

**Opening address by Mr Hugh CHETWYND
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Council of Europe**

**30th COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF PRISON AND
PROBATION SERVICES (CDPPS)**

**“Can we move away from the overuse of penal sanctions?”
Krakow, Poland, 24-25 September 2025**

Dear Minister, dear participants,

On behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, it is great pleasure to welcome you to this conference.

Thank you Minister Zurck for your personal reflections and outlining the reforms currently being undertaken in the Polish prison system.

Thank you also to Under Secretary Maria Ejchart and Director General Niziolek.

The organisation of this Conference is perfect - we have endured blue skies and sunshine the day before its opening (Monday) but rain and cold and clouds now keep us inside working during the conference.

I think I can speak for all when I say how happy we are to be here in the historic city of Krakow and to have an opportunity to learn about the Polish prison system today and during the visit to a prison tomorrow, as well as to partake in some traditional songs and dance. I also appreciate the “therapy Wawel” dragon provided to all participants to relieve the stress of our daily work; I have seen them being hugged already!

Allow me also to note that our continent continues to be impacted by the brutal war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine. Our Polish hosts have been at the forefront of supporting the Ukrainian people. In its more modest way, the Council of Europe continues its unwavering support to Ukraine. The Register for Damages for Ukraine has so far received claims from more than 55,000 persons and work is on going on a Convention to establish the Claims Commission. Also in June, an agreement to establish a tribunal for the crime of aggression was signed by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the President of Ukraine.

I would like to welcome the participation of the Deputy Minister of Justice, Ms Suhak, and of Mr Nikoniskyn, from the Ukrainian prison service which has its own set of unique challenges about which we will hear later.

Prisons and probation services are under increasing strain across the European continent. The consequences of overcrowding and lack of trained staff undermine the ability of prisons to hold persons in decent and safe conditions and to help them prepare for reintegration into the community. In some countries, the threat of organised crime is challenging prison services to maintain control while in others the informal prisoner hierarchy that emerged from Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union continues to hold sway. Some countries are moving to renting prisons in third countries to take the surplus population (probably foreign nationals) as a cheaper solution. Have the failures from past experiments of this kind led to new solutions? And, probation services are having to cope with ever increasing workloads.

As you can hear, the CPT (of which I am the Executive Secretary) has an optimistic analysis of the state of affairs in European prisons (and probation). However, this is only one part of the story as there are a multitude of initiatives across the continent to improve the way in which persons who offend are treated and supported both in prison and in the community – investment in staff / improvement in material conditions / promoting the use of new technologies to improve contacts are but a few examples.

In the Council of Europe, we are only too aware of the challenges you, as directors of prisons and probation services, face. And in all our work, our aim is to support you, whether it be through cooperation programmes, addressing specific issues such as disciplinary procedures, mental health provision, training for staff on risk assessment (or the use of force) or developing new standards through the work of the Penological Council (recommendations on mental health and education) or through the monitoring work of the CPT. The three pillars of monitoring, standard setting and corporation are now more closely associated within one department of the Council of Europe to create better synergies in our work and to respond more efficiently to the needs of our 46 Member States.

Of course, if prison and probation services are to carry out their work effectively, they need to be properly resourced and overcrowding in prisons must be ended. This requires political leaders making tough decisions. Some countries have done this.

A glance at the SPACE statistics demonstrates the trends in both prisons (published in July) and probation. Participants will have an opportunity to hear from Eduardo Coco, who is part of the team from Lausanne University which is behind SPACE. Of course, statistics can be used to support many messages, but when sound, they provide an objective basis for policy discussions. The theme of this year's conference is highly topical and perhaps should be slightly rephrased as: How can we move away from the overuse of penal sanctions? Because "we can"!

The Conference provides a good platform to explore alternative approaches and solutions – non-custodial measures, restorative justice and programmes to support persons with their reintegration into the community.

The conference is an occasion learn from each other and to network. I note that the agenda for the next two days is as usual quite full and diverse: we will hear about net-widening of prison and probation in the plenary session before breaking into workshops dedicated to *the use of data and risk assessment tools to reform penal policies*; the *promotion of positive health and trauma informed care*; *children with imprisoned parents*; and finally the *strategic approach by prison and probation services to crisis management*.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank our distinguished moderators and speakers for their dedication and for their stimulating presentations ... no pressure on you !

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•Finally, I would like to thank you all, the audience, not only for being here today, but also for the work you do, day in and day out, to ensure that the rights of those who are deprived of liberty or supervised in the community are upheld, and that they are treated fairly and with dignity.

And in the current environment it is necessary to acknowledge and celebrate this and to recognise that you are making a difference.

I wish everyone a productive event.