

Understanding the Impact of Video-surveillance on the Feeling of Insecurity in Budapest and Milan: The Perception of Urban Security NGOs

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The problem of the feeling of insecurity in urban spaces stays acute across European countries (Valera, Guàrdia, 2014). One of the measures that the local governments use to tackle this issue is closed-circuit television (CCTV). A shift from welfare to neoliberal state along with technological development contributed to the proliferation of the number of installed CCTV. In particular, under neoliberal state, social and situational crime prevention approaches were developed (Garland, 2001; Melossi, Selmini, 2009); the latter focuses on the immediate environment manipulations (e.g. installing more lighting, CCTV, etc.) to reduce opportunities for committing a crime.

Additionally, due to the political change, the redistribution of the previously exclusively central state's responsibilities to the local authorities and grass-root organizations happened. So, the local inhabitants depend on the local authorities and NGOs to provide the required level of protection from (sometimes only perceived) criminal and violence threats (Sampson, 2011).

The research studying the influence of CCTV on the feeling of insecurity in cities provides contradictory conclusions (Lorenec et al., 2013). This paper contributes to the existing scholarly discussion by studying the perspective of people who are directly involved in tackling the issue at the local level: NGOs aimed at enhancing urban security in Milan and Budapest. These organizations deal with the problem of urban insecurity in the environment where it is produced and communicate directly with the citizens (Bennett et al., 2006). Consequently, they could notice changes that are associated with CCTV in the area. Despite these organizations' role and involvement in solving the problem, their opinion is understudied in the academic literature.

This paper aims at investigating NGO workers' subjective estimation of the effectiveness of urban security interventions (including CCTV) on the feeling of insecurity of local citizens of Budapest and Milan. The cities for this research were chosen in Europe based on the maximum variation approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

For this study, the method of semi-structured interviews was selected as it allows focusing narrowly on the studied topic but still encourages an interviewee to talk extensively (Rubin, Rubin, 2012). Given a small population size (five organizations in each city), eight interviews were conducted (four in each city). For the analysis of the interview transcripts, based on the theoretical approach and fieldwork experience, I formulated the analytical categories for creating the guide for coding. After the coding phase, the relationships between the codes were studied (Crabtree, Miller, 1992; Schmidt, 2004).

The analysis shows that, in both cities, criminal activity is discussed as one of the major factors influencing the feeling of insecurity; however, other causes are different. In Milan, the discourse around the problem of insecurity is mainly built on the problem of social ties disintegration. The respondents stated that in such a big city as Milan people feel more disconnected from their community, which leads to the lack of social cohesion there and, consequently, local inhabitants feel less secure as there is a lack of trust between the locals. In contrast to this, in Budapest, the analysis reveals more objective factors: an excessive representation of crime in the media, notions of urban decay (litter, graffiti, etc.), the presence on the streets of homeless people, the stigmatization of some ethnic minority (e.g. the Roma people) and migrant groups as dangerous.

Such differences in discussed factors can be attributed not only to the discrepancies of social, economic, and political situations in the cities but also to the dominance of one of crime prevention approaches. In Italy, social crime prevention is more significant, so it highlights the role of social cohesion in improving the feeling of security. Whereas in Hungary, situational crime prevention is more prominent which puts in the spotlight the criminal activity and “objective” notions of insecurity.

The dominance of situational crime prevention in Hungary also could explain the fact that the respondents pointed out crime prevention through environmental design and CCTV to be very effective to enhance the feeling of security. At the same time, in Milan, the analysis of the interviews demonstrates that while CCTV could contribute to the feeling of security, the informal surveillance is more important, that is, there are more people in the streets and their presence can deter crime. So, social cohesion and active participation of the local inhabitants are important for improving the feeling of security in the city.

Interestingly, despite this difference in the subjective estimation of the impact of CCTV on the feeling of insecurity, in both countries, the empirical data analysis shows that the privacy concerns associated with video-surveillance are not important to the local inhabitants. On the contrary, there might be a demand for more CCTV if the citizens do not feel secure enough on the streets, which implies that they are willing to give up some part of their freedoms at the expense of more security.

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