From universal rights to individual protection: The application of the Victims’ Directive across Europe

Support VoC

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Protecting victims’ rights in Europe

The path towards guaranteeing the protection of rights of victims of crime across Europe is one of the main challenges of our times. It involves adopting a universal approach to a very heterogenic reality: from different social, legal and cultural contexts, to the diverse perceptions of key concepts, such as victims, as well as the development and implementation of varying strategies and mechanisms. It is precisely in response to these divergences that several different models and mechanisms to support victims of crime have been developed across Europe. Yet, all evidence shows that these still fall very short from providing the full support and protection needed.

Understanding the complexity of the divergent frameworks is critical to ensure that all victims of crime are offered adequate support, advice, protection and assistance. This is necessary to ensure that victims are recognised and treated with respect and dignity; protected and supported; have access to justice; and obtain restoration. Yet, beyond the criminal proceedings, a critical element is encouraging reporting of crimes, as underreporting is still a major problem for many different crimes, from human trafficking to hate crimes. Furthermore, the establishment of support mechanisms has to ensure it provides victims with a voice and enhances public confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. To this aim, as suggested by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, it is essential to undertake a human rights approach, so “the victim is no longer pleading for help on the basis of their vulnerability, pressing needs and deservingness but demanding that the state should take seriously what it owes to the individuals living on its territory and their human rights.”

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1 European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014;  
2 Ibid; Jubany and Roiha, 2016.  
3 See e.g. Bradford, 2011.  
4 European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019
This means assuming that victims of crimes have a right to justice and that criminal justice serves to redress the wrong done to victims\(^5\), so the right to justice is protected by the state. Consequently, the provision of victims’ support services needs to be based on a common understanding of the protection and empowerment of victims as a vital responsibility of all agents involved: from law enforcement agencies to prosecution and courts. Ensuring and coordinating cost effective and satisfactory services in this regard has proved to be critical, and it implies a cultural approach and a common mind-set among practitioners, which prioritises victims and gives them a voice. These changes, though, are deep and complex, and can only be achieved through a multiple approach, focusing on cultural transformations through training at the same time as on the establishment of standards and procedures\(^6\) and on the allocation of sufficient resources.

The approval of the ‘Victims’ Directive’ (Directive 2012/29/EU) on October 25th 2012, was a clear attempt towards these changes, starting from adopting a set of minimum common standards for victim support across Europe\(^7\). This, on the one hand, was fostered as a driver for change, demonstrating the priority of this matter within the EU, and on the other hand, advanced a path for the different Member States to achieve adequate protection for victims of crime.

Whilst the EU expected a complete transposition of the Directive by November 2015, at this point there was still a great variation in this process across the Member States. In the years following the establishment of the Directive, several European countries set up new services and measures or made amendments to existing ones, thus improving access to justice in these Member States. However, still in 2017, five years after the approval of the Directive, whilst some countries, such as Spain, had fully transposed the Directive, others had made hardly any changes for a satisfactory transposition.

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\(^5\) Milquet, J., 2019.  
\(^6\) Bahr and Melum, 2017.  
\(^7\) Ibid.
Due to the complexity of the transposition and implementation on the ground, currently, the process of both stages is still ongoing in some Member States, including Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Cyprus. For these states, learning from the implementation of the Directive in states such as Spain; its shortcomings and its possibilities, is key to ensuring the Directive’s coherence, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and added value in protecting victims’ rights.

**SupportVoC Project: Aims**

In order to contribute to the effective transposition of the Directive – with special attention to Articles 8 and 9 - the SupportVoC project, commencing in 2017, analysed the national political and legal frameworks of Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Cyprus in regard to existing approaches and mechanisms for the protection of victims of crimes. On this basis, the research adopted an ethnographic approach, based on interviews, participant observation and focus groups⁸, to explore the experiences and perspectives of policy makers and professionals working with victims on the ground⁹. Learning from the experiences of professionals and the cooperation between authorities and organizations was a critical part of the investigation. This was triangulated with an in-depth analysis of the implementation process and current functioning of the victim support services in Spain, as a comparative point of reference for the other countries.

The results of SupportVoC are ultimately aimed at exploring and understanding the different scenarios for the protection of the rights of victims that are put into place across Europe and the effect that these have on the ground. It is through this understanding that the research can contribute to the promotion and protection

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⁸ Visit the SupportVoC website to consult the national research reports and other outputs [https://www.supportvoceu/index.php/outputs-results/](https://www.supportvoceu/index.php/outputs-results/)

⁹ This implicated all stakeholders involved in the protection of the rights of victims of crime: Public/state authorities/agencies and private organisations; Also practitioners, including police, judges, prosecutors, lawyers and staff of victim support services and national and international NGOs.
of these victims’ rights. This involves maximising the existing support services and facilitating the implementation of new coordination measures, encouraging multi-disciplinary and interagency cooperation between authorities, agencies and organisations working with victims. The different aspects raised emphasise the importance of having appropriate support for victims, to assist in their recovery and adequate protection against secondary and re-victimisation, intimidation and retaliation. This also concerns adequate access to justice, ensuring equal treatment regardless of ethnic or social origin, nationality, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.

To this aim, the present document first analyses the key aspects of the Directive, as well as the role of the victim in criminal proceedings, and the diversity of contexts and needs of victims. This is followed by the presentation of a Generic Plan for the organisation of Victims Support Services (VSS), developed on the grounds of the results of the investigation. Following this, critical barriers and opportunities in relation to the implementation of generic victim support services are discussed in the specific cases of Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus. Finally, the document identifies constructive practices in these countries, revealing their potential transferability across Europe.

This document is envisaged as a practical tool for policymakers and stakeholders coming into contact with victims of crime, in order to familiarise themselves with the Victims’ Directive and the process of implementation.
The Victims’ Directive

A multifaceted framework: EU Legislation prior to the Victims’ Directive

The third pillar of the Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, concerned cooperation in justice and home affairs. Whilst this pillar vested the EU with new powers in areas of action such as cooperation on criminal matters, directly linked to the protection of victims, issues related to justice remained within the framework of intergovernmental relation. Consequently, the EU’s action in this area lacked openness to participation and debate by European society and EU institutions. Nevertheless, this third pillar represented a first step towards bringing to the core of the EU issues closely linked to the Member States’ sovereignty such as judicial procedures and procedural and substantial rights.

Later on, following the Treaty of Amsterdam, the increased process of communitarisation did not affect the provisions on Criminal Justice, implying that the protection of victims’ rights remained under intergovernmental cooperation. Thus, the first piece of European legislation on victims was effectively introduced in the shape of the Framework Decision 2001/220/JAI of 15th March 2001 on the status of victims in criminal proceedings, which is a distinctive legal instrument of third pillar intergovernmental cooperation.

Interestingly, by the time of the approval of this Framework Decision, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and Liberties was being discussed. Whilst this did not include any explicit right to the protection of victims of crimes, it included the right to an effective hearing before a tribunal (Art. 47). Under the Lisbon Treaty of 2008, the Charter was afforded the same legal rank as that of the founding Treaties of the EU (Art. 6 TEU). In effect, the Lisbon Treaty provided the legal basis for the EU to directly establish minimal legislation addressed to Member States on the issue of the mutual recognition of judgements and judicial decisions (Art. 82 TFEU), but also law enforcement and judicial cooperation in transnational criminal matters and, in particular, regarding the rights of victims of crime.
Furthermore, under the Stockholm Programme\textsuperscript{10}, the European Council asked the Commission and Member States to identify constructive practices in order to improve the support and assistance to victims of crime, including terrorism. In this regard, even before the establishment of the Victims’ Directive there were several plans and programs aimed at strengthening victims’ protection, especially regarding domestic and gender-based violence, such as the Budapest Working Plan from 2011.

EU legislation has dealt separately with certain crimes considering that the victims of these crimes may need specific approaches and measures. These crimes include gender-based violence; crimes based on gender identity or sexual orientation; terrorism; trafficking of human beings; sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and pornography; and crimes where children or disabled people are victims. This is considering that the specific EU legislation in force in these areas is complementary to the general provisions included in the Victims’ Directive.

There are also further provisions related to the protection of victims in different legal texts. An example is the Directive 2011/99/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 13 June 2011 on the European Arrest Warrant, which includes a mechanism aimed at ensuring the mutual recognition of the protection measures for victims of crimes issued by another Member State. The Directive 2011/99/EU on the European Protection Order (EPO) sets up a mechanism allowing persons who benefit from a protection order in criminal matters issued in one EU country to request a European Protection Order. Additionally, Regulation (EU) No. 606/2013 on mutual recognition of protection measures in civil matters establishes a mechanism allowing for a direct recognition of protection orders issued between EU countries. Finally, Directive 2011/36/ on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, states that victims forced to participate in criminal activities should not be brought to court and judged. However, it is worth noting that such provision is not mirrored, or even cited, in the Victims’ Directive.

\textsuperscript{10} The Stockholm Programme, adopted by the European Council in December 2009, provided a framework for EU action on the issues of citizenship, justice, security, asylum, immigration and visa policy for the period 2010–2014.
Thus, whilst the EU motto “United in Diversity” that has permeated policy, particularly since the Stockholm Programme, remains at the core of the Directive 2011/36/EU, it nevertheless lacks a holistic approach to the protection of victims.

A glance at the Victims’ Directive

As discussed, in order to improve and ensure support to victims of crimes across Europe, on October 25, 2012 the Directive 2012/29/EU was approved. The Directive strengthens the rights of victims, establishing minimum standards for the rights, support and protection of them and their family members. This so-called “Victims’ Directive” is to be complied with by all Member States. Articles 8 and 9 establish that Member States shall ensure victims access to confidential victim support services, free of charge, and in accordance with their needs.

The main implications is that the Directive requires all Member States to prepare interventions in favour of victims of crime, with no differences with respect to the crime suffered. The purpose is to ensure that victims of crime receive adequate information, assistance and protection and are able to participate in criminal proceedings.

Whilst the concept of victim is open to many debates, in the context of the Directive this is widely defined, relating to a person who has suffered mental, physical or emotional harm or economic loss directly caused by criminal offence, as well as family members, who have suffered harm as a result of that person’s death (Art. 2).

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11 See, for instance Jubany, 2011
The Directive considers the crime as a violation of the individual rights of the victims, as well as a socially harmful fact. Thus, it establishes that the rights of the victim must be ensured regardless of whether the offender is identified, captured, prosecuted or convicted and in spite of any family relationship between the offender and the victim. According to the Directive, victims have a range of needs that should be addressed in order to facilitate their recovery. These relate to being recognised and treated with respect and dignity; to be protected and supported; to have access to justice; and to obtain restoration.

Among the fundamental rights recognised for the victim, there is first the right to receive information in an easily understandable way, from the first contact with authorities, in order to be able to participate in the procedure. Consequently, a translation service should be guaranteed, as well as free legal assistance. The Directive provides for the victim’s right to be assisted by additional free services, support from the first contact with the judicial authority and, importantly, independently of the presentation of a formal complaint. That is, under the Directive, there is no obligation to formally report a crime in order to be considered a victim of crime and thus access support services.

In terms of specific mechanisms and measures, the Directive recognises the right to obtain a decision regarding a victim’s right to economic compensation from the offender. It also encourages EU countries to set up mechanisms for recovering compensation from the offender. To ensure this, the EU has put in place legislation that facilitates access to compensation in situations where the crime was committed in an EU country other than the victim’s country of residence. In this sense, Directive 2004/80/EC on compensation to crime victims allows people who have been victims of a crime abroad to apply for State compensation. The Directive requires all EU countries to have a state compensation scheme that provides fair and appropriate compensation to victims of intentional violent crime.

An individual assessment of the protection needs of the victims is also envisaged in the Directive, highlighting some categories that need, by presumption, particular protection. These include minors, people with disabilities, victims of terrorism, victims of gender-based violence, and those who have close relationships with the
perpetrator. Such victims will be protected by specific measures, such as interviews being carried out by specially trained professionals, no visual contact with the offender, or a possibility to be heard in the courtroom without being physically present.

Further, the Directive identifies the need to establish potential forms of restorative justice, such as mediation between victim and offender; however, to be implemented only upon the victim’s request, with their consent, and if it is in their interest.

Finally, in order to guarantee the implementation and effectiveness of these measures, the Directive requires that EU countries ensure appropriate training on victims’ needs for those officials who are likely to encounter victims in their daily work.

The role of the victim in criminal proceedings

The Directive is built on the key principle of the ‘role of the victim in the relevant criminal justice system’, warranting the right of the victim to participate in the criminal procedure. For the most serious crimes, the possibility is provided for the victim to challenge the decision not to proceed. Further provisions concern the right to legal aid, according to the conditions established by national law, as well as the right not to have contact with the offender.

The victim’s formal role in national systems will determine the approach taken in implementing some of the key rights in the Directive in the course of criminal proceedings. Since the formal role of victims in criminal proceedings varies significantly between Member States, the implementation of these Articles will to some extent be different and influence the particular procedural consequences and the extent of the rights of the victims set out in the Directive.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights\textsuperscript{15} identifies three models in regards to the role of a victim in the criminal justice system across Member States.

\textsuperscript{15} EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014
These models are theoretical abstractions that actually overlap:

**a. Victims as witnesses.** The victim is not seen as a party to the proceedings, but essentially as a witness. For this reason, the prosecution formally represents the interest of the state rather than that of the victim.

**b. Addressing damage done to victims and awarding compensation.** The right to seek compensation directly through criminal proceedings is the core of this model. The role of the victim in criminal proceedings remains similar to that of a civil party.

**c. Victims as rights holders.** Crime is conceived as a violation of victims’ rights and their active participation in criminal proceedings is therefore strengthened, aiming for empowerment of the victim.

The third model is the closest to the spirit of the Victims’ Directive, that is, the rights and empowerment of the victim is core to the framework established by the Directive.

**A single approach for divergent realities?**

As we have seen, the Victims’ Directive is a tool conceived to protect the rights of victims across Europe. This means that it needs to be comprehensive yet accommodating enough to be applied to a diverse range of situations on the ground in each Member State. These differences may relate to different social and legal traditions, as well as to differing contexts concerning recognition of and responses to victims of crime. The considerable differences between states makes it complicated to establish a common European standard. Thus, the Directive must be regarded as a starting point and a signal to the member countries that they need to work with a long-term perspective on the safeguarding of victims.\(^\text{16}\)

Further, the Victims’ Directive itself already makes it clear that services catering to crime victims can be set up in different manners adapted to the structures already in place: for example, by public or non-governmental organisations; and on a professional or voluntary basis.

\(^{16}\) Bahr and Melum, 2017.
Another key factor is to establish to what extent generic services can cater to the needs of all victims in all states. In this regard, the Directive stipulates that support services should adopt an approach that considers the specific needs of victims, the severity of the harm suffered, as well as the relationship between victims, offenders and their wider social environment. That is, when needed, victims should be referred to specialised support services adapted to their specific needs. These services can either be established separately in addition to general support services or integrated into a generic organization.\(^\text{17}\)

As discussed, especially vulnerable victims in this regard include child victims, victims of sexual violence and other gender-based violence, victims with a disability, victims who are irregular migrants and victims of violence in close relationships. As far as children are concerned, Member States must ensure they are always treated as persons in need of special protection, considering their age, maturity, level of understanding and any communication difficulties they may have.

Considering this diversity of social, cultural and legal contexts, existing structures, as well as the needs of victims, the research carried out has adopted a critical view, aiming to comprehend by what means a constructive generic model for implementing support services could best be elaborated. Based on this understanding, the Generic Plan presented in the next section is a proposal put forward as a way of covering the minimum standards established by the Victims’ Directive. As we shall see, this Plan is but a first step in the implementation of generic Victims’ Support Services, foreseeing a necessary adaptation to the specificities of each national context. Thus, ‘Generic Plan’ in this context should be read as a ‘model’ or a ‘roadmap’, subject to adaptation to the specificities, disposals and needs of each context.

\(^{17}\) EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014.
The Generic Plan: Creating the Victims Assistance Offices

Grounded on original ethnographic research and an in-depth analysis of the European and national legal frameworks, the SupportVoC results have been geared towards developing a Generic Plan for the organization and implementation of Victims Support Services (VSS). This Plan will actually be transposed in the specific contexts of Cyprus, Italy, Bulgaria and Greece, but it is envisaged to also be useful for any other European country.

The four countries focused upon in the study have different legal and political frameworks, as well as different models for service provision. In this sense, as noted, some services that should be delivered by VSS according to the Plan, could be externalized towards other public bodies or private organizations in accordance to the national context.

In this regard, the SupportVoC results point have revealed three main models of victim support across the EU\(^\text{18}\), taking into account the role of the public administration and civil society organizations, as well as their interaction in providing support, these are:

1. The state funds and provides VSS;
2. The main provider is a non-governmental organization, but which relies strongly on public funding;
3. The main provider is a non-governmental organization, which does not rely, largely, on public funding.

None of these models are, a priori, better than the other. That is, each country develops a model according to its own requirements. The proposed plan could be adapted to any of these three models of victims’ support.

\(^\text{18}\) EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014.
The objective of the plan is to provide a tool that ensures the most effective implementation of the Directive, taking into account the divergence of the context. The plan is focused on meeting, at least, the minimum services outlined in Art. 9 of the Directive particularly regarding:

a. Information, advice and support relevant to the rights of victims, and on their role in criminal proceedings;

b. Information about -or direct referral to- specialised services;

c. Emotional and psychological support;

d. Advice relating to financial and practical issues;

e. Advice relating to the risk and prevention of secondary and repeat victimisation.

As explained, the comparative dimension of the research has proven to be particularly relevant, given the different experiences that Member States have in regard to providing services for victims and the transposition of the Directive. Given the long trajectory and experience of the Spanish Victims Support Services, and particularly the Victims Assistance Offices of Catalonia, this has been taken as a crucial reference for the elaboration of the Plan. To this aim, the strengths and weaknesses of the Spanish system have been analyzed as a point of reference.

The Plan focuses on the creation of Victims Assistance Offices (VAOs), as also outlined in the Directive, with the aim to provide legal, psychological and social support to victims. Such VAOs are conceptualised as the core of the system of victim protection, by building networks and cooperation between public bodies and private organisations that assist victims. The following 10 basic principles are crucial to this aim:

1. **Public support and funding.** VAOs are expected to be financed by public funds, to guarantee that VAOs are created and managed with the goal of serving the public interest of protecting victims of crimes in a stable and sufficient manner. Whilst specialized assistance can be provided by other public services and/or
private organisations, basic assistance established in Art.9 should be offered by VAOs (and financed with public funds).

2. **Broad definition of victims.** Any person who has been considered as a victim of crime may request the assistance of the VAOs, meaning that VAOs should operate with a wide concept of victim. According to the EU Directive, the definition of “victims of crime” includes:

   a) persons who have suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss, which was directly caused by a criminal offence, regardless of their nationality, administrative status, age, etc.

   b) family members of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offence and who have suffered harm as a result of that person's death.

3. **Proximity.** Access to VAOs should be guaranteed in terms of physical proximity. This means that VAOs should be organised according to a decentralised model, following political, administrative or judicial structures of the country. They should ensure a proper assistance throughout the entire territory and therefore, VAOs would be best managed by intermediate governments.

4. **Professional specialisation.** The services offered by the VAOs should be delivered by specialised professionals with relevant training and expertise. Each VAO should have trained and multidisciplinary staff, including, at least, a social worker, a legal advisor, and a psychologist.

5. **Confidentiality and privacy protection.** The relationship between users and professionals should be based on confidentiality of the information. Additionally, the assistance should be offered in conditions that ensure the protection of the right to privacy of the victims. This means being able to provide designated space, staff and means to grant it.

6. **Trust.** Building a confidential and secure environment for the victims is essential to ensure well-being and help strengthening relationships of trust with VAOs' professionals. To this end, VAOs should assign a contact person amongst the professionals for each user.
7. **Individualisation and empowerment.** In order to avoid a homogenised top-down service, the assistance should be individualised support that strengthens the individual’s ability to make autonomous decisions. The victim’s decisions along the process should be taken into account - within the limits of the judicial process.

8. **Immediacy.** Many victims live with the negative consequences of crime, as well as a high probability to experience re-victimisation and retaliation. Here, VAOs should offer a coordinated response in a short lapse of time, especially in performing a risk assessment, and providing emotional support when needed.

9. **Inter-agency coordination.** VAOs should be placed within the network of services of enforcement authorities, judicial authorities, and private organisations that assist victims, and properly connected to all them, especially in what relates to the reporting services (in particular, law enforcement authorities). An effort should be made to ensure coordination among services to avoid duplicities and gaps.

10. **Communication.** It is key that victims know their rights and receive information on what assistance services are available in their territory. Responsibilities and functions of VAOs should be broadly publicised amongst public and private organisations, especially to identify and reach the most vulnerable victims.

In the development of the Plan, these principles have been articulated in four strategic axes, namely: Assessing victims’ needs; Ensuring comprehensive assistance; Building network and cooperation; and Providing training and communication. Each of these axes has its specific objectives, with proposed measures to achieve each objective. A further focus has been to identify the professionals responsible for implementing the measures, ensuring the most appropriate contribution in each case, towards the promotion and protection of rights of Victims of Crime.
Overview of the plan

Whilst the full-length Plan is detailed, including annexes such as a Risk Assessment Questionnaire, for the purpose of this document an abbreviated version of the Generic Plan is presented. This abbreviated version includes a summary of objectives (O), measures (M), and professionals responsible for managing the measure (R).

For the full version of the Generic Plan, please refer to www.supportvoc.eu

Axis 1. ASSESSING VICTIMS’ NEEDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O1. To receive and advise the victim about their rights as a victim of crime, the actions that can be undertaken, the possible problems arising during the criminal process, and their possible consequences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1.1. Provision of face-to-face information, adapted to the personal characteristics and experiences of the victim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1.2. Provision of phone service, to ensure a broad, immediate and anonymous access to the service and information on the rights of victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1. Professionals in victimology (preferably multilingual), within the VAO or, in the case of the phone service possibly a subcontracted entity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O2. To offer, without unnecessary delay, information adapted to the personal circumstances and conditions of the victim, as well as the nature of the crime committed and the damages experienced.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2. Personal interview, providing information on services and measures, legal advice, accompaniment, protection measures, etc., in addition to an individualised assessment (see M3.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4. Professional in victimology working at the VAO.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| O3. To minimise primary victimisation and contribute to the victim’s wellbeing. |
M3.1. Individualised Assessment of the victim’s needs, through a personal interview considering the needs expressed by the victim; the personal characteristics; the type and circumstances of the crime.

M3.2. Individualised Assistance Plan, including legal, psychological and social measures, based on the previous assessment.

R3. Social worker, legal advisor and psychologist working at the VAO.

O4. To avoid secondary victimisation and reprisals by perpetrators.

M4.1. Standardised risk test, aimed at measuring the primary victimisation and the risk of secondary victimisation, should be conducted during the individual assessment.

M4.2. Identification of protection measures for each phase of the criminal proceeding, based on the result of the previous test.

R4. Legal advisor and psychologist working at the VAO.
### Axis 2. ENSURING COMPREHENSIVE ASSISTANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O1. To ensure that the victim receives proper legal advice and that measures are deployed to protect the victim physically and mentally during the court proceedings.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M1.1. Legal advice</strong>, focusing on the rights that can be exercised within the process, the conditions of access to legal advice, services and organisations that can offer further support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M1.2. Measures to protect the victim physically and mentally during the court proceedings</strong>, most importantly the creation of separate entrances and waiting areas for victims and their families to avoid visual contact with the offender, strategies to avoid secondary or re-victimisation, provision of emotional assistance and advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R1. Legal advisor working at the VAO</strong> (referral to specialised services, when necessary).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O2. To provide basic psychological assistance and refer to specialised services when necessary.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M2. Psychological assistance</strong>, based on the evaluation and treatment of the most vulnerable victims; accompaniment throughout the process; strategies to achieve recovery. A psychological support plan should be elaborated for especially vulnerable persons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R2. Psychologist of the VAO</strong> (referral to specialised services, when necessary).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O3. To offer socio-economic advice and refer the victim to social services, when necessary.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M3.1. Economic advice</strong>, providing information on how to access the economic aid and compensations established by law, focusing on providing assistance for the application process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### M3.2. Social assistance
Social assistance, focused on referring the victim, when needed, to social services or services provided by NGOs, to ensure safe housing, medical attention, financial assistance.

### R3. Social worker of VAO
Social worker of VAO (referral to specialised services, when necessary).

### O4. To monitor the victim, especially the most vulnerable ones, throughout the criminal process and during an adequate period of time after its conclusion.

### M4.1. Monitoring according to the situation of the victim after the crime
Monitoring according to the situation of the victim after the crime, with a time frame based on the specific situation of the victim and type of crime.

### M4.2. Monitoring of the protection measures
Monitoring of the protection measures, providing information to the victim about the situation of the offender (e.g. in jail, paroles, permits).

### R4. Professional of the VAO jointly with law enforcement agencies, penitentiary and judicial authorities.
### The Generic Plan: Creating the Victims Assistance Offices

#### Axis 3. BUILDING NETWORK AND COOPERATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O1. Creating a deep knowledge of the assistance framework in order to rationalise and optimise the provision of services.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1.1. Mapping of the organisations providing assistance to victims, in the same territory as the VAO.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1.2. Identification of gaps and overlaps amongst the organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1. Public authorities that manage VAOs (e.g. Justice Department).</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O2. Ensuring an efficient coordination and joint work between VAOs and competent services and authorities that assist victims of crime.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2. Creation of an assistance network, including agencies, institutions and services that may be involved in assisting victims of crime, particularly vulnerable victims with high risk of victimisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2. Public authorities that manage VAOs (e.g. Justice Department).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>O3. Increasing the exchange and availability of data amongst competent authorities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M3. Centralised online service, to inform VAOs about new cases of victimisation to be able to contact victims and provide information on their rights. The service should also facilitate information on the situation of the offender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1. Public authorities that manage VAOs jointly with law enforcement, penitential and judicial authorities.</td>
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Axis 4. PROVIDING TRAINING AND COMMUNICATION

O1. To train professionals coming into contact with victims to guarantee victim rights, and to foster awareness on the special needs of vulnerable victims.

M1.1. Training courses for VAO staff, providing continuous training focused on addressing different types of victimisation.

M1.2. Training courses for law enforcement authorities, focused on dealing with victims during the complaint process and on strengthening the links with civil society organisations.

M1.3. Training courses for judicial actors, focused on dealing with victims during the criminal process and the use of protection measures (e.g. separate waiting areas; video-recorded statements).

R1. Assistance network with the support of public authorities (providing economic and human resources).

O2. Increasing awareness on victims’ rights and the functions of VAOs.

M2.1. Web page, providing clear information, in several languages.

M2.2. Phone service, to ensure a broad, quick and anonymous access to the service and information on the rights of victims.

M2.3. Leaflets with basic information/contact details in several languages.

M2.4. Downloadable booklets, providing information on the rights of the victim, preferably in several languages.

M2.5. Awareness-raising campaign. Special attention should be paid to disseminating information amongst victims with specific needs such as victims of gender-based or sexual violence.

R2. Assistance network with the support of public authorities
Barriers and Opportunities

This section discusses relevant barriers and opportunities that have been recognised in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus, in relation to the implementation of Generic Victim Support Services. These are presented by country, highlighting at the end of the section the common gaps and opportunities identified.
ITALY

Whilst the principles set out to protect the rights of victims of crime have been partially implemented in the Italian Judicial System, this implementation does not provide a consistent framework for setting up victim support services. The implementation has thus far focused on amending the criminal procedure to safeguard the interests of victims in criminal justice proceedings. However, although the amendments to criminal procedure have strengthened the protective measures for victims of crime, these are still not sufficient to fully implement the aims of the Directive, particularly in the cases of child victims, victims of juvenile offenders, or where the judicial authority has been replaced.

In terms of specific gaps, Italian criminal procedures do not take into account the special conditions of victims at risk of secondary or repeat victimisation, who would need a point of reference within the Public Prosecutor’s Office during proceedings. As previously discussed, a needs assessment, including a risk test measuring the risk of secondary victimisation, is crucial for effective support services. A “double track” should be implemented for criminal proceedings involving victims who have suffered considerable harm, enabling faster preliminary investigations. It might be possible to schedule a preliminary hearing in a reasonable time, allowing faster procedures for the pre-trial hearing and the possible formulation of a decision not to prosecute.

As previously highlighted, practitioners’ training is of primary importance. The skills and competences of practitioners could be improved by training courses in sociology, psychology, law, criminology and victimology, and by emphasizing the role of social workers and health practitioners at local level. At the same time, empathy needs to be strengthened among practitioners, to develop active listening skills and attentiveness towards victims’ experiences. This could be achieved through special courses, simulations and role play. Training should also consider organisational, interpersonal and management skills. Therefore, both beginners’ courses and continuous professional development should be implemented for professionals working with victims.
Further, funding needs to be allocated to ensure the quality of the services provided by victim support services. Coordinating bodies and partner public institutions should carry out dissemination activities, to promote their actions. New communication campaigns are required to promote victim support services at the local level, and should include the participation of public authorities. Awareness-raising campaigns should be implemented to reach victims and civil society, bringing attention also to secondary and repeat victimisation.

Whilst Italy has not established a central coordinating body for victim support centres, such services are provided by a set of NGOs, targeting people with different protection needs. The implementation phase calls for an effective cross-sector collaboration amongst different stakeholders in the field: victim support service operators, police, judicial authorities, social workers, and NGOs. In this regard, synergy between public and private sectors, third sector and volunteer organisations, is needed to safeguard and defend the rights of victims.

Finally, it is important to improve and implement compensation schemes for victims, whenever they made the traumatic and difficult decision to apply to become a civil party in the proceedings and the offender has been sentenced to reimburse victims. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases victims do not obtain the compensations provided under definitive sentences pronounced by the Court of Cassation, once the judicial proceedings are over. For this reason, it is necessary to seize offenders' assets once they are found guilty at the end of criminal proceedings, as well as to create solidarity funds for victims of crime, such as those implemented for victims of organized crime.
GREECE

The major economic crisis that is still ongoing in Greece has created a range of complex problems affecting the population, and especially victims of all forms of violence. The Greek welfare state, already in deep crisis, has not been able to address the various needs of victims of violence, as crimes have increased. This, in addition to the already aggravated situation of both nationals and migrants living and arriving in Greece, has caused a social crisis for the population in need.

Greek legislation provides a satisfactory scope of legal provisions regarding victims of violence, starting from the Constitution’s Articles followed by specific legal dispositions. Naturally, Greece is also obliged to follow the relevant European legislation on the subject. Most importantly, in June 2017, the Victims’ Directive came into force in Greece, whereas the Greek Parliament (L. 4531/2018) also approved the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). This treaty opens the path for creating a legal framework at pan-European level to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.

In terms of gaps, there are no public or non-governmental agencies offering support to the general group of victims. The existent state or non-governmental organisations provide support services to certain categories of victims, such as women and children who have suffered domestic violence and/or have been victims of human trafficking.

Victims of violence face protection need regarding medical care, mechanisms for reporting abuse, legal assistance, victim support and protection, psychosocial counselling and support, access to employment and often also accommodation. Lack of information on these topics and cases of undocumented victims or victims facing multiple discrimination and victimisation, such as women, children, refugees, migrants, or LGBT people is an additional problem, as these victims and especially victims of gender-based violence are particularly vulnerable and need
a specific approach by professionals. In this regard, as previously mentioned, an important role of generic support services is to refer victims to specialised services according to their specific needs.

The competent agencies suffer from the long lasting problem of understaffing and this has escalated during the last few years due to the financial crisis and the subsequent reduction in State expenditures on social policies. In addition to the above-mentioned problems, which reasonably affect the quality and range of support services, said agencies mainly operate in urban areas. Therefore, there is limited access to services for those who live elsewhere.

Finally, the increased arrival of migrants into the Greek territory compose a new landscape that agencies are called upon to manage. This draws attention to the multicultural dimension of victimisation and proves that the number of cultural mediators and professionals specialised in translation is insufficient although their work is crucial in facilitating the work of professionals of the criminal system and for improving the social welfare system in general.
The Victims' Directive has only been partially transposed to the Bulgarian national law, through amendments to two main legal acts, namely the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) and the Support and Financial Compensation for Crime Victims Act (“the Compensation Act”). As far as procedural rights of crime victims are concerned, the regulation of the involvement of witnesses with special protection needs in the criminal proceedings is unclear, in particular in relation to how these special needs are established.

The participation of children remains problematic as the law does not treat them by default as witnesses with special protection needs and leaves it to the discretion of the courts to ensure their involvement in a child-friendly manner. The law provides for free legal aid, however, it does not prescribe for mandatory legal representation for children in all legal proceedings. Further, state-paid legal aid is organised in a way that does not ensure specialised tailor-made legal support for specific groups of victims such as children, victims of sexual violence, or victims of human trafficking.

Bulgaria does not have a generic victim support entity. Instead, victim support services are provided by NGOs licensed under the respective procedures and operating with insufficient public funding, often matched with project-based financing. Services are provided to victims of domestic violence and human trafficking, but there are no specialised services e.g. for victims of sexual violence or rape, or hate crimes.

Further, the existing services are unevenly distributed geographically and there are entire regions in the country where victims do not have access to services. Additional barriers include unclear procedures for the assessment of victims’ needs at a late stage (pre-trial and trial phase of criminal proceedings) and the lack of a mandatory risk assessment for victims of crime.

Some groups of victims do not even have access to relevant services or have very limited access. These include male victims of trafficking or forced begging, people with disabilities, and elderly people. These victims have specific needs that require different kinds of services and approaches, with specifically trained staff, suitable
facilities, etc. Thus, the planning and creation of specialized services for different groups has been raised as another common recommendation for improvement.

Support services focus on crisis intervention and there are no long-term programmes to assist victims with their reintegration and empowerment. In addition, lack of medical services for victims of crime remains a problem as many victims do not have health insurance and thus have access only to emergency aid. In particular, victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation and victims of gender-based violence often have specific medical needs that the state fails to meet.

Coordination between stakeholders is also a bottleneck. For example, in cases of domestic violence no coordination mechanism or generalised provision of support services are in place, as domestic violence is not criminalised. However, interviews show that where coordination mechanisms are in place, such as in the cases of human trafficking and children, protection and support for victims is better organised.

Finally, as we have seen, training of professionals is an important aspect of the Directive. In the case of Bulgaria, training remains a challenge, with regards to law enforcement and members of the judiciary and social workers, and particularly in smaller and more remote cities.
The Directive 2012/29/EU has been transposed to the Cypriot legal framework in 2016, by the L. 2016 (51 (I)/2016). In theory, the transposition has brought about great changes in the rights and protection of victims. Some of these changes have been translated into concrete improvements, such as special measures to protect witnesses and victims, especially in the case of minors, through videotaped forensic interviews to avoid secondary victimisation. More subtle changes have also been noted, such as changes in citizens’ attitudes towards dealing with victims of trafficking. A further strong point of the current system is the existence of a legislative framework and guidelines.

In practice, however, the mechanisms for the implementation are still to be activated in places. More time and further steps are needed for an effective implementation and thus improvement of the protection of the rights of victims. In this regard, there is still a lack of coordination and cooperation between services, as well as communication and training for professionals who come into contact with victims. These, as we have seen, are all crucial aspects of the Directive.

In general, the range of victim support services is limited, with existing services catering to specific types of crime, i.e. these services do not cover all types of victims of crime. For example, although Cyprus has one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks for the protection of women and children, there is still a lack of support especially regarding LGBTQI+ or migrant/refugee population, or other types of crime, such as burglary.

Even though the legislation aims to support victims of trafficking and of domestic violence these victims encounter a range of difficulties, especially regarding accommodation, as well as financial difficulties.

The Directive aims to ensure that victims of crime and their families receive the necessary information, support and protection on a non-discriminatory basis and on individual basis, without delay. There is a lack of information for victims, and particularly with regards to information adapted to minorities and vulnerable groups. Lack of information on compensation for victims of crime is also an important aspect.
Procedures are also time-consuming (Social Welfare Services/Police – first responders, Law Office) and there is a lack of public support mechanisms. In addition to this, the bureaucratic procedures, the understaffing of public authorities and lack of adequate training reinforce the gap in victim support services. A number of NGOs try to bridge these gaps, however, relying mostly on EU- or national funding.

To conclude, the Cypriot Republic has many gaps to fill in relation to victim support services, especially in terms of communication and coordination between authorities, as well as time consuming procedures. The provision of immediate and holistic services would be important in order to accelerate procedures and to avoid secondary victimisation (especially during criminal procedures), as well as ensuring the right of translation and interpretation at all stages of victim support.

**Common gaps to be addressed**

As we have seen, in all the country cases analysed for the SupportVoC research, systemic gaps have been identified. Some common gaps were revealed as the most critical to be addressed, to provide holistic support services to victims:

- Establishment of generic victim support services, which include the whole spectrum of victimisation, regardless of whether the victim filed a criminal complaint and of the progress of the criminal procedure.
- Better coordination mechanisms and monitoring procedures between different public offices and non-governmental organisations that provide victim support services.
- Provision of systematic training to professionals including gender-based approaches and other special approaches according to the victim’s characteristics.
- Sustainable funding to establish and preserve proper accommodation facilities for victims when needed; however, different approaches are requested for different types of crime (victims of trafficking, victims of domestic violence, child victims and so on).
- Limit the lengthy administrative and penal procedures that contribute to secondary victimisation.
• Promote a wide implementation of protection measures for special groups of victims (such as sexually abused minors) during the criminal justice process and the compensation of the victims.

• Promote awareness-raising activities at a cross sector level to ensure that both potential victims and professionals are aware of victims’ rights and the relevant services in place.

**A voice from the ground**

The following quotes are extracts from the research interviews conducted in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Italy. These illustrate the arguments presented as articulated by the professionals working on the ground.

«Translation and interpretation services are inadequate, victims' ignorance of compensation is constant, psychological support and information from the police are deemed to be deficient, while in some cases victims also need financial support»

[Legal practitioner, Cyprus]

«Greece does not at all lack scientists and experienced professionals. There is a need for an agency or a Ministry that would be willing to coordinate all available bodies and financial resources under its umbrella»

[State actor, Greece]

«There isn't any law supporting women after the end of the trial and they really need to be supported in this as most women don't have a job and have a continued long-term need of support»

[Stakeholder, Italy]

«The strong point of today's victim support services is that there is a legislative framework and guidelines, but the weak point is the implementation of these guidelines for both juvenile and adult cases and the recruitment of various services that come into contact with victims»

[Clinical psychologist, Cyprus]

«Particular emphasis should be put on the countryside, where there are some other issues that must be taken into account (e.g. close interpersonal relationships, lack of staff etc.)»

[NGO, Greece]
Experiences and practices on the ground

The following section presents constructive and positive strategies identified in relation to the support to victims of crime. These practices are presented by country and range from local NGO practices to national public services.
ITALY

Whilst there is a lack of victim support services for a generic target, dealing with vulnerable people regardless of the personal characteristics of the victims (age/gender), or of specific criminological features (nature/type of crime), in the last few years new victim support services have been set up, modelled on European experiences.\(^{20}\) In addition, family groups representing the interests of family members of victims of tragic events are popular in Italy, as they share a common support path. Although organisational structures, aims and methods of these groups differ, they share several elements, including emotional and affectional bonds, allowing family members of victims to claim their rights and at the same time remember their relatives.

Although victim support services, as we have seen, are fragmented, there are several organisations dealing with specific forms of victimisation, such as victims of domestic violence or child victims of sexual violence and abuse. Several organisations against extortion racketeering and organised crime (AddioPizzo, Libera, Solidaria, Libero Futuro and others) have been set up in Southern Italy, offering support to victims of this type of crime, despite the lack of certain support services in these areas.

Further, in the following paragraphs we will highlight some further key positive practices currently implemented.

\(^{20}\) Organisations such as Centro Sostegno alle Vittime di Reato di Milano (Victim Support Centre of Milan, at Victim Psychological Support Services); Sportello OFF – Offese da reato (OFF Shop – Criminal Offences), in Turin; Centro per le Vittime di Reato e Calamità (Support Centre for Victims of Crime and Natural Disasters), set up in Casalecchio di Reno (Bo); Servizio Non da soli (Never Alone Service) in Modena and Foundation for the Victims of Crime of Emilia Romagna. It is worth noting that three out of five organisations are rooted in the cultural, economic, and political context of Emilia Romagna.
Public anti-violence number 1522: This is the free multilingual helpline set up by the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Government, open 24/24 hours, 365 days a year, offered to victims of all forms of violence. The service is based on the 1522 database, which is a mapping of public and private local services acting against gender-based violence. It thus aims to extend and strengthen the support to victims of gender-based violence and stalking, but also to people belonging to groups at high risk of discrimination, who have suffered violence, such as people with disabilities or LGBT persons. An important function of the helpline is to refer victims to territorial services. From 2012 the service is managed by the national association “Telefono Rosa” (Pink Phone).

Public Health Services: Related to victim protection, over the last few years most of the public health services have adopted specific procedures and guidelines for the reception and support of victims, especially women and minors, often working in cooperation with other institutions and private centres at local level. These procedures include a reserved path for particular services (medical and gynecological examinations, psychological counselling and support) with operators properly trained, and specific surveys to document violence.

“SvSed Mangiagalli” Centre in Milan: Open since 1996, it is part of a strong institutional network and targets women victims of rape and/or domestic violence, offering health care, shelter, support, assistance, and legal advice. The victims’ cases are handled by a multidisciplinary team made up by people with different specialisations. Professional personnel comprises 3 social assistants, 3 psychologists, 16 gynaecologists, 15 healthcare workers and obstetricians, 15 forensic doctors, 1 secretary, 1 telephone operator. Independent contractors provide legal services and no volunteers are employed. Necessary reports are compiled with data from the victim’s medical history and based on the forensic doctors’ reports, by means of specific data sheets varying according to gender and age. It also provides risk and victimological evaluations, based on medical and psychological factors. The institutional network, formalised by operational agreements with Law Enforcement Agencies, local institutions, and the University of Milan, makes this a very interesting facility with strong local roots.
**Pink Phone - Telefono Rosa** is a voluntary association founded in 1988, which provides free phone-based legal, psychological and economic counselling to women victims of violence. Today the national association is a network of local associations with headquarters in Rome. The staff consists of around 90 volunteers, 12 lawyers who are experts in civil and penal rights, 10 psychologists, 12 cultural mediators from different countries and 2 bank officials.

**Centro di Supporto alle Vittime di Reato in Mantova** was founded in 2012 and is managed by the private non-profit association Libra. The approach and the related interventions are characterised by features considered key elements in Libra’s work: empowerment, listening, helping the victim becoming aware of inner (personal) resources and informing them about local support/services (external resources); finally, constant counselling acts as glue. It is possible to go directly to the help desk during opening hours or, alternatively, by prior appointment, at any time during the working week. In addition, victims may be referred to the centre by any other local public or private service, and for emergencies, a hotline is available 24/7.
GREECE

Greece has a network to provide for support services to victims of crime, however, these are very segregated and provided mostly by private organisations. Thus, a coordinating strategy is essential, and in this regard, it is worth noting the efforts of coordination of the services by working groups and interdisciplinary meetings of the various actors. A constructive practice in this regard is the **Racist Violence Recording Network** (RVRN), which brings together various actors that report hate crimes and issues relevant annual reports.

Further, in relation to the legal protective framework for refugee women and their children, the **General Secretariat for Gender Equality (GSGE)** has brought together all relevant public stakeholders, to locate the target groups (women refugees and asylum seekers) and to provide services to victims of gender-based violence. These services include psycho-social support, legal counselling, as well as counselling in employment issues, providing shelter, food and when necessary, legal aid. This initiative is based on already existing policies, action plans and structures of the GSGE, such as the National Programme for Substantive Gender Equality (2016 - 2020), and the Network of 62 structures (40 Counselling Centres, 21 Shelters and the SOS Helpline 15900) all over Greece. These programmes initially concerned Greek or migrant women, but it was decided to expand the services to women refugee and asylum seekers and to add services such as employment counselling to the ones already offered.

Other public and private actors have also launched some encouraging initiatives. The Ministry of Justice has announced the creation of the **“House of the Child”**; that is, structures for the protection of children/victims of sexual abuse, during the legal procedure. These structures will function within the Social Service for Minors of

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21 Including the General Secretariat, the Ministry of National Defence, the General Secretariat of Reception/Ministry of Migration, the General Secretariat of Public Health/Ministry of Health, The Research Centre for Gender Equality (KETHI), the Central Union of Greek Municipalities, the Association of Greek Regions, the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government.
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the Ministry of Justice, and will be located in 5 big cities, including Athens, Piraeus, Patras, Thessaloniki, Iraklio, covering as much territory as possible. These structures were announced under Law 4478/2017 that transferred the Directive 2012/29/EU. Houses of the Child already exist through the NGO To Hamogelo tou Paidiou (The Smile of the Child), however, providing only psychosocial support.

Despite these examples of key positive strategies adopted, Greece has not yet found a way to coordinate the already existing services in a centralised way supervised by the State (e.g. Ministry of Justice) or another public or even private actor.
Although the participation of children in criminal procedures remains problematic, the safe spaces for child-friendly interrogation of children presents an interesting and positive practice in Bulgaria. The so-called blue rooms also provided through Safe Zone service have clear rules of functioning and strict requirements for the professionals how to conduct the interrogation of children.

A further positive strategy in Bulgaria that illustrates the generic services model is the Prevention of Violence and Crime Centre in Bourgas. This is a state delegated activity, which results from the joint efforts of the Bourgas Municipality, Ministry of Interior, and Demetra (NGO service provider). A multidisciplinary team – a municipal officer, social worker, police inspector, lawyer, and psychologist provide holistic support and assistance to victims. The service also includes a reception office and a space for confidential meetings and communication.

Further constructing practices concerning cooperation and concerted coordination related to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for trafficked persons and the Coordination Mechanism for Work on Cases of Child Victims of Violence. The former has the status of a bylaw (adopted with a decree of the Council of Ministers), and the latter is regulated in the former Social Assistance Act replaced by the current Social Services Act. The coordination mechanism for child victims of violence or exploitation (or at risk of violence or exploitation) envisages that a multi-disciplinary team is set up with the Social Assistance Directorate. As a minimum, it comprises a representative of the police, prosecutor’s office, and the municipality. Depending on the specific case, representatives of other institutions may be invited, including the regional health insurance fund, the child’s GP, representative of the regional education directorate and the school/kindergarten of the child, representative of a social services provider etc. The team is coordinated by a social worker.

A similar coordination mechanism has been elaborated for work on cases of domestic violence but has not yet been adopted. There are indications, however,
that the Ministry of Justice has relaunched the consultation procedure for its adoption. As regards domestic violence, in addition to (the lacking) coordination mechanism, a national body in charge of the organisation, provision and supervision of support services for victims of domestic violence is strongly needed.

As regards a centralised online service for information on changes regarding the situation of offenders, the Ministry of Interior is building such a service (under a predefined NFM project).

Finally, training for magistrates (prosecutors and judges) is provided by the National Institute for Justice out of their free choice. The same applies for lawyers, who choose whether to attend trainings organised by the Lawyers’ Training Centre. Training is free of charge for both groups.
Even though Cyprus does not have a comprehensive support system for victims of criminal offences, there are some positive practices that can be identified for specific types of crimes, mainly provided by NGOs. The legislative framework of Cyprus states that the Social Welfare Services should provide emotional and psychological support, and all necessary information to the victim. However, the role of organisations and NGOs is important, since the only public authority one can report to is the Police followed by the Social Welfare Services. Often, the victims cannot access other relevant services because they might not be accessible via telephone or because the services are closed during non-working hours.

In the following, we present some key constructive practices identified in Cyprus:

The **Citizen's Communication Line (1460)**, operative since 2002 aims to enable citizens to directly contact the Headquarters of the Police for help, information or to make complaints. It is a way for citizens to receive immediate assistance and at the same time to give the police useful information without any fear or prejudice. The line is free and open 24/7.

Another aspect that could be considered a positive strategy is the publication of a **booklet for violence between spouses and partners: strategies for risk management in high-risk incidents**, produced by the Police Force of Cyprus for victims of domestic violence. On the outside the booklet looks like a recipe book with the title ‘Recipes for Emergencies’. The booklet shows some strategies for people facing a high risk of victimisation by current or former spouses or partners.

The **Emergency Care Line (1455)** run by the Cyprus Family Planning Organisation is available to any person requesting answers on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The line offers emotional support in a climate of respect and trust.

The pan-Cyprian **psychological support line (1469)** is anonymous, free and open to the public for counselling and emotional support. It is run by trained professionals, such as psychologists, offering also online psychological support.
Further, The Safer Internet Helpline (70000 116) ensures that children, adolescents and adults have the opportunity to answer questions and to express concerns or queries about harmful conduct, malicious communication and harmful content on the Internet. The counsellors are professionals dealing with issues such as cyberbullying; changing settings; commercial risks/threats; grooming; hacking; identity theft; other potential harmful content; phishing; privacy; sexting; sexual harassment and unsolicited contact from strangers.

There is also the Helpline 1440 by the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO), which runs 24/7, staffed by psychologists and social workers, trained in using phone communication techniques. The aim is to provide counselling support for victims of domestic violence; information on other services related to domestic violence issues and information about legal rights. SPAVO also provides an escape plan, informing victims/potential victims on the availability of services offered by the SWS and the organisation itself.

Additionally, the Children’s House, operated by ‘Hope For Children’ CRC Policy Center, supervised by the Social Welfare Services and other competent authorities, is a recognised structure operating with European authorities, based on the Icelandic model of Barnahus. The House manages cases of sexual abuse and exploitation of minors in a child-friendly environment, ensuring the child’s security, protection and well-being. The House can provide all necessary services under the same roof in order to avoid re-victimisation of the child during the investigation. The Children’s House coordinates the cooperation of various competent authorities, such as the Police, Social Welfare Services, Medical Services, Mental Health Services, and Educational Services. The House has enhanced the capacity of minors and their families to report sexual violence and/or harassment of minors. However, further efforts are needed regarding migrant and refugee populations as well as delays in court hearings.

Finally, in January 2019 the Council of Ministers of Cyprus has approved the creation of the ‘Women’s House’. The objective is to protect women who have been victims of violence and to counteract the problem of under-reporting especially in cases of psychological abuse. The ‘House’ will bring together all relevant professionals,
Experiences and practices on the ground

providing counselling for victims aiming at informing and empowering them; encouragement and support to take responsibility for their professional, personal and family life; encouragement to get out of isolation, to understand that they are not alone and not responsible for the violence they suffer/suffered; individual psychosocial counselling support; legal counselling; referral or other services (such as accompanying), wherever required, shelters, police, courts.
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