



Speech

Minister of Security and Justice Ard van der Steur, Amsterdam

Speech by Minister of Security and Justice Ard van der Steur on the occasion of the European Network for Victims' Rights kick-off meeting, Amsterdam, MEA, 19 February 2016. (Engels uitgesproken, English only).

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the first meeting of the European Network for Victims' Rights.

It's no coincidence that we are launching the network now: the 22nd of February is the European Day for Victims of Crime. I'm pleased that this kick-off meeting takes place during the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the EU. Especially because the position of the victim is a priority of our Presidency. Every victim of crime in the EU has certain basic rights. Regardless of their nationality. Regardless of where the crime took place. And they must be able to exercise these rights in practice.


For many years, the Netherlands has been working hard to improve the position of victims. Our justice system – like many others – has traditionally focused on suspects and offenders. Little attention was paid to the victim's position. Victims, quite rightly, have consistently highlighted the need for more balance.

In the Netherlands, we have already done a lot to improve our victim support policy. And we work closely with organisations like Victim Support Netherlands, the Violent Offences Compensation Fund and victim associations that strive for improvement of their position. This cooperation is vital.

We believe that working from the victim's perspective is essential. We have to ask: What do victims need? We know that respectful treatment is the cornerstone of a victim-centred approach. This is highlighted in training programmes for the police, Public Prosecution Service and courts. And it now forms a core element of education and training programmes for judicial professionals.

Other important matters like the victim's right to speak, their right to financial compensation, mediation, measures that protect the privacy of victims and the option of reporting crime anonymously are laid down in legislation and our policy.

The Netherlands now has regional victim support desks where victims can go for information, advice and support during criminal proceedings.



And Victim Support Netherlands offers practical and emotional help and support for those who want it. Often the Victim Support Netherlands case worker becomes a trusted confidant.

All these efforts are driven by the following policy aims:

- treating victims properly and acknowledging their needs;
- giving victims a strong legal position;
- physically protecting victims where necessary,
- but also protecting their privacy;
- supporting victims who need help coping with the impact of the crime;
- helping victims recover from the impact of the crime, financially, practically and emotionally.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With its focus on the needs of victims, the Dutch government is committed to doing right by victims of crime, even when offenders can't be found or prosecuted.

That's why I'd like to talk about a special group of victims. Those who have suffered abuse and violence in the Roman Catholic Church and the youth care sector. Over the past 10 years, many, awful cases have come to light, including in the Netherlands.

At the request of the Church authorities, an investigation was carried out by an independent commission. Another independent commission investigated sexual abuse and violence in the youth care sector. These investigations and especially their conclusions were painful, but received the full backing of the government and parliament. The facts came to light, which led to acknowledgment of the great injustice that victims had suffered.

The Roman Catholic Church accepted its responsibility just as the Dutch government. That entailed: accepting the truth, acknowledging what happened, helping victims and those close to them, and securing compensation.

Working closely with victim associations, the Church authorities and other parties, like Victim Support Netherlands, we have established an assistance and support package for all victims.

We felt it was vital to support and empower victims. To give them more influence over the decisions and actions affecting their lives. That's why each victim can decide for themselves which parts of the package to use. Do they need one-to-one counselling? Professional help? Group discussions with other victims? Dialogue with the offender or with staff of the institution involved? Do they want to seek compensation? The choice is theirs. Their wishes are put front and centre.

Two compensation schemes have now been set up. One is funded by the Church authorities, for victims of clerical abuse.



The other is funded by the Dutch State, for those abused while in care.

Each of these measures has come about through consulting with victims. The measures ensure that victims who can no longer take legal action – because of a limitation period or the death of the offender – still receive as much justice as possible. Through assistance, recognition and compensation.

Victim support associations like the KLOKK Foundation for national consultations on Church child abuse, the SKIP Foundation on sexual abuse in institutions and foster families and FNG, a federation for relatives of victims of violent crime, have boldly confronted the Roman Catholic Church, the government and parliament. And they have achieved a great deal. I'm delighted that representatives of these organisations are here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It may seem like we have it all sorted in the Netherlands. But we certainly don't feel that way. There's still a lot of work to do.


- We'll keep working on victim protection. Especially for the most vulnerable. Our aim is to achieve a truly tailored approach, based on individual assessment. My staff tell me that's a tall order. How can we ensure victims' personal details are protected during criminal proceedings? Finding an answer will involve a lot of consultation and effective coordination.
- And what about cross-border cases? Why is it so hard for victims of crimes committed abroad to receive compensation? So hard, that they eventually stop trying. How can we improve cooperation between European compensation funds?

Clearly, there's still room for improvement.

There's a good reason that victim policy is one the priorities of the Dutch EU Presidency: victims are a European concern. Their needs don't stop at the border. An Italian victim in London needs proper help just as much as a Portuguese victim in Budapest. A Bulgarian victim in Stockholm has the same right to justice as a German victim in Athens. And they all need information.

So we welcome the Victims' Directive. It is the foundation on which every member state can build and strengthen its policy. Taking account of its own legal frameworks.

Every member state has its own difficult issues and best practices. We can learn from each other. The European Network for Victims' Rights we're launching today will facilitate this exchange.



I'd like to wish you a productive meeting, full of ideas and inspiration that you can take back home. The day promises many highlights:

- There will be an information market at lunchtime, where you can speak with various parties, including criminal justice actors, Victim Support Netherlands, the Violent Offences Compensation Fund and the victim support associations that are so vital to our efforts.
- There are also workshops on topics of urgent importance, like individual assessment, providing information to victims and cross-border cases.

I hope that, as member states, you will share information on victim support policy and practice freely and openly. Not just during the workshops, but also during the coffee and lunch breaks. Please talk about your successes, but also about the difficulties you face and the solutions you've found.

If you can do this, I believe you will have a constructive meeting. You can share useful knowledge and experiences to the benefit of victim policy and practice in all our countries. I wish you every success.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unfortunately, I am unable to take part in the rest of the day's events. It's Friday morning and I'm expected at the weekly cabinet meeting. So I must return immediately to The Hague. But before I go, I have the honour of announcing the next speaker. I'd like to give the floor to European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality Věra Jourová.

Let's make this a true European event for victims of crime!

Thank you.