



The Birth of a Red Alarm Button: Against institutional violence in Barcelona – the SIRECOVI system

Author(s): Natacha Filippi

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ACTIVIST CONTRIBUTION

The Birth of a Red Alarm Button: Against institutional violence in Barcelona – the SIRECOVI¹ system

Natacha Filippi²

In Spain, acts of torture perpetrated by prison or police officers, and sometimes leading to death, are an important feature characterising the functioning of closed spaces such as prisons, police stations, youth detention centres and temporary detention centres for immigrants. They also affect police operations outside such institutions, as in the case of demonstrations or acts of social or administrative control (Coordinadora para la Prevención y Denuncia de la Tortura, 2015, 2016). In 2016, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Spain for the sixth time for having failed to investigate the cases of state torture occurring on its territory.

More particularly, Catalan prisons, subjected to a specific regional administration, have witnessed a number of repressive acts against prisoners, be it through the imposition of solitary confinement (Marín García, 2016), beatings or degrading treatments, as happened for instance after the 2004 revolts at the Quatre Camins Prison (Rodríguez, 2015). Parallel to this, acts of violence perpetrated by the Catalan police (the *Mossos d'Esquadra*) have occurred on a regular basis since its deployment in the region in 1994. Other law enforcement agencies have been in the spotlight. The documentary *Ciutat Morta* (2013) shows images of brutality from the *Guardia Urbana de Barcelona* and sheds light on the police officers' impunity while relating confrontations with the police that took place in Barcelona in 2006.

It is in this context that on March 10th, 2016, at the Law Faculty of the University of Barcelona, the Observatory of the Penal System and Human Rights (OSPDH) presented a new mechanism of communication, called SIRECOVI (International System of Recording and Communication on Cases of Institutional Violence). The OSPDH's members officially launched the mechanism, which they described as a 'red alarm button', during a day-long conference celebrating the 15th anniversary of the Observatory. The morning was dedicated to a review of

¹ International System of Recording and Communication on Cases of Institutional Violence

² Natacha Filippi is a Research Associate at the History Workshop, Witwatersrand University, South Africa.

the past and future activities of the Observatory, as well as of the few existing Spanish mechanisms of torture prevention. The afternoon, in turn, focussed on international experiences and local structures, including support organisations for prisoners' families.

SIRECOVI was presented by Iñaki Rivera, director of the OSPDH, who also inaugurated the conference, alongside Joan Queralt, director of the Tranjus Institute, Dídac Ramírez Sarrió, vice-chancellor of the University of Barcelona, Aida Guillén, director of the Services of Citizenship Rights and Immigration of the Barcelona Council, and Amand Calderó, the general director of the Prison Services. The presence of the latter, who evoked the collaboration of the prison administration in the implementation of SIRECOVI, was surprising, even more so when taking into account the occasionally tense relationships between the Prison Services and the Observatory.

A Mechanism to Stand Against Silence

As explained by Rivera, SIRECOVI is a system that aims at undermining the silence surrounding cases of violence perpetrated by the State. The state crimes tackled by the mechanism are the ones taking place in prisons, police stations, demonstrations, or in the street. The goal of SIRECOVI consists in answering in a swift way to an occurrence of violence, in bringing pressure to the responsible administration and offering the family and friends, who are often left in the dark, an easy point of reference. More generally, as stated by the OSPDH, the mechanism wishes, 'through the systematisation, the monitoring and the communication of detected situations, [to] prevent the revictimisation of the targeted persons and the occurrence of new cases' (2016).

Rivera also briefly explained the birth of SIRECOVI. The project stemmed from a very concrete case, which took place a few years ago. The partner of a prisoner bitten by warders contacted the Observatory because she had no way of getting news about the said prisoner. The prison administration forbade the woman, the Observatory's members and a doctor from visiting the prisoner. All stood helpless before this all too frequent situation, deprived of any means to put pressure on the prison administration. In coordination with other organisations, the Observatory then decided to build up a mechanism of communication that would be swift, centralised and efficient.

The launching of SIRECOVI is hence motivated by the need to document torture, to monitor these state crimes, following the guidelines set by the Istanbul Protocol of 1999, also called Manual on Effective Investigation and

Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In order to create the system of recording and communication, the Observatory has decided to coordinate its actions with several organisations, acting at a local or international level. These include Amnesty International, the *Coordinadora para la Prevención y Denuncia de la Tortura*, the *Red Euro Latinoamericana para la Prevención de la Tortura y la Violencia Institucional* (RELAPT), the *Consell de Col·legis d'Advocats de Catalunya*, the *Consejo General de la Abogacía Española* and the United Nations Committee against Torture. As such, the Observatory presents SIRECOVI as a system available to all, including local organisations of support, but positions itself within an unequivocally institutionalised framework.

Three tools of recording and communication

SIRECOVI will operate at different levels, focussing both on the action to be undertaken after a specific event took place and the need to document each individual case in order to create more general databases and studies. According to the OSPDH, the new system has four goals: to establish a diagnostic of a particular situation of institutional violence, to develop a system of communication with national and international organisms, to create a map, accessible to all, of the different occurrences of institutional violence, and to build up a database with the collected information. The members of the Observatory insist on the fact that SIRECOVI should not be confused for a legal process, as the prime objective of the mechanism is one of communication of the event and protection of the victim (OSPDH, 2016).

In order to fulfil these objectives, the idea is to develop three distinct tools:

1. A local and international system of alert, which will use pre-redacted forms and emails in order to facilitate swift exchanges with networks of prisoners' families, centres for the defence of human rights, lawyers, organisations and institutions. Previous agreements will have been reached with each of them, ensuring swift contacts at local or international levels, depending on the requirements of each individual case.
2. A map of each and every occurrence, with a description of the case – within the limits of personal information protection – and an indication of the density and intensity of violent occurrences for each institution appearing on the map.

3. A general database, accessible to all, where each case will be recorded. The database will also contain analyses and reports, be they from an institutional, civil society or academic perspective, related to the cases.

As soon as the OSPDH receives a denunciation from the victim, his/her family, lawyer or friends, concerning a case of torture or degrading treatment, it activates the system of alert, also called ICAS. This 'red alarm button' enables the Observatory to directly contact organisations or institutions included in its own database. The red button can function either on a preventive level, in order to avoid a person from being subjected to abuse, or a reactive one, once the institutional violence has already occurred (OSPDH, 2016). The other tools, the map and the database, are equally important, as their recording task will enable the completion of new studies and analyses. In turn, they should form the necessary basis to bring pressure on the diverse institutions involved in such violence. To date, at the Spanish level, only the *Coordinadora para la Prevención y Denuncia de la Tortura* did this work of monitoring, publishing an annual report, accessible online, listing the different cases that it could record.

Conclusion

The 10th March conference hence announced the creation of a mechanism focussed on the idea of standing against torture through communication between different institutions and human rights organisations. Despite the limits that such a perspective might entail, relating to the real pressure it will be able to bring on the Spanish system of control and punishment, it does develop tools that can provide interesting elements and bases of work in the future, especially on the recording and monitoring level. SIRECOVI will first be implemented in Catalonia before being applied to the whole of Spain with the help of the *Coordinadora para la Prevención y Denuncia de la Tortura*.

Last December, the SIRECOVI system was officially launched at the Barcelona Bar Association. Since then, the OSPDH has registered 40 cases of violence in the region. For twelve of them, a process of communication between different public institutions and activist associations has been initiated in order to put pressure on the responsible administration. The map of these cases is already available on the SIRECOVI website. It presents in an effective and graphic way the frequency and type of violent acts depending on the closed institution or the venue. The different police and security forces involved in these cases include prison staff, *Mossos d'Esquadra*, the National Police, the Municipal Police and the Metro Private Security. As Rivera highlighted, the strength of this

mechanism of alert hinges on the widespread knowledge of its existence and the use of 'memory' (Rivera Beiras, 2011) – based, in this case, on a monitoring strategy – as a renewed epistemological category in the critical study of state crimes.

For more information, see <https://sirecovi.ub.edu>

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