



Staff Exchange Programme First Edition

**Hosted by the Estonian Prison and
Probation Service**

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**PROMOTING
PROFESSIONAL
PRISON
PRACTICE**

Staff Exchange Programme First Edition

In December 2024, EuroPris organised the first edition of the Staff Exchange Programme, hosted by the Estonian Prison and Probation Service. The programme brought together 10 prison professionals from across Europe: the Czech Republic, Greece, Germany, Luxembourg, and Slovenia. Over the course of a week, participants shadowed Estonian prison staff and visited all of Estonia's prisons: Tallinn, Viru, and Tartu, gaining valuable insights into Estonia's prison system and best practices. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to visit the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, where they explored Estonia's innovative approach to staff training.

This report summarises the key activities and takeaways from the exchange programme, highlighting the value of international collaboration in the development of prison staff training and the sharing of best practices across borders.

Day 1 – Tallinn Prison

Participants were welcomed by Meribel Moldau, the Adviser to the Deputy Secretary where they received a welcome kit from the Estonian Prison and Probation Service. Afterwards, the Director of Tallinn Prison, Hannes Liiva, gave a presentation outlining key facts about the prison.

After a tour to the prison facilities, participants were divided into pairs, conformed with one person from each country in each pair, and assigned to different areas of the prison, where they could shadow the day-to-day work of the prison staff.

Key learnings

Tallinn Prison is a modern penitentiary that replaced an outdated post-Soviet-era prison with inadequate conditions. Rather than refurbishing old buildings, Estonia opted to construct entirely new prisons designed to meet modern correctional needs. Currently, Estonia operates three prisons, all located near major cities. Tallinn Prison is situated outside the city, allowing for better surveillance and reducing the risk of smuggling or unauthorised throw-ins.

The prison complex consists of colour-coded buildings connected by underground tunnels. This design enables staff to move efficiently between buildings while minimising security risks associated with transferring inmates above ground. The tunnels also help prevent contraband smuggling and are equipped with orientation maps and colour-coded markings for navigation.

Inmates are housed in different buildings based on the type of crime they committed (e.g., drug offenders, sex offenders, women, and mothers with children). The complex includes an education centre, sports facilities, and workspaces.

Inmate Accommodation: Previously, prisons provided only 2.5 m² per inmate, failing to meet the standards of the CPT (European Committee for the Prevention of Torture). The new prison offers 5.1 m² per inmate.

Work and Obligations: Inmates are required to work. Refusal results in the loss of benefits, such as long-term visits of up to 24 hours, and may lead to disciplinary sanctions. Workspaces—including carpentry, locksmithing, and sewing workshops—are modern and resemble commercial production facilities.

Visits: There are two types of visits: standard visits behind glass (or a three-hour stay in a visiting room resembling a lounge) and long-term visits. During long-term visits, inmates can stay with their families for up to 24 hours in an apartment equipped with a kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. The fee for these visits' ranges from 20 to 40 EUR, depending on the apartment's size.

Smoking Policy: The prison has been smoke-free since 2017 for both inmates and staff. While inmates are completely prohibited from smoking, staff may smoke only in designated areas. The transition to a non-smoking environment took two years and was supported by nicotine patches and educational sessions.

Security Measures: Tallinn Prison has no guard towers. Instead, security is ensured through a fully electronic camera surveillance system. Staff move through underground tunnels, and cameras cover all critical areas. The operational centre maintains a complete overview of prison activities.

Staff and Equipment

Staff Structure: The prison maintains a gender-balanced workforce (50% men and 50% women). The director oversees the entire complex, while each building is managed by a unit manager responsible for daily operations.

Staff Training: Training for new prison officers lasts three years, and the starting salary is approximately 2,100 EUR. Employees have access to training facilities, including mock prison cells for hands-on practice.

Use of Mobile Phones: Staff are permitted to use personal mobile phones, but all devices must be registered. To date, no breaches or misuse of mobile phones by staff have been reported.

Technology and Digitalisation

Digital Administration: Administrative processes are primarily digitalised.

Inmate Technology: Inmates have access to tablets equipped with facial recognition technology to protect personal data. They can use these tablets to order meals, access personal records, and submit requests for various activities.

Security Technology: In addition to an extensive camera system, emergency buttons are installed in corridors and on staff radios. When an emergency call is activated, the operations centre immediately views footage from the nearest camera.

Innovations and Unique Features

Use of Dogs in the Prison Area: The prison has a kennel, but the dogs are used solely for narcotics detection. Unlike service dogs in other systems, these dogs are trained to be friendly and must not show aggression towards inmates or other people, as they are also used for searching individuals.

Navigation Within the Prison: The layout of the prison corridors is complex, and new staff may take weeks to become familiar with it. To assist with navigation, orientation maps and colour-coded markings are used.

Day 2– Tallinn Prison

On the second day of the programme, participants began their shadowing activities directly. They were mixed with other pairs to gain a different perspective, also among fellow exchange participants. They actively asked questions and received answers from the Estonian prison staff. In the afternoon, there was a presentation by Rait Kuuse, Deputy Secretary General on Prisons. Some of the key learnings from the second day were:

Core Principles: The Estonian prison system is guided by principles of humanity, professionalism, and innovative thinking, with a focus on collaboration, flexibility in finding solutions, adherence to agreements, courageous decision-making, and a commitment to learning and improvement.

Key Information on Estonian Prisons:

- **Tallinn Prison** (since 1919, new building since 2018): Closed and open prison for male and female inmates, capacity of 1,190 (closed) and 102 (open).
- **Viru Prison** (since 2006): Closed and open prison for male inmates, juvenile offenders, and pretrial female detainees, capacity of 974 (closed) and 75 (open).
- **Tartu Prison** (since 2000): Closed and open prison for male and female inmates, capacity of 933 (closed) and 60 (open).

Security Features: The facility includes mesh-protected windows, anti-vandalism sanitary facilities, plexiglass barriers in cells, and noise-isolated cells for disruptive inmates.

Intake and Record-Keeping: Inmates undergo drug testing, and their personal information (ID, photograph, fingerprints, DNA) is recorded. Items considered dangerous are stored separately, and inmates are allowed a maximum of 30 kg of personal belongings.

Digitisation: A shared database across the prison, police, and probation services tracks incidents and enables data analysis. Inmates are given tablets with facial recognition technology for communication, orders, and requests.

Staff Readiness: Prison staff receive extensive training with access to restraint tools and firearms. Security incidents are managed internally, and staff training duration varies based on role (4 months for guards, 3 years for officers).

Open Prison: Inmates can work outside the prison and use GPS-enabled phones for communication, with location monitored in real time.

Prison System Reforms: The reform launched in 2002 modernised the system, improving efficiency and lowering recidivism rates (31% for incarcerated individuals, 16% for probationers). The current system has 1,500 of 3,000 available spaces occupied, with unused capacity being considered for rental to other countries.

Some reflections from the participants after the two-day programme at Tallinn Prison were that it exemplifies a modern, high-security facility with a focus on rehabilitation, reintegration, and transparency. Estonia's innovative and humane approach to corrections is reflected in its low recidivism rates and effective staff training. The system continues to evolve, focusing on reducing recidivism and preparing inmates for a successful reintegration into society.

Day 3–Viru Prison

On the third day, the group arrived at Viru Prison, where they received a brief presentation on the facility, followed by a guided tour to familiarise with its infrastructure. Then participants started to work shadowing across various units, concluding with reflections from the participants, who highlighted the following key learnings:

A difference from the previous day was that the prison consists of multiple buildings, each marked by different colours, and is connected by a walkable internal gallery rather than tunnels. While external movement between buildings is possible, inmates can only move through the gallery, which functions as a secure passageway. Inmate status is classified based on their offences and other factors such as age and security level.

Security Measures: Prison staff may use registered mobile phones, with only visual checks conducted at the entrance. Entry requires personal identification via a

magnetic card, displaying the staff member's photo and details. Random security checks, including body scans and X-ray screening, apply to all employees. A similar random selection system is used for inmate searches, particularly in the open prison, where returning inmates undergo either thorough or preventive searches, determined by an automated system.

Education and Rehabilitation: All inmates under 18 must attend compulsory education, covering the Estonian language and standard school curricula. The prison gym is accessible to both staff and inmates, with employees entitled to 90 minutes of gym time per week during working hours.

Visits: Short-term visits last three hours, typically conducted behind glass, except for visits involving children. Long-term visits, lasting up to 24 hours, occur at least every six months but may be granted more frequently as a reward for good behaviour. These visits take place in furnished apartments, with costs shared between inmates and visitors. While external food is not permitted, meals can be purchased and prepared on-site.

Facilities and Daily Life: The prison environment is designed with colour-coded sections and decorative murals, including an outdoor exercise yard mural depicting a rural landscape. All outdoor yards are located on the rooftops. A key management system, "Key Watcher Touch," ensures accountability for cell keys, alerting the control room if they are not returned within 12 hours.

The canteen doubles as a shop, offering discounted meals and additional items like desserts and salads. Inmates in the open prison are responsible for securing their own employment, with wages paid directly to them and transferred to the prison account.

Discipline and Incentives: Disciplinary measures range from warnings and restrictions on purchases to solitary confinement. Juveniles follow a three-tier motivational system, with privileges such as gym access, long-term visits, and supervised home visits.

Communication: Inmates can make phone calls via tablets or in-cell phones, with a minimum of 10 minutes but often up to 150 minutes, depending on staff availability. Calls are not monitored.

Police Holding Cells: The prison also accommodates police detainees for up to 48 hours, with protocols completed on-site.

Day 4 –Tartu Prison

The group visited Tartu Prison where they had as well a short tour and then some work shadowing. Some key learnings were:

Entry to the Prison: Entry to the prison follows a standard procedure, consistent across all the visited facilities. Upon arrival, visitors are required to hand over their ID cards in exchange for visitor badges, which are retained until departure, at which point the badges are returned in exchange for the original ID cards. All individuals must pass through a body scanner, while their belongings undergo X-ray screening. Entry is strictly permitted in groups of three, a rule that applies universally across Estonian prisons.

Immediately beyond the entrance gate is the Wall of Honour, which showcases photographs of the prison's most distinguished employees. Opposite this display, a key message of the Estonian prison system is prominently positioned, ensuring that all staff members pass by it at least twice a day, reinforcing its significance.

Inmate Facilities and Activities: The first building included an activity room, which inmates are permitted to use provided they have not committed any disciplinary infractions. After maintaining a clean disciplinary record for one week, they may be added to a list granting them access. The materials used for activities are funded by the prison service, and inmates have the option to purchase their own creations, which can either be kept or sent home.

A music studio is also available under similar conditions. However, it is strictly designated for playing musical instruments rather than recording music.

Healthcare and Contact with the Outside World: Each prison building houses an on-site nurse, who forms part of the wider healthcare team. If an inmate requests a medical consultation, the nurse evaluates the necessity and urgency of the request before referring them to a doctor.

A particularly unique feature of the prison is the "cat room," a therapeutic space for inmates. This room, which was included in the tour, housed six cats and was furnished as a living area, complete with furniture, cat houses, toys, and climbing frames.

Psychiatric Care: The prison includes a psychiatric unit, where cells are monitored via camera surveillance.

For inmate identification, the prison employs a "card catalogue" system, which contains not only personal details such as names and surnames but also inmate photographs.

Open Prison: The prison complex also incorporates an open prison unit, as is the case in all Estonian prisons. The same or highly similar regulations apply to these units as in other sections of the facility. The open prison in Tartu consists of two units for men and one for women. At the time of the visit, only three female inmates were accommodated in the open prison, but they were off-site for work assignments.

Day 5 –Estonian Academy of Security Sciences

Upon arrival at the academy, the group was guided to a classroom where they were introduced to an introductory presentation by Laura Kikas Director of College of Justice. The academy is extensive and modern, with student dormitories located directly in front of it. These dormitories are organised according to the students' affiliation – one for police cadets, another for prison service staff, and a third for customs officers and employees of other security services. The academy provides education for the customs service, prison service, police, border guard, and crisis management personnel, such as members of the fire and rescue service. It also offers academic programmes focused on research in the field of internal security.

Joint educational programmes aim to enhance the efficiency of the academy's use, improve understanding between individual units and security forces, and foster friendly relationships among future colleagues. Education is available at levels 4 to 6 of the European education system. The training programme for prison service officers has recently been restructured to consist of 26% e-learning, 40% in-person instruction, and 34% supervised on-the-job training. At the end of their studies, students must pass an assessment test.

The basic training of cadets includes dynamic security, search tactics, self-defence, resocialisation, and intervention team tactics. New students receive a stipend, while those pursuing further qualifications are financially compensated at the same rate as they would be in their organisational units.

Forensic studies last three years and are mandatory for the role of a "case manager" (a role combining elements of a senior prison officer and a specialist educator) and higher positions. A case manager is responsible for treatment programmes, risk assessment, inmate resocialisation, and holds disciplinary authority. The study programme is conducted through in-person classes, scenario-based learning, e-learning, and internships – with the final year often spent abroad, typically in Finland. Case managers oversee the agenda for approximately 25 inmates and address their individual needs. The programme, likely at the bachelor's level, includes both compulsory and elective subjects, sports activities, and exams at the end of each course. The student union organises various sports, cultural, and social events throughout the study period.

The academy has both modern and practical equipment. The campus includes a shooting range, soundproof booths for student talks, calls, and study, a play area for children of staff or students, a massage chair, a gym, training cells, and a self-service bar operating on a trust-based system in a camera-free zone. For crisis management training, there is a simulation control centre, where a fire alert simulation was taking place during the visit. The academy also offers training spaces for customs vehicle inspections, a pipeline simulator for firefighters, and a room for testing the flammability of materials.

Main Learnings from the Staff Exchange Programme

After the presentation and guided tour to the visit, the participants had time to reflect their key learnings during the exchange.

- **Training and Professional Development:** A strong emphasis was placed on the training and education of correctional staff. Officers undergo extensive training at dedicated academies, offering a comprehensive curriculum covering various fields of prison operations. The structured training system, along with a focus on staff well-being, was recognised as exemplary and worth emulating in other systems.
- **Digitalisation and Efficiency:** The use of digital tools and optimal information systems was notably advanced, contributing to greater operational efficiency by reducing paperwork and streamlining processes. The level of digitalisation observed was significantly higher than in other systems.
- **Authority and Responsibilities:** Prison staff were recognised for having the same level of authority as law enforcement officers. They are trained in a wide range of security measures and have the same powers as the police in the event of an escape. This extensive training, combined with better facilities, leads to a more positive working environment and higher staff morale.
- **Balance Between Security and Rehabilitation:** A key takeaway was the effective balance between security and rehabilitation. The system was designed to ensure that individuals are given the opportunity to reintegrate into society while maintaining order and security.
- **Employment and Reintegration:** The programme highlighted the importance of obligatory paid work as part of the rehabilitation process. This gives individuals the opportunity to develop skills, earn a living, and prepare for reintegration into society. This model contrasts with other systems where work is voluntary and often linked to sentence reduction, leading to higher reoffending rates upon release.

- **Re-socialisation Focus:** There was a clear focus on re-socialisation, with the understanding that the goal of correctional work is to provide individuals with the chance to rehabilitate, allowing them to reintegrate into society successfully.