

Victim support on a European level...

Europe is taking big steps forward. Recently the Lisbon Treaty has been approved which will give the European Parliament a more significant role and has even led to the election of a so called President of the European Union. The President however is not a president in the way Obama is: he is not the most influential person within the EU but the permanent chair of the assembly of leaders of the European member states. Chair instead of person in charge.

Besides this Lisbon Treaty a five-year programme has been developed which will be the "guide for Europe", a kind of coalition agreement for Europe for the next five years to come. This new programme is called "The Stockholm Programme", referring to the EU presidency of Sweden during the last six months of 2009.

As President of Victim Support Europe, as chair so to say of a European umbrella organization consisting of 27 victim support organizations from 21 European member states, I had the opportunity to witness the development of this Programme up close. During the development of the Stockholm Programme, Victim Support Europe lobbied persuasively for specific attention to be given to victims of crime and to the establishment of proper support to these victims. In the last five-year programme, "The Hague Programme", no attention was given to victims of crime what so ever. As a consequence of this lack of attention, no progress was made in the development of rights for victims. A few countries, for instance the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Scotland, were the exception to the rule. During the last few years, major progress has been made in these countries in the field of service provision to victims of crime, resulting in more political and social recognition of the importance of giving proper support to victims of crime in general.

The new Lisbon Treaty will lead to an increase of "hard" legislation within the field of Justice, legislation that will be binding for all members. The 2001 Framework Decision on the Standing on Victims in Criminal Proceedings is indeed legally binding on all member states of the EU, but without any sanctions or enforcement mechanisms in place, the Framework Decisions can almost be seen as a declaration of intent, giving recommendations rather than providing legally binding demands.

A recent study, conducted by members of Victim Support Europe, showed that the implementation of this FD was very poor within most of the EU member states. Even worse, some of the member states did not even provide any support services to victims of crime at all.

The new Stockholm Programme contains an important paragraph referring to victims of crime, which was included largely thanks to Victim Support Europe's lobbying work. The paragraph means that the European Commission has to pay attention to the position of victims of crime within criminal proceedings. Jointly we are working for a safe and just Europe in which people can live and travel safely. Safe travelling is important: since freedom of movement is one of the freedoms on which the EU is established. As such, it is of outmost importance for every country to provide good support and care for victims of crime. Victim Support organisations often get messages from people who have fallen victim in a country

where they do not live who do not get the appropriate or insufficient care within the county where the crime took place. In a Europe without inner frontiers a joint policy in this area is much needed.

Although the Stockholm Programme gives attention to victims, I, as President of Victim Support Europe, have one major concern.

The Stockholm programme mainly focuses on specific categories of victims: victims of terrorism, vulnerable groups like children and women and victims of domestic violence. Especially victims of terrorism get a lot of (political) attention. It can be dangerous to focus only on these specific groups, since the major group of "usual" victims might become neglected. It may even lead to member states choosing not to develop proper support to victims of crime.

Recent research, carried out by the Tilburg institute Intervict and supported by Victim Support Europe, led to the question of whether or not any differences between victims of terrorism and victims of crime in general exist. My answer would be no. That is if the social impact of an act of terrorism is not taken into account. A victim of terrorism is, like all other victims, a victim of crime and has to deal with the same aftermaths.

We must prevent a "hierarchy of grief" and competition between different categories of victims. For every person who becomes affected by a crime committed by a fellow human, proper care and support should be available at any time, within a safe and just environment. This counts for victims who are visible (like those affected by terrorism) as well as for citizens who become victim of other serious crimes committed. Although of course specific care for specific victims might be needed.

I sincerely hope that as a result of the Stockholm Programme focus will not be limited to the categories of victims mentioned earlier. Focus should be on all victims within the European Union with appropriate care and support as a result.

Victim Support Europe will continue its lobbying to ensure that within every member state a national organisation providing support to victims will be developed. In addition, we will lobby for sufficient funding from national governments to ensure that these organisations can operate in the best way possible.

Mr. Jaap Smit MA
Chief Executive Officer Victim Support The Netherlands
President Victim Support Europe