

## The EU should demand urgent action on Romania's shameful prison conditions

Written by Charles Tannock on 4 December 2019 in Opinion Plus  
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Former MEP Dr Charles Tannock shines a light on the inhumane treatment prisoners suffer in Romania.



Charles Tannock | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

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The spotlight had already been on Romania's prison conditions due to a report earlier this year by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT).

International concern over Romanian prison conditions is certainly more than justified. It is an issue that deserves the attention of the new European Parliament, the new European Commission and the new Commissioner for the Justice portfolio, Didier Reynders.

The conditions discovered by the CPT parliamentary team fall far below expected European standards for the treatment of prisoners.

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Their report stated that, during their visit, the team was informed of allegations of physical ill-treatment of prisoners by prison staff, notably by members of the masked intervention groups based in four of the prisons visited.

The CPT found the situation at Galati prison particularly alarming, describing a climate of fear. The report detailed allegations of ill-treatment by staff corroborated by medical evidence and raised serious concerns over the lack of recording of injuries by the prison healthcare service and failures to investigate allegations effectively.

Consequently, the CPT questioned the *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* of the masked intervention groups. There have been calls on the Romanian authorities to reconsider the need for their continued existence.

The report also documented cases of severe beatings and sexual abuse by prisoners in their cells, notably among young adult prisoners at Bacău Prison.

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The CPT urged the authorities to establish a cell-share risk assessment process for persons entering prison before they are placed in an admission cell, followed by implementing an individual risk and needs assessment.

The CPT also recommended that the authorities invest far more resources in recruiting and training additional prison staff and developing their professionalism.

The CPT report further found that conflicts of interest of health care staff represented an underlying problem which eroded the prisoners' trust in their clinicians.

The CPT recommended that the Romanian authorities ensure that clinical staff are independent of prison staff.

The report also highlighted the lack of psychiatric input at all of the prisons visited, and that inmates suffering from a mental health disorder had to cope with conditions of detention which impaired their mental and physical health.

Perhaps the most disturbing concern about Romanian prisons is the allegation of physical ill-

treatment by police officers inflicted on detainees.

The reported allegations consisted primarily of blows inflicted by police officers against suspects, seemingly for the primary purpose of extracting a confession.

The CPT also commented on the investigation into allegations of police ill-treatment and recommended that prosecutors strictly apply the criteria of effectiveness.

The CPT criticised the holding of criminal suspects and remand prisoners in police arrest detention centres for up to two months or more, where they are exposed to a greater risk of physical intimidation and psychological pressure.

“No one is suggesting that prison life should be ‘soft’, and I am the first to recognise the need for retribution and deterrence for serious crimes, but such inhumane treatment as witnessed by the CPT team should not exist in a European Union member state”

These concerns are accentuated by the reported poor material conditions, inadequate healthcare resources and an impoverished regime for persons held in arrest detention centres.

The CPT urged the Romanian authorities to consider converting arrest detention centres into proper pre-trial detention facilities and placing them under the authority of the Ministry of Justice and the National Prison Administration and not the Interior Ministry and national police command structures.

Since the CPT’s report, there have been further concerns that an electronic monitoring system has been introduced, without any clarity over who will manage this system or who will take responsibility for importing the technology.

In 2005, during the accession process of Romania to the EU, I was actively engaged as an MEP in raising the plight of Romanian orphans who were in the international pipeline for foreign adoption but were caught-out by a 2004 Romanian law prohibiting this and introduced after a campaign led by Baroness Nicholson with EU support at that time.

I was motivated by my concerns about the then low standards of child protection in Romania and the very poor conditions in Romanian orphanages already full to capacity.

Our campaign, by shining a light on this problem, helped lead to improvement in conditions within these Romanian institutions. So I hope this article will now raise awareness of Romanian prison conditions.

It is both disturbing and unacceptable that such conditions exist inside a European prison system. No one is suggesting that prison life should be ‘soft’, and I am the first to recognise the need for retribution and deterrence for serious crimes, but such inhumane treatment as witnessed by the CPT team should not exist in a European Union Member State.

### **About the author**

Dr Charles Tannock is now practicing as an Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist in London. He was an MEP from 1999 to 2019 and served on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

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