

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with

Anna Aristotelous,

Director, Cyprus Prisons Department



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

I have never imagined that I would become the Director of the Cyprus Prisons Department. However, ending up leading the one and only prison in Cyprus has been a gradual and evolutionary process.

After completing my Bachelor's degree in Law and two Master Degrees, one in International and European Law and one in Business Administration, I practised law and afterwards I worked as an Associate to the Law Commissioner. Following that, I was employed by Cyprus Police as an expert in law; contributed to the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* during the process of accession of Cyprus to the European Union as regards police legal matters; participated in the Management Board of Europol, as Official Representative of the Republic of Cyprus. I have worked with four different Chiefs of Police, performing the duties of legal counsel, as from 2004.

As from 2013, I was transferred to the office of the Minister of Justice and Public Order as a Senior Officer to the Minister Office and I was assigned the reorganisation of the Police and the Prisons at the Ministry. I had an active role in drafting the Strategic Plan of the Prisons Department. As from October 2014, I am leading the Cyprus Prisons Department.

How many Prison establishments do you oversee?

The prison establishments are located in the capital of Nicosia and host all different categories of offenders, in three types of prisons, the closed prison, the open prison and the Reintegration and Guidance Center. Prison Population consists of juveniles, female inmates, pre-trial detainees, convicts (lifers and short-term prisoners).

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

At the moment we accommodate 652 inmates, from which 40 are women. From the total population 459 are convicted and 193 are pre-trial detainees. Foreign nationals make up the 40% of the total population.

How many staff do you manage?

The prison staff is estimated to be around 398 members. Apart from security, which is the most essential component for a prison to properly function, rehabilitation and reintegration are of utmost importance

and they are aligned with the normalization principle. Therefore, an abundance of professionals namely psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, medical staff (doctors and medical orderlies), teachers, physical educators and other professionals co-work in our Department.

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

Being an extremely challenging profession, a prison officer needs to be ethical and have high levels of professionalism, integrity, responsibility, honesty and reliability. Apart from the basic prerequisites for being eligible to become a prison officer, they should hold the skills to respond effectively and efficiently under stressful and demanding situations, balancing discipline with empathy towards inmates and facilitating the reintegration of prisoners in society. Recognising the need of the staff to obtain or further develop their qualifications and enhance their skills and knowledge, we have invested greatly in the education and training of the staff. Late in 2017, we have inaugurated our Prison Staff Academy.

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

The fair and successful management of a prison is not dependant to the gender of the Director or the Governor, but to the capability of identifying the needs and problems of the organisation, and effectively responding to them.

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

The shortage of staff and the deficiencies yielding from the non-high-level skilled staff.

What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2018? What challenges you had to overcome?

The biggest achievements for 2018, were the successful promotion of a learning culture for staff and inmates. It is with great pride that the Cyprus Prisons Department has been praised for its practice as one of the best in Europe regarding the educational services provided for inmates. The prison educational and vocational training system for inmates is practically and theoretically the same as the regular system, offering secondary and tertiary education, and other educational programs to meet individual needs and aspirations. In addition, the inauguration of the Prison Staff Academy, as aforementioned, has marked a new era for the prison staff in Cyprus. In 2018, a total of 396 inmates participated in school programs and 238 prison officers have attended seminars, courses, conferences and workshops in Cyprus and abroad.

Perhaps the biggest challenge we had to overcome for 2018 was the improvement of the old infrastructure of our establishments which are dated late in the 19th century.

What are the challenges for your service for the coming year?

The biggest challenge for our Department the coming year, is the overcrowding and other concerns arising from this problem, and the absence of probation services, which makes it harder to further tackle the structural issues.

Last but not least, one of the most exciting but also rewarding challenges for 2019, will be to host the 8th EuroPris Conference & Annual General Meeting and the 24th Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services in May.

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

I believe that most European prison and correctional services are suffering from overcrowding, and managing specific groups of inmates (violent extremism, sex-offenders, drug-users, mentally ill inmates and so on), corruption, smuggling of prohibited items and substances, as well as the inter-prisoner violence. What is more, radicalisation is a ticking bomb that at any moment can cause serious complications within prisons.

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

Firstly, EuroPris enables its members to become a family of experts in many fields surrounding prisons and allows us to exchange information, experiences and professional knowledge. In that way we learn how other European prisons function and adopt/adapt new techniques and strategies. Secondly, through the European Prison Information System (EPIS) different solutions and suggestions are provided regarding various prison matters.

Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?

Our prison is very active in engaging with both NGO's and Charities, with activities such as theatre, arts and crafts, dance and music shows, singing Christmas carols, blood donation, marches and parades against drug use, for the protection of environment, animal rights, Gay Pride (LGBT community), Europa Donna (Breast cancer), Poreia Christodoulas (cancer patients) and fundraising (fire victims, cancer patients, Ayia Skepi Therapeutic Community). We believe that volunteering and building relationships between inmates and society is a significant device for the reintegration and rehabilitation of inmates, by cultivating human values, such as respect, solidarity, consideration, empathy and appreciation.

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?

The most satisfying part is the fact that the inmates acknowledge the hard work I am putting in to offer a better and humane living conditions, without prejudice or discrimination, and they send me letters, hand-made flowers, cards and crafts, expressing their appreciation and gratitude.

The most challenging part is perhaps dealing with a blending of different mind-sets, personalities, and cultures of staff and inmates.

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

For my aptitude to have overturned the old-fashion mentality and prison model that governed the prison department prior to my appointment and by having made a huge difference by fighting corruption, as well as improving the living conditions of the inmates.

Equally, in practice we can be proud and be remembered as prison leadership for many things, regarding staff and inmates, including: the inauguration of the new female Block, the Prison Staff Academy, the gyms for both inmates and staff, and the close supervision units for vulnerable inmates, as well as the new uniform of staff, the budget for education of staff which it was increased from €6.000 to €120.000, the effort and work into updating and modernising the prison buildings, introducing sufficient and improved interviewing procedures for newcomers/new inmates, sentence-planning for all inmates, creating strategies and protocols for specific groups of inmates, introduction of open visits for all inmates, doubled the number of visits and the number of visitors for each inmate, increased contact with the outside world and initiatives for the resocialization of inmates, organisation and participation in a plethora of social activities, fundraisings, parades, unlimited telephone calls from 0800 – 1800 hours, use of SKYPE, 24 hour electricity, water and heating, nutritionist services and so on. Last but not least, for my determination in fighting corruption by arresting 5 prison officers (some were suspended of their service and for the rest criminal cases are pending) and 15 visitors (including mothers, wives, father) for smuggling illegal items and substances in prisons.