

Draft Conclusions
31st Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services
“Persons with Specific Needs and Vulnerabilities”
Valletta, Malta – 3-4 June 2026

Dear participants,

As we come to the end of this 31st Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services, I would like to share not only a summary of our discussions, but also a reflection on what I believe has emerged as the central message of the debates.

Over the last two days, we have discussed foreign nationals, women, older persons, mental health, probation, prisons and rehabilitation. Yet behind every topic, every policy and every challenge, we repeatedly encountered the same reality: human beings.

Human beings facing vulnerability.

Human beings carrying responsibilities.

Human beings helping other human beings move forward.

And perhaps this is the most important conclusion of our Conference: prison and probation services are, above all, services from persons to persons.

One of the first sessions of this Conference was dedicated to presenting the most recent standards, recommendations and initiatives developed by the Council for Penological Co-operation. This was not merely an opportunity to showcase our work. It was, above all, an exercise of accountability. The recommendations we develop on issues such as artificial intelligence, prison education, mental health and foreign nationals only have value if they respond to the realities faced by prison and probation services and support practitioners in addressing the increasingly complex challenges they face.

For this reason, presenting our work to you was also an opportunity to listen and to test whether our priorities correspond to your needs, as well as to ensure that the work of the PC-CP continues to be informed by the experiences, concerns and expertise of those responsible for leading prison and probation services across Europe.

In many ways, the theme of this Conference—*Persons with Specific Needs and Vulnerabilities*—illustrates precisely why this dialogue is so important.

The discussions concerning foreign nationals in prison and probation highlighted one of the most significant demographic and operational developments affecting correctional systems across Europe today. Participants noted that, while the increase has been gradual in many countries, the proportion of foreign nationals within prison populations continues to rise and, in some jurisdictions, now represents a substantial share of all persons deprived of liberty.

The workshop emphasized that foreign nationals often experience a combination of vulnerabilities that place them at greater risk of exclusion within prison systems. Language barriers, separation from family, social isolation, limited access to information and difficulties in navigating legal and administrative procedures can significantly affect their prison experience and their prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration. Participants also highlighted concerns regarding unequal access to healthcare, vocational training, work opportunities, sentence planning, early release mechanisms and preparation for release.

A central message emerging from the discussions was that equality of treatment requires more than the formal application of the same rules. Foreign nationals frequently require additional support measures to ensure genuine access to rights and opportunities as essential elements of a fair and effective judicial response.

A particularly important discussion during this Conference focused on women in prison and probation and the need to develop truly gender-responsive criminal justice systems.

The workshop highlighted that women's pathways into offending and criminal justice involvement are often fundamentally different from those of men. Poverty, violence, trauma, discrimination and social exclusion frequently lie at the root of women's contact with the justice system and create complex needs that continue throughout imprisonment, probation and reintegration.

A key message emerging from the discussions was that many criminal justice systems remain predominantly designed around male populations. Gender-blind legislation, male-centred institutional cultures and prison environments that fail to adequately address the specific needs of women continue to create barriers to effective rehabilitation and reintegration.

The workshop also challenged us to reflect on a troubling paradox: in some cases, prison is still perceived as a place of safety for vulnerable women, leading to unnecessary remand detention where social, health or protection responses might be more appropriate. This finding reinforces the importance of developing stronger community-based alternatives and ensuring that probation is recognised not as a secondary option to imprisonment, but as an effective and valuable intervention in its own right.

Another important theme addressed during this Conference was the growing presence of older persons within prison and probation systems across Europe. Participants agreed that this is no longer an emerging issue, but a structural reality that requires immediate attention from policymakers, prison administrations and probation services alike.

The workshop highlighted a clear demographic trend: as European societies age, prison populations are ageing as well. Yet many prison systems remain poorly equipped to respond to the specific needs of older persons. Participants expressed concern that prison infrastructure, healthcare services and rehabilitation programmes are often designed for younger populations and do not adequately address the realities associated with ageing.

A recurring concern throughout the discussions was the impact of deprivation of liberty on the ageing process itself. Older prisoners frequently experience physical and mental deterioration at a faster rate than their counterparts in the community, due to the

cumulative effects of imprisonment, social isolation, chronic health conditions and reduced autonomy.

The discussions ultimately reminded us that dignity does not diminish with age. As prison and probation populations evolve, our systems must evolve with them. The way we respond to the needs of older persons will be an important measure of our commitment to human rights, humane treatment and the principle that every individual, regardless of age, deserves respect, care and opportunities for social inclusion.

The workshop on cooperation between prison and probation services reminded us that successful rehabilitation does not begin with procedures, structures or institutions; it begins with the person. The powerful testimony of lived experience presented during the workshop demonstrated that change becomes possible when individuals feel valued, respected and supported, and when systems are capable of recognising their strengths and potential rather than simply managing their risks.

Participants agreed that the transition from prison to the community remains the most critical stage of the rehabilitation journey. Too often, progress achieved during imprisonment is lost because support mechanisms are fragmented, responsibilities are divided, and the connection between prison and probation services is not sufficiently strong. The workshop therefore highlighted the need to move beyond institutional boundaries and develop truly seamless pathways from custody to community.

A further key message was that rehabilitation and reintegration cannot be delivered by prison and probation services alone. Sustainable reintegration requires strong partnerships with housing providers, health and mental health services, addiction treatment programmes, employers, community organisations and wider civil society. Communities must be prepared not only to receive people back, but also to actively contribute to their reintegration and social inclusion.

Dear participants,

Throughout our discussions, one message emerged repeatedly: vulnerability is not simply an individual characteristic. It is often shaped by the way institutions respond—or fail to respond—to individual circumstances.

But at the same time, we also recognised something that is sometimes overlooked: the well-being of the professionals who work in our services. Staff resilience, ethical working environments and the prevention of burnout are not secondary concerns. They are essential conditions for effective and humane services.

Perhaps the most powerful moment of the Conference came during the lived experience session. It reminded us that behind every policy, every recommendation and every statistic, there is a human story. Listening to those who have experienced detention or supervision first-hand challenges us to see our systems through different eyes. It reminds us that rehabilitation is not an abstract objective—it is a reality that affects lives, families and communities.

Taken together, these discussions point towards a common conclusion.

The future of prison and probation services lies not in treating people as categories, but in recognising them as individuals.

Before I conclude, as President of the PC-CP and on behalf of the Vice-President, the Secretariat and all Members of the WG, I would like to reaffirm our commitment on continuously improving the way we work. We are determined to make the PC-CP more dynamic, more participative, more responsive and more connected to the realities faced by prison and probation administrations.

Our ambition is clear: to strengthen the PC-CP as a reliable, competent, modern and useful source of expert knowledge for all Council of Europe member States; a place where experience is shared openly, innovation is encouraged, and collective expertise is transformed into practical solutions.

I would like to sincerely thank our Maltese hosts, the Council of Europe Secretariat, all speakers, moderators and participants. Your contributions have made this Conference rich, thoughtful and inspiring.

The conversations held in Valletta should not end here. They should travel back with us—to our institutions, our services and our countries.

Thank you for your attention.