

**Focus:** The communication strategies around prison reform efforts in Estonia and the United States

**Goal:** Identify effective communication tactics that may be used widely, as well as challenges in the current landscape



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Powerful communications tactics include:

- Aligning with the larger social, national, or regional picture
  - E.g. desire to align with the West or to join institutions like EU or NATO
- Emphasizing the practical value of reforms
  - E.g. cost savings, increased security
- Mapping organizations of shared interests to build coalition
- Not insisting on moral purity; accepting and supporting compromise
  - Lack of public attention can yield better reform
- Better work may happen on the local or regional level
  - National politics encourage showmanship rather than problem-solving;
  - Local level can be more personal
- Emotional connections are more powerful than logical arguments
  - Reforms should be based in logic but communicated via emotional, personal connections

### Skeptics of criminal justice reform can be convinced with the right messages and the right messengers.

- Coalitions should be approached with tailored messages for each part of the coalition
  - E.g. right of all people to a chance at redemption vs lower cost of alternatives vs increased volatility following incarceration
- Beware “no-go” topics
  - These will spark massive public debates, wasting energy and time without progress
- Messengers need credibility in their specific community
  - Credibility can come from previous statements, deeds, association, even geography
- Beware false messengers
  - They do not speak for those they claim to represent
  - Often there simply is no one “gatekeeper”



**The bottom-up approach, i.e. grassroots communication, is of increasing importance due to its authenticity. It is however harder to implement than top-down messaging.**

- May uncover and incorporate common, just, and effective but unofficial alternatives to traditional criminal justice
- Harder to control the narrative and implement quickly if relying on grassroots efforts
- Unclear if all societies are equally prepared to engage in bottom-up discussions

### Current challenges to effective public communications include:

- Satisfaction with partial results making it difficult to continue reforms
- Rising crime rates increasing levels of fear, making conversations about reforms harder
- Rising populist and nationalist sentiment, which is unfavorable to criminal justice reform

**The polarization of discourse and lack of a common fact-base present particular challenges.**

- Harder to find credible messengers if there is insistence on 100% agreement on all issues
- Harder to convey a single message to a wide audience due to fragmentation of technology and new & social media
- Best approach is still to find common ground and build from there

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [World Prison Brief on Estonia](#)
- [“Estonia still has among the highest incarceration rates in Europe”](#) from ERR
- [“Summary Information on Probation in Estonia”](#) from CEP
- [“Criminal Justice System and the Process of Democratization in Estonia”](#) by Jüri Saar (NATO Democratic Institutions Research Fellowship Final Report)
- [“The Conservative Case Against More Prisons”](#) by Vikrant P. Reddy and Marc A. Levin