

10 June 2022

**Jan Keijssen's opening address at the 27<sup>th</sup> annual Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services *"Prisons and Probation: Sharing and Refocusing Knowledge and Practice"***

*Barcelo Hotel, Sevilla (Spain), 21-22 June 2022*

Dear Directors General, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is as usual a great pleasure for me to be among you, especially after so many long months of lack of physical presence at meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic which created a lot of strain on our societies and was a continuous test to our democracies.

I did hope, like all of you I imagine, that afterwards life should be back to normal, but a new challenge to the peace and democracy in Europe has unexpectedly emerged: the war in Ukraine.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in a flagrant violation of all norms of international law has led to its obviously logical expulsion from the Council of Europe on 16 March 2022. This was not an easy decision to take as it leaves, unfortunately the vast majority of the population (also in the occupied parts of Ukraine) without international scrutiny on the protection of their human rights.

And we already witness that such flagrant violations happen almost every day in the occupied by Russia parts of Ukraine, the most inadmissible of which were the recent death penalties pronounced by the court.

At the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers in Turin, Italy (19-20 May 2022) the war in Ukraine was high on the agenda. The Ministers adopted a decision<sup>1</sup> "United around our values – Council of Europe response to the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine". The CM reiterated its condemnation in the strongest terms of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and expressed its full support to Ukraine and its solidarity with its people. The Ministers also "called on the Russian Federation to immediately cease the aggression, withdraw completely and unconditionally its occupation forces from the territory of Ukraine, and release all abducted civilians, including those forcibly transferred to the territory of the Russian Federation against their will".

The Ministers also condemned "all violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law, including attacks against civilians and civil infrastructure in Ukraine and cultural and religious heritage" and urged the Council of Europe to mobilise all its instruments to hold Russia fully accountable for the human rights violations.

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<sup>1</sup> CM/Del/Dec(2022)132/2

The Ministers adjusted the Action Plan for Ukraine (2018-2022) with measures to protect displaced persons, support legal professionals, provide advice with regard to the European Convention on Human Rights, document human rights violations, protect children's rights, combat violence against women and trafficking, protect vulnerable groups including Roma, and prevent discrimination, as well as measures to support Ukrainian media and the judiciary.

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Returning my attention to the purpose of this high-level Conference, please allow me first to thank our Spanish hosts, the Ministry of the Interior and the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions for its excellent organisation and for holding it in this beautiful hotel in the magnificent city of Sevilla, a city which has existed since Ancient Roman times and where we can find numerous signs of a rich legacy of multicoloured cultures, arts, and traditions.

Your agenda is as usual quite full and also quite varied. I welcome the publication today of the 2021 Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics regarding probation (SPACE II), I am sure you are aware that these annual publications related to prisons and to probation enjoy extensive media coverage not only in Europe but also worldwide, which is very positive as this publicity, among others, allows the professionals and decision makers to have a valid reason in the eyes of the ever-increasing public scrutiny to base their planned reforms of legislation and practices on comparative and validated data. You will have the possibility to discuss with Prof Marcelo Aebi these publications for 2021 in one of the workshops and to share how your administrations are making use of these detailed numbers and comparative tables.

Another important topic on your agenda is modern prison design which is a very important aspect of transforming today's prisons and their spaces into a space which fits life behind their walls. By doing so prison administrations and the criminal justice system in general should contribute to better preparing inmates for their release and social reintegration. A modern prison with well trained staff should provide an atmosphere of normalisation as this will help inmates to understand and accept their crime, repair the harm done and desist from further offending. High walls, solitary confinement and harsh prison conditions are no longer a valid way of rehabilitating a person as they do more harm than good. Digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence play an important part in breaking visible walls and in opening prisons to the outside world, if used wisely, proportionately and humanely. You will have ample opportunities to debate this and also to learn about the latest Council of Europe standard-setting work in the field of AI and its use by the prison and probation services.

Mental health is of growing concern in our societies (the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated further the situation with mental health both of offenders but also of prison and probation staff). The Council of Europe has started considering how to mitigate the possible negative impact imprisonment and penal sanctions in general may have on the mental health of offenders, many of whom may have mental disorders before entering into contact with the criminal justice system or whose state of mental health may be deteriorated after the start of execution of their penal sanctions or measures. This is the second area the Council of Europe is currently examining and a White Paper taking stock of this situation is being drafted, taking into account the judgements of the ECtHR and of the CPT standards.

The dialogue and cooperation between the prison and probation services is a regular point on your agenda and rightly so, as without such everyday dialogue and cooperation between your services it is not conceivable to succeed in helping offenders desist from crime and restore justice in society. I am proud to say that the Council of Europe did initiate this dialogue between your services more than 15 years ago at these Conferences, at the beginning occasionally and since 2006 on a regular basis and that the Confederation of European Probation and EuroPris have been our partners since many years in this endeavour. I am convinced that after all these years of meetings and working together on numerous occasions, the prison and probation services of our member States have become really close and indispensable partners in fighting crime and in helping on everyday basis the rehabilitation and social reintegration of offenders.

We are also happy to count among the partner organisations Penal Reform International (PRI), the International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA) and the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ). All these partner NGOs are very important messengers which help the Council of Europe's standards, principles and messages in reaching directly the professionals and agencies working in the field of execution of penal sanctions and measures. I would like to specifically thank them all.

A topic which is not less important is the situation of women in conflict with the law. Many of these women have been victims in their childhood or adulthood before offending. Many of these women are mothers, often single mothers, often coming from socially deprived milieux. Society has not been always ready to help them find their way in life. Furthermore, research and evidence have shown that prisons are designed for adult male offenders and their environment is usually not adapted to women and less so to women with children. In probation settings the situation regarding access to services for women is usually better and so is the adaptation of these services to their personal circumstances but the need to do more is nevertheless evident in this area. Quite a dedicated team of speakers and moderators will discuss these issues with you, I do hope good initiatives will come out of these discussions.

An issue of continuous interest and concern is how to improve the selection, training and professional development of staff. In this area digital technologies and AI can be of great help but the human factor in taking the final decisions and making the necessary reforms is indispensable and should remain imperative in the future as well. The speakers in this workshop represent prison and probation services of jurisdictions which invest time, efforts and resources to ensure that staff of high quality enter these services and commit to improving their functioning, management and overall success of their work.

I would also like to say farewell to you all as I will be leaving the Council of Europe early next year. I wish to underline that I will miss your Conferences which in the course of the years brought us all regularly together not only as professionals but also as friends. I do feel a part of your big family. As Europe is a small continent, I hope to see you again in the near future in my new capacity.

Well, allow me at the end to wish you all fruitful work, a lot of professional contacts and good social entertainment. I am convinced there will be numerous occasions for doing so at this Conference!