

Surveillance and Security in Immigrant Detention Centres in Poland. An Overview of Key Technologies and Practices

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Abstract

Guarded Centres for Foreigners are the key instrument of detention policy in Poland. They are often considered as one of the key and at the same time most secretive forms of securitization and criminalization of foreigners. With panoptical practices of (in)direct observation and robust electronic surveillance the centres are tasked with containing and producing a (self)disciplined, knowable, governable and deportable immigrant, who can be swiftly expelled from the Polish territory. Building on ethnographic research, including interviews and photographic material, this article explores specific practices and technologies of surveillance in Polish detention centres by describing and discussing how they are deployed by detention personnel. It overviews different types of direct surveillance (e.g. direct observation, counting, inspection), at the same time discussing the role of monitoring technologies, which have significantly influenced the practices and spaces of detention. The article concludes that further development of electronic surveillance in the Polish guarded centres may be inevitable and lead to further “panopticonization” of detention in Poland.

Keywords: Guarded Centres for Foreigners in Poland, detention, surveillance, migration, securitization

1. Introduction

The migration and border management domain is driven by different policy regimes, which have the power to label immigrants and encapsulate them in completely different realities, depending on the nature and purpose of their arrival. In this sense,

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we can observe development of distinct policy frameworks and spaces dedicated to asylum seekers and refugees, economic immigrants, EU internal workers and of course irregular immigrants (Martins and Jumbert 2022). Administrative detention of immigrants represents one of such spaces, where in the name of national security and public safety immigrants are subjected to restrictive forms of control and containment.

Detention of immigrants is a global phenomenon which has become more known in public discourse in the aftermath of the so called War on Terror, when immigrant detention became more visible in the media in the form of detention rooms in airports, repurposed military facilities, remote islands, former penitentiary buildings, etc. (Mountz 2021; Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021:15). For the public opinion detention is still somehow a broad and often misinterpreted term. As De Genova et al. pointed out, "media accounts ambivalently refer to spaces of detention, alternately, as: "reception centers," "prisons," "for-profit prisons," "camps," "family residential centers," "baby jails," "processing centers," "tent cities," "holding facilities," or "black sites" (among other terms)" (2022:67). One of the elements that are common to all of these names is their penitentiary character, which has translated into the shared understanding of what detention of immigrants entails.

In official policy and legal discourse detention is framed as an administrative practice of the last resort, a part of the border security and migration management domain that allows to contain "suspicious", "unruly", or "risky" immigrants for the purposes of identification and deportation (Tazzioli 2018). In this regard, Mountz et al. argue that with detention practices "nation states and security agencies deploy rationales of deterrence and securitization (including temporal logics of prevention and anticipation), and consistently frame these rationales through narratives of migrants as security threats, rhetoric that illustrates the increasing entanglement of securitization and immigration policies" (Mountz et al. 2013:525). In this regard, detention of immigrants is closely interlinked with security rationale, driven by discourse and politics of fear but also practices that operate behind closed doors and far away from the public eye. Here, surveillance can be considered as one of the most fundamental security technologies deployed in detention facilities and beyond.

Surveillance in detention is built on technologies and specific practices that are designed to discipline and control detained immigrants in anticipation of their disruptive, disallowed, or threatening behaviour (Campesi 2018). In this regard, reality within the centres is an interplay between visibility and invisibility. On the one hand, detention centres are designed to hide immigrants within their walls, but on the other make them as visible as possible for the watchful eye of the state security apparatus. Here, visibility is a corrective, sorting and securitizing mechanism, which is supposed to control the behaviour of detained immigrants and immobilize them within the confounds of specific spaces (Mountz 2015). However, what has become increasingly

are often a double-edged sword. They are deployed against specific populations, but they also shape monitored spaces and persons who deploy surveillant technologies – including detention officers (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017; Taekke 2011). That is why, with this article my aim is to explore the practices and technologies of surveillance in Polish immigrant detention centres by describing and discussing how they are deployed by detention personnel and how they affect spaces of detention. In doing so, the article aims to unpack the specific technologies, practices, and modalities of surveillance and explain how they shape detention reality in Polish centres.

The article is structured as follows. The first part introduces the concept of detention and its role in the securitization and criminalization of immigrants. It is supplemented with the literature review on surveillance and, more specifically, monitoring and disciplining practices in detention. The second part is focused on the methodological approach applied in the article. The third and fourth part is concerned with empirical material and analysis of different modalities and spaces of surveillance, deployed in immigrant detention centres in Poland. The article ends with conclusions.

2. Conceptualizing security and surveillance in immigrant detention

Detention of immigrants has been enjoying high levels of interest among researchers and students of broadly understood critical security and migration studies (Bloch and Schuster 2005; Bosworth 2014; Mountz 2021; Niedźwiedzki and Schmidt 2021; Schmidt 2021; Tazzioli 2018). The literature indicates that detention of immigrants is one of key governmental mechanisms that entangle the realm of national security and risk management with human mobility and migration policies (Mountz 2015; Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021). This entanglement can be described as a process of securitization. In its more traditional iteration, securitization is understood as a discursive “process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as a threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat” (Fijałkowski and Jarząbek 2019:1672). However, as already indicated, securitization can also assume more mundane and risk management character, which is driven by practices deployed by security personnel. These so called “managers of unease” create objects of (in)security with their daily routines such as surveillance or security checks, labelling specific objects as threatening, uncertain and requiring supervision (Bigo 2002: 63–65).

In this regard, detention of immigrants is one of the most secretive governmental and administrative technologies securitizing migration at national level. It is deeply grounded in security and public safety rationales, which are driven by fear of the unknown and the desire to remove a specific immigrant population from the host

society. According to this security rationale immigrants are contained and processed in specialized facilities, far away from the public eye because they are believed to endanger citizens with their precarious status, “undesirability” or “unclassifiability” (Mountz et al. 2013:526). In fact, one of the key reasons immigrants are put in detention is verification of their identity. Without identities known to the state, they are presented as “anyone” who can “do anything” (Khosravi 2009:51). To manage this uncertainty, detention centres deploy a robust security apparatus specifically designed to contain, control, “invisibilize” and eventually expel an immigrant (Mountz et al. 2013; Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021).

Detention of immigrants is commonly associated with detention centres or Guarded Centres for Foreigners as they are called in Polish policy and legal discourse. These facilities are ruled by practices of spatial confinement, separation and control (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021). In this vein, they are prone to reproducing a certain penitentiary logic of camp or prison, especially in regards to disciplinary practices of containment, coercion and state violence (Martin 2012; Tazzioli 2018). In this regard, some research on detention directly invokes Agamben’s concept of “homo sacer” and his discussion on state of exception (Bailey 2009; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). In this perspective, detention facility becomes a central mechanism, which allows the separation and control of socially and politically undesirable immigrants but also keeps them in the state of “bare life”, which eventually leads to production of a deportable and manageable foreigner (Zannettino 2012). In a different line of inquiry, detention centres are analysed as sites of entwinement between humanitarianism and security, manifesting as a specific type of “carceral humanitarianism”, “hostile hospitality” or “hostipitality” (Oliver 2017; Sahraoui 2020). This angle highlights the inherent paradox of the work of detention officers and employees, who are taking care of detainees at the same time exposing them to or even facilitating violent forms of bodily removal (Khosravi 2009:44).

Detention of immigrants is not only an important site of securitization but also criminalization of migration². Under the concept of “new penology” criminologists began to conceptualize new forms of governmental technologies of incapacitation, which next to criminals include a wider range of so called “dangerous” social groups such as immigrants, poor, welfare dependents or drug addicts (Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2013:83). As pointed out by De Giorgi “it is not so much the individual characteristics of subjects that are the object of penal control, but social factors which permit to assign some individuals to a peculiar risk-class” (2006:106). Here,

² Process of securitization and criminalization of migration are closely entwined, mostly reflected in deployment of restrictive legal security driven discourses and practices which push migrants and migration into the realms of policing, criminal law and existential security. However, for analytical clarity, this article focuses predominantly on processes and practices of securitization and surveillance in detention reality. For more on “cimmigration” and detention see: (Bourbeau 2019, Menjívar, Gómez Cervantes and Alvord 2018).

immigrants are construed as a risky subpopulation, that needs to be monitored and managed for security and public safety reasons. In reference to broadly understood immigrants the catalogue of risk factors has been only growing, associating refugees as well as economic immigrants with criminal and pathological behaviours such as murders, rapes, terrorism, thefts, among other things (Klaus 2020; Wodak 2011). This has led to so called “crimmigration”, a gradual merger between criminal and immigration laws. As noted by Stumpf, this “merger has taken place on three fronts: (1) the substance of immigration law and criminal law increasingly overlaps, (2) immigration enforcement has come to resemble criminal law enforcement, and (3) the procedural aspects of prosecuting immigration violations have taken on many of the earmarks of criminal procedure” (2006: 381).

In this regard unwanted immigrants and later detainees are assigned “new legal identities, which are often tainted, stigmatized or “spoiled” (e.g. illegal, criminal, stateless). These categories impose a lasting historical racialized stigma that is unbridgeable and justifies forced confinement” (De Genova et al. 2022:68). Regarding the penitentiary characteristic of detention, detainees also share a similar ex-convict stigma after being released from the centres. They do not only become objects of state surveillance and enhanced dataveillance but also are at risk of quickly returning to confinement of detention walls. Leerkes and Broeders point out, that like in a “revolving door” situation, the so called “cobbled”³ detainees are often reapprehended and detained again in the event of continued illegal residence (2012:81).

Detention is an integral part of capture and deportation industry, which in the last years has been rapidly growing in the EU and beyond (Anderson et al. 2013; DeBono 2016; Montange 2021). Deportation is often a desired outcome of detention (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021:56). It is an “enforcement event “that involves the forcible removal of an immigrant from the receiving or host country (Coutin 2015). It is the key to so called “catch and return cycle”, which in recent years has become a cornerstone of the migration policy regime in the EU and the US (Martin 2012). As the border patrols are tasked with catching irregular immigrants, the centres are supposed to administratively, legally and physically prepare them for deportation purposes, turning them into the already mentioned “deportable objects” – easy to contain, remove and unable to disrupt the removal process (De Genova 2019). The act of deportation often involves heavily securitizing practices, including handcuffing detainees, and the involvement of armed guards and convoys in prison vans, which are supposed to separate detainees from the public (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021:53–55). All in the name of security, public safety and certainty that an unwelcome immigrant will be permanently removed from the territory of a host country.

As pointed out by Gruszczak, contemporary bordering practices have become increasingly reliant on monitoring technologies such as “biometric identification and

³ Detainees who had to be released because deportation procedure failed.

automatic recognition systems, and proactive intrusion-detection” (2022:248; see also Zarychta-Romanowska 2021). In this regard, all aspects of modern detention industry, including capture, containment and deportation share an important element – surveillance. Here surveillance is defined as a practice, focused on “systemic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection, or direction” (Lyon 2007:14). In relation to security, surveillance has often been described as an activity, reflected in collecting information on suspicious populations and bodies, with the purpose of security profiling and identification of threatening behaviours (Coaffee and Fussey 2015; Friedewald et al. 2017).

Surveillance accompanies irregular immigrants/future detainees from the moment of capture. The practice of capturing is driven by the already mentioned traditional border practices supplemented with electronic surveillance systems, including satellite drones, and infrared imaging, motion sensors, seismic sensors, to name a few (FitzGerald 2020). This is also accompanied by extended border protection, equipped with dataveillance systems, which are supposed to create a smart network capable of identifying irregular immigrants beyond traditional border areas (Bellanova and Duez 2016). Here, surveillance plays a predominantly filtering and classificatory role, designed to single out the unwanted, unidentified and risky immigrants.

Surveillance within detention has an overlapping but also expanded role. It is a disciplinary and controlling assemblage of practices and technologies, a mixture of panoptical incarceration and restrictive spatiality (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021:49–50). In the Foucauldian interpretation of Bentham’s panopticon, the element of observation, data collection, and more importantly the likelihood of these practices, entails a kind of automatic docility and self-government of observed objects, here detainees and former detainees (Foucault 1983). As pointed by Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon the likelihood of “surveillant gaze” in the form of direct or indirect monitoring is “itself tied to the emergence of disciplinary power that shapes behaviour through a subtle form of ‘soul training’” (2012:15). In this respect, through a wide array of surveillance technologies and practices detainees are supposed to surrender to a desired scheme of behaviour, and if needed they can be forced into this behaviour (Mountz et al. 2013). These technologies also allow to classify detainees, sort them into different categories, such as threatening (e.g. in interactions with other detainees), unidentified (e.g. in relation to deportation), risky (e.g. in regards to potential escape), needing care (e.g. in relation to former trauma and potential asylum proceedings) (De Genova et al. 2022:68). In this regard during their time in the centres, detainees are the objects of data-gathering practices, they are continuously analysed and profiled.

Surveillance often goes beyond the walls of the centres. Former detainees stay “on the radar” of border protection officers and are recorded in dataveillance repositories, carrying the legal and social consequences of detention, which often transforms into a special type of “extended punishment” (Martinez-Aranda 2022). Lastly, surveillance affects not only the detainees but also the guardians and executors of the system –

i.e. detention officers. They are often being watched by the same mechanisms that are supposed to discipline detainees (e.g. electronic monitoring). As observed by Elmer, in a panoptical reality even those who are at the centre of surveillance, are in some aspects captured by this system, becoming prisoners themselves (2012).

3. Methods

This article builds on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in Polish Guarded Centres for Foreigners between 2018 and 2019. The dataset used for the analysis includes photographic, video and documentary material, notes from observations, as well as 161 semi-structured interviews conducted with Border Guard and civilian staff working in all six detention centres operating at the time (i.e. in Przemyśl, Lesznowola, Białystok, Biała Podlaska, Kętrzyn, Krosno Odrzańskie) (see more about methods applied in the project: Niedźwiedzki and Schmidt 2021). The interviews have been transcribed, coded and qualitatively analysed using the MAXQDA software. All sources of empirical material have been triangulated for the purposes of achieving a more reliable dataset (Denzin 2012). This article is based primarily on data retrieved from interviews with detention staff and as well as visual material.

4. Selected technologies and practices of surveillance in Guarded Centres for Foreigners in Poland

The analysis presented in this article will focus on selected technologies and practices, discussing those elements of surveillance that have gained the most significant theoretical saturation and visibility in the empirical material – i.e. physical observation (including such practices as counting), electronic monitoring (including application of electronic sensors) and Internet surveillance.

Before moving to the analysis of everyday surveillance in detention facilities, it is necessary to briefly discuss a security ritual, which is a crucial part of its surveillant assemblage – the moment of admission to detention facility. The admission process is driven by practices focused on data collection, such as inspections and interviews. It could be described as a detailed inventory of an immigrant in terms of his/her identity (if possible), personal history material status, health, social needs, to name a few. A detainee is subjected to a series of penitentiary and detention practices such as electronic scanning, search and inventory of their personal belongings, a medical interview, a personal interview conducted by social guardians⁴, and an administrative

⁴ It is a functionary in detention facility responsible for social and often psychological wellbeing of a detainee.

Photo 1

An example of equipment used during admission procedures to scan personal belongings of detainees (photo by Maciej Stęпка).



interview conducted by return/deportation guardians⁵. In this regard the first contact with the detention facility concentrates on information collection practices, directed to uncovering the identity, socio-economic situation and medical and psychological condition of the detainee⁶. It is designed to make the foreigner as knowable as possible (see Photo 1).

Following the admission procedure, one of the most basic forms of surveillance in detention is physical observation. This concerns the population of the centre as a whole as well as the behaviour of individual detainees. Detention officers and employees responsible for security, as well as social guardians are tasked with monitoring the situation in the centre, though the scope and type of surveillance they perform may vary.

Security guards are one of the key observers and everyday supervisors of the situation in detention facility. They constitute the largest component of the detention staff. These are Border Guard officers, tasked predominantly with keeping order and

⁵ It is a functionary in detention facility responsible for administrative proceedings related to voluntary or involuntary return of an immigrant.

⁶ From the moment of capture, the Border Guard and detention facility take legal responsibility for the life and health of an immigrant.

discipline within the facility. To this end, they are a permanent feature of detention, having constant contact with detainees while stationed in the facility 24/7. Although they are the most coercive force in detention, most of their security practices focus on observation and prevention of potentially dangerous situations. As one of the interviewees mentioned: “a typical day of work is all about watching, observing them [detainees], supervising their meals, doctor’s appointments, distribution of mail and legal documentation, supervision of visitations...” (LE-P-12-I). In this respect, physical observation performed by security guards includes patrolling and supervision of specific areas inside and outside the detention buildings, inspection, escorting or counting of detainees. Every day, every detainee has to be accounted for, and every potentially dangerous item (e.g. shaving razor) given to a detainee has to be recorded and kept track of. Whenever a detainee wants to use facilities that are located outside the buildings there must be a supervising guard present, patrolling or stationing in designated areas while observing the detainee’s behaviour (see Photo 2).

For this reason, according to interviewees a competent security guard must be, among other things, “a keen observer” (P-P-30-I). This means being able to see things on multiple horizons, from multiple angles, not only monitor and react, but also correctly

Photo 2

A security guard booth with a visible red line which indicates the beginning of a restricted zone (photo by Maciej Stęпка).



interpret specific social situations e.g. interactions between detainees, their intentions. In this regard, the guards expressed high levels of uncertainty and suspicion about detainees, who are described as risky, unknowable and potentially threatening objects. To this end, while conducting surveillance security guards very often assume “the worst case scenario”. One of our interviewees mentioned that: “we do not know if it is a shepherd or a Muslim fighter, who knows how to handle a Kalashnikov and has been on jihad since he was a kid” (B-P-16-I -33). Following this line of thought, interviewees indicated that they are not only concerned with the security of the state, the facility or other foreigners but also their own, pointing out that in the event of a serious security breach they feel understaffed and ill-equipped to handle the situation. It is visible that among security guards the already mentioned fear of the “unknown immigrant”, who can be anyone and do anything is the main driver behind security and surveillance practices.

Another category of detention officers who conduct close physical observation is a social guardian. Social guardians are responsible for the social activities and socio-psychological well-being of detainees during their time in the facility⁷. They conduct socio-psychological surveillance and prepare special observation reports on the basis of their interviews and meetings with detainees. As one of the interviewees noted:

When we have a new detainee, we already start initial surveillance. It takes a month. After this month we fill in a special observation sheet, evaluate and diagnose a detainee and decide whether, for example, he/she needs additional psychological or medical assistance. After a month we already see if there is something wrong with a detainee. If something is wrong, we start another round of close surveillance (KT-P-24-I).

As social guardians have a direct and close relationship with detainees, they also participate in security evaluation of specific immigrants, indicating their potential for violent and problematic behavior. In this sense, social guardians and security guards are in close cooperation with each other. They both contribute to formal memos on problematic, unstable or dangerous detainees but there is also informal exchange of observations between staff. As mentioned by one of the security guards:

Sometimes you also need to keep an eye on a foreigner from the psychological point of view. Then, I call social guardians as they frequently talk to detainees. Sometimes I need to be a mediator. When I see on monitoring that there is something happening in a library, I go, talk and try to calm everyone down. I always inform other guys [social guardians] about problematic foreigners so they know what is going on and vice versa. (B-P-16-I).

In addition to physical observation, surveillance in detention facilities is supported and supplemented with an advanced system of electronic devices such as CCTV

⁷ Often responsibilities of social guardians are related to translations and psychological help (if they are trained psychologists).

cameras with infrared capability, motion sensors, sensors on doors indicating whether they are closed or opened, panic buttons⁸, to name a few. These technologies are often framed in the expert discourse as humane and non-invasive forms of containment, control and discipline and are treated as strategic investments in detention facilities (Gómez Cervantes, Menjívar, and Staples 2017) (see Photo 3). From a practical point of view, electronic surveillance allows a limited number of guards to observe large numbers of detainees. In many aspects, it resembles panoptical reality, where one or two observers have a potentially holistic preview on the situation but they cannot observe everyone at the same time. In this sense, the self-disciplinary element is based on the likelihood of observation rather than direct surveillance.

Photo 3

An example of a surveillance room in a Guarded Centre for Foreigners (photo by Dariusz Niedźwiedzki).



Interviews with detention personnel clearly indicate that robust monitoring and electronic surveillance technology is a part of a desired “perfect immigrant detention” reality, where surveillance dominates physical observation and tiresome security practices such as patrolling or counting detainees. Schmidt observes that from the perspective of security guards monitoring becomes an optimal solution – it makes a security practice depersonalized and minimizes interactions between detention staff and supervised detainees (2021:166). This translates into a more withdrawn

⁸ Detention staff, especially civilian workers, may use this button in order to sound an alarm whenever they feel in danger.

and remote type of supervision, limits potential for conflicts and decreases personal, psychological and material costs of surveillance and supervision of detainees. Interviewees also indicate, that the robustness of electronic surveillance substantially helps security guards to react to extraordinary situations, but it also plays an important role in reviewing recorded material after these situations as evidence of undesirable or disallowed behavior of detainees.

Another area of surveillance is the Internet and the control over electronic devices such as phones. Within the detention facility it is not allowed to have recording devices and/or devices with autonomous access to the Internet such as smartphones. Therefore, phones or other electronic devices are handled by the security personnel and if necessary distributed among detainees. The access to the Internet is rationed (in terms of time) and strictly controlled by the security personnel. Although access to the Internet is open to all detainees, specific activities and content are strictly filtered by special surveillance software. For example, certain types of communicators, Voice over Internet Protocol services such as Skype, or particular websites are blocked (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich 2021). This type of surveillance is regulated by the internal code of detention facilities but also by specific regulations at the national level. As noted by one of the security guards:

the Internet is a tool. We can imagine that a foreigner is using communicators to let someone from the outside know that he/she is going to be outside the facility at this hour. They may be desperate enough to organize an escape with assistance from the outside. By giving them full access to the Internet, we give them a powerful tool (K-P-19-Z).

The Internet is also perceived by the detention staff as a source of radicalizing content such as YouTube videos, forums with instructions on how to build a bomb or make a weapon. There is also concern for the psychological wellbeing of children placed in detention. As one of the interviewed social guardians mentioned:

The Internet is filled with inappropriate radical content. For example, young boys in detention play these games where you shoot things, they are very violent. Then they have nightmares, they are violent. We have to limit access to these games (P-P-11-I).

5. Spaces of surveillance in Guarded Centres for Foreigners

It is safe to say that the majority of spaces within a detention facility are closely surveilled. Detention personnel classifies them as “secure” areas, but in the academic literature they are often described as oppressive or micro-punitive disciplinary and carceral spaces (Gómez Cervantes et al. 2017; Schmidt 2021). Indeed, spaces of detention are driven by the paradoxical logics of safety and oppression or hyper-visibility (inside the centers) and “invisibilization” (from the perspective of the outside world). On the one

hand, detention facilities are hidden from the public eye, often in the name of security. They are located within restricted areas belonging to the regional headquarters of the Polish Border Guard or in remote locations far away from heavily urbanized areas (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021). On the other hand, everything that is happening within and outside the facility is supposed to be hyper-visible and scrutinized by the detention security apparatus. In this regard, surveillance technologies and practices serve both purposes (hyper-visibility as well as “invisibilization”), supervising the inside of the centre as well as its neighboring areas (see Photo 4).

Photo 4

An example of an external barrier (photo by Maciej Stęпка).



The surveilled spaces within the facility can be roughly divided into external and internal. Both types of spaces are often under dual supervision – direct physical observation and electronic monitoring. As already mentioned in this article, detainees outside the main buildings are electronically monitored but are also required to be directly supervised by the guards. External spaces are often interpreted as problematic and vulnerable from a security point of view, as they offer a wide array of possibilities for behavioral deviation, escape being just one example. Therefore, time that could be spent outside the main buildings of the facility is regulated and external spaces are filled with CCTV cameras, external barriers such as walls and fences with motion sensors, which regularly checked for any signs of interference (see Photo 5).

Photo 5

Surveillance installation with CCT cameras located in the recreational space (photo by Maciej Stęпка).



The outside areas are also divided into spaces which the detainees are allowed to use (common recreational areas such as sports fields, playgrounds, external gyms, etc.) and restricted or “disciplinary zones”. For instance, in the Guarded Centre in Przemyśl there are special red security lines, which should not be crossed by the detainees and are used as a gathering point before every meal. Just before meals, the detainees are gathered in front of the line, counted and then escorted by the security guards to a canteen (see Photo 6).

Photo 6

Internal space with a visible red line which cannot be crossed by a detainee without supervision of a security guard (photo by Maciej Stęпка).



The internal spaces of the centres are more complex from surveillance point of view. As the external areas are by default closely surveilled⁹, the internal areas are designed in a way that gives detainees at least a minimal degree of privacy. Schmidt observes that the internal areas of the Polish detention facilities are under constant electronic surveillance with notable exception of toilets and living quarters (2021:165). It does not mean that the spaces that are excluded from electronic monitoring are left without supervision. For instance, private quarters are still supervised but in a more direct way. During rounds, change of shift and counting detainees are required to stay in their quarters and make themselves known/visible to the guards. In the detention reality, the element of privacy can be construed as a type of resistance towards surveilling practices and technologies and automatically it is considered as a potential decrease of security levels in the facility. Detention guards often assume that under the veil of privacy detainees may plot escape plans, produce illegal items (e.g. weapons or alcohol) or harm each other.

In line with the panoptical logic, observers often fall victim to the surveillant gaze and become a part of the oppressive monitoring mechanism. In our interviews, detention officers often indicate that monitoring is not necessary to observe and discipline the detainees, but rather the staff. One of the interviewees observed that: “this monitoring is not for them, but for us [security guards]. They keep the recordings and if you

⁹ Blind spots are mostly created as an oversight or due to lack of equipment.

do something you are not supposed to do, they have evidence against us” (P-P-22-I). Although electronic surveillance is directed predominantly at detainees it also covers security guard booths or stations, which as a result are also closely monitored. Detention personnel finds this type of surveillance too extensive and limiting in terms of interactions with the detainees and other staff. For that reason, the detention officers often look for ways to escape the surveillant gaze seeking blind spots in electronic monitoring, in an attempt to find some privacy in their everyday duties.

6. Conclusions

Administrative detention of foreigners in Poland follows a general penitentiary blueprint, designed to contain and control a targeted population. As regular penitentiary facilities concentrate predominantly on coercion and correction, detention centers are driven by practices of discipline and (in)direct forms of surveillance. In this sense, surveillance is indeed a key security practice deployed in Polish detention. Its security component includes data gathering and profiling practices, which are supposed to turn unknown immigrants into known and manageable security objects. Surveillance has also an important preventive aspect as it is believed that under the gaze of the security apparatus nothing bad can happen and detainees will exercise self-discipline. Privacy is an unwelcome element, that disrupts the surveillant gaze and control over a detainee.

Even though physical observation is still a crucial part of surveillance, it is visible that indirect and electronic forms of monitoring are gaining support among the decision-makers as well as the staff. The upgrade of the electronic surveillance system is a key investment in Polish detention centers and is often financially supported by the European Union’s funds (Niedźwiedzki et al. 2021:47–49). In addition to the shortage of personnel in Polish Border Guard and the need to transfer increasing numbers of officers to the Polish eastern border (due to Russian aggression on Ukraine and the Polish-Belarusian border crisis), electronic surveillance of detainees in Poland can be expected to grow in size and strength. On one hand, this trend may limit coercive forms of supervision, which may be considered more humane, but on the other, there is a risk that it may contribute to bringing close the realization of radically panoptical prison, supervised by the minimum staff, advanced electronic devices and invasive forms of surveillance.

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