



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

Pere Soler

EuroPris talks with Pere Soler, Director General of Penitentiary Services of the Catalan Government.

Born in the city of Terrassa in 1967. Pere Soler is a lawyer, law degree from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (1991); specialized in European studies and Master of European Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He has developed his career as a lawyer in Terrassa (Barcelona), where since 1992 he established his own office having acted as counselor to other law firms and businesses. Since 2008 he has held the position of Chairman of the Arbitration Court of Terrassa. In the educational field, he has collaborated with the Bar Association of the city, in the commercial area of the School of Legal Practice and, in the field of civil and commercial law, at the College of business Savings Bank of Terrassa and Pompeu Fabra University. He is currently councilor of the city of Terrassa, and Director General of Penitentiary Services of the Catalan Government.



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

Pere Soler Until last year my professional life was not related to this field at all. I was working as a lawyer. In 2011 I also became councilman of the opposition party in the town council of Terrassa. When I received the call from the Minister of Justice I decided that, despite it could be a challenging position, working in this field was one of the best jobs you can do as a civil servant to make a better society.

How many Prison establishments do you oversee?

14 prisons and 1 Penitentiary Hospital Pavilion

How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Catalonia?

9,451

How many staff do you manage?

4,845

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

With regard to individual qualities, the most valued are: self-esteem, resilience, communication skills and group dynamics skills, ability to listen, patience and ultimately, believing in the possibilities of reintegration of persons deprived of their liberty.

In the matter of qualification, we believe in our selection processes and training programmes. For instance, surveillance officers, whom are the largest group of prison workers, are selected after



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

completing a competitive civil servant examination, a psychometric test and a physical examination. Candidates who have passed these stages are then nominated by the tribunal to make a selective course approved and organized by the *Centre for Legal Studies* and Specialized Training of the Department of Justice. This course lasts a maximum of six months and at least 50% is practical work. In these training modules we teach psychology, sociology, criminal law, criminology and personal and human development.

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

Both management and prison staff is aware that the best method to guarantee security in our prisons is to achieve and maintain a good atmosphere and respectful relationships between officers and prisoners. If we get this, conflicts are significantly reduced. On the other hand, as happens in all prison systems around the world, to ensure safety we focus on: transport of prisoners, detection of illegal objects, video surveillance, access to our facilities and perimeter control.

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

The government of Catalonia, since 2012, is suffering cuts in its budget. Therefore, many public services have suffered to find ways to continue offering its services without worsen its quality. I would say that, throughout 2013, we have succeeded in keeping the commitment of the people working in this area to ensure that inmates continue to get adequate attention.

What are the challenges for your service this year?

This year our main challenge has been the opening of a new prison “Puig de les Basses”, on June 26th, located in the northeastern city of Figueres, close to the catalan-french border. It is a modern facility, with a capacity for 1000 inmates, that has allowed us to close two obsolete 100 year old prisons. We are also keeping conversations for the closure of the old “Presó Model” in Barcelona and the opening of a new correctional facility in Tarragona in 2015. On the other hand, we are now working to manage the prison health services, transferred from our Department of Justice to the Department of Health of the Government of Catalonia, with effect from 1st October 2014.

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

Main challenges are: Keep permanent dialogue and exchange between administrations, Ensure social, political and financial support to gradually improve life conditions of our prisoners. Prison and correctional services policies cannot be understood solely as a security issue, but as a component of social policies as a whole. This is the only way we can guarantee total rehabilitation.

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

EuroPris is a key element. Networking allows us, in one hand, to cope with new challenges and political initiatives with knowledge and better chances to succeed, and, on the other hand, it allows us to exchange best practices and adapt them to each country. EuroPris makes us stronger in order to work in research and innovation and also to achieve common goals in these areas.



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?

Yes, their role in prison life is essential for two reasons. First, because they contribute to the transparency of our administration in this area and, don't forget it, is an obligation of every public service. On the other hand, the job of more than 1,000 volunteers in cultural, sporting, religious and employability activities, and their support to reintegration processes, makes that life in prison seems more closely to what real life is.

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?

What gives me more satisfaction is sharing this job with a group of excellent and committed professionals, who work every day to provide our inmates with new tools and skills that will help them to achieve a successful reinsertion.

One challenging part is going ahead despite financial and legal difficulties. Catalonia does not have any powers in law making but only in applying rules to its territory. This situation does not allow us to put into practice the penal policy we want to apply. However, with our staff and the people of the third sector, we are making progress and are achieving our goals.

One thing I do not like is how media communicates our work. They use to focus only in the areas where we are experiencing some trouble, and never mention the excellent job carried by our public servants.

Our main goal is to provide Catalonia with full powers to make and apply its own penal policy, to make its own legislation. This, in my opinion, would contribute to improve our correctional system and will allow us to decrease our imprisoned population, to apply alternative ways of serving the sentences, etc.

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

Like someone who knew how to continue his predecessor's work and has contributed to the progress of the Catalan correctional services by paying attention to each of the inmate's problems, increasing their chances to resume their lives into a better, fairer and more generous society. My wish is that our work could give more second chances to those who have temporarily lost his way.