



EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with Cristian Pleșa

Director General, National Administration of Penitentiaries, Romania

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

I have worked within the Romanian prison system since 1993. In May 2019, I was appointed Director General of the National Administration of Penitentiaries. Previously, I worked as a Deputy Director for more than one year (2018) and had been the head of the Cooperation and Programme Unit for twelve years within the same institution. I have held several positions from line staff member to top manager in the field of prison security and inmates' reinsertion.

As head of the Cooperation and Programme Unit, I coordinated the international cooperation of the National Administration of Penitentiaries with its foreign counterparts, while by implementing EU-funded projects the unit contributed to the development of the Romanian prison system.

I have an electromechanical engineering background. In 1993, when I joined the prison system, the Romanian industry was, unfortunately, in growing collapse. So I would not say it was me who chose the prison field, it was more a choice imposed by the political and social climate towards a stable field. I did not plan to work too long in this field, but I enjoyed it so much that I stayed for more than 26 years.

How many prison establishments do you oversee?

The National Administration of Penitentiaries oversees 34 prisons, two educational and two detention centres. In addition, we have six prison hospitals, one training school, two staff recovery centres and a logistics unit.

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

According to the current data there are 20.439 inmates in the Romanian prisons. The number has decreased by 5.000 in the last two years due to the law of compensatory remedies adopted in October 2017.

How many staff do you manage?

There are 12.600 employees working in prisons and at the headquarters.

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

A prison officer has a challenging and demanding job. The key skills and qualifications for our prison officers are integrity, high levels of professionalism and ethical standards, responsibility, honesty and flexibility, empathy and social sense. Having the above-mentioned attributes, a prison officer can successfully perform their tasks.

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

We want a safe environment for both staff and inmates. Although we have not had hostage actions lately, we are concerned about this issue and constantly improving our security systems to prevent it. We are permanently working on preventing escapes and finding the most effective methods to prevent traffic and use of prohibited substances and mobile phones in prisons.

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

We are planning to improve the prison conditions in the coming years, to create a few thousands of detention places by building two new prisons and detention units within the existing prisons. Part of these works will be financed through the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014 - 2021. Using the same financing system, we will also invest in and develop inmates' social reintegration by providing training to our staff, setting up new detention places and improving specific processes.

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

The European prison and correctional services are facing big challenges mainly because of overcrowding, radicalisation, development of new drugs difficult to detect and new technologies such as drones, micro mobile phones, etc.

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

We were among the founding members of EuroPris. We have supported the extension and development of the organisation. I believe it is only by a permanent exchange of ideas and good practices that we can develop our organisations. We like to communicate and to be members of this professional organisation. Due to these attributes, we share, use and manage the knowledge in our professional field. Most of the solutions to our problems exist out there, we just have to ask, look at the

answers provided by those who have had such experiences and choose the best solution that suits our own context. These are the big advantages of being part of an organisation as EuroPris whose member I am proud to be.

Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?

We have 49 collaboration protocols with various public institutions and non-governmental organisations (seven in the field of human rights, nine in the field of education and research), with universities from different cities and the Institutes of Sociology and Judicial Psychology. We cooperate with four institutions with religious profile and with 12 public institutions, such as the Ministry of National Education, the National Village Museum, general directions of Social Assistance and Child Protection. Concerning the 17 collaboration protocols with NGOs, I would like to mention the European Centre for Addiction and Prevention, Prison Fellowship Romania and the organisation 'Save the Children'. We also have collaborations in the field of education, psychological assistance and social care to facilitate social reintegration.

'Dana Cenușă - Unleashed Through Culture' Multiart Festival for Inmates is a special cultural project, unique in Europe, which takes place in November each year. The festival has a great impact both on inmates and public and studies show the transformative effect creative outlets can have on those in the criminal justice system, revealing increases in inmates' social behaviour and self-esteem.

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?

People are at the centre of our activity. We work with people for people. I do my duty to society, which is the most rewarding part of my job – every day I contribute to a better and more secured place to live in. This is our common role - to create safer societies for the benefit of all the citizens.

There is something related to the correctional work that I am not comfortable with, namely that our objectives cannot be achieved in a shorter period of time.

I like my team and I really appreciate dedicated people who constantly want a change for the better.

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

I would like to be remembered as a person who has done his duty and contributed to the modernisation of the Romanian prison system.