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## Researcher Dr Mojca M. Plesničar successful in obtaining a prestigious ERC project

Today the European Research Council (ERC) announced the results of the ERC Starting Grant 2024. Out of 3,471 applications from all over the world, 379 projects were selected for funding. Among the awarded projects was also *Sentrix* - "*Sentencing architecture: building a decision-making matrix*", a 5-year project, lead by Dr Mojca M. Plesničar, a researcher at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana. The project was awarded funding of more than EUR 1.5 million.

The *Sentrix* project introduces a fresh perspective using choice architecture to tackle a complex issue in the justice system: understanding how sentencing decisions are made. It focuses on mapping the "sentencing environment," which includes well-known factors like judicial discretion, and lesser-studied elements, such as procedural details and habitual practices. The goal of the project is therefore not to guide decisions, but rather to grasp the full scope of the sentencing landscape.

For better understanding, imagine the justice system as a pinball machine. Each sentencing decision made by a judge is like a ball navigating through a maze of bumpers, flippers, and obstacles. Currently, we do not fully understand how all these elements influence a ball's path. The *Sentrix* project therefore aims to create a detailed blueprint of this pinball machine, trying to identify not only the major bumpers (like judicial discretion) but also the hidden levers and subtle obstacles that affect the ball's journey. The project's objective is to explore how every component of the machine—both the prominent and the less obvious—shapes the outcome.

Existing research, workshops, courtroom observations, experiments and simulations will be used to build and test new models of how sentencing works. The project will unify fragmented research, employ innovative visualisation and simulation tools, and offer deeper insights into sentencing decisions, aiming to enhance transparency in sentencing and contribute to a fairer justice system.

The European Research Council (ERC) was set up in 2007 as the premier European funding organisation for excellent frontier research in all scientific areas.[1] From 2011 onwards, Slovenian researchers have been awarded 35 ERC projects. Most of these were awarded in the fields of Physical Sciences, Engineering and Life Science, while 4 projects were awarded in the field of Humanities. The *Sentrix* project was selected in the panel *The Social World and its Interactions*. It is the first ERC project selected in the domain of Social Sciences in Slovenia and the first ERC project awarded to the Institute of Criminology.

[1] <https://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/erc-glance>