



# EUROPEAN PRISON LITIGATION NETWORK

Ensuring  
Prisoners' Access  
to Justice:  
Collective Action  
for the Rule of  
Law in Detention

# MISSION AND MEANS OF ACTION

EPLN is the leading European network of civil society organisations defending the rights of people deprived of their liberty. Founded in 2013 by lawyers, former prisoners and researchers, EPLN is a grassroots initiative dedicated to strengthening the legal protection of fundamental rights behind bars. Today, the network brings together 32 organisations from 20 European countries.

EPLN works at the European level to remove barriers to prisoners' access to justice and to strengthen effective judicial responses to the structural problems affecting prison systems across Europe. Our activities combine coordinated strategic litigation campaigns with advocacy aimed at advancing human rights standards.

Many of EPLN's initiatives also include research, designed to produce robust evidence-based knowledge to support civil society organisations in litigation and policy advocacy.

To this end, EPLN regularly collaborates with leading European research institutions, including the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and universities in Brussels (ULB), Madrid (Complutense), Florence, and other academic partners.

Through this combination of litigation, advocacy and research, EPLN contributes to strengthening the rule of law and the protection of human rights in prisons across Europe.

# A PEER-TO-PEER NETWORK FOR PRISON LITIGATION ACTORS

EPLN serves as a platform for exchange and collective action among CSOs engaged in prison litigation and the protection of prisoners' rights. The network operates on a horizontal governance model. Its Board represents the member organisations, and strategic priorities are defined during general assemblies, where the members –lawyers, former prisoners, academics and NGOs and prisoners' rights activists- identify common challenges and emerging trends in criminal and penitentiary policies requiring coordinated responses.

Together with its members, EPLN produces regular legal resources on developments in prison law in 15 European countries, as well as the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). EPLN also monitors the work of international organisations dealing with detention issues.

These resources support evidence-based advocacy and strategic litigation, as well as the organisation's strategy planning.

EPLN also works to ensure that civil society perspectives are represented in international debates. It has organised several international conferences bringing together practitioners, academics and institutional actors, including events held at the European Court of Human Rights (in 2016 and 2018) and at the Council of Europe (in 2024), focusing on the impact of European case law on prison realities and criminal justice policies.

In addition, EPLN provides practical support to its members and partners. Its secretariat assists in the preparation of litigation at national and European levels and contributes to capacity-building efforts, particularly in relation to proceedings before the ECtHR and UN human rights bodies.

In times of crisis, EPLN also functions as a solidarity network. In March 2022, shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EPLN was entrusted by the European Union with a programme to evacuate and relocate civil society organisations and human rights defenders at risk. Implemented in cooperation with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the programme enabled Ukrainian organisations to continue their work and document war crimes in the penitentiary system.

---

# SUPPORTING THE RESILIENCE OF INDEPENDENT PRISONERS' RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

**A**cross Europe, CSOs working on prison issues are operating in an increasingly restrictive funding environment. Not only are funds available to NGOs undergoing a drastic reduction, but in the prison field public funding schemes also tend to prioritise state institutions or international organisations engaged in technical cooperation with public authorities. By contrast, CSOs playing a watchdog role are often sidelined because they are perceived as too critical.

As a result, resources increasingly flow towards managerial responses to prison issues, rather than towards organisations working directly with prisoners. Yet it is precisely such engagement with detainees that makes it possible to identify the real problems affecting

prison systems and to push for their structural resolution.

In this context, EPLN acts on two levels. First, we mobilise funding for supporting our member organisations in pursuing their priority actions in the defence of prisoners' rights and building their organisational capacities. Second, EPLN and its partners raise the negative impact of the global civil society funding crisis on the human rights sector. In March 2025, EPLN coordinated a joint mobilisation of more than twenty European organisations, calling on the European Commission to develop a response commensurate with the democratic risks posed by the expected weakening or even disappearance of independent human rights organisations.

# KEY AREAS OF ACTION

## REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN PRISON

**B**ringing together legal practitioners and individuals with lived experience of detention, EPLN has developed a deep understanding of the obstacles faced by prisoners seeking to assert their rights. The network works towards the recognition of specific safeguards for prisoners, including access to legal information, access to a lawyer and protection against reprisals.

Following a comparative study conducted in several EU countries, EPLN published in 2019 a White Paper on prisoners' access to justice. This initiative prompted the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) to dedicate that year's European Lawyers' Day to the issue of prisoners' access to a lawyer. It also led to prison visits

organised by Members of the European Parliament, a public hearing at the European Parliament, and a written question addressed to the European Commission by more than 40 Members of the European Parliament on this topic.

The 2022 European Commission Recommendation on prisoners' rights constituted a first response which, despite its limitations, has opened the door to renewed discussions on the need for European legislation in this field.

In this context, EPLN further coordinated in 2024-2025 a comparative study on systems of legal aid in Greece, Portugal and Ukraine. and launched in 2025 a joint initiative with

the Polish Bar Association, the University of Warsaw and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights to revive discussions at EU level in the context of the Polish Presidency of the EU.

During the European Prisoners' Rights Days in 2025, academics, bar associations and civil society organisations from 16 countries renewed their collective commitment to strengthening international guarantees for prisoners' access to a lawyer in prison.

---

## RESISTING ATTACKS ON THE RULE OF LAW IN PRISONS

**B**eyond taking socio-economic obstacles into account, ensuring prisoners' access to justice now requires enhanced mobilisation for the defence of the very principle of judicial protection of fundamental rights in prison, as well as the core principles of criminal law. The criminal justice field has become a

privileged terrain for challenges to the role of judges, particularly the authority and legitimacy of supranational courts.

EPLN, together with its members and partners, advocates for rule of law monitoring mechanisms — particularly within the EU — to incorporate concerns related to penal populism. This includes scrutiny of measures adopted for purely political purposes that reduce fundamental rights in prison and restrict prisoners' access to courts, including access to a lawyer and the scope of judicial oversight over prison administrations.

This major concern will be the subject of a joint call by prisoners' rights defenders, lawyers and judges during an international conference

to be held in Brussels in September 2026, organised with European bar associations.

EPLN also alerts international bodies on the consequences of the punitive turn observed across the continent. Particular attention is drawn to the decisive role played by long prison sentences in driving prison overcrowding, an issue that is often overlooked in favour of politically less sensitive approaches focusing primarily on prison inflows. EPLN has successfully raised these concerns before the Committee of Ministers in several contexts, including Portugal, Moldova and Ukraine, in cooperation with its national partners – Forum Penal, Promo-LEX and Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine, respectively.

## MEDICAL INDEPENDENCE IN PRISONS: A SAFEGUARD FOR QUALITY CARE

**P**eople suffering from chronic illnesses, infectious diseases and mental health disorders are overrepresented in detention, while prison healthcare systems across Europe continue to face structural shortcomings. EPLN works to improve the quality of care in prisons by advocating for the integration of prison healthcare into national public health systems and for the independence of healthcare professionals in detention. Such independence is essential not only to ensure the quality and continuity of care, but also to reduce the risk of ill-treatment in detention.

In the landmark judgment *Cosovan v. the Republic of Moldova* (2022), achieved by Promo-LEX with the support of EPLN, the ECtHR recognised the independence of medical professionals as a key condition for effective healthcare in prison. Building on this judgment, EPLN successfully advocated before the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe for stronger supervision of prison healthcare reforms in Moldova and Ukraine, leading to the requirement that prison healthcare be placed under the authority of the Ministry of Health. Both governments endorsed

this reform in 2025, with implementation planned for 2027.

In a pending case against Greece, EPLN and its national partner, the Centre for European and Constitutional Law, called on the ECtHR in 2024 to reaffirm the principle of equivalence of care, requiring that healthcare provided in prison be equivalent to that available in the community.

EPLN also advocates for medical release mechanisms for seriously ill prisoners and for improved access to harm reduction services in detention. Given

the high prevalence of HIV in prisons, largely linked to unsafe injection drug use, ensuring access to harm reduction services in full respect of confidentiality remains a critical public health issue. EPLN is currently pursuing litigation concerning the lack of access to methadone treatment in Ukrainian prisons and regularly raises this issue before the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. These efforts have contributed to recent improvements in access to opioid substitution therapy in Ukraine's prison system.

---

## FIGHT AGAINST TORTURE AND IMPUNITY

EPLN works to combat torture and ill-treatment in detention, particularly in countries where such practices remain widespread. The network supports its members in documenting cases of torture, assisting victims and bringing cases before national and international courts.

This support to field work is especially crucial in several post-Soviet countries, where prison systems still bear the legacy of violent administrative practices inherited from the Gulag era. Maintaining hotlines for prisoners and their relatives, conducting regular prison visits, and cooperating with lawyers are essential to ensure that acts of torture are properly documented and brought to justice. In 2024 and 2025 alone, EPLN supported its member organisations in the region in carrying out 28 prison visits and more than 200 consultations with victims or their relatives.

EPLN also campaigns to combat impunity for perpetrators of torture. In Ukraine, the persistent documentation work carried out by EPLN's members, Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine and the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, combined with strategic litigation at the domestic level, has led to significant progress. This includes the closure of Penal Colony No. 45 after evidence of systematic beatings was uncovered, as well as the prosecution of members of the management of Colonies N° 16, N° 45 and N° 77.

EPLN and its members also regularly bring cases of torture and ill-treatment before the ECtHR, advocating for stronger mechanisms to ensure accountability and prevention of future abuses. EPLN is notably defending in a pending case before the ECtHR a Ukrainian prisoner victim of reprisals because of him communicating with the CPT.

In Russia, despite the near-total destruction of independent civil society, EPLN continues to analyse patterns of torture within the prison system. Its findings have been widely cited by international bodies, including the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2021), the UN Human Rights Committee (2022), the UN Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Review (2023), and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2025), particularly regarding forced labour in prisons. EPLN also submits regular analytical reports to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia.

These efforts contribute to documenting the abuses suffered by detainees and to analysing the role of the prison system as a matrix of institutional violence in Russia. EPLN promotes a transitional justice approach, aimed in particular at establishing guarantees of non-repetition.

---

## PREPARING RELEASE BY ENHANCING ACCESS TO SENTENCE ADJUSTMENTS

**D**espite the increasing importance given to the social reintegration of prisoners in international standards, sentence adjustment procedures often remain largely under the control of prison administrations, while prisoners have limited opportunities to effectively present their case.

To address this gap, EPLN launched in 2024 a joint project with its members and partners in seven countries (Poland, Germany, France,

Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Ukraine) to identify the main obstacles preventing prisoners from accessing sentence adjustments. The findings will inform future litigation and advocacy strategies at the European level, aimed at strengthening adversarial guarantees and procedural safeguards for prisoners.

EPLN's work also addresses the growing use of algorithmic tools in sentence adjustment procedures, raising concerns

regarding due process, personal data protection and risks of discrimination. To assess these risks, EPLN conducted a comparative study in several countries and launched a pre-litigation research in Ukraine on the so-called "Cassandra" risk-assessment system.

Finally, EPLN works to remove barriers faced by life-sentenced prisoners in accessing conditional release, through litigation before the ECtHR and submissions to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. In 2021, EPLN and its partner Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union successfully challenged before the Court the regime prohibiting life-sentenced prisoners from communicating with prisoners held in other cells.

---

## ADVANCING PRISON REFORM THROUGH EU ACCESSION

**T**he EU accession process, marked by the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in 2022, created a unique opportunity to elevate prison reform to the level of a genuine political priority capable of addressing the structural causes of prison problems. In both countries, the network benefits from the strong expertise and credibility of its national member organisations

on criminal justice and prison matters. EPLN also builds on long-standing cooperation with the European Union, having been one of the key actors in the international working group involved in the preparation of Ukraine's penitentiary reform strategy up to 2026.

EPLN contributed to ensuring that prison issues are included among the topics monitored

by the European Commission in the accession process, as reflected in the Commission's annual enlargement reports. The conclusions reached in this framework — including the identification of structural shortcomings in prison oversight and accountability mechanisms — have helped shape the reform agenda currently under discussion.

---

# WAR CRIMES AGAINST PRISONERS: DOCUMENTING ABUSE AND SEEKING JUSTICE

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, EPLN has stood alongside its Ukrainian members to document torture committed against prisoners, raise public awareness and support victims in legal proceedings and rehabilitation. EPLN has also engaged with the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office to improve the coordination and effectiveness of investigations into crimes.

Together with its partners, EPLN obtained from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention a decision recognising as arbitrary detention the deportation in November 2022 of around 1,800 Ukrainian prisoners to Russia.

EPLN has also supported Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine in assisting victims in their repatriation to Ukraine. Since 2023, more than 500 released prisoners deported to Russia have returned to Ukrainian government-controlled territory. This work combines logistical and humanitarian assistance with legal action before national bodies and the ECtHR, as well as continuous advocacy calling on international organisations to fulfil their humanitarian mandate toward this group of victims of war crimes. It also includes advocacy aimed at reopening a humanitarian corridor for the return of deported prisoners.

These efforts are reinforced through EPLN's involvement in the international campaign "People First", which advocates for the release of civilians and other captives held as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, EPLN and Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine use the collected evidence of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in domestic proceedings and communications submitted to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine and other UN Special Procedures. Individual complaints have also been lodged with the UN Human Rights Committee.

Finally, EPLN has supported the documentation and analytical work carried out by Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine and the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group on the preventive measures adopted by Ukrainian authorities in response to Russian bombardments of prison facilities. This work includes in particular an analysis of the shelling of Penal Colony N°. 99 in July 2025, which resulted in the death of 17 prisoners.

---

# EUROPEAN PRISON LITIGATION NETWORK

21 ter rue Voltaire  
75011 Paris  
France

[contact@prisonlitigation.org](mailto:contact@prisonlitigation.org)

[www.prisonlitigation.org](http://www.prisonlitigation.org)

© European Prison Litigation Network, 2025



Photos :

Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine ;  
European Prison Litigation Network.