

Governing the Tattooed Body: Regulation of Tattoos in Croatian Uniformed Services in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the regulation of tattoos in three key Croatian uniformed systems: the armed forces, the police, and the prison system, situating them within a wider international and socio-cultural context. Drawing on qualitative document analysis and a comparative interpretative approach, the study analyses legal frameworks, institutional practices and public discourses that shape the governance of bodily markings. Tattoos are approached not only as aesthetic choices but as culturally embedded communicative signs that intersect with questions of identity, discipline and professional representation. The findings demonstrate that Croatian regulations have historically relied on restrictive interpretations of professional appearance, particularly in the armed forces and police, where visible tattoos are framed as incompatible with institutional neutrality. However, recent policy shift announcements, media debates and individual cases indicate a gradual movement toward more flexible and context-sensitive models. Comparative insights from the United States, Israel, Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom confirm that international systems increasingly emphasise content-based restrictions, especially prohibiting extremist, discriminatory or violent symbols, while relaxing rules on mere visibility. In prisons, tattoos remain formally prohibited yet are widespread as marks of identity, hierarchy and resistance, reflecting a broader tension between institutional control and personal autonomy. Overall, the analysis shows that tattoo regulations operate at the intersection of professionalism, symbolism and social change. The article argues that clearer, transparent and content-focused criteria, rather than general visibility bans, represent the most balanced and sustainable direction for Croatian uniformed services.

Key words: tattoos, regulation, military, police, prison system, professional identity, institutional norms

Introduction

Throughout history, the human body has carried different kind of marks and served as a key medium of communication, carrying both innate and acquired marks through which individuals express identity, belonging, and social status. While it is difficult to separate from innate marks, which are tended to be hidden or redefined through personal or social context, those acquired are proudly displayed to the public. Tattoos represent one of the most lasting forms of permanent bodily inscriptions that trace personal experiences, values, and symbolic orientation. As a form of nonverbal communication, they provide symbolic information about the person wearing them while articulating personal interests, social position, relationships and self-definition¹. Historical records confirm their long-standing presence: from early civilizations, where tattoos were used to show ritual or status-related purpose, to nowadays, when they are common markers of individuality and belonging.

Even with their long history, public perception of tattoos has not shifted as much as their popularity might suggest. Younger generations may embrace them more freely, though older associations with deviance, marginality, and criminal subcultures still persists²⁻³. Today, probably far more than ever before, tattoos symbolize the freedom of the individual and reflect their individual identity. The unique “I” of each tattoo wearer, of which there are more every day. Yet, despite all the new freedoms that today brings, tattoos continue to divide opinions and still carry negative associations. How they’re interpreted depends on cultural context, generational differences, professional expectations, and the way society reads bodies in public roles. In professions that rely on neutrality, representation, and institutional discipline, such as the military, police, and prison system, tattoos are evaluated not only as personal choices but as communicative symbols that may affect how the institution is perceived. The ten-

sion between individual expression and institutional demands and expectations, therefore, represents the central focus of this article. In Croatia, regulations concerning tattoos across military, police, and prison systems have changed slowly and unevenly. They are often accompanied by public debate about the justification and proportion of existing restrictions. At the same time, international examples show a wide range of regulatory approaches shaped by different cultural, historical, and security contexts.

The goal of this article is to analyse and compare the legal frameworks and institutional practices governing tattoos in Croatia's armed forces, police, and prison system, and to place them within selected international models. Using qualitative, interpretative, and comparative methods, it examines how bodily markings are managed within institutions build on hierarchy, uniformity, and the state representation, and how such practices mirror broader social values and ongoing transformations.

In doing so, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of tattoos as social, identity-based, and institutional phenomena: as personal signs, but also as sites where norms, expectations, and symbolic capital of uniformed services are continuously negotiated.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative methodology based on the analysis of legal documents, institutional policies, and relevant literature. Such an approach enables a detailed understanding of how tattoos are regulated within the Croatian armed forces, police, and prison system, and to place these national practices in a wider international and socio-cultural contexts.

The primary sources include:

- Croatian laws and regulations that apply to the armed forces, police, and prison system
- publicly accessible international policies from following countries - United States, Israel, Russia, Germany, United Kingdom
- court rulings, administrative forms, and internal procedural documents
- official statements and media communications from relevant institutions
- academic literature addressing cultural, sociological, and professional aspects of tattooing

Secondary sources include academic studies, professional analyses, and available statistical data. Special attention is given to public perception of tattooed officers and the broader social meaning of tattooing. Bringing these together makes it possible to examine both the formal norms and their cultural interpretation.

The comparative component contrasts Croatian regulatory frameworks with those of the countries that take different approaches to bodily modification. This helps to

identify distinct regulatory logic of each system and the socio-cultural ideas that shape them.

The study does not include empirical fieldwork. Instead, it builds its findings on document analysis and interpretative synthesis, connecting legal norms, institutional practices, and cultural meanings. This approach is key to understanding how tattoo policies in highly structured institutional environments.

Historical and Social Context of Tattooing

Tattoos have been recording history and conveying messages since their earliest days. Archaeological findings of bodies bearing tattoos prove to us the long-standing human need for symbolic marking of the body, which distinguishes tattoos as one of the earliest forms of expression thru non-verbal communication. The preserved remains of "Ötzi the Iceman," dating back over 5,000 years, show that tattoos were used for symbolic and functional purposes.

Throughout history, tattoos have served as signs of initiation, social status, belonging, protection, personal and collective identity. Impacted by cultural values and social norms, the values they had for the wearer and public perceptions of tattooing have shifted. Over time, they have become increasingly associated with marginalised groups and criminal subcultures, and often acted as visual signals of resistance, nonconformity, or social defiance, which strengthened a stigma that still appears in some contexts.

Social changes of the 1960s, including civil rights movements, counterculture, and expanding ideas of personal freedom, helped to spark a renewed interest in tattooing during the so called "tattoo renaissance"^{1,4}. Greater exposure of tattoos among members of public life, their increasing presence in advertising campaigns and the rise of commercial tattoo studios, further normalised acceptance of tattoos in Western societies.

Although tattoos enjoy broad acceptance today, especially among younger generations, research shows that their meanings remain situationally and socially dependent. Cultural setting, workplace expectations, and symbolic content, all shape how tattoos are interpreted². In professions defined by authority, neutrality, and public representation, tattoos carry specific institutional weight. Radek, Žabek and Budimir³ argue that the body of a uniformed official functions as an extension of the institution itself, which makes bodily markings subject to normative expectations and regulation.

Overall, tattoos function as a dynamic communicative system that connects personal expression with cultural meaning. In highly structured institutional environments, such as the military, police, and prison system, bodies become objects of regulation, and tattoos become marks of identity that can either challenge or support institutional norms.

Tattoo Regulation in the Croatian Armed Forces and Comparative International Insights

The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia has established clear conditions that candidates must meet when applying to the Croatian Armed Forces, including criteria related to physical appearance and the presence of visible tattoos. These requirements are formalized in the Regulation on the Determination of Health, Psychological, Physical and Security Requirements for Admission to Service in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia⁵. The Regulation defines the conditions for admission and explicitly prescribes the prohibition of visible tattoos. Article 51 sets out the specific prohibitions and exceptions:

- (1) Candidates for admission to the Armed Forces as referred to in Article 1 paragraph 1 of this Regulation may not have a tattoo on a visible part of the body.
- (2) A visible part of the body, within the meaning of paragraph 1 of this Article, is considered any part not covered by a long-sleeved uniform, as well as the face, head area, neck or the part of the neck above the collar of any type of military uniform, and the hands or parts of the hands up to the wrist.
- (3) By way of exception from paragraph 2, military personnel who have a tattoo on other parts of the body are required to wear military uniform in such a way that the tattoo is covered.
- (4) Tattooing and the wearing of tattoos of inappropriate content on any part of the body is not permitted.”

The regulation establishes a clear distinction between visible and non-visible body areas, with the face, neck and hands recognised as particularly sensitive zones. A neutral visual identity of the soldier is positioned as the normative ideal: the uniform serves not only as a covering for the body, but also as a covering of individuality. Tattoos, which carry a pronounced expression of personal identity, may therefore come into tension with the institutional requirement of visual neutrality. This confirms that the professional identity of Croatian Armed Forces members is conceived as collective and standardised, while private bodily marks remain subordinated to that ideal.

Simultaneously, the Regulation allows for a certain amount of flexibility. Paragraph 3 states that individuals with tattoos on nonvisible body parts to remain in service as long as the tattoos are covered by the uniform. This creates a space for different interpretations and discretionary decisions during the selection process, which can result in inconsistent enforcement of the rules.

In addition to regulatory documents, Croatian Ministry of Defence also uses supplementary communication channels to clarify practical implementation. On the Ministry’s website, in the section “Frequently Asked Questions for Cadet Applicants,” one of the questions addresses

tattoos directly. In response to “Are tattoos prohibited?”, it states: “Wearing jewellery or tattoos on visible parts of the body (face, neck, forearms, hands) is not permitted”⁶. Although such clarifications do not carry legal force, they provide candidates with practical insight into how the Regulation is interpreted in selection procedures, indirectly confirming that formal rules do not always fully account for concrete real-life situations.

The regulation of appearance applies not only to candidates but also to active members of Croatian Armed Forces. The Regulation on Service in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia⁷, in Article 24, prescribes that members “must adjust their external appearance in such a way that tattoos on the face and tattooing on visible parts of the body are not permitted.” This confirms the continuity of a visual presentation policy, regardless of one’s status (candidate or active member).

Available documentation shows that there are no publicly accessible, detailed criteria that define which tattoo motifs are acceptable, and which are not. When the content of a tattoo is considered potentially problematic, the decisions is left to commissions and supervisors. This approach leaves room for subjective judgement and may lead to unequal outcomes in similar cases. Higher level of transparency and clearer definitions on what counts as problematic tattoo content would facilitate better understanding of the rules and reduce uncertainty for candidates.

As tattooing becomes more common, especially among younger population, the tensions grow. Tattoos are far more widespread today than they were a few decades ago, and young people make the main pool of applicants to the Croatian Armed Forces. Traditionally restrictive regulations, rooted in a conservative notion of professional appearance, are increasingly out of step with societal change and contribute to declining application numbers⁸. Due to no publicly available data exist on how many candidates were rejected solely due to tattoos, it is difficult to quantify the impact of this criterion. Still, public statements by Croatian Ministry of Defence officials indicate that this is recognised as a factor in reduced interest.

The declining trend in interest has prompted an initiative to revise the regulatory framework. Throughout 2024 and 2025, Croatian Ministry of Defence officials repeatedly announced amendments aimed at liberalising tattoo-related conditions. The Minister of Defence, Ivan Anušić, stated in an interview for *Index.hr*⁹ that the decision is motivated by practical considerations and the need to attract a larger pool of candidates: “This inconsistency has excluded a considerable number of people who had a tattoo and therefore could not join the military. Nowadays we must adapt to modern trends.” His statement implicitly acknowledges that the earlier framework no longer reflects social reality. Similar remarks were made by Ivan Jušić, Director of the Human Resources Directorate of Croatian Ministry of Defence, who stated in early 2024⁸ that tattoos remain an obstacle to employment despite their widespread presence among young people. The

planned amendments would allow tattoos that can be covered by a long-sleeved uniform, while tattoos on the face, upper neck or hands would remain prohibited. Additional content-based criteria are also expected, stating that offensive, discriminatory or professionally incompatible tattoos would not be acceptable. Television reports¹⁰⁻¹¹ presented these criteria explicitly: tattoos on the face, the upper part of the neck above the collar and on the hands would not be permitted; tattoos coverable by the uniform would be acceptable; tattoos with offensive content would remain prohibited.

Although the amended regulation had not yet been officially published at the time of writing, signs of practical change have already emerged. On May 29th, 2025, media reported on the oath ceremony of the 46th generation of voluntary military trainees in Požega, where a female recruit with a visible “Ride or die” tattoo on her neck drew public attention¹². The tattoo located in an area explicitly prohibited by the current rules (the neck above the collar line), making this case a potential indicator of institutional flexibility or a transitional phase prior to formal amendments. The fact that the recruit passed all selection stages and participated publicly in the oath ceremony suggests that implementation of the rules is already shifting.

Such acceptance is more than an isolated event: it indicates a broader reinterpretation of boundaries within the military institution. In a context long marked by a rigid and conservative visual culture, these developments reflect wider social change and a shift toward acknowledging individual identity marks.

A comparative analysis of military regulations in the United States, Israel and Russia helps place the Croatian situation in a broader context. In recent years, the US military has steadily eased its rules on tattoos, mirroring wider social trends. Changes introduced in 2022, as outlined in USA_ARMY_DIR_2022-09_Soldier Tattoos¹³, allow soldiers to have tattoos on their hands, which represents a clearer departure from earlier, more restrictive practices. Restrictions still apply to tattoos promoting hate, violence, racism or extremism, as well as tattoos on the face, neck, ears and other highly visible areas. The Air Force and Navy apply similar model, while the Coast Guard (as of 2024) permits slightly more flexibility regarding visible tattoos, again with strict content restrictions. The US Government Accountability Office¹⁴ confirms that, even amid these liberalisations, all branches maintain a shared commitment to preserving a professional appearance.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), in their policies¹⁵ permit tattoos with restrictions regarding size, number and visibility, emphasising the prohibition of ideologically or religiously contentious content. Israel’s context is unique due to compulsory military service and the central role of the army in national identity formation¹⁶. Rabbi Lucas notes that traditional interpretations of Jewish law are cautious toward tattooing¹⁷, yet recent research suggests that Israeli soldiers sometimes use tattoos as a coping mechanism for trauma, memory and difficult experiences¹⁸. The regulatory system thus seeks to protect the collective integrity of the

army while acknowledging certain psychological functions of tattooing.

The Russian context differs from both the American and Israeli examples. Regulations of the Russian Federation¹⁹ do not list tattoos as a formal obstacle to military service, but in practice, the content of tattoos is carefully evaluated. According to *voennik.ru*²⁰, visible tattoos are not a disqualifying factor per se, but candidates with aggressive, anti-system or ideologically sensitive motifs may be referred for psychiatric assessment. Overtly aggressive or anti-system symbols may lead to disqualification under Article 20.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences²¹ (regarding prohibited propaganda). Traditionally, tattoos in Russia have been strongly associated with prison and criminal subcultures, complex systems of coded meaning, status rank and hierarchy. This convention, extensively documented in ethnographic literature, continues to influence the perception of tattoos even in professional settings. At the same time, Levchenko notes that attitudes in urban environments are shifting, where tattoos increasingly appear as personal decoration²² rather than social marks. As a result, the military evaluates tattoos primarily based on their symbolic meaning and their potential impact on unit cohesion and safety.

The comparative findings show that core restrictions are consistent across all examined countries: hate symbols, extremist imagery and offensive content are universally unacceptable in military service. Differences appear regarding visibility, symbolism and how historical context shapes interpretation. In Croatian system, based on announced changes and practical signals (such as the case of the tattooed recruit), appears to be shifting from a rigidly restrictive model toward a more flexible approach. It is likely that tattoos on arms and the torso, when covered by the uniform, will become acceptable, while tattoos on the face, neck and hands will remain strictly regulated.

These developments illustrate that the regulation of tattoos in the military is not merely an administrative matter but reflects deeper transformations in the understanding of the body, identity and professional integrity. Militaries that successfully balance institutional identity with personal diversity, without compromising professional standards, are more likely to remain attractive to future generations and maintain credibility in the eyes of society.

Tattoo Regulation in the Croatian Police and Comparative International Insights

The regulation of tattoos in the police system of the Republic of Croatia is based on the provisions of the Ministry of the Interior and on the Police Act²³. Although the Act does not explicitly mention tattoos, Article 47 stipulates the requirement to meet special psychological and physical health conditions as well as the condition of personal integrity, stating that “a person whose previous behaviour, habits or inclinations indicate unreliability for performing police duties shall not be considered worthy of performing police service.” In practice, this criterion is

applied when assessing the symbolism and content of tattoos.

Candidates undergo an evaluation process regulated by the Regulation on the Criteria and Methods for Determining Special Psychological and Physical Health Conditions for Persons Admitted to the Police and for Police Officers, and on the Composition and Mode of Operation of Medical Commissions in Authorised Health Institutions²⁴. Article 3 states that the health criteria are defined in Annex 1, which forms an integral part of the Regulation. In that Annex, under Section XII (Diseases of the skin and subcutaneous system), item 69(a) previously listed as a disqualifying criterion: “all tattoos in visible places and larger tattoos (>10 cm), tattoos of asocial content.” In 2010 this provision became the subject of a request for constitutional review, based on the claim that the Regulation violated the constitutional prohibition of discrimination and the right of every citizen to be admitted to public service under equal conditions²⁵. On April 23rd, 2018, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia²⁶ annulled this provision, concluding that the Ministry had not demonstrated that “the presence of tattoos constitutes a medically conditioned contraindication” nor that tattoos affect psychological or physical capacity. As a result, tattoos are no longer a disqualifying factor on health grounds, but the evaluation of their content remains mandatory.

This assessment is carried out by a special commission which examines the content, symbolism and potential public perception of tattoos. The key criterion is whether the tattoo could be interpreted as offensive or discriminatory. Radek, Žabek and Budimir³ stress that “a police officer represents both the institution and the state, and therefore the message conveyed by a tattoo must not be offensive and must be appropriate to his status.” In the prison (judicial) police, additional rules are set out in the Manual for Trainees of the Basic Course²⁷, which prohibits tattoos on the face and prescribes that visible tattoos must not contain inappropriate symbolism. In cases of non-compliance, the officer is given a six-month deadline to remove the tattoo.

In his guidelines on professional behaviour of police officers, Kalem²⁸ underlines that wearing jewellery and visible tattoos may provoke negative reactions from the public. Emphasis is placed on the prohibition of tattoos that could be interpreted as offensive; any new tattoo requires prior approval from a superior, and its placement must be such that it is not visible while the officer is on duty.

In the context of recruitment, the number of candidates applying through the Adult Education Programme for the Rank of Police Officer has been continuously declining since 2013. Balgač²⁹ presents statistics showing that, from nearly 7,000 tested candidates in the academic year 2013/14 to 2019/20, the number of candidates with a positive test outcome has dropped significantly. The decreasing interest in the police profession prompted a response from the Police Officers’ Union, which in 2017 sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior warning that the existing

regulations were not aligned with modern standards and that strict rules on tattoos further contributed to the decline in interest. The Union proposed that tattoos should not constitute an obstacle to admission to service, except in cases where they are of asocial or otherwise inappropriate content.

Despite the Constitutional Court’s decision, an analysis of the regulatory framework shows that, while no formal ban exists, there remains considerable discretionary space in assessing individual cases. Data on the number of candidates rejected due to tattoos are not publicly available.

Public perceptions of tattooed officers are highly heterogeneous. Previous studies³⁰⁻³¹ indicate that older age groups tend to perceive tattooed officers as less competent, whereas younger people are generally more tolerant. In Croatia, Katić³² confirmed the presence of a certain level of stigma towards tattooed individuals, although younger populations are markedly more open. Radek, Žabek and Budimir³ found that respondents are willing to accept a discreet, neutral tattoo in a visible place, but that most do not support large tattoos on visible parts of the body when it comes to police officers.

Comparative international examples demonstrate diverse approaches. In the United States, police agencies adopt their own policies. McMullen and Gibbs³³ found that only one state police agency (Michigan) imposes a complete ban on tattoos, while states such as Alaska, Hawaii, Mississippi and Oregon have no restrictions. In 21 police agencies, tattoos are permitted on the condition that they are not visible while in uniform, including short-sleeved uniforms. Clear differences emerge, for example, between New Hampshire, where all visible tattoos are prohibited³⁴, and New York, where most visible tattoos are banned except for discreet finger tattoos³⁵. In 21 agencies, tattoos on the neck, face and hands are entirely prohibited, while 19 agencies allow visible tattoos to be covered by clothing, make-up or special sleeves.

Police services across the United States face a chronic shortage of candidates³³. A significant portion of military veterans, who form a vital recruitment pool, due to the widespread presence of tattoos are disqualified from consideration because of restrictive policies. The authors emphasise that tattoos are no longer exclusively associated with deviant conduct and are prevalent among highly educated and socially accomplished individuals. Therefore, they recommend liberalising tattoo regulations to ensure the staffing sustainability of police departments.

The German Federal Police³⁶ mandates candidates to provide a detailed list of tattoos, accompanied by photographs and an explanation of their meaning. Tattoos in themselves are not a barrier to recruitment, unless they contain radical, extremist, sexist or violent motifs or otherwise breach human dignity. Tattoos must not be visible when wearing the summer version of the uniform; if visible, the candidate must ensure they are covered. Tattoos located on the head, neck and hands are prohibited, as

they are considered incompatible with the professional image of a police officer.

In the United Kingdom, a survey conducted in England and Wales³⁷ showed that 48% of police officers possess tattoos with 17% have them in visible places, without significant problems in relations with supervisors or the public. A corresponding Ipsos Mori survey found that 81% of citizens stated that the fact that an officer has a visible tattoo would not affect their trust in the police³⁸. Nevertheless, substantial attention continues to be paid to tattoo content. Greater Manchester Police specify that tattoos on the face and scalp are not allowed, and that tattoos that could be interpreted as discriminatory or offensive are unacceptable³⁹. Candidates are required to provide photographs of their tattoos as part of the evaluation process. Essex Police state that tattoos are assessed in terms of visibility, content, possible interpretation and position on the body⁴⁰. The Metropolitan Police, in its 2022 policy, acknowledges tattoos as part of contemporary culture, but prohibits tattoos on the face, and on the front and side of the neck, as well as tattoos of inappropriate content⁴¹.

Taken together, these examples suggest that international police services are increasingly moving away from strict, blanket prohibitions toward models that focus primarily on content and professional context rather than mere visibility. This confirms that the regulation of bodily modifications is simultaneously a normative, professional and communicative issue, in which police officers represent an institution whose authority, neutrality and public image are continuously negotiated.

Tattoo Regulations in Prisons

According to the recent estimates⁴², nearly 11 million individuals worldwide are confined in prison facilities, encompassing both detainees and those serving sentences. The primary purpose of these institutions results in prisons being commonly perceived as highly regulated institutions, characterized by stringent regulations, where prisoners are under continuous surveillance. Nevertheless, a deeper examination of the prison environment shows that despite these constraints, prisoners manage to find ways of expressing their identity beyond formal limitations, with tattooing being one of the most widespread forms of such self-expression.

Although tattooing is officially prohibited in the majority of prison systems, numerous studies confirm its broad prevalence. Tran and colleagues⁴³ provided an overview of research indicating a high frequency of tattooing during imprisonment. For example, in 17 state prisons in Illinois, 19.3% of men and 8.7% of women reported receiving a tattoo during imprisonment⁴⁴. In seven remand centres in Quebec, 37% of male inmates and 4% of female inmates reported having been tattooed in custody⁴⁵. Similar trends are recorded in Australia: in the state of Victoria, 35% of men and 32% of women were tattooed during their sen-

tence, while in Queensland the figures are 24.6% of men and 13.4% of women⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷.

Comparable data are reported in countries geographically closer to Croatia. In Hungary, 14% of prisoners received a tattoo while in custody⁴⁸, while in England and Wales the figure stands at 11%⁴⁹. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, between 11.2% and 17.5% of male inmates were tattooed during imprisonment⁵⁰⁻⁵¹. A comparative study conducted in six European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland and Sweden) found that the prevalence of tattooing during incarceration ranges from 6% to 43%, with an average of 18%⁵².

Prison tattoos carry meanings that go far beyond the aesthetic or decorative and must be understood as part of broader identity, communicative and social strategies. They signal belonging to groups and structures within the prison system, but also reflect personal history, status and hierarchy. DeMello⁴ emphasises that tattoos in prison signal belonging and identity, while Sanders¹ highlights their role in extending and reinforcing identity, especially because inmates in strict institutional settings have very few legitimate ways of self-expression. By getting a tattoo, a prisoner acquires a symbol of self that cannot be taken away, making the tattoo a mark of integrity despite institutional control.

DeMello⁵³ shows that prison tattoos, particularly those located on the face, neck and hands, mark social position and status, becoming a visual code recognisable both within the prison subculture and to the outside world. Tattooing in prison often indicates membership in a particular group and functions as a mark of collective identity. In this context, tattooing also becomes an act of resistance. DeMello⁵³ argues that tattooing in prison is a form of defiance: having lost their freedom and their possessions, inmates are left only with symbolic self-respect, which they maintain precisely by violating bans, including the prohibition of tattooing.

Prison tattoos therefore are not merely visual marks; they are complex statements about power, hierarchy, resistance and identity. They represent a way in which individuals, under conditions of almost complete institutional control, reaffirm their subjectivity and signal their place within the prison structure. In this sense, tattooing crosses the boundaries of legality and becomes a sociocultural phenomenon that reveals many of the contradictions of prison life, between surveillance and autonomy, prohibition and expression, identity and institutional anonymity.

In the Croatian prison system, tattoos also have a formally regulated status. The Execution of Prison Sentences Act⁵⁴ prescribes that, upon admission to a prison facility, a detailed body search is carried out, during which all physical characteristics, including tattoos, are recorded. Luketic describes that tattoos are photographed from several angles and added to the official description of the prisoner without the need for his consent⁵⁵. This procedure enables identification, assessment of security risks and monitoring of behaviour dynamics within the system. Tat-

toos are not viewed solely as personal features, but also as potential indicators of prior conflicts, group affiliations or the presence of risky patterns of behaviour.

During the execution of a sentence, prisoners are not permitted to obtain new tattoos. According to the Prison House Rules for the Execution of Pre-Trial Detention⁵⁶, Article 75 explicitly prohibits tattooing and self-harm, and violations of these provisions result in the remand judge being notified, as well as possible restrictions of privileges such as watching television, reading daily newspapers, engaging in sports activities or using the library.

Analyses of the symbolism of prison tattoos in the Croatian and regional context confirm their multilayered role. Žaja and colleagues⁵⁷ show that tattoos on Goli island functioned both as traces of identity and as a medium of covert communication. They can indicate criminal status, hierarchical position or personal trauma, while certain motifs such as stars, specific combinations of numbers or particular inscriptions, represent an index of potential security risk, as is also recognised in international penology².

Considering all this, tattoos in the prison system represent a unique intersection of personal autonomy, institutional surveillance, security assessments and sociocultural meanings. They are simultaneously objects of regulation and symbols of resistance, indicators of the past and means of communication, personal gestures and collective codes. For these reasons they remain an important anthropological and penological phenomenon, whose analysis cannot be limited to formal regulations but must include a broader context of identity and communication processes in the prison environment.

Conclusion

Speaking about tattoos while remaining completely neutral is almost impossible. They always provoke a reaction, whether visible or silent and internal. This paper has sought to show that tattoos go beyond aesthetics and personal preference, and that they constitute a form of communication carrying layered messages about identity, belonging, experience and attitudes towards authority. The analysis of legal frameworks in military, police and prison systems has demonstrated that these institutional bodies of the state act simultaneously as regulators and interpreters of bodily signs. They define what the body may display and what it must conceal, often based on the assumption that visible bodily markings undermine professionalism or the symbolic integrity of the institution.

In such systems, the body ceases to be exclusively personal. It becomes part of the visual and organisational identity of the institution, which raises the question: what happens when a body enters the system already marked by its own history? When it carries signs that are not the result of professional formation, but of a life lived before it? The analysis of different approaches shows that institutions often resort to general bans and restrictive rules,

even though societal attitudes have for years been moving towards greater tolerance and understanding of individual differences.

In international comparison, it is evident that many armed forces and security services are gradually moving away from strict restriction towards models that seek to reconcile professional requirements with the recognition of individual identities. The United States has eased earlier restrictions to facilitate recruitment; Israel balances between security symbolism and contemporary social norms; and the Russian approach is strongly shaped by political and cultural specificities that link tattoos to ideological loyalty and social order. In Croatia, however, a discernible discrepancy remains between social trends and institutional practice. Although regulations are in the process of change, their application still partly depends on discretionary decisions of superiors, leaving room for inconsistency and potential discrimination.

Based on the analysis conducted, it is possible to propose the most appropriate and feasible model of regulation in the Croatian context.

- First, clear and unambiguous content-based prohibitions should form the foundation of regulation: tattoos containing hate speech, extremist symbolism or elements of violence cannot be acceptable in uniformed services. Such a criterion is professionally, socially and ethically justified and aligned with international practice.
- Second, rules on the visibility of tattoos should depend on the function of the job rather than on a single rigid model. Stricter rules may be retained for representative and protocol duties, while operational and field positions should allow greater flexibility, especially where tattoos can be covered by the standard uniform. In this way, the visual identity of the institution is maintained without unnecessary exclusion.
- Third, it is essential to reduce the potential for arbitrary assessment in the application of regulations. Introducing a standardised, transparent evaluation process, along with a clear appeals mechanism, would reduce subjective interpretation and ensure more predictable decision-making. This would further strengthen employee confidence and improve institution's credibility.

Given current wider international environment, it is likely that Croatian regulation will continue to move toward gradual liberalisation. Moderately easing restrictions on tattoos on arms, shoulders and the torso, while maintaining stricter rules for the face and neck, seems to be realistic and reasonable direction. Such an approach would improve competitiveness in attracting candidates, while preserving the professional standards that the public expects from uniformed services.

Viewed as a social, cultural and regulatory phenomenon, tattoos do not represent a threat to professionalism, but rather a mirror of contemporary identities. Their presence in uniformed services does not weaken institutions,

it humanises them. It reminds us that behind every uniform there is a person with their own history, experiences and vulnerabilities. For this reason, it is important to develop policies that do not punish bodily diversity but understand and acknowledge it as part of a broader social

context. Ultimately, tattoos do not divide but connect. They point to the complexity of human identity and to the importance of respecting individuality both within and beyond uniformed systems.

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UPRAVLJANJE TETOVIRANIM TIJELOM: REGULACIJA TETOVAŽA U HRVATSKIM UNIFORMIRANIM SLUŽBAMA U KOMPARATIVNOJ PERSPEKTIVI

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad analizira regulaciju tetovaža u trima ključnim uniformiranim sustavima u Republici Hrvatskoj: oružanim snagama, policiji i zatvorskom sustavu, smještajući ih u širi međunarodni i sociokulturni kontekst. Temeljeći se na kvalitativnoj analizi dokumenata i komparativnom interpretativnom pristupu, istraživanje obuhvaća pravne okvire, institucionalne prakse i javne diskurse koji oblikuju upravljanje tjelesnim obilježjima. Tetovaže se pritom promatraju ne samo kao estetski odabir, nego kao kulturno ukorijenjeni komunikacijski znakovi povezani s identitetom, disciplinom i profesionalnom reprezentacijom. Nalazi pokazuju da su hrvatski propisi tradicionalno počivali na restriktivnom tumačenju profesionalnog izgleda, osobito u vojsci i policiji, gdje se vidljive tetovaže smatraju nespojivima s institucionalnom neutralnošću. Međutim, najave novijih izmjena politika, medijske rasprave te pojedinačni slučajevi upućuju na postupni pomak prema fleksibilnijim i kontekstualno osjetljivijim modelima regulacije. Komparativni uvidi iz Sjedinjenih Američkih Država, Izraela, Rusije, Njemačke i Ujedinjenog Kraljevstva potvrđuju da međunarodni sustavi sve više naglašavaju sadržajna ograničenja, posebice zabranu ekstremističkih, diskriminatornih ili nasilnih simbola, uz istodobno postupno ublažavanje pravila koja se odnose isključivo na vidljivost. U zatvorskom sustavu tetovaže ostaju formalno zabranjene, ali su raširene kao oznake identiteta, hijerarhije i otpora, odražavajući širu napetost između institucionalne kontrole i osobne autonomije. Analiza pokazuje da regulacija tetovaža djeluje na sjecištu profesionalnosti, simbolike i društvenih promjena. Rad zaključuje da jasniji, transparentniji i sadržajno usmjereni kriteriji, umjesto općih zabrana vidljivosti, predstavljaju najuravnoteženiji i najodrživiji smjer za hrvatske uniformirane službe.

