**The [European Prison Observatory](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

**Detention conditions in Europe**

The [European Prison Observatory](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/) (Epo) held a conference in Brussels on Monday 12th. During the meeting, the group working on prison monitoring talked with the European Commission and to some national penitentiary administrations. The Epo, today supported by the Commission, is composed by organizations involved in human rights protection of prisoners from the following European countries: Italy, France, Greece, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Spain and United Kingdom.

Alessio Scandurra, who works with the Italian association Antigone and coordinates the European Prison Observatory, opened the meeting looking back on the history of the Observatory, started in 2001. The European Commission, represented by Jesca Beneder, stressed its interest in both qualitative and quantitative information the Epo gathered on European prisons during the last two years. In fact, it has systematized all the normative instruments that underline the relevance given by the European Union to criminal justice and detention conditions. Mauro Palma, president of the Council for Penological Co-operation of the Council of Europe and new deputy-chief of the Italian penitentiary administration, emphasized the preventive role of prison monitoring bodies with respect to torture and degrading treatments. This role – he said – goes beyond the mere cognitive analysis of the phenomenon at hand. Palma, longtime chairman of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, wished that the Epo would enlarge so that all the Eu countries will be involved in the monitoring process. In his new role at the top of the Italian prison system, he also looked towards the adoption of some of the Epo suggestions in the national prison policies. The Italian penitentiary administration was also represented by Roberta Palmisano, head of the prison studies office of the Ministry of Justice. She explained the new trends of the Italian prison policies in terms of education, social rehabilitation and internal life.

The Epo members, focusing both on a single partner country situation and on the comparative point of view, highlighted the main problems faced by the European penitentiary systems and the lack of compliance with the European standards. The representatives of the eight partner countries also focused on the most recent events in their national prison systems, underlying lights and shadows of the current local situations. Health care, education, work opportunities, security and safety, actions promoting rehabilitation and juvenile prison systems have been the [main focuses](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11:the-european-prison-observatory&catid=2&Itemid=101) of the Epo. Some [good practices](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22:from-national-practices-to-european-guidelines-interesting-initiatives-in-prisons-management&catid=7&Itemid=101) implemented in specific national contexts were also presented, with the hope to export and multiply them.

In England and Wales, for instance, the development of a representative democracy inside prisons has been beneficial for prisoners, staff and the wider society. Prison governors across the EU should be encouraged to commit to the development of a similar approach. Poland has also demonstrated, though a concrete guarantee of the right to vote for detainees, that allowing prisoners the same democratic rights as other citizens acts as a symbol of citizenship and continued social participation without challenging security. Furthermore, as most prisoners come from the most disadvantaged communities in the EU and many are resident in prisons far away from family and friends, maintaining vital relationships can be difficult because visits can be very expensive for low-income families. Meeting the travel costs for family and friends on social security payments, as demonstrated by the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme in UK, should be a standard practice across the EU. Another crucial issue is privacy during visits. When family members visit prisoners, the possibility of intimacy and of sexual intercourse is paramount. A research on the private visiting rooms in France shows that they enhance family links without compromising security. The research also indicates that tension in prison is reduced if prisoners are allowed to have private visits. The French Familial Visit Unities (UVF) system should be implemented in every EU country, as well as the Italian prison university centers and the use of digital technologies for maintaining contact between prisoners and families (the technology required is low cost and secure as a Scottish program of ‘video visits’ demonstrates).

Jamie Bennett, governor of the Grendon Prison in Buckinghamshire, represented the prison institutions of England and Wales. He described the Grendon model, a very unique one in Europe, instituted at the beginning of the Sixties and entirely based on prisoner self-management and on dynamic security.

The conference has been attended by members of several European organizations involved in human rights protection (among them Fair Trials International and Harm Reduction International), to testify the interest from both national and supranational authorities and from the civil society for an independent monitoring body on prison conditions in Europe that should be enlarged and made permanent.