



By: TA | AP Insight

Is Macron's successor someone who fights the most serious crimes?



Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin is building the image of a potential leader of the nation by taking drastic measures against the most hardened criminals.

The transfer of 100 of the most dangerous prisoners to a specially secured prison is met with sympathy from those who want a tougher fight against crime but also criticism because it looks like vote-catching.

They are France's most dangerous drug kingpins, **according** to the country's justice minister – prison inmates so wealthy and powerful that even behind bars, they can continue to order assassinations, run narco-trafficking operations and launder money.

Flexing his powers as minister in charge of the French penal system, Gérald Darmanin's solution to the problem is contentious. He is moving 100 inmates – men he describes as “France's biggest criminals” – into an austere maximum security penitentiary in the country's north that critics say has echoes of tough U.S. prisons.

The move is also possibly vote-catching for Darmanin, who has joined a growing field of possible **successors** to President Emmanuel Macron after the next election, less than two years away.

Behind high walls and watch towers

In the newly reinforced Vendin-le-Vieil prison, the selected inmates will be locked in individual cells for 23 hours on most days.

Largely cut off from the world, Darmanin argues they will no longer be able to fuel drug-related violence, which has become a political issue ahead of the 2027 presidential election.

“We are here to guarantee that they don't speak to the outside, that they don't continue their trafficking outside, that they don't corrupt prison officers, magistrates, police officers and gendarmes,” Darmanin said on

primetime evening television after the first 17 inmates were transferred earlier this week to Vendin-le-Vieil from other, less secure facilities. Another 12 were moved in on Thursday.

France has had a long history of both notorious prisons (the Bastille) and prisoners – both real (Napoleon) and fictional (“The Count of Monte Cristo”).

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Still, Vendin-le-Vieil's lock-up conditions are exceptional, similar to the ultra-secure “Supermax” **prison** in the United States and Italy's tough “carcere duro” incarceration rules for Mafia members.

Vendin-le-Vieil already houses some of France's most infamous prisoners – **including** Salah Abdeslam, lone survivor of a team of Islamic State extremists that **terrorized** Paris in 2015, killing 130 people in gun and bomb attacks.

To make way for the specially selected 100 inmates – some already convicted, others in pre-trial detention – many other Vendin-le-Vieil inmates were moved out. The newcomers will be grouped together in the prison's new “Section for Combatting Organized Crime,” with reinforced security and regulations, and equipped with systems to block mobile phone signals and drones.

Among those on the list for Vendin-le-Vieil is Mohamed Amra, **nicknamed** “The Fly,” who staged an escape last year that killed two guards and then fled to Romania before he was captured and returned to France.

‘Extremely hard’ conditions

The newcomers will have just one hour a day in a prison exercise yard, in groups of no more

than five. The rest of the time, they will mostly be confined to individual cells fitted with holes so prison guards can handcuff them before moving them and with ratchet systems so inmates can't yank the doors open or shut when they have to be unlocked.

They will be guarded by 250 wardens — elsewhere, the ratio is usually 20 guards to 100 inmates, Darmanin told French broadcaster TF1.

Instead of unlimited calls with family members from prison phones, they will be limited to a maximum of two hours, twice a week — a restriction that Darmanin says will make monitoring their conversations easier.

Darmanin said the conditions will be “extremely hard” but are necessary because France risks “tipping into narco-banditry” in the absence of tough decisions

Prison visiting rooms have also been equipped with security glass dividers, to prevent physical contact between inmates and visitors. Darmanin says this will prevent mobile phones and other contraband from being smuggled in.

The new Vendin-le-Vieil inmates also won't have the rights accorded in other prisons of intimate time with partners and family members.

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Mental health concerns

Critics say Darmanin is taking a gamble by grouping together so many inmates he describes as dangerous.

“From what I know, even when they're placed under the strictest isolation, they're so smart that they always find ways to communicate

with each other,” said May Sarah Vogelhut, an attorney for one of the prisoners transferred this week. “It's almost more like a networking club for billionaire narco-traffickers.”

She and others also say the tough conditions could inflict an unacceptable toll on the prisoners' mental health.

Vogelhut said her 22-year-old client was a major drug dealer in the southern French port city of Marseille and was convicted and sentenced to 25 years for torturing his victims. He is appealing his sentence.

“I find that inhumane” - May Sarah Vogelhut

Held in isolation in another prison before his transfer to Vendin-le-Vieil, his biggest concern was the glass barrier that will prevent him from hugging his mother and touching other visitors, Vogelhut said.

“Like what we French see in American movies, when the person is behind a glass and you talk through a phone,” she said.

“I find that inhumane. I mean, imagine that a guy spends 10 years there — for 10 years, he can't hug his mother?” she said. “I think it's going to dehumanize them.”

More high-security units planned

First as a minister for public accounts, then as interior minister and since last December as justice minister, Darmanin has proven to be one of Macron's most loyal lieutenants.



Darmanin has announced plans for at least two other high-security prison units for convicted and accused drug traffickers

His close ties with the unpopular president, who can't run again, could work against Darmanin if he runs in 2027. But his government experience and tough-on-crime rhetoric could work in his favor with voters.

Darmanin has announced plans for at least two other high-security prison units for convicted and accused drug traffickers, one of them in the overseas territory of French Guiana.

Vogelhut accuses Darmanin of angling for votes and playing on "French people's fears and anxieties."

"It won't solve any problems," she said. "There won't be any less crime."