

Ladies and gentlemen,

Honoured guests, distinguished colleagues and participants,

I am honoured to welcome you to the 29th Council of Europe Conference for Directors of Prisons and Probation Services, hosted by the General Directorate “Execution of Sentences” (GDES) and the Ministry of Justice in Bulgaria.

The issue of human rights, the rule of law and democracy at the heart of prisons and probation services is of paramount importance to me as Director General of GDES. All staff who work with prisoners and those on probation undertake professional training in which the subject of human rights is embedded and considered in depth. Our employees are familiarized both with the legal acts that regulate the performance of their duties and with their performance.

In the course of their work, the staff of the General Directorate “Execution of Sentences” are guided by the principles of humane treatment of prisoners and do not allow their rights to be violated.

Prisoners' rights are guaranteed and inalienable and, regardless of their legal status, they retain their fundamental human rights, albeit with certain restrictions relating to conditions of detention and security.

Every officer, during his or her initial training, is obliged to be familiar with the Bulgarian Law for execution of sentences and detention as well as with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Nelson Mandela Rules and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

One of the main challenges facing the Bulgarian penitentiary system is the material environment in detention facilities. We have done a lot of work to solve this problem, but we have a lot more to do.

No new prison has been built in Bulgaria in the last few decades, and some of the facilities in operation do not meet modern standards.

In the current year, the General Directorate “Execution of Sentences” has implemented three projects, and measures related to the implementation of the reform of the penitentiary system are being supported in order to meet the new challenges, the international commitments undertaken and to achieve real and long-term results.

Under one of the projects that the General Directorate “Execution of Sentences” completed earlier this year, a new pilot prison with a capacity for 400 people was built, linked to a new training centre for 100 people and a halfway house. Within the same project, as a result of our joint work with many international and national experts, we have developed a new conceptual framework for the rehabilitation of prisoners, a new risk assessment tool and a new training programme for staff.

Other projects have included the renovation of prison dormitories and detention facilities. Inmate training centres and half-way houses were built.

With regard to the modernisation of the probation system in Bulgaria, we have succeeded in strengthening the implementation of probation measures and we increased the competences of probation officers and updated the risk assessment and intervention tool for offenders.

With the development and deployment of new risk assessment tools, we have taken another step towards modernising the Bulgarian corrections system. As a particular success, in addition to the significant improvement in the material environment and conditions for prisoners, I also count the improvement in the treatment of vulnerable groups of prisoners, the development and implementation of new reintegration programmes.

The creation of a new curriculum for both prison and probation officers has contributed to improving the quality of their training by familiarising them with the most up-to-date practices and principles of work, which in turn will prepare them for the challenges they face in carrying out their duties.

The development of our penitentiary system is in line with changes in the legal framework, society and the socio-demographic profile of offenders, and requires our staff to continuously improve their skills. This has led to the updating of training systems and concepts, the evaluation of existing diagnostic tools and the effectiveness of individual and group programmes to ensure the quality of their delivery.

As a result of our efforts, just a few days ago, the enhanced monitoring of Bulgaria for poor conditions in detention facilities was dropped after a final resolution of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. In its resolution, the Committee of Ministers noted that, with the measures taken by Bulgaria, the problem of overcrowding in places of detention has been almost completely resolved and the material conditions have been significantly improved.

The results achieved are of the utmost importance for our organisation and are in fulfilment and service of the reform of the penal enforcement system. In this way, we have made significant progress in dealing with the new challenges and international commitments made by the Bulgarian State, and we have achieved real, significant and long-term results.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work with outstanding professionals who are constantly upgrading and developing their competences, improving the work with prisoners and probationers and always guided by respect for their rights and the rule of law.

Thank you for your attention.