

Closing Speech – 30th Annual Conference

Distinguished Undersecretary of State Ms Ejchart

Distinguished Director General Ms. Niziolek,

Distinguished President of CPT Mr. Mitchell,

Dear Directors General of Prisons and Probation,

Dear Representatives of the Polish Ministry of Justice, Prison and Probation Services,

Dear Colleagues from the various bodies of the Council of Europe,

Dear colleagues from international organizations that provide support, expertise, and connectivity to prison and probation services across Europe —special thanks to the Confederation of European Probation, EuroPris and Penal Reform International,

My dear and valued members of the PC-CP Working Group,

As Chair of the Council for Penological Cooperation of the Council of Europe, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the significance of this event, held in the beautiful and historic city of Kraków.

First, I want to express our profound thanks to our Polish colleagues for their warm hospitality and for hosting us so warmly — both professionally and socially. Thank you for the wonderful dinners, from Tuesday's gathering to last night's gala, for the dancing, the open bar and for organizing today's visit to the prison, which many of us will have the opportunity to attend.

To those who contributed to organizing this conference — and in particular to my fellow PC-CP Working Group members: Maria, Paulina, Jorge, Kim, Frederik, Carla, Daniela, and Dominik — a big thank you. And of course, none of this would have been possible without the leadership and hard work of the Council of Europe staff, Christine and Louise. Thank you for your dedication.

As you all know, it's never easy to choose themes that will resonate with you — the leaders of prison and probation systems across Europe. We are well aware of how limited your time is. If you choose to spend two days with us, our objective must be to ensure that you leave with new ideas, a bigger network of colleagues, practical solutions, or fresh perspectives — things you might not have considered before or, at least, not in the same way. We truly hope we have achieved that goal.

In times of crisis — and unfortunately, we are becoming all too familiar with such crises — fear can spread rapidly, both among the public and political leaders, as it was well emphasized yesterday by our Polish colleagues. Fear often drives us to protect ourselves from what we don't fully understand, from what unsettles us.

In our field, this often translates into a desire to increase security by locking more people up for longer periods of time. As we've heard over the past few days, the number of people in prison continues to rise across nearly every European country, and overcrowding remains a major concern for prison and probation leaders throughout the continent.

That's why this year we chose to frame the conference around the question: "Can we move away from the overuse of penal sanctions?" And yes, Hugh was right when he said that the right question should be How we can move away ...? And now, after everything we have heard and shared these days, I put the question to you once more: *Can we really? If so, how?

During the first part of the conference, a group of experts reflected on the effects that overcrowding and net-widening are having in various European countries. We realized once again that we share many of the same problems and perhaps we can share solutions as well. AS we all know about the problems, I would to focus on the solutions, as the ones commented by Caron McCarthy in her excellent intervention. She urged us to be "smart on crime" and to learn from one another, highlighting good practices such as improving access to education in Georgia, expanding open-regime compliance in Spain, and implementing small detention houses in Belgium, among others.

It was also very interesting to hear the experts explain that we should not analyze the realities of the prison and probation systems separately, as they form part of the same system, with the same individuals often entering and exiting both systems in a continuous cycle. Additionally, we must consider that some solutions we seek in one system may have unintended consequences in the other. For example, one of the reforms implemented in England and Wales: the promotion of early release of prisoners, aimed at reducing overcrowding, has led to an unsustainable increase in workload for the Probation Service.

From the outset, we knew that crisis management had to be a central theme of this year's conference. Unfortunately, in recent years, we have been faced with increasingly severe challenges that have pushed our societies — and by extension, our prison and Probation systems — to their breaking points.

We are witnessing the horrors of war in different parts of the world, and, as the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Mr Alain Berset recently pointed out, "these crises demand clarity and courage", such as the human tragedy with no end in sight taking place in Gaza, and the horror of the war in Ukraine, considered by the Secretary General "an existential test for the European order".

We thank the Ukrainian representatives who joined us to share how such a devastating situation — a war — affects the prison system. In wartime, the primary priority of the Ukrainian penitentiary service is the safety of both staff and inmates. The conflict has led to the development of emergency protocols for damaged facilities, improved interagency coordination, specialized staff training, and the use of rapid-response tools. Prisoners of war are managed according to humanitarian law, with monitoring systems, individual ID cards, and digitalized case files ensuring continuity during transfers or evacuations. Despite functioning under extreme conditions, the system operates with very limited resources and relies heavily on international support. We learned in the workshop that communication and cooperation is key to continue functioning.

The Croatian representative also addressed how, shaped by past experiences of war, natural disasters, and chronic staff shortages, Croatia has integrated emergency preparedness into its prison management framework. Authorities, once in denial of structural issues, now rely on evidence-based decision-making to improve security, living conditions, and human rights compliance.

To design effective criminal justice and prison policies that can manage such crises — while still advancing toward our two core goals: public safety and the rehabilitation of offenders — we must rely on solid, reliable data. Data that informs us, supports us, and guides our decisions.

A highly informative workshop focused specifically on this key issue: how data can and should influence policymaking. We learned about the SPACE statistics and the significance of this being the first time that all 46 countries have submitted data. Some of the key findings shared included a post-COVID trend of rising prison populations; the fact that women consistently make up about 5% of the prison population, a figure that has remained stable for many years; and that around 25 billion euros are spent annually by the 46 European prison administrations. On average, 81 euros are spent per prisoner per day.

We also heard about the experience of the UK and how they use data to improve the delivery and practice of probation policy. It was explained how the UK works to ensure an evidence-based approach by using both quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources — including service user feedback. The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insights, in order to make decisions that are as well-informed as possible. This approach has been particularly successful in improving the quality of pre-sentence reports and advice provided to the courts.

Finally, we learned that Poland has developed a recidivism risk assessment tool to replace individual assessments previously conducted by officers. They drew on input from other countries and existing research to create this new tool, which collects data on over 400 static and dynamic factors from their database, supplemented by direct questions to inmates. The tool provides not only a percentage estimate of recidivism risk but also insights into how that risk can be reduced. Since last year, all prisoners in Poland have been assessed—amounting to around 100,000 individuals so far—resulting in the creation of a large and robust database. Preliminary outcomes suggest that the tool is contributing to increased institutional security and enabling more tailored individual intervention programs.

On the other hand, within the PC-CP, we are clear that the major structural problems facing our prison systems, as the ones mentioned before, should not overshadow the fundamental need to continue focusing on what is truly the backbone of our work: the individuals in prison and under probation and their specific needs.

We know that a very high percentage of those who commit crimes have also been victims themselves — victims of abuse, violence, and neglect. These experiences leave deep trauma, with consequences across all areas of their lives. For many years, we have focused our attention on risk. This year, we also wanted to focus on needs — and how a trauma-informed approach can help us better understand and respond to the needs of the people in our care.

During the Workshop focused on “Promoting Positive Health and Trauma-Informed Care,” we reflected on the need for prison systems to have reliable data on those who die in custody (and outside, too), as many of these deaths are preventable. Analyzing such data will help us identify risk factors and design appropriate interventions. The researches on the table encouraged us to improve data collection and transparency in this regard.

During the workshop, we also learned about the trauma-informed approach being implemented in some prison systems. Research shows that untreated trauma increases the risk of recidivism, while integrating trauma knowledge promotes recovery and resilience. So let's go for it. However, mental health and trauma issues don't belong only to the prison

population. We also discussed the impact of the prison staff's social role on their own well-being. We must care for the caregivers. To do so, we need to shift the view of prison staff from *"punishers"* to *"professionals"*. We must also consider the impact of overcrowding not only on the mental health of prisoners but also on the tensions it creates between prison staff, which affects their well-being.

Related to this, we have just heard that the prison population is increasingly neurodiverse. Experts are encouraging us to move away from the term "disability" and instead use concepts like *functional diversity* and, more recently, *neurodiversity* — frameworks that are gaining wider acceptance across society and that we must progressively integrate into our penal and prison systems. Early detection is key. It allows us to personalize our approach to neurodivergent individuals and combat the stigma that often surrounds such conditions. To achieve this, we need training and a better understanding of this reality. We must approach it with empathy, not fear, and work alongside these individuals to improve their lives and help them break free from criminal behavior.

This year, we also took time to remind ourselves that people in prison are part of family systems, and that incarceration has a sudden and often devastating impact on those families. We focused specifically on the Children of incarcerated parents, during the workshop we learned that over 2.5 million children in Europe have a parent in prison. These children cannot hug their parents or do homework with them. They face social stigma, which often—unfortunately—pushes them toward a life of crime and, eventually, incarceration themselves. While these children visit their parents in prison, they are not always treated with the care and sensitivity they deserve. This issue is central to the Council of Europe's 2018 Recommendation, which was emphasized throughout the workshop

We also learned that, although we cannot prevent their parents' incarceration—though we should aim to do so through the implementation of primary prevention measures—we can work with families to strengthen child-parent bonds during detention, which is a key protective factor. Making the prison visit experience less traumatic is equally important. I would like to thank the organizations working across various prison systems to achieve this goal, such as *Bambinisenzasbarre* in Italy and COPE across Europe, as well as the researchers whose compelling evidence raises awareness and encourages authorities to address this often overlooked issue.

During this conference, we have also had the opportunity to learn more about the Polish penitentiary system. Hosting this event here has been, in my view, an enriching experience—especially since Poland is currently going through a historic moment in the reform of its prison system, as we have heard several times throughout these past few days.

In particular, I was deeply moved by the speech of Ms. Maria Ejchart, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Justice. Her address made me reflect on the importance of having individuals like her—those with a clear, professional, and human-centered vision of what a modern penitentiary system should be—holding positions of responsibility. I am grateful for the clarity with which she presented a system that requires substantial reforms and, over the past three years, has already made significant strides with tangible results. I would like to congratulate Poland for the tremendous work being done, and wish them continued success with the reforms still to come.

Allow me to also take this opportunity to highlight and promote the two key recommendations we are currently working on within the PC-CP.

This year, we are finalizing the revision of the 1989 Recommendation on Education in Prison. Society has evolved significantly over the past 35 years, but education remains a cornerstone in the rehabilitation of offenders. People with low levels of basic education and inadequate professional skills are still disproportionately represented in our prison systems.

The updated text we are working on aims to promote a broad and inclusive concept of education, one that embraces all the diverse learning opportunities that prison systems can offer to holistically improve the lives of those under our care.

We, at the PC-CP, encourage all of you — the leaders of prison institutions across Europe — to ensure that education is prioritized. Education must be seen as a fundamental pillar of rehabilitation, not a secondary issue. Access to educational opportunities — whether formal education, vocational training, arts, sports, or other forms of learning — SHALL be central to the resocialization approach we apply to those deprived of their liberty.

We are also in the process of revising the 2012 Recommendation concerning foreign nationals in prison or under probation. We fully recognize the complexity of this issue, which has significant political, social, and cultural implications. More importantly, it has direct and profound consequences for the foreign nationals under our care. These individuals must be treated on an equal footing with the rest of the prison and probation population, with respect for their fundamental rights and dignity. At the same time, we must remain aware of their specific circumstances and challenges—including language barriers, cultural differences, and potential isolation from family and community support networks. It is essential that we tailor our interventions to effectively respond to these unique needs, ensuring not only fairness but also the promotion of their successful reintegration into society.

Please help us disseminate the standards developed by the Council of Europe in our field. We need your support to ensure that these recommendations are translated into national languages and shared widely within your institutions, particularly among frontline staff and those responsible for implementing policy on a daily basis.

These standards are not just theoretical frameworks. They are practical tools designed to improve the quality, fairness, and humanity of prison and probation systems. It is crucial that all professionals, regardless of their role, are aware of and guided by these principles. The broader the application of these standards, the stronger and more cohesive our collective commitment to human rights, rehabilitation, and effective justice systems will become.

I would like to extend my thanks once again:

- * For your presence,
- * For your contributions,
- * And for helping sustain this conference as a unique space for mutual learning year after year.

It is truly a privilege for us – at the PC-CP- to select the topics for this conference, but we are always open to your ideas and suggestions for future gatherings.

Next year, we will have the pleasure of celebrating the conference in the beautiful country of Malta, and we look forward to seeing many of you there. We will get more information about this from Chris in a minute.

Let us continue, each day, to strive to improve our prison and probation services. Though we know it is complex, let us do our best not to allow them to become tools for social or political agendas driven by fear.

Thank you very much.