



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF  
PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

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## EuroPris Interview

### Jože Podržaj

#### EuroPris talks with Jože Podržaj, Director General of the Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia

**EuroPris:** Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?

**Jože Podržaj:** I could say that I have not chosen prisons, at least not intentionally or consciously. I had a state scholarship and it was a duty of mine to reimburse it when I completed my studies of psychology. And as a result I was employed in the prison system, at first as an apprentice psychologist. It was not accidental that I was employed first in Dob Prison, our biggest prison, while I have lived nearby. It was far from my imagination that I will spend my whole professional career in the prison system, but the path went on in this direction. As a psychologist I worked for first three years and then just by chance I took charge of one of the units. After that I accepted a place of Head of the Treatment Department in Dob Prison and in 1997 I became Governor of the Dob Prison for 17 years. Since 2014 I work as Director General of Slovenian Prison System.



#### **2. How many Prison establishments do you oversee?**

We have our facilities in 15 locations. One of them is the Head Office in Ljubljana and among the fourteen others there are seven prisons and seven detached units.

#### **3. How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Slovenia?**

At the moment we have 1.335 inmates in Slovenia and our capacity is 100% occupied. There is a problem of irregular placement of remand and convicted prisoners and in result some facilities are overcrowded



(Ljubljana, Maribor, Dob and Koper), but some have a rate below the capacity. I have in mind Correctional Home Radeče. In comparison to the situation in previous years I could say that we are now in a favourable situation.

#### **4. How many staff do you manage?**

All together we have 863 employees at the moment. We are a bit under the planned scheme of employees. Due to the scale of working duties we do not have enough prison guards and treatment staff. Additionally we still have not passed standards and norms related to prison staff and we work intensely on this at the moment. We hope we will manage to complete it in the mandate of the present government and the Minister of Justice who is focused on finding solutions for prison system.

#### **5. What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?**

First of all, I expect a proper level of personal maturity and of course a high level of personal integrity. I also expect abilities like empathy, social sense, clear attitude towards offenders and finally ability to cooperate in a team.

#### **6. What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?**

Taking into account specific and complex work in prison environment I think a combination of male and female employees is extremely important. In Slovenia we do not have a large number of female employees among security staff except in a women's prison. I endorse a practice of some European countries where female employees are equal in all aspects of work, also in security level. We have reached a high level of representation of female employees in the field of treatment and women working as pedagogues, social workers, psychologists, therapists are a large majority. We see this as a qualitative and welcoming contribution.

#### **7. What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?**

While we haven't had difficulties with escapes in the last few years we do pay a lot of attention to hinder input of prohibited substances and technical equipment for illicit communication into units with a closed regime.

We are also very attentive to employees' integrity, to make them aware of dangers and risks related to their work. We put forward this concern already in the entering selection of candidates for the system.

#### **8. What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service over the last year? What challenges did you have to overcome?**

From the general point of view there is no doubt that the Strategy of Prison System 2017-2020 is a great achievement. It is the first document of that kind in our system. I would like to point out also a program which we implement with the help of European Social Fund: Inmates Development of Working Competencies. The aim of the project is to increase the level of basic knowledge and skills of prisoners to obtain a successful



integration on labour market after release and effective rehabilitation. An additional plus is an increased number of activities and inmates involved in the program.

### **9. What are the challenges for your service in 2017?**

To improve personnel situation as first, meaning to include step by step additional personnel in the field of security and treatment. As mentioned we work on acceptance of standards and norms related to prison staff set by the Ministry of Justice.

### **10. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?**

Slovenian prison system in some segments differs from other systems around Europe and general situation in Europe as such. Fortunately, we are not yet faced with the problem of radicalization and we have significantly fewer issues with the presence of foreigners in our prisons, which certainly mean some relief in comparison to the European situation. In these segments where we are currently in a favourable situation the challenges for Europe are great. And of course we are proud of introduction of methods and programs that have been present in Slovene prison system for a long time and provided good results, in particular relaxation of regimes, avoidance of exaggeration in security approaches, etc.

### **11. What benefits do you see being linked to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

Already the idea of establishing of EuroPris as organisation was in Slovenia adopted very positively, which we confirmed by joining as members. And I gratefully confirm that this decision again and again turns out to be correct and meaningful. EuroPris is a lively organization, there is much going on, information is exchanged, we get to know other systems and others get to know us. Knowledge and different understandings of solutions are very welcome and are helpful in our everyday practice. Membership also guides us in a sense where we are as a system compared to others, what others are doing differently or better and what could be useful for us. In short our membership in EuroPris has a very positive effect.

### **12. Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?**

There is already a long tradition of cooperation with many NGOs, we would of course wish even more of such cooperation, but there are some systemic obstacles in particular related to financing. However, I think there is still room for improvement in this segment. To enrich our cooperation with NGOs and charities is thus one of the challenges we are facing.

### **13. What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?**

Three years ago I accepted the challenge of being Director General with a belief that with many years of experiences in the system important steps could be made for improvement. Of course, this is my subjective evaluation, which could however be supported by some facts. During my period as Director General there have been some positive shifts that give me some satisfaction. And if I would end my mandate today, I will



not leave with a bad feeling that not enough was done. Of course, there could always be done more and better, but so far I can conclude that some things have moved forward and that some new things are being set up, no matter whom will be in the position of Director General.

Regarding feelings of disappointment, I could say that this is a general sense of management in the public sector. If someone is not a bureaucrat in spirit, he or she feels a limitation of tools for doing what seems right for employees as well as for inmates. Here I am referring primarily to the reward system, not just in sense of money, but also in other ways to make people feel better, what good and responsible employers are able to do in the private sector. Here I feel a bit cramped, but this is more or less a general reality of the state sphere. There is a practical inability to reward a good employee and on the other hand to limit an unsuccessful one. There is also a challenge for me to balance the role of prison in itself and to bring in human, prospective and stimulating views to inmates and employees.

#### **14. If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?**

In the palette of beautiful and less beautiful situations and events, it would be hard and also unfair to choose only one. There were so many powerful, good also not as good situations, but I take them as part of a profession and it's very difficult for me to pick only one that would stand out.

