

Vratsa Home for Male Juvenile Delinquents - Bulgaria

Introduction

Vratsa Home for Male Juvenile Delinquents (from now on "Vratsa home") is the only prison in Bulgaria offering an open detention regime. It differs however from what is expected to be an open detention house in Western Europe. This facility belongs to Vratsa Prison built in 1928, which has a capacity of 336 places. Vratsa Home is a separate ward from the Vratsa prison and it is specifically dedicated to male juvenile delinquents. It is located in the middle sized city of Vratsa 115 km away, up north, to the capital city Sofia. Like the prison it belongs to, this facility is owned by the Bulgarian Government. The building housing this facility has been renovated recently to be turned into a place dedicated to minor boys. It opened in 2018 offering residents a more comfortable accommodation and services meeting European standards.

Scale

Vratsa Home can accommodate 32 residents. During the visit, there were only five people staying in the facility.

RESCALED-principles in practice:

- Small-scale
- Differentiated
- Community-integrated

Differentiation

Target group:

The target group at Vratsa Home consists of boys aged fourteen to eighteen mostly convicted for petty thefts. After eighteen, residents are moved to a standard prison to finish their detention time unless they need to finish their school time. In this case they are allowed to stay until they are twenty years old. Residents are predominantly illiterate Roma. For them, staying there is the only opportunity to go to school. Most of them are regular residents for this kind of facility. They come and go for stays averaging four months.

Forms of security:

Vratsa Home uses a combination of static, procedural and relational security measures. The facility is surrounded by a high fence, which is topped with barbed-wires and about twenty cameras are spread around the facility. There is a camera in each classroom or office in the school building, as well as in the dormitories with one camera in each apartment, and a few cameras in the common rooms. Each window is fitted with bars. However, in fact relational security is the golden practice for this facility. Of the fourteen staff employed, two only are guards whereas twelve are involved in care duties (psychologists and teachers mostly). The guards are wearing uniforms and they are mainly monitoring the cameras. They have very limited interference with the residents. The rest of the staff is not wearing uniforms and they are constantly in contact with the residents.

In addition, the facility has some procedural security measures. Residents can move freely inside the premises of the facility. They can have family visits with one week prior notice. Regarding technology, there is one public phone booth installed outside the school building. To be able to use it, residents need to purchase a specific phone card. Mobile phones are prohibited and school computers do not allow access to the internet.

Activities:

Activities that are offered at Vratsa Home consist of educational tasks. The residents go to school every morning to learn how to write, read. In the afternoon, they have social, religious, cultural and sports activities. Sometimes the facility organizes visits from different organizations that give presentations on educational topics, because the residents get more involved when they get visits from new people. The free time they are given can be spent practicing sports with the indoor and outdoor equipment provided with open access. Cultural activities (cinema, museum, theater etc.) to neighboring Vratsa city center can also be arranged. Residents are allowed to move freely within the premises at any time except at night.

Community-integration

Location and architecture:

The facility is located in Vratsa, Bulgaria. Vratsa is the largest city in northwestern Bulgaria and lies at the foot of the Vrachanski Balkans. As a result, the city is near numerous caves, waterfalls and rock formations.

Vratsa Home is located in a remote area with almost no neighbors. The population of Vratsa is about 152 813 (2021).¹

First impression of a visitor: "Fences topped with barbed wires immediately gives the bad impression of a standard place of deprivation of liberty offering poor rehabilitation opportunities. Once inside, amenities around, mainly for sport (basketball field and gym equipment) soften this impression. However, the whole institution is not homely at all".

The main building of the facility follows a panoptic design. The specific ward dedicated to minor boys was initially repurposed from its previous use as accommodation for prison staff. After remaining unoccupied for over 20 years, it underwent renovation in 2018 to serve its new purpose. The architecture of

the facility clearly reflects its function as a correctional home. It comprises two buildings, one housing dormitories and the other serving as a school. Surrounding these buildings are freely accessible sports facilities and a garden. Additionally, there is a spacious gymnasium. A garden-like area with benches and a bookshelf resembling a mailbox provides a calm space for residents to rest, with several cats wandering about.

The dormitories are located in a separate two-story building. The residents are segregated into different apartments based on their legal status as accused, defendants, or convicted individuals. The dormitories, situated on the first floor, resemble apartment-style accommodations. Each room measures around ten to fifteen square meters and accommodates one to three beds. There are shared bathrooms and dining areas. The dormitories are poorly furnished, lacking proper furniture aside from the beds and old-style television sets.

Interaction with the community:

Besides cultural or social activities (cinema, museum, theater etc.) to neighboring Vratsa city, interaction with the community is limited. Its remote location does not allow exchange of any kind except in the supply the facility requires from its direct environment.

Vratsa Home for Male Juvenile Delinquents

Founded: 2018

Capacity: 32

Security level: High

Nearest city/town: Vratsa
(Bulgaria)

Nature of interaction: Visited by
FARAPEJ (24/11/2022)

¹Vraca (Province, Bulgaria) - Population Statistics, Charts, Map and Location. (2021). City Population. Retrieved June 26th, 2023, from https://www.citypopulation.de/en/bulgaria/admin/06__vraca/