

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with

Jana Špero, Assistant Minister for Prisons and Probation at the Ministry of Justice: Prison Administration of Croatia



You have recently been appointed Assistant Minister for the Croatian Prison and Probation Service, congratulations! It was just recently that the prison service and the probation service were merged into one single agency in Croatia. What was the reason for that reform?

Thank you very much! I am very excited to have been entrusted with such a great task and responsibility. It is a fact that in October last year, the prison system and probation services was merged into one Directorate of the Ministry of Justice. Through this we are planning to achieve better benefits for the clients which both systems share and work with, especially with regard to cases of conditional release. In addition, many aspects of the collaboration between the two services is now simpler which in turn enables a more qualitative approach in treatment and rehabilitation processes for specific groups of offenders. As both services are part of the criminal justice system we are looking forward to offer combined training and educational opportunities for all staff with the main focus of decreasing crime and recidivism for safer communities while individually helping offenders stay on the right path.

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

My early professional beginnings are marked by my work cooperating with the international criminal courts and as a co-agent of the Republic of Croatia before the International Court of Justice in the genocide case. Before my appointment to my current post I had the privilege to head the Sector for Probation at the Ministry of Justice from 2012 to 2017. My experience in the probation service was gradual as I started as a probation officer and then gathered more experience as the manager of the Probation Office Rijeka. It was practically a logical development to get involved in this field after I received my Master Degree of Law and the Master Degree - Specialist of criminal investigation. My work in the criminal justice field as a Council of Europe international consultant and expert enabled me to give my contribution to a number of prison and probation projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Montenegro and Bulgaria where I was involved in many aspects of the development of their services. I am most proud of having been the project leader of two EU Projects for development of the Probation service in Croatia and am honored to be able to contribute to the European probation family as a board member of the Confederation of European Probation.

How many prison establishments do you oversee?

Currently the Croatian prison service consists of 25 various establishments which are comprised of prisons and penitentiaries across the country, as well as two Juvenile Correctional Institutions, the Diagnostics Center and Training Center. The Central Office for the prison system is located at the Ministry of Justice and is responsible for coordinating all tasks related to the facilities I mentioned.

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

I am very pleased to be able to confirm that at this moment we have a total of approximately 3200 prisoner while our prison capacities allow us a maximum of 3900 prisoner.

In Croatia you have a national assessment unit for all prisoners sentenced to more than 6 months in prison. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a unit?

Indeed we have a Diagnostics Center which is located in Zagreb and to which all persons who receive a prison sentence over 6 months are referred to. There a team of experts comprised of many professional backgrounds such as psychologists, social workers, social pedagogues, jurists/criminologists, medical physicians and many others assess each prisoner before he or she is recommended to the competent prison or penitentiary. Each person sentenced undergoes psychological, social, legal/criminological, pedagogical, medical testing and risk assessments and an individual proposal for the sentence program is drafted. In my experience I cannot detect any disadvantages of such a central center since the same composition of experts applies their expertise and experiences to all prisoners across the country, making this part of the process unified and just for all prisoners across Croatia.

How many staff do you manage?

At this moment the Croatian prison service is comprised of a staff of about 2700, the probation service counts just over 100 civil servants.

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

Anyone interested in becoming a prison officer in Croatia needs to be aware that there is a difference between security staff and treatment staff. It is crucial that we have staff members of high moral values, educated and especially motivated to face daily challenges when performing work that takes place in a very specific and demanding environment.

What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?

Certainly there have always been many obstacles and challenges for women in the field of corrections. But in their work women have proven to be very resilient and persistent when performing their duty in 'tough' environments. Nowadays this is in particular evident not only in corrections but also in many traditionally male jobs across the world, such as vocational professions and military jobs. This shows that gender is not the key to performing well at your job, but that you do it successfully, with enthusiasm and dedication.

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

As technology advances it enables humanity to make greater strides in every aspect of life, there are no limits possible to set to the imagination of prisoners in using it to their advantage. Experiences, such as the use of drones and smuggling of mini cell phones and countless other forbidden objects into prisons, have made us much aware of the dangers that are lurking. Therefore we are consistently making efforts to stay one step ahead of prisoners in order to keep law and order and to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff.

What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2016-2017?

We are particularly pleased to have alleviated the overcrowding in our correctional facilities and that we are managing the prison population in compliance with European standards. We are planning to further invest in the development of prison treatment programs and to continue expanding our partnerships to non-governmental organizations which are an important factor in the support of the reintegration and re-socialization processes of (former) prisoners.

What are the challenges for your service next year?

Our efforts will be directed to secure assets for various investments since we always detect room for improvement of material conditions in our establishments. Our goal is also set to offering possibilities and ways to invest in our most valuable asset – our human resources, through constructive and valuable education and training while striving to keep all our staff highly motivated and content.

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

The first thing that comes to mind is the change of prison populations across European correctional services which are the result of a large number of migrants. The services across Europe, in addition to everyday challenges, face new circumstances for which new trainings and educations need to be established and conducted. In order to alleviate existing problems, I believe that it is of great importance that prison services across Europe have a strong and continuous cooperation and tackle problems together through dialogue and mutual support.

What benefits do you see being linked to an organization such as EuroPris?

I strongly believe that being a member of EuroPris is a valued advantage since it connects various prison systems and expands ones horizons concerning innovative approaches to prison practices. It is our duty and mission to apply good practices for the benefit of not only communities on a local level but also all communities across Europe which we in turn adapt and improve as we are continuously faced with new developments.

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

As the first woman in charge of the prison service in Croatia, I hope to overcome reservations that prison positions are predetermined for male colleagues. Most of all, I hope to be remembered as someone who governed prison service in accordance with all European standards for the benefit of both prisoners and employees.