

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with

Ángel Luis Ortiz González, General Secretary of Penitentiary Institutions of Spain

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

“In my professional career, I have been in contact with the prison service in different moments. For ten years, I worked for the Ombudsman as legal advisor, being responsible for the areas of justice and prisons. In addition, for a period of ten years prior to work for Ombudsman, I was Judge in one of the prison supervisions courts in Madrid.

These two experiences gave me the necessary background to accept my actual responsibility as the General Secretary of Penitentiary Institutions of Spain”.

How many prison establishments do you oversee?

“In this precise moment, the Spanish Prison Service rules over 84 prisons”.

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

“The number of prisoners in the whole country is 58.000. Approximately, 50.000 are in prisons under the central administration and 8.000 are in prisons under the supervision of the Catalan administration”.

How many staff do you manage?

“The number of professionals working for the central administration is around 24.000”.

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

Working in a prison requires the important knowledge that, according to article 25.2 of the Spanish Constitution, the main objective of our penitentiary system is the re-education and resocialization of inmates. Achieving this aim is only possible if, as professionals, we respect the fundamental rights of people serving sentences in prison”.

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

“In this moment, most of security matters are under control. A lot of years have passed since the last prison escape and attacks to professionals have decreased by fifty percent in the last 10 years. In 2019 the total number of aggressions was a little more than 300.

From my point of view, the main problem is to transfer the health attention of inmates from penitentiary administration to the health authority. In 1979, our Penitentiary Law created a specific system of health attention, inside the penitentiary administration. This system has worked since then. But nowadays, the lack of personal and other structural problems makes its continuation impossible.

Another important problem, directly related to the security, is the introduction of drugs in prisons, as a consequence of family visits and penitentiary leaves. This issue is important both, from the perspective of the health of inmates and the general security conditions of the prisons”.

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

“The aim is to make re-education and resocialization a reality through the implementation of therapies, the improvement of open regime and the application of community measures instead of short-term prison sentences.

For this, it is basic that penitentiary professionals have the necessary tools and working conditions”.

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

“Actually, the main objectives are:

- The definition and implementation of treatment and strategies dealing terror offenders.
- The implementation of the Decision UE 909/2008, so that inmates can serve their sentence in the country where they have their own roots.
- The coordination of penitentiary administration and community, so that the transition between prison and freedom can be done step by step and with the necessary support of public institutions and society”.

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

- “Being aware of the best practices of other countries in penitentiary issues and international recommendations.
- Give more visibility to Spanish practices in the penitentiary field.
- Taking part in international forums and receiving international information for penitentiary professionals.
- Participating in the groups organized by EuroPris dealing different actual issues as gender violence, foreigners, children in prison, ...”

Do your prisons engage with NGO’s / Charities?

In the central penitentiary administration, we work in coordination with 1.154 associations and NGO’s. The number of volunteers that are authorized to come in prisons is 11.201.

The activities and general intervention of these organizations is essential, and it is regulated in specific protocols under the Penitentiary Social Board, created ten years ago. Our experience is that the participation of external agents is very beneficial for inmates”.

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 satisfactory part of my work is to represent a system with modern prison facilities without overpopulation.

The most challenging aim is to achieve the specific treatment for each specific inmate, so that he can return to society in the best personal and social conditions.

The most difficult is to accept that this aim is not always possible due to internal and many times external difficulties of inmates”.

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

“I would like to be remembered as a professional that tried to develop the aim of resocialization and re-education of inmates and also the use of open regime as a specific way of serving a prison sentence”.