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A lone voice in the wilderness? Persistent problems with victim support in Czechia

Samotny głos wołającego na pustyni? Utrzymujące się problemy w zakresie wspierania pokrzywdzonych w Czechach

Abstract: This article examines the challenges in implementing victim support in Czechia and highlights discrepancies between legislative frameworks and practical applications. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including a focus group conducted in 2017 with experts in victim support and an expert survey in 2022. While the 2013 adoption of the Act on Victims of Crime led to notable improvements in victims' rights and services, persistent problems include ineffective information delivery, regional disparities in service provision and a lack of inter-agency coordination. The article concludes that while legislative reforms have laid a solid foundation, systemic changes and practical implementation are essential to ensuring effective victim support and mitigating secondary victimisation.

Keywords: victims of crime, victim support, Czechia, legislative framework, secondary victimisation

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wyzwania związane z wdrażaniem wsparcia dla ofiar w Republice Czeskiej, podkreślając rozbieżności między ramami prawnymi a praktycznymi zastosowaniami. W badaniu wykorzystano podejście oparte na metodach mieszanych, w tym grupę fokusową z ekspertami w zakresie wsparcia ofiar przeprowadzoną w 2017 roku oraz ankietę ekspercką zrealizowaną w 2022 roku. Podczas gdy przyjęcie ustawy o ofiarach przestępstw w 2013 roku doprowadziło do znacznego wzmocnienia praw i usług dla ofiar, utrzymujące się problemy obejmują nieskuteczne dostarczanie informacji, regionalne różnice w świadczeniu usług oraz brak koordynacji między instytucjami. W artykule stwierdza się, że chociaż reformy legislacyjne położyły solidne

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fundamenty, zmiany systemowe i praktyczne wdrożenie są niezbędne do zapewnienia skutecznego wsparcia dla ofiar i złagodzenia wtórnej wiktylizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: ofiary przestępstw, wsparcie dla ofiar, Czechy, ramy prawne, wtórna wiktylizacja

Introduction

Victims of crime have different needs, some of which are specific to the individual situation of the victim, but others which are common to all victims. These universal needs include the need for information, the need for respectful treatment and the need to understand the proceedings. Together with the victims' movement and empowerment of victims, in criminal proceedings and beyond, it has become increasingly important to effectively exercise rights that satisfy these basic needs (Maguire 1991). Although the status of the victim and their possibilities for exercising their rights are limited by a given legal system (Braun 2019), victim support is a universally important issue. A sense that someone is listening to the victims and taking them seriously is crucial. Various forms of support and approaches in criminal proceedings, including clear information about the case itself, also help to mitigate the impact of the crime on the victim (Dinisman, Moroz 2017). Evidence shows that the use of victim support can strengthen victims' overall confidence in the criminal justice system (Bradford 2011), although it is important that this support is professional and high-quality (Laxminarayan 2015). Validation of victimisation and sensitivity of law enforcement agencies help victims cope with the negative psychological consequences of crime (Elliott, Thomas, Ogloff 2014).

European documents corroborate the significance of these requirements. Nevertheless, even subsequent legislative incorporation does not ensure that victims' rights will be duly implemented in practice. A study on the implementation of Recommendation (85) 11 of the Council of Europe on the position of the victim in the framework of criminal law and procedure pointed to discrepancies in the examined jurisdictions between the "law in books" and "law in action" as regards victims' rights (Brienen, Hoegen 2000). The initial prerequisite for victims to exercise their rights is an awareness of those rights. The authors have concluded that formal implementation is no guarantee of actual implementation. The attitudes of the authorities towards victims and their awareness of their duties in this respect are of significant consequence (Brienen, Hoegen 1998). It was anticipated that EU legislation would serve to improve the situation. In particular, Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012, establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of the victims of crime (OJ of 14.11.2012, L 315, pp. 57–73) (hereinafter the "Directive") should ensure that individuals who have fallen victim to crime are recognised and treated with respect and receive proper information, support, protection and access to

justice. Furthermore, the Directive stipulates that EU countries must guarantee that officials who are likely to interact with victims receive adequate training on how to meet their needs. In addition in 2020, the European Commission adopted its first-ever EU strategy on victims' rights (2020–2025) with the objective of guaranteeing that all victims of all crimes within the EU are able to fully exercise their rights (European Commission 2020a). Nevertheless, the report on the implementation (European Commission 2020b) and the subsequent evaluation of the Directive (European Commission 2022) identified several shortcomings in its practical implementation, particularly with regard to access to information, support services and protection in accordance with victims' individual needs. These shortcomings were observed in the majority of Member States. To address the identified problems, the Commission proposed amendments to the Directive in 2023 (European Commission 2023). These amendments pertain to improving five main victims' rights: access to information, support, protection, participation in criminal proceedings and access to compensation.

1. Background in Czechia

In 2013, influenced by developments at the Union level, Czechia adopted Act No. 45/2013 Coll. on Victims of Crime.¹ This Act, which could be considered a real milestone in the regulatory approach to victims of crime, incorporates the relevant regulations of the European Union, including the Directive (OJ of 6.08.2004, L 261, pp. 15–18; OJ of 14.11.2012, L 315, pp. 57–73). The main aim was to improve the treatment of victims and the position of victims in criminal proceedings (Government of Czechia 2012). The Act guarantees several rights to individuals who become victims of criminal offences (Jelínek 2014; Grívna, Šámal, Válková 2020). These comprise the right to receive professional help, including psychological and social aid, legal assistance, the right to receive legal information and the right to undergo restorative programmes to the extent and under the conditions laid down in this Act or other legislation. At the first contact, the police have a duty to inform victims about their rights. According to the law the victim will receive other necessary information on their case from organisations providing victim support and others involved in the criminal proceedings. The victim should be informed in an understandable way, taking into account their age, mental and physical health and overall maturity. In the event of imminent danger, the victim has the right to police protection. The victim also has the right to the protection of privacy and to protection against secondary victimisation. At any stage of the

¹ In this context, it is important to mention that Czechia implemented a new legislation on the protection of victims of domestic violence in 2007 (Act No. 135/2006 Coll.). This legislation introduced specialised and comprehensive support for victims of domestic violence by establishing intervention centres, as well as the possibility of preliminary measures, including the expulsion of the violent person by the police.

criminal proceedings, the victim has the right to make a “victim impact statement”. Last, but not least, under the conditions laid down in this Act, the victim has the right to financial aid from the state. A lump-sum aid payment should help the victim overcome their worsened social situation, if the damage caused by the crime has not been fully compensated otherwise.

The Czech Code of Criminal Proceedings No. 141/1961 Coll. considers a person against whom a criminal offence was committed to be an “injured party”. The legal definition of the word “victim” was only introduced to Czech law by the Act on victims of crime. A victim is an individual who was or could be bodily harmed, who suffered property or non-material damage by a criminal offence or at whose expense the perpetrator of a criminal offence has enriched themselves. Any person who feels they are a victim of crime should be considered such until it is proved otherwise or unless it is clearly an abuse of the victim status under this Act. Whether the perpetrator has been identified or convicted has no bearing on the status of the victim. In addition, the Act defines a special category of particularly vulnerable victims, to whom it provides a higher level of protection: children, disabled persons and victims of particular offences such as human trafficking or sexual offences (Durdík et al. 2018). In 2021, the list of particularly vulnerable victims was expanded to include victims of domestic violence. Particularly vulnerable victims have the right to be interrogated by law enforcement agencies in a sensitive, non-harmful manner in a specially designed room, or the right to avoid contact with the perpetrator throughout the criminal proceedings. A separate part of the Act regulates organisations which provide support to victims of crime. Entities that intend to provide support to victims under this Act must be accredited by the Ministry of Justice for providing legal information and/or restorative programmes. Accredited organisations, mainly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can apply for financial support from the state budget for these activities. In addition, the Probation and Mediation Service (PMS) has branches throughout Czechia, where victim support is also provided. Other services for victims are provided according to different laws, mainly as a social service. All subjects providing support and services to victims of crime can be found in a register that is operated by the Ministry of Justice and is accessible online. The register also includes contact information of attorneys who agree to provide legal aid to vulnerable victims, at least to some extent, for free (Štefunková 2016).

However, shortly after its adoption the Act on Victims of Crime was criticised for, among other things, insufficiently transposing the Directive (La Strada Česká republika 2015; Kalibová 2016). The legal regulation of the right to information itself, in particular, was not considered very well established (Jelínek, Pelc 2015; Kozák 2015). The victim has to receive all the information at the first contact with the police. This results in the victim being immediately overwhelmed by the bulk of information, much of which is unnecessary at that time. In practice, the victim simply signs several pieces of paper, without any special treatment or real impact. The duty to provide all the information at the first contact does not allow officers to take into account the victim’s individual needs or psychological condition.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, to examine the possible discrepancies between the legislative framework and the practical implementation of victim support in Czechia, and secondly, to identify any changes that may have occurred in this area over time. It is based on a qualitative research design using two complementary data sources: (1) a focus group conducted in 2017 with experts working in victim support and (2) an expert survey conducted in 2022 among service providers for victims.

2.1. Focus group (2017)

In 2017, a focus group was convened as a qualitative sub-study of a victimisation survey. The aim was to explore the state of victim support in Czechia and to identify key issues in the practical application of the Act on Victims of Crime, after five years of being in effect. The specific objectives included evaluating the provision of victim services and capturing the experiences of professionals involved in implementing the law. Participants were selected through opportunistic sampling, with the goal of forming a group of professionals with relevant experience in victim support. The final group consisted of eight participants representing:

- the police of Czechia (2 participants)
- NGOs involved in victim support with different target groups (victims of crime in general, children and victims of domestic violence) (5 participants)
- the PMS (the sole nationwide organisation mandated to provide victim support under the Act) (1 participant).

In terms of professions, the respondents were varied: social workers, lawyers, psychologists and directors of an organisation. Some participants also worked outside the victim support sector itself, for example, in the justice sector or academia. The focus group discussion centred on factors influencing the level of victim support. The session was recorded, transcribed and then subjected to qualitative content analysis (Wright 2017). The focus group constituted a component of a broader research initiative; the resultant analysis was published in a comprehensive research monograph (Roubalová et al. 2019).

2.2. Expert survey (2022)

Five years later, an additional survey was conducted among providers of victim services to create a complementary analysis to the general victimisation survey. Among the respondents of this expert survey were representatives of victim support NGOs (n=22) and the PMS (n=80). All organisations registered as NGO victim support providers and all PMS centres were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate was 58% for NGOs and 100% for the PMS. The complete

results of the survey have been published in a research monograph (Roubalová et al. 2023). Although the survey's primary focus differed, at the end of the questionnaire respondents had the opportunity to share anything else they considered important to mention on the issue of victims of crime. Most comments assessed the status and application of victims' rights. We therefore separately analysed these open-ended responses, as they offered valuable qualitative data reflecting practitioners' experiences with the application of victims' rights. After discarding irrelevant responses, 7 answers from NGOs and 26 answers from the PMS were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006; Kiger, Varpio 2020). The survey was analysed based on the results of the focus group, also constituting a secondary, comparative analysis for this purpose. Content and thematic analyses were then used as complementary approaches (Neuendorf 2018; Vaismoradi, Snelgrove 2019). The key areas of focus were as follows:

- promptness and clarity of provided information
- availability of victim-specific support
- provision of professional services and prevention of secondary victimisation
- coordination and efficiency of support systems
- need for research and data collection.

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The participants of the focus group and survey were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of their anonymity, and they provided their informed consent. We must also mention some limitations of this approach. The first one is that the two studies under analysis had different primary purposes. Moreover, the focus group relied on opportunistic sampling, which may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives in the field. The open-ended nature of survey responses can limit the depth of analysis for some themes. Some limitations could also stem from the different methodological approaches. Some authors suggest that while problematic issues tend to be under-communicated in questionnaires, they may be overstated in focus groups (Carlsen, Glenton 2012). On the other hand, this mixed-methods approach can provide complementary insights and can help overcome the restrictions of each individual method (Lawal 2009). Despite these limitations, we believe that these combined sources can provide valuable longitudinal insights into the effectiveness of victim support in Czechia and the application of the Act on Victims of Crime.

3. Victim support from the perspective of professionals

3.1. Experts in the focus group

In 2017 we identified a number of categories related to shortcomings in the practical application of victim-orientated legislation and its practice. We divided these shortcomings into four themes:

- the unpreparedness of individual actors
- a lack of interdisciplinarity
- inaccessible support
- an uninformed public.

At the same time, we identified two sources from which these difficulties stem – the system and the people involved in the system. It should be mentioned that the categories and difficulties are not exhaustive, but are mutually interconnected.

The discussion often referred to the system being unprepared to apply the Act and the related unpreparedness of individual actors, such as the police and the authorities for the social and legal protection of children. This lack of preparedness was said to stem from the absence of standardised guidelines and adequate training in working with victims, among other things. Staff training is also complicated by high turnover. The obligation of the police to inform victims was seen to be the most serious problem. As mentioned above, by law the police must provide victims with information on their rights at the first contact, that is, at a moment when a victim is usually unable to process such information. No sufficiently effective and comprehensible way of informing victims was found. In practice, the obligation to inform the victim is often of a formal nature:

there are an awful lot of rights for the injured party or victim under the law. Paradoxically, as the catalogue of rights has grown, victims are exercising fewer of those rights than they did before the Act came into effect, because the information is often formal, and they don't really know how to do this. (R4)

The police are aware of these shortcomings and are looking for ways to meet victims' needs in practice:

I agree with you; we'll try to re-train police officers this year. We don't know what effect it will have. But what is missing is an informed public that knows the Act exists and what it contains – though not in police lingo, but in an understandable way. (R5)

According to the participants, the situation is further complicated by a lack of training with practical overlap, or

well-structured and targeted training focused on soft skills. (R2)

Even with precisely prepared guidelines and related informative material, there is a need to emphasise its application and to consider the specifics of individual victims. The way we communicate information is of key importance to the victim, especially in light of their current psychological and physical state, as evidenced by the following statement:

[W]ell, all this can be conveyed through normal human contact without a lot of written material. (R3)

Last but not least, according to the experts, the very nature of criminal procedure, and thus its focus on offenders, may be the reason for its problematic application.

Working with victims requires an interdisciplinary approach and the cooperation of various bodies that come into contact with victims. A number of the experts identified the lack of a platform with space to define the competencies of individual parts of the system, mutual communication on current problems and mutual expectations from individual actors. During the discussion, the experts gradually came to a consensus that a police officer, for example, cannot play all the roles a victim needs in a crisis at the same time (i.e. provide crisis intervention while performing their professional duties correctly).

The discussion further addressed the accessibility of support:

[A]ccessibility and finding support is a major problem. Only then can we talk about its quality. (R3)

The previous need for a platform to exchange information may partly stem from another shortcoming, namely the uneven distribution and disorganisation of support providers. The experts pointed out that individual organisations are not sufficiently aware of each other's activities and therefore often do not refer victims to other providers. Services for victims are difficult to access in some regions, and are even inaccessible in others. In some cases, the authorities are not even aware of their existence. The Register of Providers of Support to Victims of Crime, which was established under the Act, was intended to better organise services. However, it is not user-friendly and only provides basic information about individual services. A better organised register with a clearer layout could be beneficial, not only for victims but also for experts.

The experts from the non-profit sector often meet clients who do not know whether the events they have experienced can be classified as a crime – if they are victims at all – much less whether they are entitled to assistance. The lack of information among the public also results from the individual shortcomings described in the previous group, but may also be the result of certain cultural characteristics:

the fundamental problem is finding assistance, because when someone in Czechia becomes a victim, they have no information about where to turn and they don't know what to expect from that assistance. And the third point, which is absolutely crucial, is that we don't have a culture where it's normal to ask for help. (R3)

Another expert said that:

most of the time people don't know about these things until it happens; no-one reads about what to do if they become a victim ahead of time.... I'm only interested in what concerns me and what I care about, too. So maybe that's normal. (R8)

The participants in the discussion also suggested possible solutions to the problems they identified. Better awareness would be facilitated by creating easy-to-understand brochures that would provide a summary of basic information and would be available at any time, so that the victim could refer to it when they are able to focus on that information. Another possible way to deal with these problems according to experts is to create a centralised institution that would address several

of these issues. This institution could map the current needs and the distribution and regulation of services across the country. In this context, it could assist in reallocating funds according to the current needs of regions, cities or communities (e.g. by reallocating financial resources to providers in areas that are not adequately covered). Last but not least, it could serve as a platform for communication and interaction between different organisations. The Centre could also be a clear, accessible source of information (e.g. in the form of a telephone hotline), a kind of “signpost” that enables the victim to navigate the current network of NGOs or the legal assistance available in individual regions. Overall, however, the experts rated the adoption of the Act on Victims of Crime very positively. It has brought a large number of positive changes, especially by significantly strengthening the position of victims, but as the focus group discussion showed, some adjustments and improvements are undoubtedly needed in practice:

It certainly has a number of good points, but is there a huge corresponding cultivation and improvement in practice? I don't think so. (R4)

3.2. Experts five years later

In the expert survey we conducted five years after the focus group, topics related to the functioning of the victim support system came up again frequently and spontaneously. Although the legislative framework is good according to the representatives of NGOs and the PMS, its application in practice still leads to reservations.

However, I think the adoption of the Act on Victims of Crime was a huge step in the right direction, and the opportunities for victims are completely different than they were a few years ago and the situation is continually improving. (R18)

Another respondent added that:

legislation in Czechia is at a high level in terms of victims' rights, the position of the victim and witness protection. However, its application in practice by criminal justice authorities is still lagging behind. There is a lack of understanding of the fundamental change in criminal justice philosophy that has occurred from the victims' perspective. The biggest gaps in the application are among judges, public prosecutors and court-appointed experts. (R6)

According to the respondents, the possibilities offered by the Act are not sufficiently utilised. Overall, there is a lack of awareness of victims' rights and the state should strengthen media campaigns.

Every citizen should know that there is an institution where a victim of crime can get support. Knowing what services can be obtained there and under what conditions should be as automatic as knowing, for example, that you have to go to the tax office to do your taxes or to a registry office to get a birth certificate, which everyone is taught at school. This is not what happens in practice. (R32)

However, the experts still see a lack of understanding among law enforcement authorities, who do not always accept the change of perspective in favour of victims. The police are still perceived as the weakest link. The shortcomings in providing information to victims persist. There are also gaps in the training of police officers in dealing with victims despite police officers often being the first to come into contact with victims, and thus playing a key role.

[T]hey can help a lot, but they can also do a lot of harm. (R9)

There is also a problem in the way the system is set up overall. Cooperation between various bodies working with victims is not sufficiently connected, and there is no exchange of experience between them. There is no comprehensive national concept for supporting victims of crime, but it will always be about individual people because

[t]he system can't protect the victim if the individuals in it fail. (R4)

Victims' experiences currently vary depending on "who they encounter". Some victims have good experiences and appreciate the sensitive approach; for others, the experience is negative.

The accessibility of support was also seen as a problem. There are plenty of services in the major cities, but it is worse outside these areas, where victims do not know where to turn for help and how to deal with the situation. The regional distribution of services is inadequate. There are not enough providers of support, and the quality is often lacking. Psychological and psychiatric assistance is unavailable, especially for child victims. Free psychotherapeutic and legal assistance is also insufficient. The PMS has nationwide coverage but does not have sufficient capacity to work with victims. Victim support is underfunded by the state. It would also be advisable to reconsider the manner of financing. NGOs have to apply for grants every year, and even well-established organisations that provide high-quality services are not assured a regular supply of funds. The situation of victims is also complicated by long waiting times for requests for financial aid from the state to be processed or the frequent unenforceability of compensation.

It is unfortunate that in my work, I often have to deal with the fact that the victim is not able to collect compensation from the offender by distraint, as they are often poor, over-indebted and unemployed. (R26)

The issue of domestic violence was also discussed in comments. The approach to domestic violence was cited as an example of good practice and the way that other groups of victims should be treated (Přesličková et al. 2023). For example, strengthening specialised services can better address the specific needs of victims. The experts also agreed that victims should not be simply informed about the availability of support, but that it should be actively offered, as in the case of domestic violence, where the intervention centre itself contacts the victim to offer assistance after the offender is expelled. However, even the situation of victims of domestic violence is not ideal; they are also affected by systemic problems, especially regional short-

comings in the availability of services. The lenient sentences imposed on offenders for this serious crime was also seen negatively. The insensitive approach of the courts in child custody cases was mentioned as a problem as well.

Conclusions and discussion

Looking at the two analyses, the first thing that strikes the eye is that there is not much difference between them. The problems identified five years ago remain almost unchanged. The practitioners agreed that the legal position of victims of crime in Czechia is gradually improving. The Act specifically devoted to victims of crime was undoubtedly a very positive step. From practice, however, also comes a persistent opinion that the main weaknesses of the Czech victim support system is that the transfer of information is poorly set up and implemented, especially at the police level, and there is a general lack of awareness of victims' rights. Shortcomings in the obligation to inform the victim and the lack of public awareness were the most strongly voiced topics among the experts/practitioners. The sad thing is that in the five years between the studies, this problem seems to have not been effectively addressed. The need to provide victims with prompt, clear information constantly fails to be implemented in practice. No clear brochures or materials have yet been produced to convey the information in an easy-to-understand manner.

Another enduring problem is the inaccessibility of support. Our practitioners were in agreement with academics (Jelínek, Pelc 2015; Kozák 2015), pointing out that victim support is disproportionately concentrated in a few major cities, while the rest of Czechia is not sufficiently covered by the service providers. The Probation and Mediation Service, which is supposed to provide at least a basic level of support, struggles with insufficient staffing. Another unsolved problem is the lack of effective communication between the various stakeholders that come into contact with victims. The proposal from the experts in the focus group, to establish a centralised institution, was not heard. Moreover, the area is inefficiently funded. In this setting, taking the specific needs of victims into account is very difficult. Particularly in the questionnaire survey, the practitioners pointed to the randomness of the experience with representatives of the system, which depends mainly on who one encounters.

The training of law enforcement officers is still regarded as inadequate. This may be the underlying cause of the insensitive approach to victims by the police and the courts that some have criticised (Kozák 2015). Some law enforcement officials have consistently rejected a paradigm shift in criminal proceedings towards empowering the victim. Although it turns out that it is mainly about people in specific cases, systematic training and increasing the competencies of those who come into contact with victims is still an important topic. The need for special treatment is logically greater, especially for sensitive offences. While measures

supporting victims should always be evidence-based, support for research and data collection does not appear to be a particular priority. A significant shortcoming is the lack of relevant official data on victims in Czechia to work with (Roubalová 2021). The absence of comprehensive data collection can have an impact on the collaboration of stakeholders, who address the issue only from their perspective, rather than as a set of complementary actions. As a result of this isolated perspective, practitioners tend to focus their assessments only on the practical aspects of the issue and do not perceive the absence of data collection as a significant problem. Support for research and data collection did not resonate among the experts. This may be also due to the fact that they consider “practical” things to be more important, although it is the data-based arguments that could help persuade politicians and legislators to correct the problems they encounter in practice. From an external perspective, however, this absence appears to be a significant problem. It can be observed that this lack of data collection manifests itself precisely in the insufficient capacity of the system to provide a basis for mutual cooperation, and thus a comprehensive systemic solution.

The Act on Victims of Crime has been in force for more than ten years. However, the standing of victims is improving quite slowly, and – as confirmed by our analysis – many of the shortcomings that were identified when the Act was adopted still persist today (Jílovec, Kozák 2016). Although many of the limitations of effective application have been identified and confirmed by multiple sources (La Strada Česká republika 2015; Kalibová 2016; Nyklová et al. 2021), little has been done to correct them. To date, most efforts to improve the victim support system in Czechia have sounded like a lone voice in the wilderness. Nevertheless, the rationale behind this phenomenon remains opaque. The problems described herein are not very surprising; as evidenced by the introduction to this article, many other countries are facing similar issues (Ivanković et al. 2019; Soo, Espenberg 2019; European Commission 2022). On the other hand, in the contemporary era there is a plethora of materials available² that address these issues and propose efficacious solutions (FRA 2019a; 2019b; 2023; 2024; Altan, Baudoin-Naneix 2022; Meindre-Chautrand, Baudouin-Naneix, Lokerse 2022; COVIS-project 2024). Furthermore, there is the option of utilising the established best practices of nations with a long-standing tradition of providing high-quality victim support (Wedlock, Tapley 2016; UK Ministry of Justice 2020).

It is evident that legislative reforms alone are insufficient to achieve meaningful improvement in the treatment of victims. The “law in books” must be put into practice; it is imperative that reformers address the fundamental concepts underpinning the criminal justice system and the tasks and roles of the individuals involved in proceedings. It is very important that legislative change be accompanied by comprehensive communication and training measures that would ensure

² See e.g. materials developed by Victim Support Europe <https://victim-support.eu/> or the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) <https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/victims-rights>.

the establishment of uniform standards for training police officers and court practitioners in victims' rights. Furthermore, these measures should facilitate the dissolution of myths and preconceived views that impede the recognition of victims (FRA 2019b). Clear conceptual and systemic anchoring is only the first step towards overall improvement and eliminating other shortcomings, such as high latency (especially in gender-based violence), the practical application of victims' rights, victims' overall distrust in the criminal justice system and secondary victimisation. In accordance with the recommendations put forward by our respondents, the FRA advises that states should maintain:

[...] a state body responsible for ensuring that sufficient victim support organisations exist, that performance standards for such organisations are clearly defined, and that compliance with these standards is monitored to secure the delivery of victims' rights in practice. In this regard, Member States should consider introducing measures to strengthen and further develop the system of organisations providing victim support services. This implies, in particular, working towards a comprehensive, joined-up structure of victim support services serving different groups of victims. Improving the coordination of support services and increasing the level of public funding to provide adequate support to meet the needs of victims of different types of crime can help achieve this. (FRA 2023: 4)

The absence of a strategic victim support framework and its consistent implementation could be regarded as the most significant drawback of the situation in Czechia. It is evident that a multitude of NGOs are undertaking commendable initiatives that encompass the provision of services to victims and the realm of education, research and training. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the absence of state support invariably renders these endeavours as ad hoc projects, consequently perpetuating the fragmentation of the system. It is crucial to recognise that the role of NGOs should not be construed as a substitute for the state, particularly in circumstances where state funding for victim support is perceived, by some, to be very deficient. The initiative from the Ministry of Justice of Czechia to establish an expert platform is indicative of a glimmer of hope. This platform is expected to lead to a national concept for the provision of support to victims. The establishment of a new register of service providers for victims has the potential to engender positive change. This initiative should also contribute to the creation of a unified information system and establish a clear division of the roles of different stakeholders and of mapping and assessing the needs of victims. Furthermore, it should support research and data collection in order to clarify how many potential and actual victims there are, and how well they are exercising their rights. Furthermore, the opportunity afforded by impending legislative changes, which are designed to fulfil the obligation to transpose relevant EU directives, must be capitalised upon. It is to be hoped that this will not represent yet another unheard lone voice in the wilderness.

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