

19.06.2018. Council of Europe's Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services. Opening Plenary Session: Urmas Reinsalu, Minister of Justice

Dear directors and officers of correctional services, representatives of international bodies, experts, distinguished delegates!

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all in Estonia in Jõhvi.

It is an honour to facilitate the 23rd Council of Europe's Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services and at the same time, our chance to introduce the Estonian prison system to so many high-ranking civil servants from different countries.

The geographical location of the Department of Prisons of the Ministry of Justice - Jõhvi - is not accidental, nor based on economic calculations. The eastern border region was the most intensively sovietised area of Estonia in the aftermath of the Second World War.

For large countries and nations, mass repressions are a tragedy; for small nations, it is a catastrophe.

In order to re-establish the moral values and norms of a democratic society, it is not enough to change legislation. It is crucial to have a critical amount of population believing and acting naturally in accordance with these values. A prison is, in a way, a small society within a society. It has its specific rules, regulations and inhabitants.

So the Estonian prison system has knowingly and staunchly promoted, alongside legal reforms, professional ethics and moral values of prison officers. We have taught them that their authority comes with a responsibility to be an example of a good citizen, of a good human being. I believe in the Estonian saying "*Kuidas metsa hõikad, nõnda vastu kajab.*" (The forest answers in the same way one shouts in it.)

Thus, the political agenda of moving one of the three prisons of Estonia, Viru Prison, and the Prison Department of the Ministry of Justice to Jõhvi, has been the integration of the eastern region of the country. Viru prison was opened in 2008 and the Prison Department relocated to Jõhvi in 2013 – contrary to many sceptics, the idea has not failed.

In our criminal justice system you can certainly come across aspects that we are proud of, but also issues on what we need to work harder. Luckily, in Estonia there has been a political consensus that new and modern prisons have to be built. The New Tallinn Prison, which all of you are welcome to visit, will complete the renewed prison infrastructure in Estonia. At the same time, there is a lot of improvements ahead of us, concerning the offender resocialisation work.

I wish you all a pleasant stay and an interesting conference in Estonia.