FOSTER

Fostering Child-Friendly Legal Environments through collaborative networks

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1. Introduction

The project **FOSTER - Fostering Child-Friendly Legal Environments through collaborative networks** is an EU funded initiative which aims to facilitate a comprehensive, child-friendly approach to justice that ensures the protection of the rights and well-being of child victims of crime. This objective will be achieved by building and enhancing the capacity of lawyers to support the children and by establishing robust cooperation networks between legal professionals, relevant authorities, and stakeholders, while equipping them with the necessary tools. Furthermore, the project aims to raise awareness about the importance of child-friendly justice and child protection among legal professionals, policy makers, and the general public, while contributing to the development of child-friendly justice policies and practices at national and EU level.

FOSTER project is implemented in Greece, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Hungary by a consortium of five partner organisations:

The **Centre for European Constitutional Law – CECL**, project coordinator, is a leading public benefit foundation and research institute, based in Greece. Its areas of focus include Justice and Fundamental Rights, Democracy and Public Institutions, and Social Policy and the Welfare State. CECL is a training provider with extensive experience in the training of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and other legal professionals, closely collaborating with the Greek School of the Judiciary, Bar Associations, and other professional associations at the national and European level. CECL also hosts the national focal point for FRANET, the multidisciplinary research network of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and is a member of the Greek National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI).

The **Society of Social Psychiatry P. Sakellaropoulos – SSP. P. Sakellaropoulos** is a non-profit non-governmental scientific organisation, which was founded in 1986 and

provides high quality mental health services in Greece as part of the National Plan for Mental Health "Psychargos" of the Ministry of Health. It focuses on prevention, timely intervention, human rights promotion in mental health, advocacy and networking and it operates 35 mental health units in 5 Prefectures, including mobile mental health units and day centers for children and adults, rehabilitation units. It also provides training to professionals, including teachers, judges, prosecutors, legal experts, police officers, journalists in the framework of community awareness rising.

The Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD in Bulgaria, which has been long engaged in advancing child rights, with a focus on protecting the rights of child victims of crime. Over the years, CSD has conducted comprehensive research, developed policy recommendations, and implemented training programmes aimed at improving the treatment of children within the justice system. The Centre has been instrumental in promoting a child-sensitive and trauma-informed approach to legal proceedings, advocating for reforms to align national practices with international standards.

The Centre for Social Sciences Institute of Legal Science (CSS) in Hungary, CSS is a research centre for the legal sciences, conducting theoretical, empirical and comparative researches. The Centre also carries out basic, applied and comparative research in these fields and conducts its scientific work independently of political influence, and

The **Institute of Criminology (IK)** at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana is an organisation founded in 1954 as the first criminological institute in the former Yugoslavia. Since its establishment, its primary activities have included research, teaching, information dissemination, and the organization of a library and documentation service.

In order to present, analyse and summarise the current state of legal practice concerning child victims and their rights, as well as to identify the areas where lawyers require capacity building, partner organisations implemented desk and field research in their countries, the conclusions of which were summarised in national training needs

assessment (TNA) reports for each of the following countries: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece. The national TNA report for Slovenia was drafted by the Institute of Criminology (IK) at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana; the national TNA report for Hungary was drafted by the Centre for Social Sciences Institute of Legal Science (CSS), the national TNA report for Bulgaria was drafted by the Center for the Study of Democracy, and the national TNA report for Greece was drafted by the Centre for European Constitutional Law (CECL) and Society of Social Psychiatry P. Sakellaropoulos (SSP. P. Sakellaropoulos), who collaborated in the organisation of the desk and field research activities.

The results of the research activities provide the consortium with valuable inputs in order to develop two training packages: one for lawyers - trainers, focusing on adult learning methodologies and advanced issues of child friendly justice and one for lawyers focusing on the rights of children who are victims of crime. In addition, both training packages will include modules on data protection for children involved in judicial proceedings in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and EU Directive 2016/680, elements of child psychology and child-friendly communication, and collaboration with relevant support services and competent authorities.

2. Research Methodology

The Centre for European Constitutional Law (CECL) in Greece, leader of the research activities, provided the frame for the implementation of the research activities by providing the Research Protocol, questionnaires to be used in semi- structured interviews and focus groups, as well as templates in order to draft the national TNA reports.

From September to December 2024 partners implemented the desk and field research activities in their respective countries. The desk research was based on literature review of resources (official reports by national or international authorities involved in child

protection, reports and publications by NGOs and other material published in the frame of national or international projects) on the topics of the legal framework on the rights of child victims of crime, practices, tools and methods applied in justice involving children, with a special focus on child victims of crime, best practices, guidelines and recommendations for lawyers when representing child victims of crime and challenges related to lack of knowledge regarding the application of child-friendly justice by lawyers, focusing on child victims of crime. The field research included the organisation of interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 102 lawyers, state authorities, NGO representatives and other actors involved in judicial procedures with child victims of crime and child protection.

In detail:

Field research in Slovenia involved a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with various professionals who interact with child victims of criminal offences. In October and November 2024, a total of **16 respondents** participated in two focus groups and six interviews. The participants came from diverse groups of respondents from within and outside of the justice system: judges (1), prosecutors (2), attorneys (6), social workers (1), an expert from the Children's House (1) and NGO representatives (5).

Field research in Bulgaria was carried out between October and November 2024 with a total of **25 participants** involved; in detail, the research presented the perspectives of 15 lawyers, 8 representatives of victim support NGOs, 2 representatives of the academia, a judge, a prosecutor, and a police officer.

Field research in Hungary included **32 participants** in total. In detail, three focus groups (FG) were conducted: one in person FG on November 7th, 2024, with 9 participants from a broader group of relevant professionals including experts in medicine (e.g., traumatology, paediatric gynaecology), clinical and child psychology, and social work, one in person FG with 7 legal professionals on November 12th, 2024; and a third (online) FG on November 12th, 2024, to accommodate 5 participants unable to attend the

previous in-person sessions. Additionally, the research team conducted 11 individual interviews with key professionals (lawyers, attorneys, and child protection specialists) between October and November 2024.

The field research in Greece were conducted from October to December 2024 and involved a total of 29 participants. In detail, CECL organised 6 interviews with legal professionals and one FG with 10 lawyers, while and SSP. P. Sakellaropoulos organised two FGs with 7 health care professionals and CSO representatives and 6 interviews with health care professionals working with children.

Partners drafted the national TNA reports in December 2024 which were reviewed by CECL. CECL also finalised the consolidated TNA report in March 2025, with the collaboration and review of all partners. The consolidated TNA report aims to summarise the conclusions of the research implemented in the partner countries and contribute to the development of training material that is relevant for the target groups, who will be trained in the upcoming project activities.

The structure of the present report is organised into five chapters, each providing an analysis of the research results from the participating countries, along with key findings drawn from comparing the different frameworks and participants' perspectives. However, as the primary objective of this report is to identify the training needs of lawyers and draw conclusions regarding the necessary training topics for the development of training packages, we encourage readers to also refer to the national TNA reports attached to this consolidated report. These national reports offer more detailed information on the current state of the rights of child victims of crime in each participating country.

3. National Framework

3.1 The legal framework on the rights of child victims of crime and involved actors in Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Greece

Slovenia

According to the desk and field research conducted in Slovenia by the Institute of Criminology (IK), Slovenia has made significant progress in protecting child victims in criminal proceedings, largely influenced by the Victim's Rights Directive and new legislation that established the Children's House and regulates the treatment of child victim within its framework. Child victims' rights focus on active participation and protection from harm.

In addition, the Criminal Procedure Act (ZKP)[1] provides key safeguards and protective measures, such as the right for child victims and witnesses to be accompanied by a support person (ZKP, Articles 65 and 240), the option to question the child with the help of a pedagogical or other expert in specially designed spaces (ZKP, Article 240), the recording of the child's interview (ZKP, Article 84), and the removal of the accused from the witness hearing, which is required for certain child victims (ZKP, Article 178). Additionally, the law permits the prohibition of questioning child victims during the main hearing (ZKP, Article 331) and the exclusion of the public during the child's examination at the main hearing (ZKP, Article 331). While these measures enhance child victim protection, legal professionals highlight areas for further improvement, particularly in tailoring procedures to children's psychological needs[2].

Authorities conduct an individual assessment to evaluate a child's risk of secondary victimisation, intimidation, and retaliation to determine if and to what extent special

[1] *Zakon o kazenskem postopku* 1994, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 176/2021, available at https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO362

[2] L. Briški, 'Položaj otroka kot oškodovanca v kazenskem postopku,' in A. Šelih, K. Filipčič, in L. Briški (eds.), *Otrok kot žrtev kaznivih ravnanj*, Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, Inštitut za kriminologijo pri Pravni fakulteti v Ljubljani, Pravna fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, pp. 112–35, K. G. Šugman, 'Otrok žrtev - otrok priča v kazenskem postopku,' *Revija za kriminalistiko in kriminologijo* vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, pp. 207–15.

protection is needed (ZKP, Article 143č). During this process, the victim can state their views on the protective measures. Under the law, child victims are automatically considered in need of special protection in criminal proceedings. However, the interviewed practitioners suggested expanding this to include developmental and psychological evaluations to improve communication with the child.

In Slovenia, the special act entitled the Protection of Children in Criminal Procedure and their Comprehensive Treatment in Children's House Act (Zakon o zaščiti otrok v kazenskem postopku in njihovi celostni obravnavi v hiši za otroke, ZZOKPOHO)[3] regulates the treatment of child victims and witnesses of criminal offences protection for juvenile victims and witnesses of certain criminal offences, such as offences against humanity, life and body, sexual integrity, marriage, family, and children in the Children's House. The purpose of Children's House, which is based on the Barnahus model, is to coordinate hearings and medical examinations, psychological support and therapeutic services provided under one roof[4]. The "Children's House" facilitates that the child's testimony is held in a child-friendly environment, ensuring no unwanted personal contact between the child and the suspect, with the assistance of a Children's House expert and counsellors who provide crisis support before and during a child's interview and psychosocial assistance afterwards (ZZOKPOHO, Articles 23, 24, 25, 33 and 34). The "Children's House" plays a key role in reducing the need for child victims to repeat their traumatic experiences[5].

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[3] *Zakon o zaščiti otrok v kazenskem postopku in njihovi celostni obravnavi v hiši za otroke* 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 54/2021, available at https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO8216

[4] European Commission, *Barnahus Slovenia: Supporting children victims of violence* [website], https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/public-administration-and-governance/barnahus-slovenia-supporting-children-victims-violence_en (accessed 28 August 2024).

[5] Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za pravosodje, 'Zakon o zaščiti otrok v kazenskem postopku in njihovi celostni obravnavi v Hiši za otroke,' 2020, https://e-uprava.gov.si/drzava-in-druzba/e-demokracija/predlogi-predpisov/predlog-predpisa.html?id=11379 and Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za pravosodje, 'National Guidelines for Barnahus in Slovenia,' 2019,

Since its launch (in May 2022 for sexual offences and from May 2024 for other crimes), the Children's House has significantly reduced repeat interviews, with only one documented case of re-interviewing due to new evidence, as reported by the interviewed expert from the Children's House. The legislation foresees recording of a witness statement, which is sometimes mandatory (ZKP, Article 84, and ZZOKPOHO, Article 26); however, there is no set limit on the number of interviews with a child victim.

For procedures conducted at the Children's House, the Slovenian Protocol on Forensic Interview with the Child and the Rules on the Training and Assessment of Competence of Professionals and Counsellors at the Children's House provide specific guidelines for professionals who either interview or provide psychological treatment to child victims admitted to the Children's House. The Protocol on Forensic Interview with the Child[6] is based on the internationally recognised National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol but has been adapted to Slovenian law and language. It establishes basic rules for interviews, including how to introduce the interviewer, inform the child of their rights, explain the use of recording devices, and structure the conversation to allow for free narration and structured questioning. Some attorneys who participated in the focus group discussions, stated that they follow this protocol when interviewing child victims, considering it a useful framework for conducting sensitive conversations[7].

Actors such as the police, courts and other state authorities, experts, and court interpreters are required to take special care of vulnerable victims (ZKP, Article 18a). In addition, the Children's House cooperates with professionals from courts, the police, public prosecution service, social work centres, educational institutions, non-

https://rm.coe.int/prems-104918-eng-2577-barnahus-slovenia-couv-texte-a5-web-bleu/16809e5ed1 (accessed 5 September 2024), p. 10.

[6] *Protokol forenzičnega intervjuja z otrokom* 2022, available at: https://www.hisa-za-otroke.si/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Protokol-forenzicnega-intervjuja-z-otrokom.pdf

[7] Correspondence of IK with the Ministry of Justice, 16 September 2024.

governmental organisations, health professionals conducting medical examinations, and other professionals working with children[8].

Participants in the interviews and focus groups reported various experiences with inconsistent collaboration among professionals remaining a challenge. Indicatively, interviewed judges and prosecutors mentioned varied approaches by defence attorneys; some attorneys handle cases with sensitivity, while others are less considerate of child victims. Some attorneys focus on building trust while others meet the children only shortly before the hearing. According to NGO representatives who participated in the research, attorneys rarely consult NGOs that previously worked with the child, missing potential insights into the child's well-being and needs. On the other hand, attorneys shared mixed experiences with their collaboration with social work centres; two interviewed attorneys reported the lack of responsiveness by social work centres and lack of providing crucial information for the child's background.

Bulgaria

According to the desk and field research conducted in Bulgaria by the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Bulgaria has a specialised legal framework to protect children involved in judicial proceedings, however their practical implementation remains inconsistent and often inadequate, particularly in terms of legal representation, protection during proceedings, and support systems for child victims.

The Bulgarian Constitution and the Child Protection Act foresees that the state is obliged to safeguard and uphold the fundamental rights of all children, providing a suitable

[8] Article 7 of the ZZOKPOHO; *Uredba o načinu sodelovanja med javnim zavodom Hiša za otroke in drugimi udeleženci pri zagotavljanju celostne obravnave v hiši za otroke* 2022, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 135/2022.

economic, social, and cultural environment, as well as access to education, freedom of expression, and security[9].

Children aged from 10 years and more are heard in all proceedings affecting their rights or interests unless their hearing would harm their interests; children younger than 10 years can be heard depending on their maturity[10]. However, UNICEF notes that although legislation acknowledges this right, its implementation is inconsistent[11]. Parents can represent their child aged more than 14 years in legal matters. If there's a conflict of interest, a special representative (typically a lawyer) is appointed by the court. There are neither concrete requirements for the profile, nor a unified procedure for appointing such a representative. As mentioned by the participants of the FG, some bar associations use the Legal Aid Act procedure by analogy.

Children victims of crime are involved in different judicial proceedings particularly as victims of domestic violence. Noteworthy is that child victims of domestic violence in Bulgaria are frequently involved in a special legal procedure within the civil justice system which is regulated under the Protection from Domestic Violence Act[12]. This law is not criminal in nature and its main purpose is to protect the victim. Children are involved in the procedure under this law not only as so-called direct victims, but also as "indirect" victims, since according to the law every child witness of domestic violence is also recognised as a victim. This Act focuses on protecting victims rather than punishing the abusers and gives courts the authority to impose measures including requiring abusers to attend programmes, or offering support services to victims. This process, which was mentioned by many participants to the research activities can overlap with criminal and civil justice, complicating the legal situation for affected children.

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[9] Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/521957377, Art. 14, Child Protection Act, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134925825, Art. 1
[10] Child Protection Act, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134925825, Art. 15.
[11] Fresno, J.M. et al (2021), *Analysis of the Child Protection System in Bulgaria: Final Report 2019*, Sofia, UNICEF Bulgaria, 12 May 2021, p. 43.
[12] Protection against Domestic Violence Act, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135501151

The Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) (*Наказателно-процесуален кодекс*)[13] and the Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crime Act (AFCVC) (*Закон за подпомагане и финансова компенсация на пострадали от престъпления*)[14] are the main legal acts regulating victims' rights in Bulgaria.

In criminal proceedings, child victims have the right to participate in the pre-trial phase with specific protective guarantees, and in the trial phase, they can participate either as witnesses or request to be a party. They have the right to have a lawyer in each of the stages. However, in practice, as pointed out by professionals who participated in the research activities, few child victims have legal representation, and very few are recognised as parties in the case during the trial stage.

Until recently, Bulgaria's legislation was behind international and European standards in protecting victims' rights, including repeated interrogations and other violations of children's rights in the pre-trial stage, as stated by practitioners who participated in the field research.

In 2023, Bulgaria amended its Criminal Procedure Code to better align with EU Directives 2012/29 and 2016/800, aiming for a more child-friendly approach. However, practitioners mentioned that their practical implementation is still unclear, and there is resistance from many police officers and prosecutors. The amendment established the status of "victim with specific protection needs," which is particularly relevant to children. All crime victims, including children, must undergo an individual assessment to determine their physical and mental state and identify specific protection needs. However, some practitioners noted that these assessments are often too formal and superficial, there are significant delays and doubts whether the professionals involved have the necessary skills.

[13] Criminal Procedure Code, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135512224
[14] Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crime Act, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135540550

In addition, despite the fact that legally children are always victims with specific protection needs, the CPC differentiates between the procedures for questioning minors and juveniles on the one hand, and witnesses with specific protection needs on the other. Witnesses with specific protection needs should be questioned in premises specially equipped for that purpose; in the mandatory presence of a psychologist or a pedagogy specialist and, if needed, in the presence of the parent or caregiver, and by the same investigative authority if repeated questioning is needed. These provisions are, however, applied only if their application "will not seriously impede criminal proceedings".

In Bulgaria, specialised "blue rooms" for interviewing children have been in use for years, but their establishment has been inconsistent, often relying on project-based initiatives. By 2024, the national Child Protection Agency identified 70 blue rooms[15], though according to the field research, only about half are functioning due to lack of specialised staff and relevant issues. Child protection professionals argue that these rooms help minimise the negative impact of legal proceedings on children, but their use remains controversial among prosecutors, some of whom underestimate their importance or find that the involvement of psychologists complicates their work.

Furthermore, there are rules for informing children of their rights in the pre-trial stage, but as field research showed, practitioners often rely on caregivers or lawyers to relay this information, and authorities may not have the skills to explain it directly to the child. Although child victims can request a lawyer, it is rare for them to do so.

Child victims are entitled to legal aid, including counseling and representation in criminal, civil, and administrative cases, as well as in non-court proceedings[16]. According to the field research, the investigative authorities or the court support the child who wishes to have a lawyer at any stage of the proceedings. Bulgaria's National Legal Aid

[15] State Agency for Child Protection, 'A methodology has been established for the use and operation of special "Blue Rooms" for hearing children and conducting interrogations', Press release, 25 July 2024.
[16] Legal Aid Act, available at: https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135511185

Bureau (NLAB), in partnership with bar associations, manages the delivery of legal aid at both the national and local levels. The bar associations are responsible for organising legal aid within each jurisdiction, with the lawyers being selected from a registry maintained by the NLAB. In practice, fewer lawyers are choosing to join the legal aid registry, and those included have no formal specialisation requirements for those undertaking cases involving children. Noteworthy is that in legal aid cases, lawyers have less than 24 hours to familiarise with the case and often meet their clients shortly before a hearing.

Multiple questioning and secondary victimisation were repeatedly outlined as a major shortcoming of the criminal proceedings in Bulgaria which is linked to the ineffective cooperation between the active actors responsible for the pre-trial and the trial phase.

Furthermore, a significant challenge in Bulgaria is the lack of adequate interpretation services for foreign language speaking children involved in legal proceedings, with limited availability and poor-quality interpretation being recurring problems.

Child victims who don't request a more active role in the trial are usually only heard once as witnesses, and their involvement ends there. If they don't become a party, they lose certain rights, like attending hearings, which may affect how well their interests are protected. Although authorities are required to inform child victims about their right to become a party, this isn't always done clearly or in a way children can understand. Lawyers, when present, need to be more proactive in ensuring children are aware of this right. The situation raises questions about whether children are seen as independent rightsholders, separate from their parents. However, becoming a party can be a potentially traumatic experience for a child, so parents and lawyers must carefully consider the pros and cons of this decision for each case.

Key actors involved in child protection and justice processes for child victims in Bulgaria play a range of roles, from legal and social support to coordination and protection, but the majority of practitioners involved in the research activities emphasised on the lack of collaboration aimed at the well-being of the child.

The police, judges and prosecutors are among the actors directly involved with the children victims of crime. Children's Pedagogical Room Inspectors are specialised police officers, who work with child offenders in the pre- trial stage, but also prepare assessments about child victims. Judges and Prosecutors are crucial figures within the justice system.

The Child Protection Units (CPUs) at Social Assistance Directorates (SADs) operate at municipality level, handling cases of children at risk. They decide on protection measures, accompany children in trials, and provide advice to courts on child-related matters, such as questioning or decisions in divorce cases. They are criticised for lacking sufficient capacity to fulfil their responsibilities.

The State Agency for Child Protection is responsible for drafting policies and guidelines on child protection. It also monitors the use of child-friendly spaces like "blue rooms" for questioning children and ensures a standardised methodology for interviewing a child in pre-trial and trial phases, but also for non-justice actors[17]. This methodology applies to questioning both a child victim and an accused child and despite not being legally binding, it is an instrument that is affirmed by all relevant institutions. As it was published during the time this research was conducted and its application remains to be seen.

The National Legal Aid Bureau oversees the provision of free legal aid to vulnerable individuals, including child victims. The Bureau works with local bar associations to maintain lists of lawyers. When attorneys are listed as duty attorneys, they have the opportunity to indicate that they work with children by declaring. However, there is no list of lawyers who only work with children, nor is there a mechanism to confirm what their declaration is based on. There is a list of lawyers who represent unaccompanied minors in legal matters.

[17] The methodology can be found at SACP's website.

NGO staff also provide direct support to child victims and their families, offering the most specialised knowledge of children's rights and legal protections. Many of these professionals have access to training in child protection.

On the other hand, the healthcare system in Bulgaria operates in isolation from other actors in the justice and child protection systems. It is not involved in coordination efforts and is not seen as a key stakeholder for child rights training, despite the fact that healthcare providers may offer initial assistance to child victims.

Collaboration among actors is considered ineffective according to the responses received from participants of our field research activities. In detail, 60% law enforcement and justice professionals estimate their collaboration with other service providers as very good, while less than 30% of the health care, education, or social services professionals believe they work with police, judges and prosecutors is satisfactory.

Hungary

Child Protection Act (CPA, Act XXXI of 1997) serves as the primary legal framework for child protection in Hungary[18]. It mandates professionals and institutions to report suspected child endangerment, ensuring early intervention of child welfare services. Amendments to the CPA introduced Barnahus type hearing and therapy centres[19] to support abused children. According to Article 61 of the CPA, the child protection services may organise special services for the examination and therapy of neglected and abused children, especially in cases of sexual abuse.

Hungary's criminal procedure laws provide enhanced protection for minors. Act XC of 2017 categorises children as “persons requiring special treatment,” ensuring safeguards

[18] Act XXXI of 1997 on the protection of children and the administration of guardianship affairs. (1997. évi XXXI. törvény a gyermekek védelméről és a gyámügyi igazgatásról) https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99700031.tv

[19] Hearing and Therapy Centre. https://ogysz.hu/meghallgato-es-terapias-szolgalat

such as protection of personal data and privacy, procedures without delay and repetition, avoiding meetings between victim and accused, audio recordings, using a special interview room or video conferencing[20]. The 2013 and subsequent amendments facilitated child-friendly hearing rooms, limiting interviews, minimising trauma, and ensuring expert participation. The 'special expert' system, introduced by Act CXXXIV of 2021, allows child psychologists and professionals trained according to the Barnahus model to assist in hearings.

In Barnahus type centres, a protocol is applied to ensure a systematic and child-centred approach to supporting victims and quality standards.

Since 2011 Hungary no longer has an independent juvenile court system, with general courts handling juvenile cases with specially composed panels rather than dedicated juvenile judges.

Victim support services have been restructured since 2011, with Victim Support Centres (VSCs) established across Hungary. On 22 February 2011, the Victim Support Line started its operations (number 06 80 225 225), which is available free of charge, 24/7, for victims of crime and professionals who aim to assist them. VSCs provide legal, emotional, and financial assistance to victims[21], but challenges remain, such as victims disengaging due to ongoing relationships with perpetrators or inadequate training of police officers, who provide the initial assessment of needs questionnaire to victims[22]. The opt-out system for direct victim access to support services was introduced in 2021 to improve engagement. By 2025, the government aims to establish VSCs in all districts to ensure nationwide access to victim support.

[20] Act XC of 2017 on Criminal Proceedings https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2017-90-00-00.4
[21] Act LXXX of 2003 about legal support.
[22] De Coll, Ágnes - Molnár, Melinda: Összefoglaló tanulmány a BBa-5.4.5/10-2019-00001 számú „Komplex áldozatsegítési szolgáltatások az emberkereskedelem áldozatai részére" című projekt eredményeiről; Ministry of Interior, Budapest, 2022; 12, 23 pp.

For legal aid cases, police officers contact the bar association, where assignments are made alphabetically; however, for specific cases, any attorney may be directly contacted and appointed as a guardian ad litem.

Greece

Greece has a comprehensive legal framework for child protection, aligned with international conventions and EU laws.

According to the Greek legislation (Article 227 of the Greek Code of Criminal Procedures and Ministerial decision 7320/2019), the examination of child survivors of crimes like sexual abuse, human trafficking, and domestic violence follows specific legal procedures. It takes place in designated facilities, ideally within the Children's Houses, or in specially adapted spaces. The process must be conducted without undue delay and with as few interviews as possible. A trained child psychologist or psychiatrist assesses and prepares the child, ensuring their well-being throughout the process. Investigating officers and judicial authorities communicate through the psychologist or psychiatrist. A parent or guardian may be present unless their presence poses a conflict of interest. The child's testimony must be recorded both in writing and audio-visually, and this recording is used in legal proceedings to prevent repeated questioning.

The Children's Houses were established to provide a safe and specialised environment for forensic interviews. However, implementation has been slow. While Athens has a fully operational House, others planned for Piraeus, Thessaloniki, and Crete face delays due to staffing and infrastructure issues. Although a structured interview protocol exists, no official state-led training is available for professionals conducting these interviews.

The Protocol for Child Forensic Interview, established by Ministerial Decision 7320/2019, creates a child-friendly environment for forensic interviews. It includes guidelines for professionals to assess the child's developmental stage, to provide a safe and supportive environment for children, including medical and psychological support, and to reduce re-traumatisation by minimising repeated interviews. However, the lack

of specialised training for professionals and inconsistencies in implementation hinder the effectiveness of this protocol.

According to the practitioners who participated to our research, delays in opening child protection facilities[23], the lack of exclusive forensic interview authority leading to repeated questioning, and insufficient training for professionals on the Protocol for Child Forensic Interview contribute to gaps in child protection services.

The rights of victims are regulated by Law 4478/2017[24] (integrating Directive 2012/29/EU). The Greek law establishes several key rights for victims, including the right to receive information from the first contact with a competent authority, the right to make complaints in a language they understand or with necessary linguistic assistance, the right to information about their case, and the right to interpretation and translation services. Victims also have the right to support from victim services, to be heard during criminal proceedings, and to receive legal aid. They are entitled to avoid contact with the offender, have their privacy protected, and receive individual assessments to identify specific protection needs. Child survivors of crimes related to personal and sexual freedom are entitled to legal aid for both civil and criminal claims under Law 3226/2004. A prosecutor, investigating judge, or court may appoint a lawyer from a special bar association list if needed. Regarding privacy and confidentiality, Law 3500/2006 mandates that police officers maintain confidentiality for survivors of domestic violence, prohibiting the release of information that could reveal the victim's identity. Additionally, Article 352B of the Criminal Code imposes penalties on anyone who discloses information about a minor victim's identity between the time of reporting and the court's decision.

[23] The Greek Ombudsperson, Annual report, 2020, https://old.synigoros.gr/resources/ee2020-p00-plires-keimeno.pdf
[24] Accessible in NOMOS legal database.

However, lack of coordination between legal, health care, and social services, as well as a shortage of trained professionals, weakens the system's effectiveness[25].

Various actors are involved in child protection, each playing a specific role in ensuring the safety and well-being of minors. The Child Public Prosecutor handles cases involving children as either perpetrators or victims of crime, while the Department for Minors, operating within the Public Prosecutor's Office, safeguards minors' rights. The Greek Police is competent for the investigation of any crime against children, but noteworthy is that there are specific police offices and directorates for dealing with cases of domestic violence[26].

The Deputy Ombudsperson for Children's Rights, part of the independent Greek Ombudsperson authority, monitors child rights violations, ensures legal compliance, and advocates for necessary policy changes[27]. The National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA) provides protection and psychosocial support, coordinates social services, and operates hotlines for child protection and social assistance[28]. Law 4837/2021 mandates that each child protection organisation appoints a Responsible Person for Child Protection to report and document child abuse cases. The Institute of Child Health plays a key role in paediatric health and child abuse prevention, developing protocols for professionals to identify and manage abuse cases[29]. Child psychiatric clinics and mental health centres in public hospitals are often the first to detect child abuse and provide psychological support, frequently upon orders from the Child Public Prosecutor.

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[25] UNICEF Greece, An Assessment of the Child-Friendliness of the Juvenile Justice System in Greece, 2023, accessible in English and Greek, https://www.unicef.org/greece/en/reports/assessment-child-friendliness-justice-system-greece . The assessment was led by the UNICEF Country Office in Greece and the Ministry of Justice and it was carried out by Coram International with the support of Terre des hommes Hellas.

[26] Greek Police, Official Website, Domestic Violence https://www.astynomia.gr/odigos-tou-politi/chrisimes-symvoules/endooikogeneiaki-via/

[27] Ombudsperson for Children Rights, Official website, https://www.synigoros.gr/paidi/profile-stp.html

[28] **National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA),** *Home* [online], available at: www.ekka.org.gr [Accessed 16 September 2024].

[29] Institute of Child Health, Official Website, https://ich.gr/%cf%80%ce%bf%ce%b9%ce%bf%ce%b9-%ce%b5%ce%af%ce%bc%ce%b1%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b5-2/

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also contribute significantly to child protection efforts. Indicatively, UNICEF supports state initiatives in implementing the legislation concerning children rights[30]. ELIZA focuses on preventing and addressing child abuse through awareness campaigns and professional support. ELIZA helpline "10454" offers support to professionals who may suspect that a child is being neglected or abused[31]. The Smile of the Child provides legal, psychological, and social services to child victims, operating a national 24 hour seven days a week SOS - National Helpline for Children "1056" and a specialised daycare centre which provides individualised mental health services to children and adolescents who have been victims of abuse, neglect, and domestic violence[32]. The Network for Children's Rights promotes child rights advocacy and policy implementation to guarantee respect for diversity and to put an end to discrimination[33]. The Network for Children's Rights and ARSIS participate in the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) for unaccompanied children. Terre des Hommes Hellas works on child protection system improvements, emphasising restorative justice[34]. SOS Villages Greece provides alternative care for children without parental support, ensuring their well-being through foster family programs, psychological aid, and education[35].

Despite the efforts of these institutions, the practitioners who participated in the research activities stated that the main challenges include fragmented coordination among the services, insufficient resources, and gaps in the implementation of child protection policies.

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[30] The Office of UNICEF in Greece, Official Website, https://www.unicef.org/greece/en/what-we-do
[31] https://eliza.org.gr/oi-draseis-mas/grammi-eliza-10454/
[32] **The Smile of the Child,** *Home* [online], available at: www.hamogelo.gr [Accessed 16 September 2024].
[33] Network for Children's Rights, Official Website, https://ddp.gr/en/the-network/
[34] Terre des Hommes Greece (n.d.) *Projects - Child-Friendly Justice*. Available at: https://tdh.gr/en/projects-child-friendly-justice (Accessed: 18 September 2024).
[35] SOS Villages Greece, Official Website, https://sos-villages.gr/en/sos-childrens-villages-greece-3/

Key findings

All of the examined countries have established robust legal frameworks to protect child victims, shaped by international and EU legal instruments. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks varies significantly based on their implementation and the practical challenges faced.

Each country has adopted legal provisions that include specific protective measures, the establishment of child-friendly facilities (such as Children's Houses), and protocols designed to ensure children are interviewed in a sensitive manner by a team of experts, with safeguards for their privacy and a focus on preventing secondary victimisation. These measures are inspired by the "Barnahus" model, which aims to offer a coordinated, child-centered approach to victim support.

Additionally, all countries have integrated protective measures specifically for children's rights, as well as rights for victims of crime (regardless of age), within their legal frameworks. This includes access to information, psychological assistance, and legal aid at minimum.

Despite these advances, field research conducted with practitioners highlights the challenges of consistent law implementation. In many of the examined countries (Bulgaria, Greece, and Hungary), child-friendly facilities are often operational only for specific cases and primarily in urban areas. The lack of specialised services results in inadequate support for children, repeated testimonies in various authorities, delays in legal proceedings, and an increased risk of secondary victimisation.

Furthermore, a wide range of actors, both from the public and private sectors, are involved in supporting child victims, including law enforcement, judicial authorities, child protection agencies, and organisations providing legal aid and psychological support. However, research participants noted that interagency cooperation remains a significant challenge. There is a lack of uniform policies, systematic collaboration, and comprehensive training among professionals, which results in inconsistent approaches and fragmented support for child victims.

3.2 Practices, tools and methods applied in justice involving children, with a special focus on child victims of crime.

Slovenia

In Slovenia, there are no universally adopted protocols or standard operating procedures for professionals dealing with child victims in criminal proceedings.[36] The only applied Protocol is the abovementioned Protocol on Forensic Interview with the Child.

Regarding personal data of child victims, Slovenian law provides various measures to protect them. The court can exclude the public from the main hearing to protect the child's best interests; in such cases, the participating parties and the defence counsel are required to maintain confidentiality of all information disclosed in the hearing (ZKP, Article 296). Publication of personal information about a minor involved in criminal proceedings or any information that reveals their identity is a criminal offence (Criminal Code (*Kazenski zakonik* - KZ-1[37], Article 287)[38]. Additional protective measures exist for cases where disclosing personal data could endanger the child or their relatives. These measures include redacting information from case files, marking certain data as non-public, assigning pseudonyms to witnesses, and using technical safeguards such as protective screens and voice distortion (ZKP, Article 240a). The interviewed prosecutors and attorneys generally agreed that the legal framework for protecting child victims' personal data is adequate and effectively applied in practice. While media reports in the past occasionally revealed a child's identity indirectly, such incidents have become rare.

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[36] Correspondence with the Director of the Bar Academy of the Bar Association of Slovenia, 10 September 2024; correspondence with the Ministry of Justice, 16 September 2024.
[37] *Kazenski zakonik* 2008, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 50/2012, available at: https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO5050
[38] Several controversial cases of reporting on criminal cases involving child victims have been identified in the literature (V. Jakulin, 'Poročanje medijev o kazenskih postopkih,' *Pamfil*, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1-10).

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria there are no protocols for handling cases of children in judicial proceedings.

On the other hand, non-governmental efforts, particularly by UNICEF, are playing a crucial role in strengthening children's rights in judicial procedures. In 2024, UNICEF signed a partnership agreement with the Ministry of Justice and the National Legal Aid Bureau to improve access to justice for children at risk, child victims of violence, and other vulnerable groups. This includes training lawyers across the country on child-sensitive legal aid[39].

Noteworthy is that in 2023, a cooperation agreement between the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Justice, National Legal Aid Bureau, and bar associations was signed to improve coordination in protecting victims of domestic violence[40].

Hungary

In Hungary there are no relevant or specialized protocols in place or any policies about data protection of children in judicial proceedings, however the legislation is in line with the GDPR.

In 2020, the Children's Rights Cabinet of the National Office for the Judiciary was established, in accordance with the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice, to improve communication with children, including developing child-friendly legal notification forms, according to their age. The forms, which are available only to judges, are not compulsory but depend on the individual circumstances of the case. However, participants to our research stated that the

[39] National Legal Aid Bureau, Ministry of Justice and NLAB signed a MoU with UNICEF, 2024, Press release.
[40] National Legal Aid Bureau's Annual activity report for 2023, available at: https://mjs.bg/home/index/239ca44b-a384-45a4-9c6f-aa0e5843f92d?top=1

practical implementation remains inconsistent. Authorities make efforts to ensure child-friendly communication, however, often these documents are provided without explanations or simplifications, making them difficult for children to understand.

In child protection, methodological guidelines were introduced in 2016 and 2018 by the **Ministry of Human Capacities** (EMMI) to standardise responses to child abuse across sectors, including health care and social services[41]. The 2020 EMMI guidelines outlined the responsibilities of health care providers in cases of child abuse or neglect[42]. However, the clarity and enforcement of protocols within healthcare and police services remain uncertain.

The Margit Schlachta National Institute of Social Policy operate the Child Protection Hotline, offering support to children at risk and also published a handbook on child abuse prevention.

Greece

Participants of our research noted the use of protocols for handling child victim cases, especially in health care and NGO settings. However, a major issue is the lack of national standardisation, leading to fragmented practices across services. The effectiveness of these protocols is further limited by insufficient training and inconsistencies in their implementation. However, as pointed out, the problem isn't the existence of common protocols, but rather than the fact that these protocols cannot cover the significant gaps in real-life situations.

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[41] Methodological Guidance – Uniformed and sector-neutral principles and methodology on the operation of the child protection detection and signaling system aimed at recognizing and eliminating child abuse.
https://kk.gov.hu/download/e/60/c0000/A%20gyermek%20b%C3%A1ntalmaz%C3%A1s%C3%A1nak%20felismer%C3%A9s%C3%A9re%20%C3%A9s%20megsz%C3%BCntet%C3%A9s%C3%A9re%20ir%C3%A1nyul%C3%B3%20egys%C3%A9ges%20elvek%20%C3%A9s%20m%C3%B3dszertan.pdf

[42] http://tegyesz.hu/storage/2020/02/Gyermekb%C3%A1ntalmaz%C3%A1s-kezel%C3%A9se-%C3%A9s-kivizsg%C3%A1l%C3%A1sa-m%C3%B3dszertan-2018.pdf

The Protocol for Child Forensic Interview, established by Ministerial Decision 7320/2019, creates a child-friendly environment for forensic interviews. It includes guidelines for professionals to assess the child's developmental stage, to provide a safe and supportive environment for children, including medical and psychological support, and to reduce re-traumatisation by minimising repeated interviews. However, the lack of specialised training for professionals and inconsistencies in implementation hinder the effectiveness of this protocol.

Other protocols have been developed for handling cases of child victims, especially in healthcare and NGO settings, but there is no national standardisation, leading to fragmented practices. For example, the Institute of Child Health has developed a Protocol for investigating child abuse and neglect, offering guidelines addressed mainly to health care professionals[43]. It provides information on abuse indicators, reporting, roles of professionals, and legal timelines. However, professionals often struggle with the practical application of these protocols due to a lack of training. In addition, the NGO Eliza has drafted protocols for handling child abuse cases by police and health care professionals, as well as a training for police officers[44]. These protocols are applied in child protection units in hospitals to assess, treat, and report abuse cases. The Ministry of Education has also developed a website and several protocols to address school bullying[45]. These protocols include case management, prevention, and definitions of bullying, alongside guides for educators on identifying and managing child abuse cases.

In addition, there is no uniform policy specifically for the personal data protection of children involved in judicial proceedings. While general data protection laws like GDPR and professional codes of conduct exist, child protection services and NGOs have also implemented internal measures to safeguard children's data. However, inconsistencies in these measures are apparent, particularly in rural areas. Despite legal confidentiality

[43] Available at: **https://ich-mhsw.gr/?p=700** [Accessed 21 September 2024].
[44] Information poster for health professionals available at: https://eliza.org.gr/protokolla-odigoi/ [Accessed 21 September 2024].
[45] https://stop-bullying.gov.gr/institutional-framework

requirements, children's testimonies in cases of sexual abuse and exploitation are sometimes leaked to the media. According to one interviewed practitioner, the solution lies less in stricter regulations, rather than in raising awareness among journalists and media owners and fostering collaboration.

Key findings

Across all the countries examined, there is a notable absence of uniform protocols for handling child victim cases in judicial proceedings, in addition to the previously mentioned protocols for establishing and operating Children Houses. While in some countries (e.g., Greece and Hungary) protocols are developed at ministry level, or within the health care sector, or by NGOs, the implementation of these protocols remains inconsistent. Often, professionals are not provided with systematic training on how to apply them effectively.

Regarding data protection for children involved in judicial procedures, professionals involved in the research generally deem the legal framework adequate. However, there is no national consistency in policy enforcement, which hinders the effective application of the law. In countries like Hungary and Greece, the lack of robust monitoring mechanisms has sometimes resulted in data breaches, with information about child abuse and exploitation cases being leaked to the media. This can cause secondary victimisation, re-traumatisation, and potential disclosure of the child's identity. Notably, Slovenia appears to be the only country where the law protecting the personal data of child victims is effectively implemented in practice.

Some positive examples include interagency collaboration to support the rights of child victims, such as the right to information (Hungary), the right to legal aid (Bulgaria), and access to health care (Greece and Hungary).

3.3 Best practices, guidelines and recommendations for lawyers when representing child victims of crime

Slovenia

Desk and field research did not identify specific materials tailored to attorneys representing child victims[46]. However, national authorities and other organisations share best practices and recommendations through training courses, which were considered effective by the interviewed attorneys.

For example, the Supreme Court and the Children's House have developed child-friendly materials, such as brochures and cartoons, to explain legal processes to children[47]. High Court Judge Janko Marinko has also authored a specialised manual on gathering personal evidence, which includes guidelines for questioning child witnesses[48].

In addition, the Slovenian Ministry of Justice organises annual training courses for judges, prosecutors, and court staff on treatment of child victims. Despite being optional, these sessions are well attended. Some of these courses are also accessible to attorneys, although to a limited extent[49]. Over the past two years, the Ministry has presented the Protocol on Forensic Interview with the Child at various training sessions, seminars, and conferences[50].

The Slovenian Bar Association occasionally organises training for attorneys representing child victims, sometimes in collaboration with the Children's House. For example, in

[46] K. Božič, 'Vloga pooblaščenca otrok žrtev kaznivih dejanj,' Pravna praksa, no. 37, 2006, pp. 28–29.
[47] The brochures are publicly available on: https://www.sodisce.si/znanje/publikacije/ and https://www.hisa-za-otroke.si/publikacije/. The Child in Court video is publicly available on the website: https://nasodiscu.si/animacije#otrok-na-sodiscu.
[48] J. Marinko, *Pod katerim drevesom si ju videl? Ugotavljanje dejanskega stanja (izbrana poglavja)*, Ljubljana, Lexpera: GV Založba, 2013.
[49] Correspondence of IK with the Ministry of Justice, 2024.
[50] Correspondence of IK with the Ministry of Justice, 2024.

October 2024, they jointly organised two sessions for attorneys on the role of an attorney within the Children's House[51].

However, attorneys in focus groups emphasised that practical workshops, showcasing real-life cases and how to handle specific situations when representing child victims, are more valuable to them than written materials.

Bulgaria

UNICEF's Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia created in 2023 a Training Package on Child-Friendly Legal Services, aimed at equipping legal professionals with the knowledge and skills to provide services that prioritise the best interests of the child (aligned with FOSTER project's objectives). Bulgarian practitioners participated in piloting the training, along with professionals from Albania, Azerbaijan, Greece, Moldova, and Turkey.

As of October 2024, the Centre for Training of Lawyers "Krustyu Tsonchev" is offering training sessions using this methodology, supported by trainers from legal aid NGOs and the National Legal Aid Bureau. UNICEF is also open to collaborating with the FOSTER consortium to align their initiatives.

In addition, the Bulgarian Prosecutors' Association has been actively involved in the training of prosecutors and professionals working with children in the justice system. They developed two main resources: the Children's Trail Guide, which helps integrate protection, support, and reproach in responding to children exposed to risk factors, and the Child's Path. A Handbook for Trainers, which provides tools for trainers in multidisciplinary training for professionals working with children at risk (victims, witnesses and perpetrators of crime). Another publication, Themis sees the child,

[51] Invitation to the training https://www.odv-zb.si/2024/09/10/usposabljanje-vloga-odvetnika-v-hisi-za-otroke-oktober-2024/.

promotes child-sensitive law enforcement practices for working with child victims, witnesses, and perpetrators.

Moreover, the "Handbook for lawyers representing foreign children seeking or granted international protection, with a focus on unaccompanied minors" outlines the international and domestic legal frameworks and the role of the lawyer who represents a foreign child, but does not address non-legal aspects.

Hungary

There are no official guidelines or recommendations for lawyers working with child clients, but participants in interviews and focus group meetings shared some promising practices. During initial meetings, the focus should be on building trust rather than discussing the case details. Lawyers should prioritise understanding the child's needs, adjusting their approach based on the background of the child and the nature of the case. Trust is also built through keeping promises and respecting cultural differences.

The NGO Hungarian Helsinki Committee in collaboration with international organisations, developed a multidisciplinary training programme, which equips lawyers handling children who are suspects or accused of crime with expertise in child psychology, neurobiology, and international legal standards.

Noteworthy is that although there is no mandatory training organised by the state for lawyers representing children in criminal cases, three universities in Hungary (the Eötvös Loránd University, the Pázmány Péter Catholic University and the University of Pécs) offer specialised postgraduate programmes in child rights and juvenile justice.

The National Office for the Judiciary (NOJ) has promoted child-friendly justice since 2012 through initiatives like the Child-friendly Justice Working Group and the National Programme for Child-Centred Justice, which aims to uphold children's rights in legal procedures. Judges receive training on handling child-related cases, and an annual

National Conference on Child-Centred Justice covers topics like domestic violence and online crimes against children.

Other practices shared by the participants of our research activities include a relevant Facebook group where experts could share training resources and updates on legal issues, but also multidisciplinary trainings organised by the 13th District of Budapest with the participation of professionals from various fields. In addition, the Budapest Police Child-and Youth Protection Unit (BRFK GYIVO) has developed a handbook emphasising the importance of understanding victimhood, aiming to enhance the treatment and care of child victims.

Legal chatbots explaining criminal law to children show potential but pose ethical concerns. Key issues include data privacy, appropriate language, human intervention protocols, and accountability. While chatbots can provide general guidance, they cannot fully address individual legal cases, raising concerns about their reliability and ethical implications.

Greece

Initiatives by the Greek Police and the Deputy Ombudsperson for Children's Rights focus on training field professionals to identify signs of child abuse and promote skills of child-friendly communication.

Furthermore, NGO initiatives aimed at enhancing the awareness of lawyers on children's rights include trainings such as those organised by UNICEF Greece in February 2024, which focus on improving child-friendly legal services and ensuring that children's rights are prioritised in legal proceedings. Training programmes for children and professionals in the field also play a crucial role in enhancing awareness about children's rights.

Projects like Terre des Hommes' i-RESTORE and i-RESTORE 2.0[52] seek to promote restorative justice and empower child survivors.

Noteworthy is the EU-funded "Child Front" project (with CECL, CSD and SSP.P. SAKELLAROPOULOS being among the consortium partners), in the frame of which partner organisations developed an e-learning platform aimed at training judges and prosecutors on children's rights, child psychology, and child-friendly communication to ensure the consistent application of European child-friendly justice policies[53]. In addition, the EU funded FAIR Project's practical handbook provides guidance for lawyers on child-friendly communication and interdisciplinary collaboration with social workers and psychologists, emphasising the holistic representation of children[54].

In the frame of our field research, practitioners working with child survivors of crime emphasised on practices for enhancing communication skills aimed to create a trusting, supportive environment while minimizing re-traumatisation. Building trust with children, especially those who have experienced trauma, requires time, training, and a personalised approach. It is essential for professionals to gather relevant information about the child beforehand and adapt their communication style to the child's developmental stage, age, and specific circumstances. Key practices include creating a child-friendly atmosphere, ensuring a comfortable physical space, and establishing rapport by discussing neutral subjects like school life or hobbies. Professionals must be mindful of non-verbal cues and avoid overwhelming the child with too many or directive questions. Additionally, providing breaks during interactions and using age-appropriate tools, such as drawing materials or games, can help engage the child effectively. At the same time, professionals should avoid adopting parental attitudes or imposing

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[52] i-Restore 2.0: Προσβάσιμες Ποιοτικές Διαδικασίες Αποκαταστατικής Δικαιοσύνης για Παιδιά που έρχονται σε Επαφή με το Νόμο | Terre des hommes Greece
[53] CHILDfront: CHILDfront
[54] **FAIR Project**, *Practical Handbook for Lawyers: When Representing a Child, Training Materials on Access to Justice for Migrant Children,* Module 6, April 2018. https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Europe-FAIR-module-6-Training-modules-2018-GRE.pdf

authority; another important skill which should be promoted is to address own biases, stress, and fears. For these reasons, supervision is vital both for the professionals involved, but also for the child who will receive their support.

To provide holistic support, working within multidisciplinary teams is crucial. Especially in working with child survivors, professionals, particularly for those in legal and investigatory contexts where the risk of secondary victimisation is significant, should be trained on trauma-informed approach and understanding the psychological and emotional needs of children. Professionals are encouraged to prioritise empathy and sensitivity, minimising the number of times a child is asked to recount traumatic experiences. This approach includes offering emotional support, reassuring the child, and ensuring that the child understands that they are not to blame for the abuse. Notably, the Thessaloniki police department's initiative of having female officers conduct interviews with child survivors of sexual abuse reflects a strategy to avoid re-traumatisation, considering the high prevalence of male perpetrators.

In dealing with children with additional vulnerabilities, such as those with developmental disorders, disabilities, or different cultural background, practitioners must adopt alternative communication methods. In Greece, the lack of specialised professionals and consistent support for vulnerable children, including those with disabilities, further complicates communication. It is essential to tailor approaches to these children's specific needs, ensuring clear and effective communication without further stigmatisation or harm. Legal practitioners and other professionals are encouraged to implement culturally sensitive, gender-inclusive practices and recognise systemic barriers that may prevent vulnerable children from accessing justice. Roma children, face systemic marginalisation and severe rights violations in justice processes; unaccompanied children with migrant background also frequently experience rights violations, including hate speech, violence, and lack of access to basic rights such as information and interpretation. However, a good practice adopted in Greece is the operation of specialised police units for identification and referral of unaccompanied children in the frame of the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM).

Key findings

In the countries examined, various initiatives and practices aim to support and train lawyers representing child victims of crime.

In Slovenia, there is a variety of trainings provided in the justice sector aiming to provide lawyers with the necessary tools in order to be able to represent children.

On the other hand, in the majority of other countries, educational materials and training programmes are organised by bar associations or NGOs on an ad hoc basis, with participation being optional. In Bulgaria, there are efforts to systematise such trainings with the involvement of state authorities ("Krustyu Tsonchev" Centre for Training of Lawyers and the National Legal Aid Bureau). In Hungary, three universities provide postgraduate programmes in child rights and juvenile justice. In Greece, trainings to lawyers are mainly linked with project-based initiatives of NGOs.

Lawyers involved in the field research shared their insights on best practices in collaborating with child victims of crime. A key emphasis was placed on the importance of developing skills in child-friendly communication and understanding the profound impact of trauma on children. Additionally, they highlighted the necessity of providing holistic support to child victims, which can be achieved through effective collaboration among all professionals involved in the case.

3.4 Challenges related to the application of child-friendly justice by lawyers, focusing on child victims of crime

Slovenia

A review of the literature and focus group discussions highlights several challenges faced by attorneys representing child victims. Despite legislative reforms aimed at strengthening the rights of child victims, ambiguities in the law persist, particularly regarding protective measures, such as the possibility of questioning the child victim or

witness with the assistance of a pedagogical or other expert and in specially adapted premises (ZKP, Article 240), which are vaguely defined which may hinder their practical application[55]. In addition, protective measures in the ZKP are not systematically are included in different sections, which makes it difficult for the legal professional to monitor without relevant training.

Furthermore, the role of the legal representative for child victims is not clearly defined, leaving attorneys to rely on their own judgment, which creates further uncertainty in their duties[56]. Another significant systemic issue is that attorneys representing child victims are not required to have specialised skills in areas such as psychology, criminology, or child communication[57]. An empirical study from 2020 found a strong need of professionals working with child victims in criminal proceedings for practical training, such as workshops in child victim psychology, with periodic updates to ensure professionals are well-equipped[58]. Attorneys should be able to clearly communicate to the parents that they are appointed as the child victim's representatives to safeguard the child's best interests and provide counsel to the child, not to the parents.[59]

Noteworthy is that in contrast to attorneys who represent child victims, Slovenian law requires training for attorneys representing children accused or suspected of committing a criminal offence (ZKP, Article 452b). The training covers various topics such

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[55] L. Briški, 'Položaj otroka kot oškodovanca v kazenskem postopku,' in A. Šelih, K. Filipčič, in L. Briški (eds.), *Otrok kot žrtev kaznivih ravnanj*, Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, Inštitut za kriminologijo pri Pravni fakulteti v Ljubljani, Pravna fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 127.
[56] K. Božič, 'Vloga pooblaščenca otrok žrtev kaznivih dejanj,' Pravna praksa, no. 37, 2006.
[57] K. Filipčič, 'Otrokove pravice v kazenskem postopku,' in A. Šelih, K. Filipčič (eds), Otrokove pravice v Sloveniji: sedanje stanje in izzivi za prihodnost, Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 2015, p. 95; D. Janjatović, *Preprečevanje sekundarne viktimizacije otrok, žrtev nasilja v družini,* doctoral dissertation, Ljubljana, Pravna fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani, 2020, pp. 132–133, https://repozitorij.uni-lj.si/Dokument.php?id=140665&lang=slv (accessed 2 September 2024).
[58] D. Janjatović, *Preprečevanje sekundarne viktimizacije otrok, žrtev nasilja v družini*, p. 198.
[59] Z. Stankić Rupnik, 'Sensa podkast Modra soba,' [interviewed by Metka Kuhar], 30 December 2023, https://sensa.metropolitan.si/podkast/zoran-stankic-rupnik-o-zastopnistvu-in-zasciti-otrok-v-tezavnih-okoliscinah-podkast/ (accessed 16 September 2024).

as child rights, appropriate interview techniques, child psychology and communication with the children[60].

Furthermore, due to the connection between victimisation and offending, often referred to as the victim-offender overlap, attorneys representing juvenile defendants sometimes discover that they may also have experienced violence as victims. Likewise, attorneys may come across child victims in non-criminal contexts, such as divorce cases, where the child's best interests conflict with those of the legal representative. Training in these cases, could help attorneys improve their ability to identify and address such issues at an earlier stage[61].

Research, along with input from legal and social professionals, highlights that proceedings for child victims are often **excessively long**, which can worsen victimisation. A lack of court-appointed psychological experts delays child victim cases more than other proceedings. Experts emphasise the need for prioritising these cases to minimise harm.

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, despite the existing strong legal framework to protect child victims of crime, there are significant practical obstacles hindering effective advocacy for these children. Challenges include limited specialisation, inadequate training, and systemic inefficiencies.

Participants of the FG identified the following key challenges, such as the lack of timely provided legal aid as many child victims don't receive legal assistance until the pre-trial

[60] *Pravilnik o programu in načinu izvedbe osnovnega in rednega usposabljanja za sodnike, državne tožilce, policiste, zagovornike in poravnalce, ki sodelujejo v postopku proti mladoletniku* 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 67/2021, available at: https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=PRAV14196

[61] Z. Stankić Rupnik, 'Sensa podkast Modra soba,' [interviewed by Metka Kuhar], 30 December 2023, https://sensa.metropolitan.si/podkast/zoran-stankic-rupnik-o-zastopnistvu-in-zasciti-otrok-v-tezavnih-okoliscinah-podkast/ (accessed 16 September 2024).

phase is well underway, often after multiple interrogations without the necessary protective measures. Legal representation usually only occurs during the trial, and even then, children are seldom constituted as parties in the proceedings. In addition, there is limited direct communication of lawyers with child victims. Lawyers often communicate through parents instead of directly with the child, which can be detrimental to the child's interests and well-being. Unclear representation is another significant issue; it is unclear whether lawyers represent the interests of the child or the parents, especially in cases involving domestic violence or family conflicts where the child's interests may differ from those of the parents. Lawyers often encounter situations where parents make decisions that are not in the best interest of the child, sometimes leading to secondary victimisation or manipulation. Lawyers and professionals are often unaware of how to support children with disabilities, who are at higher risk of violence. There is limited experience or knowledge about safeguarding the rights of these children. Many lawyers have not received any child-specific training, leading to a significant gap in the quality of legal assistance; on the other hand, lawyers working with NGOs and legal clinics tend to be more specialised and systematically trained. Despite the need for further training, lawyers are not motivated to pursue additional qualifications. Bar associations are unable to encourage or monitor the mandatory training requirements for lawyers.

Hungary

According to our research, the Hungarian child protection and justice systems face critical structural, educational, and legal gaps that hinder child-friendly justice. Addressing these issues requires training, increased resources, child friendly justice measures and stronger restorative justice approaches to protect child victims.

The main challenge is that many professionals with different educational backgrounds need to collaborate in the child protection system; however, there is no comprehensive training on identification, referral, and intervention involving all relevant professionals.

Another systemic issue is the lack of a unified, nationwide policy for implementing the wide range of regulations and laws concerning children and young people. Urban areas have better-equipped police stations and courts with child-friendly facilities, whereas rural areas lack essential resources. And although Barnahus type spaces have been established, they are rarely used. Furthermore, the abolishment of juvenile courts has weakened judicial expertise in handling child related cases.

Child victims' voices are not adequately considered in legal proceedings, despite legal provisions encouraging participation. Especially certain groups of children, including LGBTQI+ youth, migrant children, Roma children, children with disabilities, children in foster care, face systemic discrimination and unique barriers in the justice system. Roma children and families distrust law enforcement due to fears of stigma, retaliation, or child removal, leading to underreporting of crimes. Children with mild intellectual disabilities or disorders may struggle to understand legal consequences, making fair treatment difficult in criminal cases.

The child protection sector in general faces severe understaffing, with 20% of positions unfilled in state-run institutions[62]. There are also high turnover rates and burnout leads many professionals to leave their work, especially for professionals working in correctional services for children.

Greece

Practitioners involved in the research activities mentioned that there are several challenges regarding the application of child-friendly justice for child victims of crime in Greece, particularly in the systemic inefficiencies of child protection and upholding children's rights.

[62] Written statement of the Directorate-General for Social Affairs and Child Protection for the 2023 Child protection mapping (31.05.2023)

One major issue is the lack of a comprehensive approach to support children who are victims of crime, as evident by the shortage of specialised services, trained professionals, and coordination among the various authorities and organisations. This results in delays, gaps in all kind of services (accommodation, psychological and legal support), and difficulties in referrals. In some cases, children are placed in hospitals as a temporary measure, where they may face further abuse or become frustrated with the system, sometimes even requesting to return to the abusive family environment. Furthermore, there is understaffing within child protection services and judicial authorities, which significantly impedes the ability to identify a child's best interests and provide effective support, and exacerbates delays in legal proceedings.

Another challenge is the lack of uniform protocols for handling cases involving child survivors of crime. Although some regional or profession-specific protocols exist, there is no consistent policy nationwide. The Children's Houses, which are supposed to help with forensic interviews, are underutilised, leading to multiple examinations of the child, which can be distressing. An interviewed police officer mentioned that a child survivor may need to testify about the traumatic experience an average of seven times and up to fifteen in some cases.

While collaboration among professionals (e.g., prosecutors, police, social workers) is generally good, there is a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, but also differences in the priorities, aims and approaches (e.g. by the involved psychologists, police officers, lawyers), which create tension in the collaboration.

The majority of interviewed professionals highlighted a lack of information provided to child survivors of crime. Additionally, the exercise of the right to be heard depends on professionals' judgment of whether the child is mature enough to understand and process the information. Regarding legal aid, children who are suspects or accused of a crime are immediately provided legal representation by the police or prosecutor, but for child survivors of crime, legal representation is only arranged when deemed necessary.

There is also concern over the role of the family in cases involving child victims. Professionals must be cautious when dealing with family members, especially those who may be perpetrators or complicit in the crime, because parents could retraumatise the child or influence their testimony.

The legal representation of the child often depends on the family's stance, intentions and financial means, which can lead to the child not being represented and not exercising their rights. Children's access to legal aid is also problematic, with legal representation often being provided only when deemed necessary, rather than as a right.

In addition, the child's testimony can be undermined during court proceedings, sometimes by defence attorneys who dismiss the child's account as unreliable or falsely accusing the child of lying. The child's voice is frequently ignored, and their involvement in the legal process often depends on the professionals' knowledge and attitudes. The failure to involve children in decisions related to their cases undermines the principle of considering the child's best interests.

The research highlights significant concerns regarding the handling of sensitive information about child survivors of crime. Participants expressed a lack of trust in the police, often due to insufficient training. The media's role in publishing details about child victims was identified as a major issue, as it can lead to the child's identification, retraumatisation, and a further loss of trust. Despite the criminal nature of disclosing such sensitive information and the National Broadcasting Council's authority to invoke sanctions on the media, there are still many cases where details about the child's identity and sensitive information about the case are leaked to the media.

The lack of qualified interpreters and specialised professionals to support children with migrant background, or children with disabilities and developmental disorders further compounds these issues. The interpretation system is flawed, with untrained interpreters often used, which affects the accuracy of communication, particularly in sensitive cases involving children.

A common concern which came out from our research activities is the lack of adequate education and training for professionals (lawyers, prosecutors, judicial staff, and practitioners working with child survivors). In particular, lawyers do not have the necessary training in child protection and child-friendly legal practices, and children's right to be heard and participate in the process.

Key findings

Several challenges were identified by practitioners involved in the research activities, most of which are common across all the examined countries.

One of the primary challenges is the lack of adequate facilities, such as Children's Houses, as well as the insufficient expertise and coordination among professionals working on cases involving child victims of crime. Understaffing further exacerbates this issue, making it difficult to provide immediate, individualized, and holistic support to the child.

In particular, professionals in Hungary and Greece highlighted that this gap is linked to the absence of a uniform policy for all professionals involved in the justice process for children.

Other common challenges identified in the research include repeated interviews and prolonged criminal procedures, which can deepen the trauma experienced by the child.

Regarding lawyers, there is a consensus that many lack the necessary knowledge and skills to handle such cases, especially when it comes to child-friendly and trauma-informed communication. Additionally, lawyers often struggle to fully safeguard the child's right to be heard in legal proceedings, sometimes conflating the child's interests with those of the parents.

Another significant shortcoming is the lack of timely access to legal representation. Although the law provides for it, legal aid is rarely offered during the pre-trial phase. Moreover, state authorities often fail to recognise the conflict of interest between

parents and children, leaving the choice of legal representation to the family, which can be problematic.

Practitioners also emphasised on the discrimination and inadequate support faced by children with additional vulnerabilities, such as those from different cultural backgrounds, with disabilities, or those with developmental disorders. The risk of abuse, violence, or exploitation is considered particularly high for these children, yet there is a significant shortage of specialised professionals who can effectively communicate with them and identify cases of abuse. Interpretation services are also seen as inadequate in both the timeliness and quality of support (particularly in Greece and Bulgaria).

Lastly, practitioners pointed out that the justice system often fails to recognise that children involved in the justice system as perpetrators of crime are frequently themselves victims.

4. Training needs of lawyers

Slovenia

According to the interviewed professionals, key training priorities include preventing secondary victimisation when communicating with child victims; building trust with children; effectively gathering information that is accurate, relevant, and appropriate; providing clear legal guidance tailored to a child's age and psychological development; identifying and assessing best and worst practices in working with child victims, even with the support and guidance of the Bar association.

All attorneys expressed a clear need for trainings in child psychology and communication with child victims, as they are concerned about causing secondary victimisation. Many attorneys feel that they lack the necessary skills to establish trust with child victims, which is essential for obtaining relevant information. They often rely on their intuition and previous experience but seek feedback and guidance on the appropriateness of

their practices. Especially with traumatised victims, attorneys voiced their uncertainty as to how best frame their communication before formal proceedings take place.

Furthermore, they find it challenging to inform child victims about their rights, particularly the right not to testify against family members, as stipulated by the law (ZKP, Article 236). In general, participants in focus groups and interviews highlighted that attorneys believe it is essential for child victims to have at least a basic understanding of the criminal proceedings, their role in the process, and, on a practical level, what their questioning will entail. The main challenge is adjusting the information to the child's age and psychological development.

Moreover, the interviewed professionals supported that such training should be mandatory for all attorneys representing child victims of crime, similarly as this is required for defence counsels defending minors accused of criminal offences.

Last but not least, the field research conducted in Slovenia showed that according to the attorneys' views, when assessing their own competences, training on the legal framework, such as child rights and data protection, is not necessary.

Bulgaria

Field research highlighted the need for interdisciplinary training for lawyers, focusing on key areas such as child psychology, communication skills, and international and European instruments for protecting victims' rights.

In detail, lawyers need training that integrates knowledge of child psychology, impact of trauma, and the importance of collaboration with social workers and psychologists when supporting child victims. Specific training is also required for cases like domestic violence or sexual abuse, with an emphasis on building trust and understanding the profile of child victims. Lawyers must be sensitive to the emotional and physical effects of legal proceedings on children and should know how to access professional support when necessary.

In addition, lawyers require training on trauma-informed communication and approaches to effectively represent and support vulnerable children, as they often recognise their own shortcomings in handling sensitive situations.

Many lawyers, particularly those who graduated years ago, lack updated knowledge of international human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This knowledge is crucial for understanding children as individual rights holders.

Lawyers defending parents in civil cases like divorce should also be trained to understand the psychological impact of their actions on children, recognising the potential consequences of legal actions on a child's well-being.

Lawyers need to be aware of both their legal and ethical responsibilities in safeguarding children's rights, as well as the higher risks that vulnerable children face within the justice system. Improvement of soft skills and qualifications in the field of child-friendly justice of lawyers is important, so as to avoid lawyers' using their "parental instincts".

The participants to the research also emphasised the importance of discussion-based training and experiential learning methods like simulations, which help develop and practice communication skills.

Hungary

According to the research, to effectively support child victims, lawyers require targeted training in trauma-informed care, effective communication, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Lawyers should be trained on child-friendly communication; to build trust with children before discussing sensitive topics, allowing gradual disclosure; to explain legal processes in a way children can understand; to empower the children and ensure that they understand their choices, legal outcomes, and available support and allow them control over their participation.

Specialised training is needed for working with marginalised groups, including Roma children and children with disabilities, to tailor legal approaches to their needs.

Training should also cover awareness on child development and well-being but also the impact of trauma on child development.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary training is considered necessary; training should involve lawyers, social workers, psychologists, and medical professionals for a holistic approach.

Participants shared that in-person workshops including interactive methods are preferred over online training. Additionally, resources should be consolidated to make legal knowledge on children's rights more accessible.

Greece

The literature review and field research reveal a consensus among practitioners on the urgent need for improved training for lawyers working with child survivors of crime. Participants highlighted a lack of systematic training on children's rights and child-friendly justice, with most lawyers receiving training through personal initiative or external NGOs, not formal education.

Lawyers' competencies in key areas like legal frameworks, child psychology, communication with children, and child protection services were assessed poorly by the majority of participants, although lawyers affiliated with NGOs showed stronger expertise. Key challenges mentioned by lawyers included difficulties in communicating with children in vulnerable situations and reconciling their professional training, which focuses on seeking the truth and case outcomes, with the need to avoid re-traumatising the child.

Training was identified as essential in the following areas: child psychology and communication, ensuring child-friendly interactions that prevent secondary trauma, managing biases, and handling conflicts of interest; practical application of the legal framework, covering children's rights under national laws, EU directives, and relevant

case law; confidentiality and data protection in order to address challenges in protecting children's privacy and upholding confidentiality, and interdisciplinary collaboration to foster effective collaboration with other professionals (e.g., health care providers, psychologists) to better support children.

Key findings

In all participating countries, practitioners involved in our research agreed that lawyers representing child victims of crime do not receive adequate training to effectively fulfill their role. The main training gaps and needs identified are grouped into the following four categories:

1. **Training on Child Psychology, Child-Friendly Communication, and Trauma-Informed Approaches**

Practitioners emphasised that lawyers and other professionals working with child victims of crime are often unfamiliar with essential elements of child development and psychology. This knowledge is critical for understanding how to approach a child based on their age and developmental stage. Additionally, there is a strong need to train lawyers in child-friendly communication. This includes creating a safe environment for children, dedicating time to build trust, and using language that children can understand to facilitate open communication. Given that child victims of crime are often traumatised, lawyers must also be able to recognise signs of trauma, avoid behaviours or language that could lead to re-traumatisation, and collaborate with professionals who can provide expert support. In addition, lawyers lack the skills to understand and support children with specific vulnerabilities, such as those from migrant backgrounds, minorities, disabilities, or developmental, psychological/ psychiatric disorders. While some lawyers working with NGOs supporting vulnerable groups receive training on these topics, they represent a minority.

2. **Training on Building Networks and Collaboration Among Professionals in Child Protection and Victim Support**

Collaboration among professionals involved in child protection is consistently highlighted as a priority across all countries. This collaboration should extend beyond judicial staff and lawyers to include social workers, psychologists, and health care professionals, ensuring a holistic approach to supporting child victims. The need for such collaboration is exacerbated by the lack of standardisation in protocols, practices, or policies, leading to fragmented practices and poor coordination. Professionals need to be aware of their roles, the roles of other actors, and the available support networks, enabling them to provide timely information to child victims. Delays in this process can contribute to feelings of insecurity and anxiety, hindering the development of trust with the child. This holistic approach should also include the care for the future of the child after the end of the judicial process.

3. **Training on the Legal Framework for the Protection of Children and Victims' Rights**

While lawyers who participated in our research noted that they are generally informed about the legal frameworks surrounding client rights and procedures, there is a significant gap in their understanding of how to apply these laws, particularly with respect to children's rights. A key area of concern is the child's right to be heard and to participate in legal proceedings. Furthermore, the rise of social media and the digital landscape has altered the nature of crimes against children, necessitating updates on knowledge regarding cybercrime and the use of the internet for child exploitation.

4. **Training on the Ethical Responsibilities of Lawyers, Including Professional Codes of Conduct, Boundaries, and the Protection of Children's Personal Data**

Our research found that lawyers are often not trained on how to uphold ethical responsibilities in their practice, such as respecting professional codes of conduct, maintaining boundaries, and protecting the personal data of children involved in

judicial proceedings, whether as victims or perpetrators. Many practitioners reported experiencing uncertainty regarding the limits of support they could provide. Another common concern was the lack of awareness that a child's best interests may differ from those of their parents. Additionally, the impact of media exposure must be considered. Lawyers should be alert to cases where sensitive information about children is leaked, risking the identification of the child and the exposure of case details to the public, potentially leading to shame, re-traumatisation, and hindering the child's recovery.

5. **Experiential Learning**

Practitioners participating in our research emphasised that effective training must include opportunities for experiential learning, such as discussions, simulations, case studies, and specific workshops where professionals can practice and apply the knowledge they have gained.

5. Conclusions

Our research implemented in four EU countries (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece) identified that all countries have adopted specific measures in order to safeguard the rights of child victims of crime. The measures include specific facilities and procedures (establishment of spaces in the form of “Children’s Houses” based on the Barnahus model), the involvement of experts in order to support the child and the provision of rights to allow the child to participate in the procedures and exercise their rights (e.g., right to legal aid, right to receive information, right to interpretation if needed). Despite the rich legal framework, the application of the law remains a challenge and in all examined countries, practitioners expressed their views that there is a gap between what the law foresees and how it is applied in practice.

In addition, the lack of standardisation in terms of protocols and policies applied for children involved in judicial procedures, leads to different approaches of the actors involved, and consequently to fragmented support to the children.

In most cases, lawyers do not receive training on child friendly justice and lack the necessary skills in order to be able to identify the needs of the children, especially children who have experienced a crime against them. Training initiatives are usually provided by bar associations or NGOs on an ad hoc basis and participation is voluntary.

As a result, our research identified training needs among lawyers who represent child victims of crime. Practitioners agree that there is a lack of adequate education on child psychology, child-friendly communication, and trauma-informed approaches. Lawyers often struggle to understand essential aspects of child development, which affects their ability to interact with children appropriately based on age, psychological needs, and their traumatic experience. Furthermore, many lawyers lack knowledge of supporting vulnerable children, such as those from migrant backgrounds or with disabilities, and they often receive limited training in these areas. Another key issue identified is the need for better collaboration among professionals involved in child protection and victim support. Effective support for child victims requires coordination between judicial staff, lawyers, social workers, psychologists, and health care professionals. Additionally, lawyers often lack sufficient training on the legal frameworks protecting children's rights, especially concerning the child's right to participate in legal proceedings. Training on ethical responsibilities, including respecting children's personal data and managing media exposure, is also lacking, with many lawyers uncertain about the boundaries of their role and the differences between a child's and their parents' best interests. Experiential learning is highlighted as providing opportunities to exercise knowledge through participation in workshops, simulation exercises and case studies.

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