice systems confronting shared transnational challenges.

Keywords: comparative criminology, institutional hybridization, post-socialist transition, European convergence, criminal justice reform

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1 Introduction

When planning this contribution, I initially drafted a grand title: "European Comparative Criminology: Bridging Insights Between Western and Central/Eastern Regions". On reflection, and recalling Ron Clarke's gentle reminder that "small is beautiful", I narrowed the lens. Slovenia, precisely because it is "compact"—in territory and population size—and situated at a historical, institutional, and geographic crossroads, offers a compelling vantage point for comparative criminology. It carries postsocialist legacies while aligning with European Union norms and practices. In that sense, Slovenia can illuminate both divergence and convergence across Europe's criminal justice landscapes (Meško & Jere, 2012; Šelih & Meško, 2010).

Slovenia's criminological scholarship has itself matured substantially since independence in 1991, particularly following the organization of the 9th European Society of Criminology annual conference in Ljubljana in 2009—a milestone that signalled Slovenia's integration into the

European criminological community. Subsequent publications have demonstrated the breadth of this development. Beyond the criminal justice domains examined here, Slovenian researchers have contributed to comparative analyses of post-socialist crime and transition (Šelih & Završnik, 2012), policing transformations across Central and Eastern Europe (Meško et al., 2013), and emerging fields such as green criminology and environmental governance (Eman & Meško, 2014; Eman et al., 2020). This intellectual development both reflects and informs the institutional reforms that follow.

This paper synthesizes peer-reviewed work and policy developments to show how Slovenia bridges Western European and Central/Eastern European (CEE) trajectories across six domains: juvenile justice, penal policy and imprisonment, probation, organized crime, victims' rights, and policing. The argument is threefold. First, Slovenia demonstrates meaningful convergence with Western European standards, particularly in diversionary youth justice, restrained use of imprisonment, and a late but rapid institutionalization of probation. Second, distinctive contexts—notably geography and institutional history—still shape challenges such as transnational organized crime and public trust. Third, hybrid solutions—adapting Western models to local institutional traditions—have been central to Slovenia's progress.

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2 Juvenile Justice: From Form to Substance

Under socialism, youth justice in Slovenia was formalistic and statecentered. Genuine alternatives to punishment were limited. Following independence, reforms incorporated restorative and diversionary approaches—most notably the introduction and expansion of victim–offender mediation in the mid-1990s, together with a stronger role for social work and family engagement (Filipčič, 2011; Meško & Jere, 2012). By international standards, the deprivation of liberty for juveniles is rare in Slovenia; custodial measures are used sparingly and as a last resort (Filipčič & Prelič, 2011). This places Slovenia close to the welfare-oriented, diversionary end of the European spectrum discussed by Dünkel (2014).

Recent Slovene work also engages with contemporary criminological theory. For instance, Kokoravec-Povh et al. (2024) apply Situational Action Theory to compare rural and urban contexts of juvenile offending, showing that Slovenia's youth justice research is not only reform-oriented but theoretically and methodologically current. Taken together, these reforms and studies suggest a durable orientation toward rehabilitation and restorative justice in Slovenia, notwithstanding the punitive shifts observed in parts of Europe during the 2000s (Dünkel, 2014).

3 Penal Policy and Imprisonment: Moderation with Modernization

Slovenia is frequently cited for its moderate use of imprisonment relative to many European peers (Flander et al., 2023). According to the latest Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics SPACE I, Slovenia's prison population rate sits at the lower end among EU countries, reflecting a longstanding penal culture of restraint and a policy emphasis on alternatives to custody (Aebi & Cocco, 2025). Historical analyses show that post-1991 reforms modernized sentencing frameworks and prison administration while generally avoiding sharp moves toward punitiveness (Flander et al., 2023).

This penal moderation is not identical to stasis. The system has faced pressures—capacity constraints in some facilities, and periodic political calls for tougher sentencing—but overall it has remained aligned with European humanrights standards. The policy trajectory has favored community sanctions, electronic monitoring, and other non-custodial options, thereby maintaining relatively low incarceration rates compared with many Central and Eastern European states and even some Western jurisdictions (Aebi & Cocco, 2025; Flander et al., 2023).

4 Probation: Late Institutionalization, Rapid Catch-up

A specific feature of Slovenia's trajectory is the late formalization of a national probation service—established only in 2018 (Mrhar-Prelič, 2022). For years, community sanctions were handled by courts and social services without a dedicated probation agency. Once the political and administrative window opened, however, implementation proceeded quickly and deliberately. The model drew on European best practices—including training and technical components learned from Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, and nearby Croatia—while being integrated with Slovenian legal traditions (Mrhar-Prelič, 2022).

This institutional leap has practical consequences. Probation now prepares presentence reports, supervises community sanctions, and provides structured rehabilitative support. Together, these functions consolidate Slovenia's policy of restrained use of custody and ensure that community-based sanctions are credible and well-managed (Flander et al., 2023; Mrhar-Prelič, 2022). In a comparative perspective, Slovenia shows how late adopters can achieve rapid convergence by learning from neighbours and aligning promptly with Council of Europe guidance on probation.

There are also positive consequences. As Flander et al. (2023) observe, entries to prison decreased after 2018, at least partly due to the 2017 Probation Act and the 2018 establishment of the Probation Service, which expanded non-custodial options, such as community work, for sentences of up to two years. At the same time, the extent of impact will depend on resourcing, inter-agency coordination, and continued evaluation—ongoing priorities in early implementation accounts and recent analyses (Flander et al., 2023; Mrhar-Prelič, 2022). Lastly, according to the latest Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics SPACE II, Slovenia's probation population rate already exceeds its prison population rate; in 2023, the ratio was around 1.6 probationers per one inmate (Aebi et al., 2025).

5 Organized Crime: A Transnational Crossroads

Slovenia's geography—bordering Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia, with an Adriatic port at Koper—places it within transnational illicit markets that connect the Balkans and Western Europe. Early Slovenian scholarship grappled with definitional and measurement challenges (Mozetič & Jager, 2005) and then moved toward building indicators and monitoring tools (Meško et al., 2009). More recent analyses map

spatial patterns and rural-urban dynamics, showing that organized crime activity is geographically dispersed and networked, rather than territorially monopolized (Slak & Dobovšek, 2024).

The policy implication is clear: Slovenia functions less as a seat of entrenched mafia governance and more as a corridor and logistical interface in wider European markets (Meško et al., 2009; Slak & Dobovšek, 2024). That position requires sustained cross-border cooperation (e.g., via Europol) and a portfolio of tools—from intelligence-sharing to specialized investigative capacities—aligned with the demands of a transnational, rather than purely domestic, threat profile.

6 Victims' Rights and Victimology: From Margins to the Center

Victimology in Slovenia has matured substantially since the 1990s. Foundational work documented victimization patterns and called attention to previously underrecognized harms, including secondary victimization (Filipčič, 2008; Šelih, 2012). Legislative reforms—most notably the transposition of Directive 2012/29/EU—expanded victims' procedural rights, information, protection, and access to support ("Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime", 2012). National laws strengthened the framework: a state compensation scheme for victims of violent crime was introduced in 2005 (Ministry of Justice, 2025a) and a multi-agency approach to domestic violence in 2008 (Ministry of Justice, 2025b).

Practice has followed policy. Slovenia has integrated child-friendly interviewing and multidisciplinary approaches (in line with European good practice) and invested in risk assessment in domestic violence policing and prosecution, aligning with international recommendations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). Persistent challenges remain—particularly the fragmentation of services across NGOs and awareness gaps among victims—but the overall arc is one of institutionalization and professionalization, consistent with broader European convergence (Filipčič, 2008; Kanduč, 2020; Šelih, 2012).

7 Policing and Public Trust: Institutional Reform vs. Attitudinal Lag

Slovenia's police underwent rapid post-1991 professionalization, shifting from a socialist "militia" model to a democratic, service-oriented force, with investments in

education (e.g., the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security at the University of Maribor), specialization, and international cooperation (Meško & Jere, 2012; Meško & Klemenčič, 2007; Meško et al., 2013). Research on police legitimacy and trust indicates progress alongside enduring challenges. Among young people, and specifically student populations, perceived procedural justice and fair use of authority are central predictors of trust in police and the criminal justice system (Meško et al., 2014; Reisig et al., 2012). Trust in the criminal justice system and perceived legitimacy have been central topics of research and policymaking over the past two decades, contributing to both national perspectives and testing of Western legitimacy theories. Slovenian research has emphasized legitimacy perspectives across multiple domains—including policing, courts, and prisons—building on foundational work in procedural justice (Hacin & Meško, 2020, 2025; Meško & Hacin, 2025; Reisig & Meško, 2009).

The latest OECD Trust Survey (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025a, 2025b) indicates that trust in public institutions in Slovenia remains below the OECD average (28% vs. 39%). Notably, Slovenian trust levels are higher than those of several post-socialist peers—such as Czechia (19%), Slovakia (22%), and Latvia (29%)—but still trail behind high-trust OECD countries like Switzerland (62%), Norway (61%), and Luxembourg (56%). This pattern highlights Slovenia's intermediate position within Europe's trust landscape, situated between lower-trust post-socialist states and high-trust Western democracies (OECD, 2025a, 2025b).

Finally, corruption remains a persistent challenge to institutional legitimacy. Research on detected corruption cases reveals that breaches of due process—particularly in public procurement, management of state property, and official appointments—directly undermine citizens' trust in formal institutions and the rule of law (Dobovšek & Škrbec, 2012).

The comparative lesson is that institutional reform can be swift, whereas attitudinal change often unfolds more gradually. Community-policing practices and local safety partnerships have helped build trust, particularly outside large urban centres where rural criminology research has documented distinctive crime patterns and community-police relations (Bowden & Meško, 2025; Meško & Bowden, 2024). Continued emphasis on transparency, responsiveness, and problem-oriented policing remains vital for sustaining legitimacy across both urban and rural contexts (Meško & Hacin, 2025; Meško & Jere, 2012; Meško et al., 2014).

8 Conclusion: Convergence, Context, and Hybridization

Slovenia's trajectory since 1991 shows how a small, strategically located country can bridge Western and Eastern European criminologies. In juvenile justice, probation, victims' rights, and penal policy, the country has converged with Western European norms—often achieving low custody rates and embedding restorative and community-based responses (Aebi & Cocco, 2025; Dünkel, 2014; Filipčič & Prelič, 2011; Mrhar-Prelič, 2022). At the same time, context matters: geographic position within transnational illicit markets and historical legacies continue to shape certain pressures—particularly in organized crime and public trust (Meško et al., 2009; OECD, 2025a, 2025b; Slak & Dobovšek, 2024). The throughline is hybridization—combining European standards with national and local institutional designs and capacities.²

If comparative criminology (Aebi & Linde, 2015) seeks not only to describe differences but to learn across them, Slovenia offers a laboratory of reform: a case where small is beautiful because it makes the dynamics of convergence, the persistence of context, and the value of hybrid solutions especially visible. That visibility, and the policy learning it enables, can inform European criminal justice as systems confront shared challenges that increasingly transcend borders.

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² Slovenia's ongoing commitment to evidence-based crime prevention is reflected in its 2024–2028 National Crime Prevention Strategy ("Resolution on the National Programme for Crime Prevention and Suppression 2024–2028", 2024), which emphasizes multi-sectoral approaches across local safety, violence prevention, economic crime, and cybercrime. For broader discussion of Slovenian criminological contributions (Meško, 2023, 2024; Šelih & Meško, 2010).

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Slovenija kot most med zahodno- in vzhodnoevropsko kriminologijo

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Prispevek preučuje, kako sta strateški položaj in postsocialistična preobrazba Slovenijo postavila v položaj mosta med zahodno- in vzhodnoevropsko kriminologijo. Analiza, ki se opira na strokovno pregledane raziskave, statistiko Sveta Evrope in razvoj politik od osamosvojitve leta 1991, sledi vzorcem konvergence in divergenca na šestih področjih kazenskega pravosodja: mladoletniško pravosodje, kaznovalna politika in zapiranje, probacija, organizirana kriminaliteta, pravice žrtev in policijsko delo. Argument je trojen. Prvič, Slovenija kaže smiselno konvergenco z zahodnoevropskimi standardi, zlasti prek preusmeritvenega mladoletniškega pravosodja, stopenj zaprtih oseb z omejenim odpustom in institucionaliziranih pogojnih služb. Drugič, posebni konteksti – zlasti geografski položaj znotraj nadnacionalnih nezakonitih trgov in postsocialistična institucionalna zapuščina – še naprej oblikujejo specifične izzive pri nadzoru organizirane kriminalitete in javnem zaupanju. Tretjič, hibridne rešitve, ki prilagajajo zahodne modele lokalnim tradicijam, so bile osrednjega pomena za reformno pot Slovenije. Pozna, a hitra vzpostavitev probacijske službe ponazarja, kako lahko majhne države »preskočijo« z učenjem od sosedov, hkrati pa ohranjajo institucionalno skladnost. Slovenija tako ponuja laboratorij reform, kjer dinamika konvergence, vztrajnost konteksta in vrednost hibridizacije ostajajo še posebej vidne, kar zagotavlja informacije o sprejemanju politik za evropske kazenskopravne sisteme, ki se soočajo s skupnimi transnacionalnimi izzivi.

Ključne besede: primerjalna kriminologija, institucionalna hibridizacija, postsocialistična tranzicija, evropska konvergenca, reforme kazenskega pravosodja.

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