

Coronavirus and prisons in the EU

Member-State measures to reduce spread of the virus

SUMMARY

The coronavirus crisis has put huge pressure on European prisons, already often affected by chronic overcrowding and poor healthcare services. Ensuring strict sanitary conditions, adequate health monitoring and the necessary distancing to prevent an outbreak in these closed environments – particularly vulnerable to contagion – has been a considerable challenge for most, if not all EU Member States.

Starting from March 2020, as lockdowns and states of emergency gradually came into force across Europe, EU Member States have taken a number of containment measures to protect prisoners' health. These measures have consisted mostly of suspending all visits and regular activities in order to limit contacts among detainees and also between detainees and the outside world. Transfers of prisoners between EU countries have been put on hold as well.

Improved sanitary measures have been taken in detention centres, in terms of both personal hygiene and cleanliness of premises. At the same time, several Member States have sought to reduce overcrowding, by limiting entries and increasing exits, for instance by postponing the execution of sentences or using alternatives to detention. However, according to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, at least half the Member States did not seek alternatives to detention.

This briefing looks into the various measures adopted by Member States between early March and the end of May 2020 in response to the challenges posed to the Union's prisons by the coronavirus crisis. While, at the time of writing, containment measures in many Member States are gradually being eased, the long-term impact of the pandemic on prison conditions and populations remains to be seen.



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Introduction

Often [overcrowded](#) and lacking resources and adequate health services, Europe's prisons were at high risk in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. While seeking to preserve prisoners' [right to health](#), most EU countries introduced [restrictions](#) affecting their other rights, such as the right to family life. Measures such as depriving prisoners of contact with families and social activity, or locking them in their cells for almost 24 hours a day, contributed to a feeling of distress and insecurity among prisoners and in some countries led to violent reactions. In [Italy](#), for instance, there were riots in several prisons, resulting in more than 10 deaths among inmates. In this challenging situation, several international and non-governmental organisations called on states to make sure measures to prevent coronavirus outbreaks in prisons upheld human rights. The World Health Organization issued specific [guidelines](#) for prisons, insisting on the importance of access to information and adequate healthcare provision. In its [statement](#) of 20 March, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture noted that any restrictive measure should be 'necessary, proportionate, respectful of human dignity and restricted in time', and recommended finding alternatives to detention, in particular in situations of overcrowding. The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) also stressed the need to reduce detainee numbers, suggesting releasing those particularly vulnerable to coronavirus as well as low-risk offenders, a call echoed by the [European Prison Litigation Network](#), and a number of public figures calling for an [amnesty](#). [Penal Reform International](#) noted the importance of equivalence of care, as per the [UN Nelson Mandela Rules](#), also advocating early release for older or sick inmates. The EU [Fundamental Rights Agency](#) (FRA) stressed the challenges of ensuring access to justice, as courts drastically limited their activities and turned to remote technology (potentially [detrimental to defendants](#)). Although the 'justice lockdown' may have adverse after-effects, such as renewed prison overcrowding when normal court activities resume, the current crisis could also be used as an opportunity to enhance prison conditions, for example by increasing the use of alternatives to detention and improving the quality of prison health services.

Situation in Member States

While the number of coronavirus cases in EU prisons is relatively low, the situation varies among Member States, with some ([Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [France](#)) reporting a significant [number of infections](#) among both prisoners and staff. Nevertheless, all took similar measures to prevent contagion,^[1] including banning visits, suspending leave and open regimes, and putting educational, recreational or resocialisation group activities on hold. In some prisons, even open-air walks were suspended. These restrictions were often offset by more time for phone calls, sometimes free of charge, and increased access to television or other media. Many countries postponed non-urgent hearings or facilitated remote (video-conference) hearings, recommending that lawyers contact detainees by phone or other remote means. In most countries, [access to lawyers](#) was maintained, either by phone or in person, with specific arrangements such as glass partitions or masks. More than half of Member States sought to reduce prison populations, especially in cases of overcrowding. Many limited new prison entries by [suspending or postponing prison sentences](#), or proposed [alternatives to detention](#) such as early or temporary release on parole (with or without tagging). Prison populations thus [fell](#) considerably in some countries (e.g. France, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and Cyprus). All Member States took sanitary measures to protect detainees' and prison staffs' health, including regular disinfection, protective equipment and quarantine zones to isolate prisoners with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 infection. Many imposed 14-day isolation on all new detainees. Some took specific measures for prisoners in at-risk categories. The pandemic has also affected [judicial cooperation on criminal matters](#). [Prisoner transfer](#) between Member States under [Framework Decision 2008/909/JHA](#) was put on hold in most countries, because of general transfer bans or practical obstacles, such as the closure of internal EU borders and flight restrictions. Some countries report that transfers are still happening but only by land and with neighbouring countries; most decisions

on transfers are taken on a case-by-case basis. By the end of May, several countries had begun to lift restrictions and [restore visits](#) under certain [conditions](#).

Belgium

All prison visits were suspended between [13 March](#) and [25 May](#) to protect both inmates and staff. To compensate, each prisoner received extra calling credit to be able to stay in touch with family and friends. Video calls were introduced from 29 April, in theory in all prisons, but in practice in only [4 out of 30 prisons](#). People needing access to prisons for professional reasons, such as police officers, lawyers, judges and care workers, could still do so if alternative types of contact were not possible and as long as they abided by the new sanitary rules. Prison staff are required to wear protective equipment, and masks have been mandatory for all prisoners since the easing of the measures. Prisoners were able to continue in employment, providing hygiene and social distancing rules were upheld. Leave permits were either temporarily suspended or prolonged on [20 March](#) and limited detention schemes – for prisoners working or studying outside prison – were put on hold. All infected prisoners and all newcomers are put in isolation for 14 days. Court appearances continue but, when possible, prisoners are represented by their lawyers or sessions take place via video conference. Prisoner transfers are permitted as long as the prison has been coronavirus-free for the previous two weeks. [Measures](#) to reduce detainee numbers include suspension of detention, early release and suspension of sentences. The number of prisoners fell from around 10 900 to [9 635](#). The measures were updated on [30 April](#) and their easing began on [25 May](#).

Bulgaria

Following the declaration of a [state of emergency](#) on 13 March 2020, Bulgaria temporarily [suspended](#) visits to prisoners from family and friends, leave and work outside prison as well as all group activities for inmates. No inmates can be transported outside prisons. However, prisoners have the right to visits of lawyers, on the condition that the latter respect preventive rules put in place. Authorised visitors are checked at the entrance, and their temperature taken. Extensive [sanitary measures](#) were introduced, such as regular disinfection and frequent ventilation of all premises, as well as distribution of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, etc.) and disinfectant to staff in direct contact with inmates and to medical specialists. Quarantine areas were created in prison hospitals and prisons. New arrivals undergo a medical examination and 14-day active monitoring of their health, while every patient with Covid-19 symptoms is tested, followed up on a daily basis and placed in isolation until the test results are received. According to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies [survey](#), while 15 to 20 % of prisoners are in overcrowded cells, Bulgaria has not reported any measures aimed at reducing the prison population.

Czechia

On [14 March](#), all visits – except those by prosecuting authorities – were suspended in line with the [state of emergency](#) declared by the Czech government. To [compensate](#), flexibility was given with regard to receiving food parcels, and telephone and video calls, and more 'outside time' was allowed. Sanitary measures have been taken, such as more frequent disinfection of common spaces and mandatory wearing of face masks by staff members, and by prisoners whenever they leave their cells. Sewing machines and equipment were distributed by the prison administration in order for inmates to produce [face masks and protective Plexiglas shields](#) to be used in both prisons and hospitals. Prisoners with symptoms and new inmates must go into preventive quarantine for 14 days. If they test positive, they are moved to regular public hospitals treating Covid-19 patients. Prison leave was temporarily cancelled. Courts and judges were asked to use video-conferencing (possible in all 35 Czech prisons) to avoid the need for prisoner transfers to courts or for judges to visit prisons. Whenever possible, courts had to [postpone](#) the start of new custodial sentences. Visits have been allowed again since [23 May](#) but restrictions remain in place.

Denmark

In March 2020, the Danish [Prison and Probation Service](#) suspended visits for inmates, with the exception of [lawyers](#), priests, and diplomatic or consular representatives. Compensatory measures included extended access to phone and video calls. On 12 March 2020, to reduce the number of prisoners, prisons stopped receiving [new inmates](#). Inmates have only been allowed to exit in very specific situations, but can save up to four regular exits to be used when normal circumstances resume. Many activities have been suspended; but some employment has gradually been permitted. Prisoner transfers are allowed to a limited extent only. The restrictions were [governed](#) by [Decree No 221 of 17 March 2020](#), extended to 11 May. Prison summons resumed on 23 April 2020 but new inmates must isolate for 14 days. Since 18 May the measures have been [gradually relaxed](#): all inmates may now receive visits from close relatives, except those subject to visitation and letter control, and inmates in 14-day quarantine.

Germany

It is [difficult to assess](#) precautionary measures in detention centres in Germany as they fall under the responsibility of the [Länder](#) and there are no uniform nationwide rules. All *Länder* apply generally accepted standards of hygiene set by the [Robert Koch Institute](#), and some, such as [Bavaria](#), triggered existing pandemic plans. Most have introduced a 14-day quarantine for new prisoners, suspended all leave and non-professional visits, restricted employment opportunities and training, and introduced measures to reduce inmate numbers. The latter often include the release of prisoners based on subsidiary penalties, the temporary non-enforcement of short sentences (Berlin until July 2020 and, Bavaria and Lower Saxony for six months) and the halting of new prison entries. In several *Länder* juvenile sentences have been suspended and/or juvenile prisoners released. The German Justice Ministry also decided that countrywide [criminal trials](#) could be interrupted for up to three months and ten days during the crisis. In [Bavaria](#), use of protective materials is mandatory when social distancing rules cannot be respected. Sick or presumably infected prisoners, as well as all new arrivals have to go into isolation. Prison visits have been suspended, except for lawyers. To compensate, a generous volume of telephone calls are permitted and financial support provided, if needed. If employment cannot continue because of the virus, prisoners receive their previous wages on a pro rata basis. In [North Rhine-Westphalia](#), another large German *Land*, similar measures apply.

Estonia

Estonia [suspended](#) all prison visits, except by professionals (lawyers, clergy, notary and consular officers) on 14 March 2020. Court hearings are held via video-conference. Open regime prisoners are no longer allowed to leave prisons and there are no transfers. All detainees in closed prisons have been locked in cells, with daily one-hour walks in the open air cancelled (except for the mother and child unit) and all group activities suspended. [Estonian prisoners](#) have however been able to continue educational programmes remotely. Prisoners were given extra TV channels, reading material and board games, drawing materials, guidance for yoga and exercises, and allowed more [phone calls](#). A prison [testing strategy](#) was developed, with prison medical departments performing Covid-19 tests. [Sanitary measures](#) include providing all prisons with adequate amounts of disinfection products and personal protective equipment. Suspected or confirmed cases are placed in isolation for 14 days. According to the [FRA](#), there were no reports of increased use of alternatives to detention. The emergency [exit strategy](#) for prisons began on 29 April 2020. Planned medical treatments and daily walks resumed for those not in isolation. [Visits](#) restarted on 25 May in open prisons and in secured rooms in closed facilities, and all prison visits resumed as of 1 June.

Ireland

The Irish Prison Service put a series of [measures](#) in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in prisons. To [alleviate overcrowding](#), approximately 400 low-risk prisoners (around 9% of the prison population) were granted temporary release on a case-by-case basis, between 11 March and

7 April 2020. Since 30 March, screening has been undertaken at entry points for prisoners, visitors and prison staff. Anyone suspected of being infected is isolated and tested; a specific isolation centre has been set up to allow for quarantine in confirmed cases. [Visits](#) have been disallowed since 28 March 2020; instead the Prison Service has developed a new video-link system to allow prisoners to communicate with families. A new method for the electronic transfer of money to prisoner accounts has also been implemented. New prisoners are quarantined for 14 days. All prisoners over 70 years of age and those medically vulnerable are being 'cocooned', so as to minimise interaction with other prisoners or staff. The number of TV channels and national newspapers available to prisoners who are cocooning was increased. Work and training activities have been curtailed and prison schools have been closed. While prison gyms remain open, their use has been restricted and physical distancing arrangements introduced.

Greece

On 19 March 2020, the Greek government prohibited all [visits](#) and all incoming items for prisoners (food, clothing, etc.). The government also cancelled prisoners' permissions for short-term leave and prohibited transfers (except for disciplinary or health reasons). In exchange, the possibility of [e-visits](#) was expanded to 11 of the country's 34 prisons. New detainees have their temperatures checked and remain in a special isolation area for 14 days. Also in March, the government announced the creation in each prison of a solitary confinement facility for the ill. All cases that could not be dealt with in local prisons would be treated in two [special units](#) designed to accept prisoners infected by the virus. Masks, gloves, cleaning solutions and personal hygiene items were distributed. Prison schools were closed, reportedly without the [possibility](#) for inmates to follow online courses. Various organisations have [complained about](#) overcrowding (as high as 253 % in some prisons), inadequate access to healthcare and problematic hygiene and cleanliness. [Protests](#) have broken out in some prisons with [inmates](#) calling for measures to protect their health and reduce overcrowding. Despite having [intended](#) to release certain categories of prisoners (the elderly or those serving the last part of their short or medium-term sentences), the government [withdrew](#) the plan to legislate early release measures, claiming it was not necessary as no prisoners were infected by Covid-19. Nevertheless, a proposed [bill](#) aims to decongest Greek criminal courts when they return to regular activity. The restrictive [measures](#) began to be scaled down on 18 May 2020.

Spain

On 15 March, Spain adopted [measures](#) aimed at reducing inmates' [contacts](#) with the outside world. All [visits](#) were suspended, as well as all activities (e.g. learning activities) requiring the presence of non-official personnel, such as NGO volunteers and accredited professionals. Prisoners were allowed to make more phone calls, including to stay in touch with their lawyers. It is reported that around 200 [mobile phones](#) were distributed by the penitentiary institutions to allow prisoners to communicate with their families. The [Prison Observatory](#) reported that video-conferences were limited to 10 minutes and mobile phones were disinfected after each call. For inmates lacking resources, free-of-charge telephone calls were authorised. Transfers between prisons were also suspended, with the exception of those justified by exceptional, sanitary or judicial reasons. Inmates enjoying semi-freedom could continue going out for work purposes, but had to undergo medical checks upon their return to prison. To [reduce](#) the prison population, the open regime with electronic monitoring was expanded. As of 18 May, [5 300](#) inmates were serving their sentences at home with different control systems. Sanitary [measures](#), including specific provisions for cases of suspected coronavirus infection, were also introduced in prisons, along with social distancing provisions such as the establishment of shifts for lunch and dinner. At the end of April, prison isolation measures began to be [relaxed](#) and certain prisons activities were allowed once On 13 May, family and lawyer visits, more. On 13 May, family and lawyer visits, and transfers of prisoners [resumed](#) under strict sanitary measures.

France

With a national lockdown announced as of 17 March 2020, the authorities [suspended](#) prison visits and all indoor prison activities (educational, socio-cultural, sport, working). Sports activities in the open air and in gyms, and walks in small groups remained [authorised](#), as well as lawyer visits. To compensate, each detainee was granted a credit of €40 per month for phone calls and free TV. Domestic and international [transfers of prisoners](#) were suspended, except for security reasons. [Sanitary measures](#) included the provision of masks for prison staff as of 28 March. Several hundred prisoners across France were placed in isolation with suspected coronavirus infection, while [testing](#) for detainees was lacking. The French independent body monitoring prisons pointed to the high sanitary risk of detention in overcrowded conditions, [calling](#) for action to reduce the prison population. Following the declaration of a [public health emergency](#), the French government adopted a [decree](#) providing for [measures](#) to reduce prison overcrowding by means of: early release (less than two months of the sentence left), exceptional sentence reductions of up to two months, release on parole, suspension of sentences (e.g. for medical reasons). Execution of short-term sentences was [postponed](#) to limit new prison entries. The French prison population [fell](#) from 72 422 on 1 March to 58 926 by 24 May, from a [119 % occupancy rate](#) to below 100 %. However, overcrowding remains an issue, as in some cases inmates were crammed together to create space for the isolation of coronavirus cases. Relaxation of the measures began on 11 May, with the resumption of [family visits](#).

Croatia

From mid-March, [measures](#) were taken to halt the spread of the coronavirus, as [recommended](#) by the Institute of Public Health. Prisoners' visiting rights were restricted but exceptions were granted when necessary to protect their rights in court proceedings. All activities involving interaction with the outside world were suspended (work, NGO visits, leave). To compensate, prisoners were offered more frequent and longer telephone calls and video-conferences with family and friends, as well as the use of a video link with the competent courts. They were allowed to spend more time in the fresh air and were granted more free time, while respecting distancing measures. In order to limit the possibility of infection, sanitary procedures were imposed, including footwear disinfection on entry, and wearing of protective equipment by staff when on duty. Each correctional institution provided adequate facilities for inmates showing signs of respiratory problems, and separate rooms for the 14-day quarantine of all newly admitted prisoners. In order to lower the risk of contagion, the Minister of Justice recommended that courts postpone imprisonment whenever possible. That measure and the suspension of sentences led to a [reduction](#) in the number of prisoners.

Italy

[Decree Law No 11](#) of 8 March introduced several measures to deal with judicial proceedings and also [suspended](#) all visits and the partial-freedom regime. Several compensatory measures were taken, e.g.: communications between inmates, their relatives and their lawyers could take place either by phone or video-conference, the time available for calls was increased and free video calls were granted to all inmates. The penitentiary administration [launched](#) a procedure to buy more than 3 000 mobile phones. Despite the alternative communication options, the decision provoked a violent reaction in several prisons, costing the lives of more than 10 inmates. [Decree Law No 18](#) of 17 March introduced the possibility for prisoners with less than 18 months to serve – under certain conditions and for certain [categories](#) of offence – to benefit from a simplified procedure for home detention. As of 8 May, [reportedly](#) 3 116 individuals had been put in home detention, of whom 835 had an electronic bracelet.^[2] In April, [4 700](#) additional bracelets were ordered. [Sanitary](#) procedures included quarantine for new inmates and infected individuals, isolation facilities and the provision of protective equipment for prison staff. On 20 March, the Department for Penitentiary Administration [updated](#) the measures to limit contagion in prisons. Prison transfers were suspended, unless for health or emergency reasons, e.g. in response to rioting. The rules were

[updated](#) again on 10 May by [Decree Law No 29](#), which stated that, from 19 May to 30 June, talks with relatives and lawyers should still be carried out remotely, by phone or video call; however, prison governors, in consultation with regional health authorities, could plan limited visits in person.

Cyprus

Coronavirus-related measures have been in place in Cypriot prisons since [10 March](#). They include sanitary measures, such as protective equipment, both for staff and inmates, disinfection of premises, and temperature screening for prisoners and anyone entering prison facilities. Some prison jobs were suspended, but kitchen staff and wing cleaners continued their work, wearing protective materials. Prisoners not allowed to work were nonetheless paid. All visits were suspended on 15 March, but calling hours and the possibility of video calls were extended. Newcomers were put in quarantine. Prison transfers were limited to the most urgent cases and escorted leave permits were suspended as of 13 March. Transfers to courts were still permitted but only for urgent matters and inmates were obliged to wear a protective robe, gloves and a surgical face mask. Measures to [reduce prison overcrowding](#) included early release, moving some inmates to an open prison, and electronic home monitoring. Of a total of [800](#) prisoners, 114 were granted early release and 10 were released by decision of the Prison Board. Gradual [relaxation of the measures](#) is under way.

Latvia

Following the declaration of an [emergency situation](#), Latvia introduced several [restrictive measures](#) in prisons from 17 March, such as a ban on all visits, on work outside premises, on leave and on activities with the presence of third parties. Educational activities were organised remotely or cancelled. To compensate, prison administrations could grant additional phone and video calls and extend time for outside walks. [Meetings with a lawyer](#) were allowed in rooms with glass partitions. As far as possible, court hearings were organised by video-conference. Prisoner transfers between detention places and from abroad were suspended with a few exceptions. To limit new entries, short-term imprisonment (15 days to 3 months) was [suspended](#) for the duration of the period of emergency. [Sanitary measures](#) were reinforced in order to ensure that prisoners maintained a distance of two metres, disinfectant was available in all common areas, and face masks were used by all staff in contact with prisoners. All prisoners could receive healthcare at any time of the day and be hospitalised in severe cases. The Latvian Prison Hospital was prepared to receive coronavirus-infected prisoners with a dedicated floor equipped with 30 beds. All new detainees were isolated and their health monitored for 14 days. While some open air and resocialisation activities [resumed](#) as of 12 May, [family visits](#) for prisoners resumed as of 9 June.

Lithuania

Lithuania introduced its first [restrictions](#) on 28 February 2020. Measures included a ban on family and other visits (defence lawyers were allowed in [exceptional cases](#)), large-scale events and prison leave, sport activities, visits to libraries and hairdressers, incoming parcels and resocialisation programmes. No incoming or outgoing movement was allowed, meaning no prisoner transfers and a ban on inmates' movement outside prisons for those on open regime. To compensate, inmates were [granted](#) additional phone calls. Returning parole prisoners and all new prisoners (including those surrendered from foreign countries) were placed in [isolation](#) for 14 days, as was any potentially infected person and their contacts. The Prison Department [stated](#) that if an institution was unable to guarantee isolation for at least 14 days, it should not accept new incoming prisoners. The majority of prison staff were equipped with masks and hydroalcoholic gel, and the premises were disinfected regularly. Lithuanian authorities did not issue any recommendations to use [alternatives to detention](#) during the crisis. [Visits](#) remained banned until the lockdown was lifted.

Luxembourg

On 24 March, the penitentiary administration introduced an [action plan](#) to halt the spread of the virus. The plan involved four stages, depending on the level of alert, and included [sanitary](#) measures for inmates, new arrivals (e.g. special [quarantine](#) sections) and prison staff. Judicial activities were also [reduced](#) to limit movements of people; this included the temporary closure of the criminal records [office](#). From 18 March, activities involving physical contact (work, workshops, sport) and prison visits were [suspended](#), but prisoners could stay in touch with families and lawyers via video calls. Family visits resumed on [11 May](#) under certain conditions: detainees and visitors must be separated by a window pane, the number of visitors is limited to two, and visits last a maximum of 30 minutes. Use of face masks and hand sanitiser is compulsory for all visitors. As of 29 May, visits are no longer restricted to family. No specific [measures](#) were taken to reduce the prison population, owing to the low number of inmates. Schrassig prison (the only closed prison in Luxembourg) has [capacity](#) for 597 detainees; during the coronavirus crisis it was host to approximately 450 prisoners.

Hungary

In Hungary, an [operative body](#) was established to coordinate prisons' work and provide guidelines regarding the pandemic. Measures were adopted gradually from 5 March. Facilities were to be disinfected twice a day. Prison staff received masks, gloves, protective clothing and thermometers. Inmates received 10 000 masks. [Visits](#) had to be carried out in complete isolation using internal telephones. Detainees were allowed a maximum of two visitors, excluding children and relatives over 60. In practice, however, prisons [reportedly](#) suspended all visits, invoking the curfew restrictions Hungary had introduced on 27 March, which did not include family visits to prisoners as a reason for leaving home. Visits from [lawyers](#) were allowed, following a temperature check and a questionnaire on their coronavirus exposure. Detainees could communicate with family through Skype for up to 15 minutes per week. Additional phone time was offered but detainees had to pay; in some cases, prisoners could make [telephone](#) calls at the prison's expense. On 2 April, the [prison hospital](#) was declared ready to admit inmates infected with Covid-19. New measures were introduced on 5 April (two-week quarantine for new detainees and a ban on prison leave). As of 15 April all [training and educational activities](#) were suspended; in exchange, free use of the gym was authorised and televisions provided for each cell. [Calls](#) for the early release of vulnerable (elderly and sick) inmates and to suspend the sentences of petty offenders were [rejected](#). The government adopted [changes](#) to the code of criminal procedure, including [measures](#) to allow hearings by audiovisual means and closed court proceedings, but did not introduce [alternatives to detention](#). On 27 April, the Hungarian Ombudsman [announced](#) an inquiry into the prison situation during the pandemic.

Malta

The Maltese government prohibited all prison [visits](#) on 12 March 2020, initially for seven days. A set of [measures](#) were adopted at Malta's state prison. Hygiene measures comprised: regular cleaning of facilities by staff and prisoners; installation of hand sanitisers and procurement of masks (obligation for staff and inmates to wear a mask at all times). Items coming from outside the prison were placed in a fumigated room for 48 hours. Every inmate and staff member's temperature was taken daily and all cars entering the prison complex fumigated. Prisoners were issued with phone cards and could use Skype [facilities](#) to communicate with family. New [inmates](#) were [isolated](#) for two weeks before joining the general prison population. [Plans](#) were announced in April to transfer vulnerable prisoners to a more segregated area. A temporary emergency clinic and dormitory for staff were built and have been in use since 8 April by prison [officials](#) who work on two shifts, operating for one week at a time. At the end of March, there were [calls](#) to set up temporary prisons to ease overcrowding at the state prison; segregate elderly and vulnerable prisoners, and consider house arrest for vulnerable [prisoners](#) approaching the end of their sentences.

Netherlands

The Dutch Prison Service suspended all visits from [14 March](#). As of [1 April](#), visits to youth detention centres were only allowed in special cases. Options for telephone contacts and video calls were offered as an alternative when possible. Professional visits (e.g. by lawyers) could continue if they could not be replaced by online meetings. New prisoners undergo a medical check and are placed in isolation for at least two weeks. Prisoners with coronavirus-like symptoms are also placed in isolation or transferred to a hospital if needed. In all prisons, the general sanitary rules imposed by the [Ministry of Health and Environment](#) are followed. All court services were suspended until 19 May, except for urgent business. Where possible, detainees attended hearings using digital communication from prison. Time off for prisoners outside prison was also suspended temporarily. Activities for prisoners and work continued to take place when all safety measures could be applied, otherwise alternatives were offered. To limit the number of prisoners, people sentenced to less than three months will be summoned to serve their sentences later. Inmates approaching the end of their sentences, who are only in prison at night, were kept outside to limit prison entries. Rules on arrest and detention for '[minor crimes](#)' were temporarily amended to reduce the number of new inmates. The authorities [announced](#) the gradual easing of coronavirus-related measures from 2 June.

Austria

Family visits and prison leave were restricted from [26 February](#) and completely suspended between 15 March and 11 May 2020, but inmates had access to alternative means of communication, e.g. more phone calls and video-conferences. Visits have now resumed, but with [restrictions](#) on visitor numbers. Access to lawyers remained possible at all times, always behind a glass partition. Educational events were suspended from 12 March until 31 May. Inmates no longer able to work were offered alternative employment, while prisoners affected by plant closures received compensation. Arrangements were made to separate guards and limit the risk of infection. Prison staff are obliged to wear protective masks. Prisoner transfers can still take place, but only in reduced numbers and applying strict hygiene measures. Inmates who have been transferred must wear masks for four weeks. New arrivals are tested for Covid-19 and kept in quarantine pending the result. Urgent [criminal court hearings](#) that cannot be held via video-conference take place under [reinforced sanitary measures](#). Prison sentences not exceeding three years can be [postponed](#) for the duration of the health measures. By 28 April, the number of prisoners was reduced by about [500](#). On 27 April, the Ministry of Justice announced an initiative to increase the number of prison staff by [176](#).

Poland

Poland [suspended](#) all prison visits from 19 March 2020, while increasing possibilities for detainees to communicate remotely with their families (by phone or correspondence) and increasing access to TV, radio and press. Prisoners have not been allowed to go outside for work since [6 April](#). Restrictions on visits have also [affected](#) prisoners' right to see a lawyer: in some cases, lawyers were asked to provide a medical certificate to meet their client, despite that not being a legal requirement. The Parliament adopted extraordinary laws also aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus in prisons, such as the [Covid-19 Act](#) and its subsequent amendment, which [provided](#) for the possibilities of interrupting sentences (not exceeding three years) and extending the use of electronic monitoring for sentences of up to 18 months (previously limited to one year). The authorities introduced several [sanitary measures](#): anyone entering a prison has their temperature taken, all prisons have been provided with disinfectants, medical supplies and protective equipment, and officers have to wear protective masks when entering into contact with prisoners. Inmates with confirmed Covid-19 infection are placed in isolation in a separate building, and new inmates who were previously abroad in countries with a high number of infections are quarantined.

Portugal

According to [FRA](#), a number of [measures](#) were taken in Portugal, such as temporary suspension of all visits, prison transfers, and entries into prison except by prison staff, and limited functioning of the [courts](#). Each prison had to adopt a [contingency plan](#) and increased sanitary procedures were introduced for common areas and prisoners' private facilities. Although, as of [6 May](#), no prisoners were reported to be infected with the virus, all sentenced individuals entering a prison underwent a 14-day quarantine and suspected cases were put in isolation in the prison hospital. Since visits were suspended, prisoners were allowed to make three (as opposed to one) daily phone calls. [Lawyers](#) were only allowed to enter prisons to deal with urgent cases, and had to abstain from face-to-face contacts with prisoners and use the phone instead whenever possible. The government adopted [extraordinary measures](#) to reduce the prison population, by pardoning shorter prison sentences of up to two years, setting up an administrative leave regime for convicted prisoners and arranging for extraordinary anticipation of release on parole. As of early May,^[3] approximately [15 % of the prison population](#) had benefited from these exceptional measures. On 12 May, it was [announced](#) that Covid-19 tests in prisons would be increased from 250 to 450 a day.

Romania

On 24 February, the National Administration of Penitentiaries [triggered](#) an action plan, comprising the intensification of cleaning and disinfection; epidemiological triage for inmates, staff and visitors; extension of quarantine up to 27 days for extradited prisoners; and guidelines for confirmed/suspected cases of infection. The decrees instituting the [state of emergency](#) (195/16 March 2020) and its extension (240/14 April 2020) provide for the suspension of: visits, the right to receive goods, and permission to leave prison. In exchange, the length and number of telephone calls were increased (to 45 minutes a day for those in maximum security and 75 minutes a day for other detention regimes) as was prisoners' right to online communications. Prisoner transfers were suspended, with exceptions (e.g. medical emergencies). The number of prisoners exercising certain activities (e.g. sports) was limited while education or professional training and remunerated work outside prisons were suspended. Instead, educational materials were broadcast on the internal television networks. Respiratory isolation spaces were set up in five prisons. [Law 55/2020](#) of 15 May 2020 ended the state of emergency and marked the beginning of the [state of alert](#). Accordingly, previous restrictions were relaxed: visits are now allowed with a separation device between the inmate and the visitor; visitors must wear protective equipment; and inmates' activities and work have resumed with social distancing measures. There were no changes to the legislation or practices relating to the use of [alternatives to detention](#).

Slovenia

The FRA [reports](#) that visits to prisons were first restricted in early March and then [suspended](#) as of 13 March. On 6 April, the Slovenian [Ombudsman](#) reported that [lawyers](#) were allowed to visit their clients behind a glass barrier only. Contacts with families were maintained via telephone. Sanitary measures were put forward by the National Institute of Public Health and protective equipment, such as gloves, surgical masks and disinfectant, was [delivered](#). Prison buildings were also cleaned, ventilated and disinfected regularly. On 29 March, the [SARS-CoV-2 \(Covid-19\) Act](#) introduced temporary measures for the administration of justice. The act included the possibility to suspend prison sentences for one month, and release early prisoners who had less than six months left to spend in prison. These options were only possible having assessed the safety of and associated risk to society. [Under these provisions](#), 15 prisoners were released and 68 had their prison sentences suspended. Prisoner transfers from one institution to another could be authorised to prevent the spread of the virus. In addition to containment measures taken to reduce the prison population, other measures were geared towards social distancing. Measures began to be lifted as of 18 May: [visits](#) are now allowed (limited to one person) and detainees are [returning](#) to their cells.

Slovakia

[Preventive measures](#) were adopted at the end of February to halt the spread of the virus among prisoners, including disinfection of prison facilities. A special internal regulation introduced ad hoc sanitary measures for individuals, the provision of protective equipment for prison staff, medical procedures for new admissions and quarantine measures. Other measures taken in relation to the pandemic [included](#) the suspension of all visits, with some exceptions for judges, lawyers and other people providing legal assistance. Where a lawyer's visit was denied, record would be taken and the [Bar Association](#) would ensure follow-up with the Directorate-General of [Prison](#) and Court Guards. Prisoner transfers were also postponed to limit the spread of the virus. As family visits were suspended, inmates were allowed to make more phone calls. It was [reported](#) that one phone company provided all prisoners with a one-off credit of €2 (approximately 20 minutes of calling time). No measures to reduce the prison population were taken in Slovakia.

Finland

In Finland, the [Criminal Sanctions Agency](#) adopted a pandemic disease contingency plan and provided [guidelines](#) for prisons on 2 April. All family and normal visits were suspended; in exchange, the possibility of Skype calls and normal telephone communication was increased. However, authorities, lawyers and legal counsel could still visit prisons, providing they abided by hygiene and distancing measures. Hearings were conducted by means of remote communication. The [execution of prison sentences](#) not exceeding six months (or for unpaid fines) was postponed until 19 June 2020; a [law](#) adopted on 7 April extended this period until 31 July and included longer prison sentences. Prison leave could be granted for important reasons only; previously granted leave permissions could be cancelled. Prisoner transfers from closed to open prisons continued, unless the prisoner had symptoms. Prisoners in at-risk groups, such as those over 70, were placed in separate wards and cells. Work activities were cancelled in closed prisons; in open prisons restrictions on work outside the prison were considered on a case by case basis. However, activity allowances and salaries paid in open prisons were paid even if activities were suspended. Religious services were still organised via Skype or radio. Most prisons organised distance-learning activities. Prisoners who were ill were isolated following a decision of the prison healthcare unit.

Sweden

As of 12 March, the [Swedish Prison and Probation Service \(SPPS\)](#) took a number of contact-limiting [measures](#) to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, such as temporary suspension

Table – Measures taken by Member States

Country	Restrictive measures including ban on visits	Measures to reduce prison population	Sanitary measures
Belgium	✓	✓	✓
Bulgaria	✓	X	✓
Czechia	✓	✓	✓
Denmark	✓	✓	✓
Germany	✓	✓	✓
Estonia	✓	X	✓
Spain	✓	✓	✓
Ireland	✓	✓	✓
Greece	✓	X	✓
France	✓	✓	✓
Croatia	✓	✓	✓
Italy	✓	✓	✓
Cyprus	✓	✓	✓
Latvia	✓	✓	✓
Lithuania	✓	X	✓
Luxembourg	✓	X	✓
Hungary	✓	X	✓
Malta	✓	X	✓
Netherlands	✓	✓	✓
Austria	✓	✓	✓
Poland	✓	✓	✓
Portugal	✓	✓	✓
Romania	✓	X	✓
Slovenia	✓	✓	✓
Slovakia	✓	X	✓
Finland	✓	✓	✓
Sweden	✓	✓	✓

Source: EPRS.

of all leave and all visits (the restriction did not apply to lawyers or clergy). To [compensate](#) for these restrictions, prisoners were offered free domestic phone calls and half-price international calls (to approved numbers) up until [18 June](#). Systems were tested to provide inmates with contact with their children using tablets. At the time of writing, restrictions [remain](#) in place and no date has been set for restoring visits. All special measures are under permanent review and will be lifted gradually. As to health-related measures, inmates who are infected or suspected of being infected are placed in [isolation](#). [Newly sentenced](#) people cannot enter prison if they show symptoms. The Prison and Probation Service [received](#) personal protective equipment from the Swedish Armed Forces.

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ENDNOTES

^[1] This briefing looks at the situation in closed prisons; it does not examine the effect of coronavirus on [probation](#).

^[2] Other sources [reported](#) that, between 29 February and 31 March, 465 prisoners were released, while the number of individuals in the partial-freedom regime fell from 1 097 to 884.

^[3] According to a Ministry of Justice [report](#), by 29 April, 1 186 detainees benefited from a pardon of their sentence and 674 were granted an extraordinary leave.

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