

CIA prison exposed in Romania

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Journalists from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the German television magazine “Panorama” have uncovered the location of one of the chain of notorious secret torture prisons run by US Central Intelligence Agency in Europe. The prison is situated in a residential area of the Romanian capital, Bucharest.

The prison in Bucharest began operations following the closure in 2003 of a similar torture centre in Poland. The prison was located in a building housing the Romanian National Registry Office for Classified Information (Official Registrului National al Informatiilor Secrete de Stat) authority. The transport of prisoners to the prison from Bucharest’s airport was carried out in inconspicuous minibuses.

The cells were located in the basement of the ORNISS building. The cells were mounted on springs in order to disorientate the prisoners, who were also subjected to sleep deprivation, water boarding, beatings or being forced to adopt excruciating positions for long periods of time. Former employees of the CIA told journalists that after the initial round of “interviews” the prisoners were given medical and dental examinations.

Some of the prisoners were held there temporarily prior to being switched and tortured in other locations or transferred to Guantanamo. The CIA’s code-name for the secret prison in Bucharest was “Bright light”. The centre was located at Mures Street 4. The prisoners held at the facility included Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, who is accused of carrying out the attack on the US warship Cole in Yemen and now sits in Guantanamo where he faces trial by a military commission.

Al Nashiri was brutally tortured in 2002 and 2003. According to CIA documents, he was allegedly threatened with execution by a gun and a drill. He was also stripped naked, beaten and subjected to water boarding. Some of the abuse is alleged to have taken place in Poland. It is likely that he was transferred from Poland to Bucharest and then to Guantanamo. He apparently made confessions under torture, which he has now revoked. His case was the subject of an investigation by the EU parliamentary commission, which urged the US not to execute him.

The alleged co-ordinator of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who, according to memos of the Bush administration was water boarded on no less than 183 occasions, was also incarcerated in the Romanian prison before he was transferred to Guantanamo.

The Romanian authorities established the ORNISS in 2002 by emergency decree in order to co-ordinate the state’s secret operations—in particular with NATO. Its head has the status of a cabinet secretary and reports directly to the Prime Minister. Officials must ensure that confidential information is treated according to NATO standards and only those responsible in each case have access to such information.

The authority was established at a time when Romania was seeking entry into NATO. An American in a high NATO position at that time declared, “The Romanians would have done anything for us.” The then Romanian President Ion Iliescu said that his country would behave as a de facto NATO member, and then in 2004 the country joined the alliance. In 2001 Iliescu had already signed a bilateral agreement with the US government which allowed the US military and civilians to carry out covert operations on Romanian territory.

The secret prison in the basement of the ORNISS building proved particularly useful because its employees are pledged to strict secrecy. Romanian parliamentarians responded to revelations concerning the torture cells by pleading ignorance and declaring that Romania had nothing to do with the matter.

Accordingly, journalists confronted a wall of silence when the deputy head of ORNISS, Adrian Camarasan, addressed them in a room adorned with the Romanian, NATO and European flags. When asked by a reporter if he had ever seen Americans in his premises, Camarasan answered, “No, no, I can no longer remember.” According to the Panorama report a spokesperson for ORNISS told the dpa news agency the reports were “pure speculation”.

The research by the journalists was conducted with great care. They reported that a source in the US intelligence community had described the location and the appearance of the former prison in Bucharest. The reporters made their own enquiries in Bucharest, located and photographed the complex and then showed their evidence to three of their informants in Washington. All three recognised the complex located near a railway line.

The prisoners who were taken to the torture chamber were completely disoriented. Their eyes were blindfolded and their ears plugged, leaving them with no idea of their location. The cells were partly constructed from prefabricated parts, and an arrow had been painted on the floor pointing in the direction of Mecca—a mocking concession by the torturers to the religious

persuasion of their victims.

The existence of such torture prisons in Europe (“black sites”) was long denied by both the US and the countries involved, including Lithuania, Poland and Romania. After the attack on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001 the prisons were established as part of the “war on terror” in order to incarcerate so-called “valuable prisoners” who were subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques”—i.e., forced to make confessions on the basis of brutal torture techniques.

A report by the US Department of Justice from 2004 listed ten torture techniques that were expressly allowed, including simulated drowning and sleep deprivation due to days of incessant loud music and bright neon lights. In addition, detainees were locked away for hours in small boxes, hung by their arms, or had their heads banged against the wall. Often they were given nothing to eat for days or their cells were left freezing cold.

In 2009, the *New York Times* had suggested that one of the CIA prisons in Bucharest was located near the Interior Ministry building.

The Swiss newspaper *SonntagsBlick* in 2006 reported that secret prisons had also been established in the the former military base Mihail Kogalniceanu in the southeast of the country. The Swiss intelligence forces had intercepted a fax, which was the first proof of the existence of secret US prisons in Europe. According to the classified document, 23 Iraqi and Afghan citizens were interrogated at the Mihail Kogalniceanu base in Romania. Similar interrogation centres run by the CIA were established in the Ukraine, Bulgaria and Macedonia and Kosovo.

The Mihail Kogalniceanu military base had been used by the US since the Iraq war. When the newspaper asked the commander of the military base about the existence of such a prison he categorically denied any knowledge. The existence of CIA prison sites in Lithuania and Poland has been known for some years, but there had been no confirmation of such a facility in Romania. What was known was that so-called “rendition” flights by the CIA had transported “valuable prisoners” to Romania.

With regard to Europe, the “rendition” program is alleged to have been stopped by the Obama administration after he came into office in 2009. At least no new information about such flights have been released. Instead the Obama government has apparently shifted its emphasis to the targeted killing of their enemies by means of special forces and drones, rendering imprisonment and interrogation unnecessary.

Human rights organisations and journalists found ample evidence of the torture of prisoners following the conquest of Tripoli by the rebel forces backed by NATO. The complicity of European governments, including Romania, with these international human rights violations had already been uncovered by a special committee of the European Parliament in 2006 and its special investigator Dick Marty. Marty declared

that at least 100 people had been transported by the CIA to various secret European locations, including Romania. Leading Romania representatives vigorously denied the claim.

The report of the Special Committee concluded “that the CIA was in several cases clearly responsible for the illegal abduction and detention of suspected terrorists in the territory of the Member States as well as special renditions, involving, in some cases, European citizens”.

The report of the Special Committee asserted that the purpose of the special renditions was to ensure “that the suspects should not be subjected to a court of law.” The CIA “terror suspects were kidnapped by undercover methods, arrested and turned over.” Other countries (including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Afghanistan) were entrusted with the prisoners, countries, “which, even the US government admits practice torture in interrogations.”

In 2006, US President George Bush admitted that the captured senior Al-Qaeda suspects were taken to other states. He avoided, however, identifying these countries, arguing this could cause enemies of America to take action against its allies.

One of these “valuable prisoners” was Abu Zubeida, an alleged confidant of Osama bin Laden, who had been abused in Lithuania. He has now lodged a suit at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

In an article in the *New York Review of Books*, Zubeida described the cruel tortures he suffered:

“I woke up, naked, strapped to a bed, in a very white room. The room measured approximately [13 feet by 13 feet]. . . . After some time, I think it was several days, but can’t remember exactly, I was transferred to a chair where I was kept, shackled by [the] hands and feet for what I think was the next 2 to 3 weeks. During this time I developed blisters on the underside of my legs due to the constant sitting

“The cell and room were air-conditioned and were very cold. Very loud, shouting type music was constantly playing. It kept repeating about every fifteen minutes twenty-four hours a day.”

He was put in wooden crates in which he could not breathe or had to sit hunched for hours. He was on a cot. He was strapped down, his nose sealed with cellophane, and water was forced down his throat—until he collaborated, an ex-CIA agent related. In fact CIA memos make clear that Zubeida was subjected to waterboarding on 83 occasions.



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