

26th CoE Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services

20-21 September 2021 - 10h00

Vidamar Resort Hotel - Funchal

Senhor Conselheiro Cabral Barreto, digníssimo Representante da República na Região Autónoma da Madeira

Senhor Secretário Regional da Educação Ciência e Tecnologia, em representação do Presidente do Governo Regional da Madeira,

- Dear Mr. Jan Kleissen, Director of Information Society - Action against Crime, Council of Europe,

- Senhor Dr. Rómulo Mateus, Diretor-Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais, Portugal

- Dear Mr. Alan Mitchell, President of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture,

- Dear panellists,

- Dear participants,

It is both an honour and a privilege to welcome you to Madeira, one of the oldest tourist destinations in Portugal and in Europe / and to have this rare opportunity to address such a distinguished group of specialists on prison and probation services, gathered at this twenty six (26th) Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to praise the Council of Europe / as an international organisation dedicated to promoting and defending human rights, democratic development and political and social stability in Europe; **the first in the world endorsed with bodies to promote awareness and respect for human rights in Member States.**

Over the more than 70 years of its existence, the activities developed by and the achievements of the Council of Europe not only in the protection and promotion of human rights, but also in the field of the prevention of torture; the prevention and fighting violence against women and domestic violence, corruption and other crimes, are remarkable.

The role of the PC-CP, Council for Penological Co-operation in promoting the humane treatment of offenders, decent conditions in prisons and ensuring socially effective and rehabilitative penal sanctions and measures, preparing recommendations, guidelines and handbooks, helping national authorities to improve prison and probation policies, should also be highlighted.

The COVID-19 pandemic placed serious challenges and created a major disruption in the normal running of the justice systems all over Europe, including in the prison and probation services, revealing in an unequivocal way, the existing fragilities.

In the Justice sector, very particular challenges emerged, transversal to most States: ensuring that the activity of the courts did not stop completely; respecting the sanitary measures in force; protecting the prison population; avoiding the spread of the virus in prison facilities; ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable in the access to justice, are just/ some examples.

Throughout this health crisis/ we have learnt a lot from each other, /and the Council of Europe /has played a central role / in spreading information /and sharing best practices between Member States. The choice of the subject of this Conference/ is an example of the care with which the Council of Europe bodies and committees/ have followed the evolution of the pandemic in national prison systems.

Therefore, at a time when in our States important steps have been taken to control the pandemic, the theme of this Conference could not come at a better time, to also discuss **how** to move forward in specific areas.

In Portugal, in 2017 we launched a national strategy for the requalification and modernization of both correctional and probation services.

But the threat of the pandemic aggravated the challenges/ and forced urgent changes/ to the previously established priorities /and forced us to take swift action in order to prevent the spread of the virus /and to protect the health of inmates, those on probation and young offenders.

The spread of the pandemic had a direct effect on the prison system, as an outbreak of Covid-19 within it, could lead to the implosion of the system at the speed of light, and to the occurrence of an institutional and health crisis.

Hence, in Portugal, as a preventive measure, the various social, political and legislative players realized the need to remove some prisoners from the system, while creating quarantine spaces to treat those in need.

So, we did what many other States did:

- In April 2020, the Parliament approved a law /on amnesty for small prison sentences up to two years; a pardon for cases of human need; and for those inmates who already had a routine of authorised exits, the Parliament also approved the possibility of extraordinary administrative exit permits, in order for them to remain at home for the duration of the pandemic.

In short, with these three measures, Portugal managed to remove about two thousand inmates from the prison system, protecting the prison population, the system and all those who are part of it.

And although there were those who had feared an increase in reoffences, the reality surprised us all /with an almost nil increase in the crime rate of those that had been released.

- The January 2021 we started the vaccination plan for the prison population, which is almost complete with an inoculation rate for prison staff of 87,5 % and an inoculation rate for inmates of 91 %.

In addition to the vaccination process, within the prison system, more than fifty thousand (50.000) (PCR and rapid) tests have already been carried out. We continue testing within the scope of screening following

suspected cases or confirmed cases; all correctional facility professionals; and incoming and quarantined prisoners.

During the lockdown we had to ban inmate visitation more than once. In 2020 they could not celebrate Christmas with their families.

We quickly increased the duration of telephone calls with families; and replaced our video conference systems to provide inmates with videoconference facilities for communicating with their families and friends; we installed telephones in cells facilitating their contacts with the outside.

When we restarted visitation, acrylic separators in the parlatories have been introduced.

In concluding these short remarks on the way we have dealt with the COVID 19 crisis in the Portuguese prison and probation system, I am proud to mention that, in this complex and sensitive system, comprising prisoners, the criminally insane, young offenders, and people serving community sentences, there were no deaths as a result of Covid-19 and that all outbreak situations were resolved in a timely manner and with the service's own resources.

The top management team of our national prison and reintegration services, headed by Mr. Rómulo Mateus, had to face the impact of the spread of this pandemic threat since the first quarter of 2020.

So it is fair that, I publicly acknowledge and thank Mr. Rómulo Mateus, his colleagues and all the Directorate General staff for the effort and dedication they have shown during these times of great pressure.

But Covid-19, hasn't diverged us from the path we set in 2017: the requalification of correctional and juvenile justice facilities, and the digital and management modernisation of central and local prison and probation services.

And although we face an internal context of budgetary constraints, with shortages and the ageing of available human resources, we must proceed with that reformist path and look forward to the future, not in search of the time we have lost in dealing with Covid-19, but in search of the clues that the pandemic crisis pointed out to us.

In a time of digital transformation, the opportunities for Prison and Probation are vast, as long as we don't lose sight of the goal and use innovative technology to find a good balance between efficiency, security and rehabilitation.

We must expect to implement proven technology, measure outcomes, support evidence-based practices and use technology, including Artificial Intelligence, to enhance our knowledge and, if necessary, we should look around and adapt technology used in other sectors and areas that can be very interesting and applicable in our prison or probation environments.

Just to give you an example.

Offender communication was one of the biggest problems we had to face during the pandemic crisis. However, solutions have been found all over the world to ensure that inmates stayed in touch with family and friends, helping them maintain personal relationships and contributing to their mental wellbeing and the mental wellbeing of their loved ones.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear participants

I strongly agree with the Conference organizers when they say that “We can gain an edge over the pandemic” if we put our minds to it.

The Ministry of Justice of Portugal continues to rely on the experience of the Council of Europe in the field of prisons and probation, whose discussions and work over the years have enabled us and other States to improve public policies in these and other related areas.

I wish every one of you a pleasant stay in Madeira and hope that you will have excellent opportunities to exchange experiences and knowledge on how “to gain an edge into the future” of prison and probation services all over Europe.

Thank you very much.