

Opening address by Mr Hugh CHETWYND  
Head of Department, Deprivation of liberty  
Executive Secretary, European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and  
Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT)  
Council of Europe  
31st COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF PRISON AND  
PROBATION SERVICES (CDPPS)

“

“Persons with Specific Needs and Vulnerabilities”

Valetta, Malta, 3-4 June 2026

Dear Permanent Secretary, dear Directors-general, dear colleagues, dear friends

On behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, it is great pleasure to welcome you to this 31<sup>st</sup> edition of our annual conference.

Thank you, Permanent Secretary Dimech, thank you also to our host Chris Siegersma

The organisation of this Conference is

I think I can speak for all when I say how happy we are to be here in this historic city of Valetta and on the beautiful island of Malta. It represents a distraction from our daily toils and gives us the space to drawn breath, broaden our horizons and through interactions learn how others are approaching similar challenges.

However, we do not operate in a void, whether national or international.

Allow me to say a few words linked to the ongoing brutal war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine. Europe is standing by Ukraine. In its modest way, the Council of Europe continues its unwavering support too; at the meeting of foreign ministers of the CoE in Chisinau on 15 May 2026:

- 36 countries and the EU declared their intention to join the *Agreement on the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine* – this marks a crucial step towards the practical implementation of the tribunal tasked with investigating, prosecuting and trying persons who bear the greatest responsibility for the war.
- There was renewed support to contribute to Ukraine’s programme of reforms, - the Action Plan for Ukraine, “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction 2023-2026”, which includes reform of the prison and probation service.

In this context, I would like to welcome the participation of the Deputy Minister of Justice, Mr Pikalov, and Mr Nikoniskyn, from the Ukrainian prison service, who we all remember last September in Krakow provided us with a sobering insight into the challenges of running a prison service during wartime.

The recent CoE meeting in Chisinau probably garnered the most amount of headlines due to its adoption of a political declaration underlining and clarifying member states views of the European Convention on Human Rights system, notably in the context of migration.

I mention this as the treatment of foreign nationals has clear implications for prison and probation services. Foreign nationals make up around 50% or more of prisoners in 10 European prison jurisdictions, including here in Malta, and many other jurisdictions have between 10 and 20% non-EU foreign nationals in their prisons. Even those prison systems where there are currently almost no foreign nationals such a situation will likely change in the years to come.

The challenge for prison management and probation is how to work with a group of persons many of whom will be liable for removal at the end of their sentence. The management of sentences is predicated on the fact that persons in prison will reintegrate into the communities from which they came prior to their criminal conviction. What kind of sentence plan should be developed for persons liable to removal? Should it be tailored to their specific circumstances or based on the assumption that they might remain in the country and go back into the host community? Do prison management and probation know whether someone will be liable for removal at the end of their sentence – should they? Should a prison sentence below a certain limit be transformed into an immediate removal order – would that assist with managing overcrowding?

At the same time, certain prison services have to accommodate persons who have committed no criminal offence and are placed in prison for administrative reasons pending their removal. Such a situation impacts negatively the running of the prisons concerned and is totally inappropriate.

These are all issues which the workshop on foreign nationals will address.

Another group which poses a different range of challenges is that of older persons in prison and on probation. The numbers are rising and some prisons or sections of prisons are effectively operating as care homes and having to put in place palliative care processes for end of life. Considering the often-complex needs and vulnerabilities of older prisoners as regards health needs, chronic illnesses, cognitive decline and reduced mobility, their increasing presence will have significant implications for prisons and probation. I look forward to our discussions on this topic.

The conference will also look at women in prison.

Although the numbers of women in prison and on probation represent a small percentage of the overall numbers, there has been a clear recognition over the past 15 years that women should not be treated as vulnerable men held within prison systems built by men for men and largely managed by men. There is a necessity to develop a distinct approach towards addressing the needs and challenges that women face in prison and on probation. There are many good policy practices that have been developed in various European countries and there is much that can be learned from each other. The CPT intends to adopt updated standards on the treatment of women in prison in the coming months. The PCCP will also be drafting a recommendation on women in prison and on probation as from next year.

The fourth topic “Cooperation between prison and probation services” is one which unites us all here and aims to explore how these services can work together more effectively to ensure continuity of care for individuals transitioning from custody back into the community.

There are of course other groups with specific needs and vulnerabilities that could be highlighted. However, I would like to emphasise one other important subject which is critical to the well-functioning of a prison and to supporting persons on probation. That is healthcare.

The CPT has recently published its updated and expanded standard on healthcare in prison. Yes, prison healthcare services play an important role in preventing ill-treatment. But more broadly they can make a significant contribution to the overall quality of life of prisoners and to the working conditions of staff in the establishment within which they operate. And, the positive impact of prison healthcare services goes beyond the limits of imprisonment. It is an issue of wider public health, as time spent in prison may be an opportunity to identify and treat prisoners with transmissible or chronic diseases or to adequately support those persons with substance use or mental disorders, before their release into the community. We shall hear a little bit more about this later this morning.

I am afraid that I cannot end without mentioning the perennial burden which many of the prison systems in Europe are facing. Left unchecked it threatens to undermine the functioning and purpose of imprisonment. I am of course speaking about prison overcrowding. Recently, an unprecedented event took place in Belgium when all the directors of prison went on strike to express their profound exasperation at the lack of action taken to address this crisis. Even the recently opened model prison of Harren is being undermined by overcrowding. You are well aware of the nefarious consequences prison overcrowding brings. Persuading politicians is proving harder.

This is a priority for the Council of Europe and over the next year we will be examining this issue under the Monegasque and Dutch Presidencies, and sharing the examples of those jurisdictions which have managed to have some success in bringing prison population numbers down.

This conference is an occasion learn from each other and to network. I would also like you to feed back to us on how we can ensure these conferences are most valuable for you in addressing the pertinent topics in the most effective manner.

Let me also take the opportunity to thank our distinguished moderators and speakers for their dedication and for their stimulating presentations ... no pressure on you !

Finally, I would like to thank you all and your teams for the work you do, day in and day out, to manage diverse groups of challenging persons securely, safely and fairly, in prisons and in the community. This important work deserves recognition.

I wish everyone a productive event.