



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF  
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

## EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

### Esa Vesterbacka

EuroPris talks with Esa Vesterbacka, Head of the Criminal Sanctions Agency (RISE), Finland

Esa Vesterbacka is the Director General of the Finnish Prison and Probation Administration (Criminal Sanctions Agency). He is licentiate in Law and also holds 2 master degrees in Law and Law with Court Training from the University of Turku. He started his career in 1977 at the University of Turku teaching criminal law and procedural law. After being a public prosecutor for 2 years, he entered the prison system in 1987 as prison Governor of Köyliö Open Prison. Since then he has held different positions in prisons and Ministry of Justice and starting with 2005 he is in his current position of Director General.



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

**Esa Vesterbacka** Criminality as a phenomenon interested me already when I was a student. After working as a prosecutor, I wanted to get a workplace, which would be more down-to-earth and versatile. Thus, I applied for a post as the director of Köyliö Open Prison, which led me to work in different positions in prisons, in the Ministry of Justice and now in the Criminal Sanctions Agency.

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

The duties of the Criminal Sanctions Agency also include the enforcement of community sanctions. We have 15 closed prisons, 11 open prisons and 15 community sanctions offices. In addition, we have three assessment centres for prisoners and community sanction clients and a separate health care unit responsible for the health care of prisoners. The Criminal Sanctions Agency also has its own training institute.

#### **How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Finland?**

At the moment, there are about 3 100 prisoners in Finland. The population of Finland is about 5.4 million, hence we have 58 prisoners per 100 000 inhabitants. The number of community sanction clients is slightly higher than the number of prisoners.



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**How many staff do you manage?**

The staff of the Criminal Sanctions Agency adds up to about 2 750.

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

In my opinion, the basic requirement should be that a prison officer is a mature adult, who has good self-knowledge and self-confidence and who is able to set an example to others. Other required skills are gained through education and, after, that, in practical work.

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

Security is mainly based on knowing the prisoners and working interactively with them. For a long time, we have had to reduce staff, which weakens the possibility of adequate interaction.

**What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2013? What challenges you had to overcome?**

Despite the made savings, the quality of the prison services and the security of prisons have remained good. The staff members have been able to develop their work and find new working methods.

We have followed the development of recidivism for years. Recidivism has been decreasing in many successive years, also last year. Various things have influenced it but some of the credit can also be given to the work done by our staff.

**What are the challenges for your service this year?**

The savings of the central government continue and concern us, too. It is probable that we have to close down several prisons and further reduce staff in the coming years.

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

A common challenge for everyone is perhaps to get adequate resources for our work. Free movement in Europe, which is a positive thing in itself, has also increased the number of foreign prisoners everywhere. Another thing probably in common is the increasing amount crime organised across the borders. Furthermore, overcrowding is a problem that concerns many prison services.

**What benefits do you see being linked as a Member to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

I think that international cooperation is very important. The development of the Finnish prison services has benefitted greatly from the close cooperation with the other Nordic countries, which



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started already in the 1960s. It is important to find joint solutions and learn from each other. EuroPris is an organisation that makes it possible to discuss common practical matters and find and pass information on the best solutions. EuroPris is also a pioneer in the use of new information technology as it has been creating a joint data resource. I would warmly recommend the EuroPris membership to all European prison services.

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

One of our main strategic goals is to build the prisoners paths to freedom and to a life without crime with the help of other operators. Therefore, we have partnered with several NGO's, which provide rehabilitation services for our clientele.

### **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?**

I aim to visit prisons as often as possible and, during those visits, I frequently see how enthusiastic and committed to their work the staff is, which delights me. The hastiness of my work is sometimes frustrating. There are many things I would like to look into more closely but do not have enough time for it. On the other hand, the work of a director general is highly versatile: one day I can be in the corridors of a special ward of a prison, the next day in an international conference. It is important to always bear in mind that the effectiveness of my own work can also ultimately be seen in the abilities of the released prisoners to live without crime.

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

The prison and probation services were brought together in the same organisation called the Criminal Sanctions Agency in 2010. I hope that even after decades, the solution will be considered successful for both work forms and that the joint nature of the work will have enhanced even more.