

**Opening address by Ms Hanne JUNCHER, Director, Directorate of Security, Integrity
and Rule of Law, Council of Europe**

**29th COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF PRISON AND
PROBATION SERVICES**

**“Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law at the Heart of Prisons and
Probation”**

Sofia, 24-25 June 2024

Excellences,

Directors General,

Dear colleagues and partners,

I would like to start by thanking the Vice-President of Bulgaria, the Minister of Justice and the Director of the Prison Administration for hosting this important conference. It is an important annual event that brings together the Directors General of the prison and probation services of the Council of Europe member States, as well as high-profile and experienced European researchers, practitioners and NGOs.

Bulgaria is a land with an ancient history, culture and traditions. I am confident that, in addition to promoting the role that the Council of Europe plays in improving human rights and the rule of law in the criminal justice area, these three days will also allow us the privilege of to learning more about Bulgarian life and hospitality.

As usual, we have an impressive line-up of speakers and participants, as well as a busy and very interesting agenda with workshops, plenary sessions, plus a visit to the newly constructed prison in Samoranovo.

The themes to be discussed cover a wide range of challenges faced by the prison and probation services and are of key importance: improving the autonomy and resocialisation of prisoners, combating organised crime groups; preventing net-widening in probation; managing returnees and their families; the role of victims in the rehabilitation process; and the evolution of high-risk prison regimes.

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By way of background, the Council of Europe is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. Starting in 1949 with 10 member States, today we have 46 member states, covering a population of 700 million people.

The Organisation was created after two world wars which had devastated Europe. Its aim was, and continues to be, to bring peace, protect human rights, and improve democracy and the rule of law.

We all thought that such atrocities would never happen again, but we are once more living through challenging times for Europe and the world. The full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation is the most brutal reminder of why the Council of Europe came into being and why its mandate is more pressing than ever.

The 4th Summit of the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government took place in Reykjavik in May last year. It was dedicated to precisely these extraordinary challenges and confirmed the role the Council of Europe must play in protecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

At the Summit, the member States agreed to establish a Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine as a first step towards an international compensation mechanism for victims. The Register opened an office in Kyiv in March 2024.

On 2 April 2024, the Register of Damage for Ukraine officially opened the claims submission process for compensation of damage, loss or injury caused by the Russian aggression.

The launch took place at the 4th meeting of the Conference of Participants of the Register of Damage, held in The Hague as part of the Ministerial Conference on “Restoring Justice for Ukraine”, and attended by ministers and senior officials from more than 60 states. So far more than 2,500 claims were submitted *[figure to be updated by 24 June 2024]*.

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Another important development to mention is that on the 17th of May, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe formally adopted the Framework Convention on AI and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. The Convention will be opened for signature on in Vilnius on the 5th of September.

Following this, the draft CM Recommendation on the Ethical and Organisational Aspects of the Use of AI and Related Digital Technologies by Prison and Probation Services, which was finalised at the end of last year, should soon be adopted by the Committee of Ministers.

We invite you to make use of the important standards and principles it contains in developing your own legal and practical guidance in this area. AI is rapidly entering all areas of our societies and the prison and probation services have to be prepared to make use of this new tool as well.

It will be important to avoid any negative impact it might have on human rights, data protection and the rule of law in general. This involves respecting high professional and ethical standards and investing in staff training.

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The Council of Europe is currently developing standards related to the management of persons with mental disorders and the promotion of positive mental health by the prison and probation services. Many prison and probation services are concerned with the growing number of offenders with mental health problems. In some countries, their number is very high indeed.

Moreover, we have seen these numbers grow significantly during and after the pandemic. Urgent measures are needed to cope with this challenge, and adapted treatment centres need to be used for this purpose. The centres have to be well-staffed, with adequately trained personnel.

The Council of Europe standards in this field will be finalised by the end of 2024 and will be brought to the attention of the national authorities of our member States. We very much hope this will assist you in improving the treatment of prisoners with mental disorders and in promoting positive mental health. We also hope it will help staff in their daily work.

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I would also like to inform you that the Council of Europe is considering the possibility of launching a project on combating informal prison hierarchies. Such a project would be addressed to countries facing that challenge, and aim at protecting vulnerable inmates, increasing security in full respect of human rights, dealing with prison overcrowding, and investing in human resources, staff training and good prison management.

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Excellencies, dear partners and guests,

You are all doing a challenging job in difficult circumstance. The demands on the prisons and probation sectors are constantly increasing and they are complex. Moreover, the public may not always fully realise, or appreciate, the implications.

The Council of Europe is immensely grateful for the time and effort you invest in exchanging, and making available, your experience, both with us and with your counterparts.

The case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings of the CPT, as well as of national mechanisms, leave no doubt that achieving prison and probations services that respect human rights within a democratic society grounded in the rule of law requires a conscious effort, determination, and resources.

We are here to support you in those efforts. This conference, which is part of a by now very well-established tradition, will hopefully be a fruitful and pleasant occasion to reflect further on all these matters.

I wish you success in your work! Thank you for your attention.