

Restorative Justice in Lithuania: Exploring New Options in a Post-Soviet Context

How well do the North American ideals and practices of restorative justice translate into an Eastern European context? How can RJ become truly meaningful to post-Soviet societies?

A recent two month visit to Lithuania provided a rare (for me) opportunity to explore these questions as I was invited to teach a short introductory restorative justice course. The invitation came from LCC International University, an English-language liberal arts university based in Klaipeda, Lithuania, with an enrollment of approximately 600 students from all over Eastern Europe.

The class for the 6-week (half-semester) academic course was relatively small compared to classes I teach back in Winnipeg but the nine students in the group represented well the diversity of the LCC student population – 3 Belorussians, 1 Ukrainian, 1 Latvian, 1 Macedonian and 3 American exchange students. For most of the students RJ was a very new idea and provided a very radical contrast to an Eastern European criminal justice system perceived as based primarily on punishment and revenge. However, the enthusiasm of the students was contagious. Who can tell how and where the ideas discussed here will take root and flourish as time moves on?

In addition to this course, I also participated in a community workshop to introduce basic RJ concepts and school-based restorative practices to an audience of 20-30 school guidance counselors and administrators from the surrounding Klaipeda community. Again, it was an opportunity to introduce some new ideas, to plant some seeds and see how they can grow over time. School discipline in Lithuania still is deeply affected by the Soviet legacy of suppression of dissent and social control through shaming and humiliation. A deeper understanding of restorative dialogue and child empowerment as an alternative to harsh punishment can only come as more and more school teachers and staff begin to appreciate the deep paradigm shift that these alternatives embody.

Restorative justice is still a very new concept for Lithuania and its neighbours in the Baltic region of Eastern Europe. RJ principles are beginning to be recognized in several national criminal justice systems and a few pilot programs have been established in the last decade. Most notable here is the introduction of pilot mediation programs to respond to a juvenile delinquency in a few jurisdictions in Lithuania and Estonia. However, this is only a beginning and much more work is needed to explore and present the potential for RJ to address the many social divides faced by communities in this region.

My brief visit to LCC highlighted for me the tremendous divisions so evident within the societies of Lithuania and the surrounding countries. One obvious gap is the generational gap – the gaps between the generation that experienced world war and famine and their children and grandchildren, as well as the divisions between the generation whose existence was bound up in survival under Soviet occupation and then the generation

which came of age with the breakup of the Soviet Union, dreaming of new freedoms and possibilities but then embittered by endless political corruption and economic mismanagement. As difficult as it was for me, as a Western outsider, to understand the context of my East European students who grew up in post-Soviet societies, it must have been almost as difficult for their generation, born after the dramatic events of the early 1990s, to comprehend the Soviet and Nazi occupations that shaped the lives of their parents and grandparents.

Generational divisions exist within the debris of other social and historical divisions, for example, the divisions between different ethnic and linguistic identities such as the gap between Lithuanian-speaking and Russian-speaking Lithuanians, both of whom carry their own distinct stories and perspectives of the Soviet legacy. The historical legacy must also include other difficult divisions only rarely publicly addressed, such as the gap between the local residents and the descendants of those exiled to Siberia or elsewhere during various Nazi and Soviet purges, descendants who, for the most part, are not welcomed should they seek to return to their ancestral homelands and reclaim the homes and properties now taken over by those who stayed behind. For Lithuanians, even more poignant is the fate of Lithuanian Jewish community, completely decimated through the Nazi holocaust, a history now largely ignored or suppressed aside from a few stone cairns marking the sites of mass graves hidden in the woods.

In all this complexity and social division, RJ ideals and practices can perhaps provide a vision of hope and a pathway toward an alternative story of community empowerment and reconciliation. It was truly a privilege to be able to share this vision for this brief time at LCC International University and to walk for a time with those who are beginning to explore its potential.