

VSE Annual Conference, Warsaw 14. – 17.5.2014
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Distinguished participants, dear friends,

It is really a great honor for me to be speaking at my first Victim Support Europe Annual Conference. I started in VS Finland in early March as the successor of the former Executive Director Petra Kjällman who many of you know. Petra sends her best regards and seems to be a very happy retired woman who is in excellent health and spirit taking care of her grandchildren, dogs, husband and house by the sea.

A grand 20 years Anniversary Seminar and Retirement Party was arranged in Helsinki in February. Petra worked in Victim Support Finland since the start of our organization for the whole 20 years and has certainly been the FACE for crime victim support in our country so it is both an honor and a big challenge to step into her “big boots” as we tend to say back home.

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It feels very good to start working in an organization that knows what it is doing, has a clear mission and is well connected to sister organizations in Europe. And my feeling is that this is also the reality in the victim support organizations present here at this meeting.

And I have to say that I am very proud of our staff. There are four of us here and I think we have done a good job in actively participating at this event as speakers, chairpersons and active networkers. I was actually told before coming here that there is a tradition and also a test: you have to have at least five new business cards in your pocket before the end of the meeting. Last night at the lovely dinner I did ask for help from the people at the dinner table and I am can now relax with the five business cards well kept in my wallet.

And this is really what these European wide networks are about. They are about connecting and learning from each other, finding common interests and common views, planning joint advocacy strategies, showing what it is to work as a united movement with a common aim that speaks with once voice and aiming at the best possible systems and treatment of the people we work for - in this case for victims of crime.

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The task that I was given for this session was to give my thoughts and reflections on this meeting and working as a European network. I will here also refer to some of my earlier experiences in working with similar networks.

Firstly, it has been very clear to me during these days that there is very high expertise and long experience in working with crime victim issues at this meeting. Many here have been involved in their national services for many years, some since the start of them. And I think it is important to remember and keep in mind what it was when it all started.

In some European countries the journey is beginning. And here I think there is great opportunity for twinning or other ways of cooperation so that well-structured and inclusive victim support systems will be developed also in countries where this is still in the process.

Yesterday at one workshop there was a very intense discussion on volunteering – an issue which is always inspiring and also challenging. A question was raised on how to recruit and motivate volunteers in countries where there is no strong tradition of volunteering in the civil society and the turnover of volunteers is fast. Those of you working with volunteers know how frustrating it can be when your well trained valuable volunteers stop doing their volunteer work – and it is a big job to find and train new ones.

If we had the golden answer into always recruiting and training well-motivated and qualified volunteers wouldn't that be something. But I suppose this is something that makes the job so rewarding: after hard work you have these people that are ready to use their free time, their knowledge and experience in helping people who find themselves in a vulnerable situation.

And the answer we heard in the workshop of how to find new motivated volunteers I think was excellent. The answer was that making it public and telling in your advertisements that volunteering in crime victim support requires that the standards of the volunteer work are high because of the very important and challenging job you do.

Earlier when I was working in the Finnish Red Cross, which is the biggest volunteer organization in our country, many times people at the Red Cross said that VS Finland has a good volunteering system, that it is demanding volunteer work but that their volunteering systems are well-functioning – and we have much to learn from them.

So victim support organisations seem to be real experts in this field. And I hope that we can be of help to those countries where volunteering does not have long traditions - since volunteering in victim support seems to fit in and function very well.

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Secondly, it has to be said that already a lot of excellent work has been done to support the rights of crime victims at the European Union level. VSE and the national organizations have been very active in advocating for a high-level legal instrument and here we are: 1,5 years to go and the Directive should be implemented nationally in the member states. And we know that the Commission – with the help of VSE and other stakeholders – has come out with a good guidance document which the Member States should use as their guiding tool in the implementation process.

I have to say, that having such a good international binding instrument as a starting point for national implementation and advocacy is a great situation and opportunity for us working for the rights of crime victims in EU countries. In some aspects it is a bit contrary to the former experience I have had working in the migration and refugee field, where the EU legal instruments are sometimes describes as being a compilation of the lowest common denominator among the member states.

So of course we now need to cooperate as a network because.... We need information of what is going on in our respective countries, how they plan to interpret the standards in their implementation processes and mostly important: what are the best practices that we should share among ourselves so that we can go to our Governments and tell them: "This is what you should do. This has been working well in country X. Why don't we do the same in our country."

This way we could also learn to know where the MSs are aiming at and what they might be copying from each other. Unfortunately, the experience is – and I am not saying that this is because of bad will, often it is a question of trying to share limited national resources – that MSs have a tendency of implementing Directives according to the minimum levels and this can lead to sharing not always the best practices but sometimes also sharing the minimum practices.

So like the former Finnish Prime Minister Mr Paavo Lipponen said to us NGOs who were present at the 1999 Tampere EU Summit where the basis for the EU area of freedom, security and justice was established: Yes this is good, but you NGOs should remain vigilant! We – not the native speakers ran to check our dictionaries – and learned that being vigilant is about "ever awake and alert, sleeplessly watchful". This was the task give to us by the Prime Minister!

So if we stay vigilant, I believe that we have much better chances in seeing the better models and standards implemented in our respective countries. And I am happy that we have already decided to intensify our cooperation with some our Nordic colleagues.

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Thirdly, I would like to reflect on the collegial spirit I have experienced here.

My longest experience of European networks comes from the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, ECRE, which is a Pan-European network of 82 NGOs protecting and advancing the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons. ECRE works to promote the establishment of fair and humane European asylum policies and practices in accordance with international human rights.

Not an easy task in today's European politics where the discussion around migration and the rights of migrants and refugees is extremely politicized. I have great respect for NGOs and people who have the courage to raise their voice for some of the most vulnerable – but sometimes not the most wanted – people in Europe: the asylum seekers, refugees, victims of human trafficking, irregular migrants... Many people working in this field also get personal negative – and sometimes quite aggressive – contacting from those who are of the opposite view.

Even if the circumstances are difficult, also refugee organisations have been able to raise their voice on the national and European level to influence decision-makers and to raise awareness of the refugee crisis and treatment of these vulnerable people.

What NGOs and people working with difficult or disputed issues need from the international networks, is support from each other, from colleague to colleague, from organization to organization. This can be about just having people around you that speak the same language about complex issues or it can be about practical knowledge-sharing. It can be about learning new

ideas of how to work with your aims - and here the good experiences and models from fellow-organisations in other countries play an extremely important role.

And I am so glad that this spirit I have experiences also here at this Conference. This is not only about sharing information, good models, working methods, initiatives. We are here also to be encouraged by our good colleagues so that when we go back home we are again one step more motivated to do a good job, to face the challenges and to raise our voice for this important aim that we work for – because there are certainly not easy things we are dealing with.

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In Finland it is often said that we should estimate the level of how well our so called well-fare society works according to what the situation of the most vulnerable people are, whether they are the sick and the poor, the disabled, the refugees or those who have become victims of serious crime and do not have personal resources to cope with what has happened.

In our work in defending the rights of crime victims we also send a general message of the importance of taking care of each other and defending the rights of those who do not have the strength to do it themselves. All this adds to the common good, it adds to building societies of solidarity and understanding – societies which I think are best for all their people. What could be more important.

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I want to thank the Polish colleagues and VSE for organizing this excellent conference! It is always a long journey to organize such big events, millions of details which you did not think about in beforehand but just have to tackle when they come along. It has been a true pleasure to enjoy your warm hospitality here in Warsaw. And I have to admit that I did not have any clue of the well-developed victim support system you have in Poland and the active role that your Government has had in working for the Victim Directive.

Thank-you for all the speakers for their interesting inputs – and for this opportunity to speak about my thoughts after this first Annual Conference and for the opportunity to learn from the great work you are doing!