

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the 2024 ad hoc visit to Latvia was to examine the treatment of persons held in prisons and to follow up on the situation found in the 2022 visit.

In the report on its 2022 periodic visit, the Committee had expressed its grave concern that many of its long-standing recommendations, some of them dating back to the first visit to Latvia in 1999, remained unimplemented (or only partially implemented). This concerned, in particular, the malignant influence of the informal prisoner hierarchy in Latvian prisons and, subsequently, inter-prisoner violence (the extent of which was largely underestimated by the authorities due to the lack of effective investigation and the rules of the informal prisoner hierarchy forbidding prisoners to complain).

The findings of the 2024 visit, as set out in this report, demonstrate that there is still a lack of progress across a range of critical areas. These include the conversion of dormitory-type accommodation into cellular-type accommodation, the elimination of the pervasively harmful effects of the informal prisoner hierarchy, and the improvement in the recording, reporting and effective investigation of suspected cases of inter-prisoner violence. In addition, there needs to be a significant increase of custodial staff numbers and their presence in the detention areas. Further development of prisoner reintegration, and the provision of adequate assistance to prisoners with substance-related problems should also be put in place.

More specifically, the Committee concludes that the Latvian authorities are still far from fully implementing their duty to protect inmates from inter-prisoner violence as well as to carry out effective investigations when it occurs.

Furthermore, the Committee notes that the informal prisoner hierarchy continues to be deeply embedded in almost every aspect of daily prison life.

The Committee reiterates its view that the situation of prisoners belonging to the lowest caste of the informal prisoner hierarchy, which in some cases could amount to modern slavery (in the form of forced labour), could be considered to constitute a continuing violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 3 prohibits, *inter alia* all forms of inhuman or degrading treatment and obliges state authorities to take appropriate measures to prevent such treatment, including that carried out by private individuals, such as fellow prisoners.

Moreover, staff numbers are totally inadequate for prison staff to be in a position to protect prisoners from other inmates who might wish to cause them harm, or to prevent the influx of prohibited objects, especially illicit drugs, into the prisons. Indeed, the current staffing numbers and approach do not allow for the development of a dynamic security approach or for the establishment of meaningful contact between custodial staff and prisoners, which would enable staff to understand the needs of prisoners, assist them with daily living issues, and motivate them to engage in purposeful activities.

The Committee calls upon the Latvian authorities to significantly enhance their efforts to eradicate the influence of the informal prisoner hierarchy in the prison system, which is *inter alia* undermining the authority of the state, fuelling inter-prisoner violence, and promoting access to illicit drugs in prisons.