

Speech of Ms Annemie Turtelboom
Minister of Justice
to the Conference of DG's of the member states
of the Council of Europe

Ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to say a few words to you

As this is a network event, I will not take too much of your time

Because evidently a speech at a network event, takes the networking out of the event

First let me welcome you in Belgium

A country that is alive and kicking

After some had already announced its funeral

We needed 500 days to form a government after last elections in 2010

But we now have had a government that has produced more reforms in the 500 remaining days than other governments in ten years

The result is that Belgium has performed better throughout the long economic crisis than all of its neighbours, except Germany of course

But let me speak about prison reform, one of the many reforms of this government

Mr. Meurisse has already described you the broader picture, better than I could do

So I need only to explain the political drive behind this

There has been a political shift in my country in the last decade, as far as penitentiary policies are concerned,

It is the growing awareness that if you let so-called petty crime unpunished, too many of this little criminals become professional gangs

And so politicians understand now that if you do not have a proper penitentiary policy, voters will take you into account for having failed to combat petty crime

That is a big shift compared to the past

When most of the public opinion thought that prison policies consisted of putting criminals behind bars and forgetting about them

Or thought that putting money into prisons was the same as throwing away money, as prisons were by definition bad places that in no way contributed to a better society

So this has changed

And this is why, even in these extremely difficult times of budgetary restrictions, our government has continued to invest in a modern prison policy

We are building three new prisons and two new forensic psychiatric institutions

We need this, urgently, because throughout the crisis the number of detainees has been rising

And because many of our prisons are still in buildings from the nineteenth century

But we have also taken measures to diversify the application of penal law

To lay the foundation for a more individualistic approach of each detainee

To change the policy of detention in a cell, to a more varied and active life within the prison walls

We needed to work hard for this, to have a few bright ideas, the application of new technologies and better management

The most spectacular result was the doubling in less than two years time of the use of electronic anklets to keep detainees at home instead of in their cell

About 800 electronic anklets were in use early 2012, today the number is 1600, and rising

By implementing these changes we have paradoxically been able to apply the sentences of the courts more and better than before

Whereas in the past the overcrowding in our prisons made it impossible to apply sentences of less than three years

Due to this situation judges were condemning criminals to higher sentences – in general 37 months and more – to be sure that the sentence would become reality

Besides there were huge problems of delays in applying probation measures, work sentences or the use of electronic devices

Therefore judges were more and more hesitating to pronounce these kind of alternative sentences

What we achieved

By investing in new prisons

By better managing the alternative sentences

And by really applying the sentences for so called petty crime

Is that we reversed the spiral of ever overcrowding and its consequences

What we hope is that judges will again condemn criminals to shorter sentences or to more alternative sentences

This should then have the same paradoxical effect as has been noticed in Sweden or Netherlands

By making punishment more effective, in the end you empty your prisons

So that you can try to rent the empty buildings to your neighbour country, as our Dutch neighbours proposing to us these days

Once you have more space, you can diversify and you have the capacity to humanize your prison policies

Or as Mr. Meurisse has explained to you: to pass from a sentence based on incarceration and isolation, to a constructive and protective approach, focused on reintegration

We are surely not yet out of the many reports of human rights organisations

- I always wonder if any country has even been out of these reports –

But I am sure we've turned the corner

And that we are, here in Belgium, on our way, to a more modern, more efficient and more social approach of penitentiary policies

Having said that

And regardless of the grey and cold weather outside

I wish you a nice stay in Belgium

And quite interesting and stimulating debates

Thank you