

Recent Developments in the Hungarian State Victim Support System

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ABSTRACT *The article explores the victim support activities of the Hungarian police and the Victim Support Centers both from an institutional point of view and the added value of their services, and how they cooperate with the Victim Support Offices. In addition, the operation of the newly introduced opt-out scheme will also be analyzed. Consequently, the article aims to predict the final organizational structure and the division of functions between the different state actors of the Hungarian victim support system, the reconstruction of which, is currently coming to an end. The article is based on empirical and qualitative research focusing on the Hungarian legislative framework for victim support, utilizing interviews conducted with professionals working in the state victim support system in an attempt to map out the institutional relations and added value provided by the state actors in Hungarian victim support meanwhile shedding light on the long-lasting shortcomings of the system and analyzing how the recent developments addressed them.*

KEYWORDS *victim support, Hungary, Victim Support Center, single point of access, police.*

1. Introduction

The field of victim support falls outside the boundaries of *stricto sensu* criminal law, since the aim of substantive and procedural criminal law is to hold the perpetrators of crimes criminally liable and to achieve specific and general prevention through the operation of an appropriate sanctions-regime.¹ Instead, it falls inside the field of criminology, more specifically in the sub-discipline of criminology called victimology.² The concept of victim support is difficult to define. The simplest way to describe it is based on its most striking characteristics: victim support is some kind of (public) service provided to

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¹ Talia Fisher, "Economic analysis of criminal law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Criminal Law*, ed. Markus D. Dubber and Tatjana Hörnle (Oxford University Press 2014), 42–43.

² Lorraine Wolhuter, Niel Olley and David Denham, *Victimology. Victimisation and Victims' Rights* (Routledge, 2009), 13.

persons who have fallen victim to crime,³ and that aims to alleviate social, physical and material harm suffered by victims of crime, whose quality of life is threatened as a result.⁴ Thus, victim support has a solid foundation on social solidarity and equity.⁵ Hence, victim support can be considered social work, which aims to alleviate the effects of harmful behaviors.⁶

The modern state has a primary obligation to maintain internal security and protect its citizens. One of the strongest tools of a state to this end is criminal law. Although it is an undeniable fact that the number of offenses committed each year in the European Union steadily decreases,⁷ there are at least as many cases where the state has failed to protect its citizens as the number of offenses committed – and recorded in the criminal databases – in its territory.⁸ This data does not even take note of the latency in crime. The question therefore arises as to what the state does for people who have become victims of crime and how it addresses the various needs of the victim to restore their original status.⁹ The answer to the question is, evidently, that the state sets up a victim support system to provide specific services to those who have been victims of crime, in order to alleviate its harmful consequences.

While victim support has a well-founded theoretical basis in the global context, the realization of victim support services remains diverse on the level of states. This field has started to develop in the 1970s both in the USA and Europe.¹⁰ One of its earliest manifestations was realized in the UK by a network of criminal justice practitioners, which developed into a community-based service essentially provided by a civil society organization.¹¹ From this point forward, victim support developed in two directions in Europe, namely one that is predominantly characterized by NGOs funded by the government, an approach taken by the

³ Klára Kerecsi and József Kó, *Az áldozatsegítő szolgálat hatékonyságvizsgálata. Második szakasz. Összefoglaló jelentés* (2008), 6.

⁴ Heleen J. Janssen, Dietrich Oberwittler and Goeran Koeber, “Victimization and Its Consequences for Well-Being: A Between- and Within-Person Analysis” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 37, no. 1 (2021): 102. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-019-09445-6>.

⁵ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation

⁶ Judit Kozma, “A szociális munka professzionalizációja a jóléti államokban,” *Kapocs* 6, no. 2 (2007): 2.

⁷ For details, see Eurostat database. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/crim_off_cat/default/table?lang=en.

⁸ For example, in 2024, 233.470 offenses were registered in Hungary. See: Beáta Borbély, *Tájékoztató a bűnözés 2024. évi adatairól* (Legfőbb Ügyészség, 2025), 9

⁹ The report of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights in case AJB-7599/2012 (rapporteurs: Dr. Barbara Zséger and Dr. Cecília Bódis).

¹⁰ Carina Gallo and Kerstin Svensson, *Victim Support and the Welfare State* (Routledge, 2019), 31–33.

¹¹ Lesley Simmonds, “Lost in transition? The changing face of Victim Support,” *International Review of Victimology* 19, no. 2 (2013): 202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026975801247277>.

UK,¹² and another that is characterized by state actors in the field of victim support, a path followed by Sweden for example.¹³ Nevertheless, both systems are characterized by services provided to victims of crime by the state. However, in the former, the state essentially provides subsidies to civil society organizations to realize victim support, while in the latter, the state sets up its own state actors in victim support for the provision of services. Hungary follows the same model as well, which will be demonstrated later in this article.

Unlike victim support in the global context, the operation of a (state) victim support system in Hungary has a relatively short history. The first attempt to create such a system was made in 1997, building on European experience. In 1998, the National Foundation for Public Safety and Crime Prevention was established, which initially took on tasks related to victim support.¹⁴ The foundation was set up by the government, which meant that the Hungarian victim support system was a mix of the two methods of realizing victim support in the beginning. However, this attempt was a short-lived one, since the Hungarian victim support system was radically transformed with Hungary's accession to the EU. In 2005, the Hungarian Parliament adopted Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance of Victims of Crime and State Compensation (hereinafter referred to as VSA), which transposes several EU secondary legal acts into Hungarian law. As a result, the Hungarian victim support system is heavily influenced by EU legislation.¹⁵ From this point forward, victim support services were provided by a variety of state actors in Hungary including government offices, the police and eventually Victim Support Centers as well.

The article fills an important research gap in the English language literature about victim support. Even though some Western victim support systems are quite well documented, Central and Eastern European models remain out of focus. This article contributes to existing literature by providing a thorough qualitative analysis of the Hungarian state victim support system. It examines the trajectory of development of the Hungarian state victim support system, showcases the state actors tasked with the provision of services and introduces the services provided to victims in an attempt to demonstrate that the Hungarian system has been modified to a great extent in the last two decades. Additionally, the article also considers whether the development of the Hungarian victim support system positively affected the status of victims. As such, the article will answer the following research questions:

1. How did the Hungarian state victim support system develop in the past two decades?

¹² R. I. Mawby, "Victim Support in England and Wales: The end of an era?," *International Review of Victimology* 22, no. 3 (2016): 203-221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758016649065>.

¹³ Gallo and Svensson, *Victim Support*, 3.

¹⁴ Zsanett Schweighardt, "Áldozatvédelem, áldozatsegítés és a büntető felelősségre vonás," *Jog- és Politikatudományi Folyóirat* 3, no. 2 (2000): 19.

¹⁵ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 47.

2. What state actors operate in the field of Hungarian state victim support?
3. What kind of services are provided to victims of crime in Hungary?
4. What are the shortcomings of the Hungarian state victim support system?
5. What are the roles of state actors operating in the field of Hungarian state victim support system and how do they cooperate with each other?
6. Were the shortcomings addressed by any change over the course of the past two decades?

2. Methods

To answer the above questions, both empirical and qualitative research was carried out. Qualitative research concerned the development of the Hungarian state victim support system in the past two decades, the services provided therein and the roles of the state actors operating in this field. Qualitative research was carried out via the analysis of the legislative framework that is the basis of the Hungarian state victim support system. Moreover, Hungarian literature was utilized to discover the shortcomings of the Hungarian state victim support system.

Additionally, empirical research was carried out in order to shed light on the added value provided by various state actors operating in the field of Hungarian state victim support and aimed to map out their institutional relations with each other. The research was carried out by conducting interviews with the County and Metropolitan Police Headquarters – either in person or in writing – and with the coordinator of the Victim Support Centre in Pécs. As such, 20 individuals answered the research questions via electronic means. Besides, an in-depth interview was conducted with the coordinator of the Victim Support Centre in Pécs in person. Consequently, the research covers all counties in terms of the police and provides access to the methodology applied by the Victim Support Centers. The interviews focused on the staff employed by the police headquarters for the task of victim support, the organizational structure in which they are employed and their respective roles. In addition, the interviews gathered best practices, good examples of the operation of victim support services which are described in this article to exemplify the meaningful activities of these actors. Consequently, the pool of information gathered in the research covers each Police Headquarters in Hungary and the operation guidelines of Victim Support Centers guaranteeing the widest possible insight into the Hungarian victim support system.

As the final goal of this study, a critical analysis of the findings of the research in the discussion will answer the last question regarding whether the shortcomings of the Hungarian state victim support system were addressed by the various policy changes.

3. Findings

3. 1 The organizational structure of the Hungarian state victim support system

As already briefly referenced, the VSA has largely reorganized the Hungarian state victim support system. Based on EU legislation, it sets out the most important services provided to victims of crime. The institutional structure for victim support, though, is not regulated by the very same act. Instead, it is set out by governmental and ministerial decrees adopted on the authorization provided in the VSA.¹⁶ Until 2017, the sole provider of victim support services were the county and metropolitan government offices (hereinafter referred to as Victim Support Office) on the basis of a government decree.¹⁷ However, beginning from 2017, on the initiative of the Ministry of Justice, Victim Support Centers were set up in county administration centers and the capital city with the aim to cover all counties by 2025.¹⁸ Victim Support Centers have subsidiary, yet nonetheless important, function in the state victim support system which will be discussed below. In addition, the police have also gradually taken on responsibilities relating to this field. From the early 1990s until the adoption of the VSA, it only had an active role in crime prevention.¹⁹ However, after the adoption of the VSA in 2005, its functions in victim support were first regulated in a ministerial decree,²⁰ then in a regulation adopted by the National Chief of Police.²¹ The updated version of that regulation was adopted in 2013. In addition to defining the tasks and responsibilities of the police in connection with victim support, it sets out an organizational structure which shall be implemented in each County Police Headquarters.²²

Consequently, victim support services in Hungary are provided by three different state actors, namely the Victim Support Offices operated in the county and capital government offices in the capital city and the county administration centers, the Victim Support Centers which are also operated in the county administration centers and the police that provides victim support services on a lower level of administration that is called a district in Hungary.

3. 2 The services provided by the Hungarian state victim support system

Apart from the organizational point of view, it is also important to showcase the services provided by the Hungarian state victim support system. It allows for a

¹⁶ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 46.

¹⁷ Gábor Veisz, *VOCIARE National Report on Hungary. Victims of Crime Implementation Analysis of Rights in Europe* (Victim Support Europe 2019) 31.

¹⁸ <https://vansegitseg.im.gov.hu/elerhetosegek/>; 2072/2017 (XII. 28.) Government Decision on the more efficient implementation of victim support § 6(c).

¹⁹ László Oláh, "A rendészeti bűnmegelőzés gyakorlata és lehetőségei 2011-ben," *Belügyi Szemle* 59, no. 5 (2012): 29.

²⁰ 17/2007. (III. 13.) Justice and home affairs ministerial decree; 64/2015. (XII. 12.) Home affairs ministerial decree.

²¹ 50/2008. (OT 29.) order of the National Police Headquarters.

²² 2/2013. (I.31.) order of the National Police Headquarters.

range of services to help people who are victims of crime or offences against property committed in the territory of Hungary, or who suffer harm, in particular physical or psychological injury, emotional distress or damage to property incurred by crimes or offences against property committed in the territory of Hungary.²³ This sets both the personal and the territorial scope of the Act. Generally speaking, the scope of persons eligible for victim support services largely – though not fully – coincides with the definition of victims in procedural law. The difference is that in case of the procedural law, the victim is the person whose right or legitimate interest was harmed by the offense, while the VSA extends this definition over persons who are indirectly affected by an offense. This definition is in line with relevant international guidelines.²⁴ However monetary services, such as state compensation for damages resulting from an offence and the immediate financial support are only provided in cases of specific offences (e.g. intentional, violent crimes against the person, incorporating a number of offences).²⁵ It is also important to note that not only Hungarian citizens are eligible for victim support services, but also EU citizens residing in Hungary, refugees granted protection in Hungary, third country nationals and stateless persons who become victims of crime on the territory of Hungary.²⁶

The state currently provides financial and other services (in kind) to victims of crime. The former category includes immediate financial assistance and state compensation, while the latter includes advocacy, certification of victim status, witness care and shelter.²⁷ Monetary services are intended to compensate or cover all or part of the property damage and costs incurred by the offense. The so-called immediate financial assistance is intended to cover at least part of the victim's extraordinary expenses for housing, clothing, food, travel, medical and other expenses of a social nature stemming from the crime committed against them. The maximum amount of immediate financial assistance may be up to 43% of the average gross monthly income in the national economy in the second year preceding the time and date of the perpetration of the crime. This also sets the basis for the amount that can be granted via state compensation, which may compensate for a much larger amount of the damage incurred by specific offenses.²⁸

²³ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 1(1).

²⁴ Act no. XC of 2017 on Criminal Procedure § 50; Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power Adopted, General Assembly resolution 40/34 of 29 November 1985.

²⁵ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 2(1a) 6).

²⁶ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation §§ 1(1)a) to f).

²⁷ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 4(1).

²⁸ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation §§ 4(3), 7(2).

A decision granting immediate financial assistance is subject to the discretion of the competent authority, which also applies to the determination of its amount.²⁹ Thus, there is no income limit for granting immediate financial assistance, but it may only be awarded in cases where the victim is unable to pay for their basic needs due to the offence committed against them. In contrast, state compensation for damage incurred by an offence may only be claimed by persons who are victims of a violent crime against a person and whose physical integrity or health has been seriously damaged as a result, or by a person who has been indirectly affected by such crime - for example, if the victim of the crime was a relative of the person concerned and the victim died as a result of the crime.³⁰ A further limitation of state compensation was that only a person whose income did not exceed twice the applicable basic amount (the yearly basis) of the state compensation, already referred to above, was entitled to compensation. This limitation was abolished as of 1 January 2021.³¹ Lastly, it is important to note that the state does not undertake to compensate the victim for the entire loss suffered, but only for losses not exceeding fifteen times the basic amount.³²

Services in kind are designed to help the victim or witness to assert his or her rights, in particular by providing information, counselling, and emotional support. These services aim to address the victims' most important needs that arise after a crime is committed against them such as empathy, advocacy enabling the victims to effectively navigate the criminal justice system and professional help in processing the trauma induced by the offence.³³ In addition, victim support authorities also certify the victim's status by issuing an official certificate, which entitles the victim to make use of various social security (health insurance) services and financial benefits.

3. 3 The shortcomings of the Hungarian state victim support system

Even though there is a wide variety of services provided to victims of crime in Hungary, the state victim support system had some flaws in the past. The shortcomings can be approached both from an institutional point of view, and from the services provided to the victims including criteria of provision. Overall, most of the victim support services provided by the state are only available to individuals who have become victims of a crime, namely having a certification of victim status, witness care and assistance in asserting their rights and

²⁹ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 27.

³⁰ Barbara Zséger, "Hogyan járul hozzá az áldozatsegítés hazai rendszere az áldozatok vagyoni kárának megtérüléséhez," *Themis* 11, no. 3 (2013): 347.

³¹ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation (effective until 1 January 2021) § 6(2).

³² Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 7(2).

³³ Carl B. Clements, Dia N. Brannen, Shalene M. Kirkley, Trina Gordon and Wesley T Church, "The measurement of concern about victims: Empathy, victim advocacy and the Victim Concern Scale (VSC)," *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 11, no. 2 (2010): 289-290.

interests.³⁴ However, state compensation is limited to cases of violent crimes against a person, which objectively narrows down the cases in which the victim may be entitled to compensation, even though not only such offences have serious material consequences (for example, traffic offenses may result in a great deal of damages in the vehicle of the person who is not at fault of the accident). In addition, it should be noted that state compensation is capped and cannot exceed the maximum amount. If the amount of damage exceeds the maximum compensation, the remaining amount is not reimbursed. The VSA therefore imposes significant restrictions on the most helpful service, which can be seen as a shortcoming of the victim support system, since a significant proportion of victims are excluded from the scope of the state compensation scheme and others may face only partial compensation for their damage incurred by the offence.

Another critical point of state victim support is the institutional system. The Victim Support Office – that was the sole provider of victim support services for more than a decade – was and is still operated by the county and capital government offices, which also means that the territorial coverage is far from ideal, as victims who do not live in or near the county administration centers or the capital city have to travel to access victim support services. In certain counties, travel distances can amount to a hundred kilometers. Moreover, the victims' health, financial circumstances, age, and family situation can be an obstacle to making a longer journey.³⁵ The lack of territorial coverage was indicated by the very low number of victims of crime who received some form of victim support service. In Tolna county, for example, there were more than 4,000 victims per year until 2016. Only 3-7% of them received victim support.³⁶ Finally, another problem is posed by the lack of professional staff specialized in victim support in Victim Support Offices. Therefore, victims often encounter staff who lack the personal skills and professional knowledge required to assist victims.³⁷ Additionally, the environment in which victim support services are provided in the Victim Support Offices also hamper the outreach to victims. As these Offices are seated in the county and metropolitan government offices, they do not meet the needs of a victim, since they have a predominantly official and rigid setting, which may discourage victims from seeking help.

3. 4 Old and new actors in the Hungarian Victim Support System

Originally, Victim Support Offices provided all public services associated with state victim support in Hungary until 2017 – notably monetary services, advocacy for the rights of the victims and witnesses, issuing certificates and providing emotional support. In other words, the Victim Support Office carried out functions both typical of public administration (e.g. monetary services and certificates are granted in an administrative procedure) and atypical of public

³⁴ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 4(1).

³⁵ László Illés, "Volt egyszer egy program. Az áldozatsegítés Tolna megyei mintamodellje," *Belügyi Szemle* 64, no. 4 (2016): 82.

³⁶ Illés, "Volt egyszer egy program," 84.

³⁷ Schweighardt, "Áldozatvédelem," 27.

administration such as advocacy and emotional support. Before 2017, the Victim Support Office was not the only actor in the field of victim support, since the police, another state authority, also had and still have its own functions in this field. Finally, from 2017, the establishment of Victim Support Centers changed the landscape of the Hungarian victim support system.

The underlying reason for the diversification of the state victim support system was the existence of the systemic shortcomings described above. As of 2017, Victim Support Centers have taken over – in a subsidiary manner – functions that are atypical of public administration in an effort to introduce social work in the wider judicial system which better suits victims' needs. Additionally, although not expressly for this reason, the police also created a system which can mitigate the lack of sufficient territorial coverage. In the following sub-sections, these actors and their roles will be demonstrated.

3. 4. 1 The role and added value of the police

According to the 2/2013. (I.31.) order of the National Police Headquarters, the Hungarian police operate a victim support network which consists of victim support rapporteurs on two organizational levels (national and county). Victim support rapporteurs on the national and county levels carry out managerial functions regarding the rapporteurs operating on a lower organizational level. They are also tasked with supervising the victim support activities carried out by police departments operating under the authority of County Police Headquarters. With view to the efficient operation of the victim support network, the national and the county level rapporteurs cannot be tasked with other police functions simultaneously.³⁸ It is clear that the police – unlike the Victim Support Offices – does not provide public services in this field. Instead, its functions coincide with its original functions including crime prevention and investigation. As the police are usually the first authority which victims of crime contact, they have an important role in properly informing them about their rights and options in the victim support system. Consequently, the 2/2013 (I.31.) order first and foremost sets out rules about the provision of information to victims about their rights (in speech, in writing and even in leaflets), communication with the victims regarding the case and lays down standards of procedure serving to protect vulnerable victims.³⁹

It is interesting to note that although not required by the 2/2013 (I.31.) order, a survey which was sent to the county police headquarters and the National Police Headquarter in the beginning of 2024 showed that the above tasks are carried out at each district police department by police officers who are either investigators, crime scene technicians or who primarily focus on crime prevention. Communication between the victim support rapporteurs operating on a national, county or district level is realized in standard police procedures.

The survey also indicated that the victim support network operated by the police has two major advantages over the state victim support system: extensive territorial coverage and a range of services. First and foremost, it should be

³⁸ 2/2013. (I.31.) order of the National Police Headquarters §§ 3–5.

³⁹ 2/2013. (I.31.) order of the National Police Headquarters §§ 8–14.

emphasized that during the research, 211 victim support rapporteurs were employed by the police, most of whom work at one of Hungary's 148 district police departments (179 of 211 rapporteurs), which greatly overstretches the territorial coverage achieved by the Victim Support Offices operating in the county administration centers and the capital city. The essence of the victim support network is that the victim is able to discuss their situation with the rapporteur after the police interviewed them, whereby the rapporteur facilitates access to state victim support services and provides emotional support.

In addition, each County Police Headquarters declared in the survey that they cooperate with civil society organizations either on an *ad hoc* basis or based on strategic partnership. Most notable among these civil society organizations are those who specify in victim support such as the Fehér Gyűrű charitable association (közhasznú egyesület) established for aiding victims of traffic accidents, or other charity and ecumenical services operated either by civil society or various churches. They provide services that efficiently complement state victim support services in more than one way. First, through their efforts, financial aid can be provided to individuals who become victims of crimes other than violent crimes against a person. For instance, traffic offenses do not fall under the category of offences that justify state compensation, but they are nevertheless offences with consequences that are comparable to crimes of violence against the person. In this case, instead of state compensation, victims are supported by various civil society organizations, such as the above-mentioned Fehér Gyűrű charitable association.

Another finding of the empirical research conducted via questionnaires at the police is that a further merit of this type of cooperation is that victim support may go beyond the traditional notion of victim. An example is a case from Somogy county, where a television fell on a child entrusted to the custody of grandparents. As a result, the child died of his injuries. In the end, the police found that the grandparents could not be held accountable for the tragic accident. However, in the absence of an offence, there is no victim. Yet, it is plausible that family members needed psychological support which was indeed provided through the above organizations.

Although not as widespread as the above practices, there are some specific characteristics of the victim support networks found in some counties in Hungary that are also worth mentioning. For example, communication with the victim is regulated in a unique way in Somogy county where the rapporteur of the case is obliged to contact the victim within five days of the reporting of the offence and to consult the victim at least once a month during the investigation until the indictment is issued. During such consultations, the victim must be informed of the progress of the case and be advised that they may provide further information on the case. This practice helps promote the interests of victims in criminal proceedings, where, in principle, victims have long been perceived as witnesses with special status who have directly suffered the crime, but without any further consideration regarding their specific needs after being victimized.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the Budapest Police Headquarters explained in the survey that it established formalized cooperation partnership

with various state actors and civil society organization operating in the field of victim support. The so-called Victim Support Professional Networks operating in districts of Budapest are coordinated by a victim support rapporteur employed by the Police Headquarters. In addition to civil society organizations, local governments, civil guard associations, family support centers and even general medical practitioners take part in the initiative. The added value of such formalized system is the ease of communication and the wide range of services that can be provided on short notice.

3. 4. 2 The role and the added value of Victim Support Centers

Apart from the new role of the police in victim support, another major development of the Hungarian system was the establishment of Victim Support Centers. Currently 20 Victim Support Centers and 3 Victim Support Points operate in Hungary. This essentially creates a nationwide network of centers mostly based in county administration centers.⁴⁰ The Centers operate under the authority of the Ministry of Justice.⁴¹ These centers do not replace the Victim Support Offices but rather complement them. It is therefore important to note that the Victim Support Centers do not carry out administrative procedures, such as issuing official certificates of victim status, deciding on immediate financial assistance or state compensation. Instead, their main role is to promote the interests of victims of crime.⁴²

According to the coordinator of the Victim Support Center in Pécs, Victim Support Centers represent a different approach to the public victim support system than that of the Victim Support Offices. They have the advantage of taking victim support out of the traditional official environment that best describes government offices and avoiding the rigorous procedures of official administration, thus increasing victims' trust in their activities. Experience so far shows that in all of the county administration centers where Victim Support Centers have been opened, there has been an increase in the number of victims who have applied for victim support services. Based on the interview conducted with the coordinator of the Victim Support Centre in Pécs, while Victim Support Offices are mainly visited by victims of offences against property and misdemeanors, Victim Support Centers are relied on by victims of offences of violence against a person, such as relationship violence – the circumstances of which offences differ in a great deal.

The methodological reform taking place in Victim Support Centers can be best exemplified by the fact that they were designed with view to the crisis of the victim. A safe environment is reflected even in the color of the rooms and the furnishings. Efficient tending to the specific needs of the victim is facilitated by applying professional case management, tailored to each individual case, and implemented until the crisis of the victim of crime is resolved. This is necessary

⁴⁰ <https://vansegitseg.im.gov.hu/elerhetosegek/>.

⁴¹ 362/2016 (XI. 29.) Government Decree on certain duties and powers related to judicial services § 4(3)a).

⁴² Orsolya Doszpoly, Gábor Barta, István Novák and Péter Patai, "A hazai áldozatsegítés rendszerének aktuális kérdései," *Fontes Iuris* 6, no. 3 (2020): 15.

because each victim and their situation is unique. Victims are affected in different ways by crime and thus have different needs. The most important factor is, of course, the seriousness of the offence, but the victim's capacity to process the resulting trauma is equally important. Overall, the process of victim support consists of two types of activities: psychological support and practical help and information for the victim about the situation caused by the offence.⁴³ Both functions are fulfilled by the Victim Support Centers.

Consequently, the activity of the Victim Support Centers can be considered as social rather than administrative work, which must be taken into consideration when choosing the staff for the center. As a result, Victim Support Centers rarely employ lawyers better suited for taking care of administrative procedures. Instead, they employ social workers and heavily rely on the assistance of a psychologist during the management of each crisis situation.⁴⁴

3. 5 Institutional relations and a single point of access

As already described above, the Hungarian victim support system is currently operated by several state actors in the form of Victim Support Offices, Victim Support Centers, and the police, all of which administer different tasks. Victim Support Offices carry out administrative procedures, Victim Support Centers tend to the personal needs of the victim in the form of professional case management and the police operate as an information hub for the victims, and as the first point of entry into the justice system. Since the current state of the Hungarian victim support system has been under reconstruction in the past few years, notably due to the establishment of Victim Support Centers, institutional relations between the three actors are still developing.

As the division of functions currently stands, it could very well happen that after the victim reports the crime to the police, it is required to submit several requests to the Victim Support Office for immediate financial assistance, state compensation for damages and a certification regarding their status while, for the psychological needs, they would need to approach Victim Support Centers. This practice is highly recommended to be avoided since it could result in secondary victimization where the victim needs to repeatedly recall the offence they sustained, thus repeatedly inducing stress that was caused by the offence itself in the first place.⁴⁵ As such, close cooperation needs to be established between the state actors in order to mitigate this effect.

To this end, there is a tendency where the above actors coordinate their operation in an attempt to create a single point of access to the different victim support organizations, which greatly helps avoid secondary victimization in line with the

⁴³ György Virág, "Az áldozatsegítés módszertana" in *A kriminálpolitika és a társadalmi bűnmegelőzés kézikönyve*, ed. Andrea Borbíró, Anna Kiss, Edit Velez and Lajos Garami (Igazságügyi és Rendészeti Minisztérium 2009), 106-107.

⁴⁴ Doszpoly, Barta, Novák and Patai, "A hazai áldozatsegítés," 15.

⁴⁵ Ilona Görgényi, "Az áldozatpolitika története, elmélete és gyakorlata nemzetközi kitekintéssel," in *A kriminálpolitika*, ed. Borbíró, Kiss, Velez and Garami, 30.

Preamble of the EU directive on the rights of victims.⁴⁶ Based on the interviews conducted with the County Police Headquarters, there are formalized cooperation partnerships in 16 counties among these actors. In 3 counties, the cooperation is limited to efficient communication and coordination meetings between the police and the Victim Support Offices. However, in 12 other counties, the victim support employees both from the Victim Support Offices and the Centers hold reception hours at the police departments in various towns. This effort is particularly significant in Budapest, where such reception hours are provided in all 23 police departments operating in the capital. This kind of cooperation lets victims contact victim support organizations easier and builds trust. In addition, in two counties, namely Somogy and Csongrád-Csanád, victim support rapporteurs employed by the police may take part in the questioning of the victim in case of particularly serious offences to further decrease the effects of secondary victimization. Similar single points of entries can be established in Victim Support Centers as well. For instance, in Baranya County, an employee of the Victim Support Office is stationed at the Victim Support Centre which lets victims receive every kind of victim support service at the same place without the need to visit the Victim Support Office as well.

Creating single point of entries for the victims can make a great difference in the administration of their cases. Cooperation between the state actors results in efficient communication and greater reliability of each actor even shortly after the victimization took place. One such example of institutional cooperation that took place in Somogy County was shared in the survey. Three persons died in a traffic accident. Although the family of the deceased persons resided in another county, the victim support rapporteur of Somogy County Police Headquarters personally visited the deceased persons' family to help navigate the administrative procedure and fill out the request for immediate financial aid that was later delivered to the Somogy County Victim Support Office by the rapporteur. The financial situation of the victims' family excluded them from travelling to any county administration centers where they could do so in person. Thus, the single point of entry proved indispensable in overcoming difficulties of the victims' family regarding the location of the Victim Support Offices.

Another case described in the research was where the police as a single point of entry proved to enhance the operation of the victim support system involved a homicide which took place in Komárom-Esztergom County. The family of the victim resided in Zala County where they contacted the Victim Support Office since they financially aided the deceased victim's previous husband who took care of their three children alone. The deceased person's family needed financial and emotional help. The Victim Support Office in Zala County approached the victim support rapporteur of the Zala County Police Headquarters to establish communication with the Komárom-Esztergom Police Headquarters. In addition, through the assistance of the latter police headquarters, the previous husband and

⁴⁶ Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA, Preamble (62).

their children were aided in contacting the family support services in their place of residence.

In addition to specific institutional relations, the Hungarian state victim support system was developed in an opt-out direction through the modification of the VSA. An opt-out scheme for the operation of a victim support system describes the method of reaching out to the victims. In an opt-out scheme, the police, being the first public authority to encounter the victim, send their contact information to the competent organization after a report about the offense had been made. Upon this provision of data, the victim support organizations then contact the victims of crime, which lends them a more active role.⁴⁷ The Hungarian legislator introduced this methodology in case of violent crimes against a person. In such cases, the police has to acquire a statement of the victim whether they wish to be contacted by the competent victim support service.⁴⁸ This was already a significant step in the direction of an opt-out scheme as before 1 January 2021, the police could not forward the data of victims under any circumstances to victim support offices or centers. However, on 1 November 2021, this system was further modified with the inclusion of six more offenses in this area, and the police now has an obligation to inform the victims of such offences about the transmission of their data to the competent victim support services against which they may object. If they do not do so, their data is automatically transmitted.⁴⁹

This opt-out scheme has also contributed to the realization of a single point of access model in the Hungarian state victim support system, as the police is now required to send every important detail about the offense that was committed against the victim to the victim support services, which makes it unnecessary for the victim to recount the offense all over again when they apply for services to any victim support service.⁵⁰ As such, even though the opt-out system does not formally realize the single point of access, it significantly lessens the effects of secondary victimization through practice.

4. Discussion

The findings shed light on various systemic issues that existed in the Hungarian state victim support system for a long time. However, they also show that the Hungarian system has gone through various structural changes in the last few years with new state actors appearing and other state actors, such as the police taking on more responsibilities while the legislator also introduced an opt-out

⁴⁷ Oleksandra Boychenko, Nikolas Konstantinou, Levent Atlan and Aleksandra Ivankovic, *Report on the practical implementation of the EU victim's rights directive 2018–2024* (Victim Support Europe, 2025), 191.

⁴⁸ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation (effective between 1 January 2021 and 31 October 2021) § 43/A.

⁴⁹ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation (effective from 1 November 2021) § 43/A.

⁵⁰ Act no. CXXXV of 2005 on Assistance to Victims of Crime and State Compensation § 43/A(1)c).

scheme in connection to several offenses. As such, it is worth exploring whether the above changes managed to mitigate at least some of the listed shortcomings of the Hungarian system.

First, it should be reiterated that the Hungarian state victim support system had many flaws in the first two decades of the new century. It is clear that it provides insufficient monetary services to victims of crime, because state compensation for damage is maximized and provided to a very limited group of victims. Furthermore, even though immediate financial assistance is provided to victims regardless of the offense, the financial aid provided therein has much less monetary value. Additionally, the Hungarian state victim support system has lacked meaningful territorial coverage for a long time with Victim Support Offices having been operated in the capital city and administration centers. Finally, Victim Support Offices offer a rigid and official setting where victims are supposed to seek help which also hinders their willingness to turn to the authorities in such a delicate matter.

However, the structural and methodological development introduced in the past 10 years seems to mitigate some of these shortcomings. Most importantly, the introduction of a new methodology focusing on the emotional needs of victims in Victim Support Centers offers an alternative to the official environment provided by Victim Support Offices. Nevertheless, regardless of the new methodology, Victim Support Centers also lack significant territorial coverage. Instead, they are mostly located in the capital city and administration centers together with Victim Support Offices. Consequently, the introduction of Victim Support Centers to the Hungarian state victim support system solved only one shortcoming that is the insufficient provision of services in kind to victims of crime in Victim Support Offices. On the other hand, though, the police managed to mitigate the problem of territorial coverage with the deployment of more than 200 victim support rapporteurs who operate under the county level administration, namely, in districts which usually consist of 20-30 municipalities as opposed to counties consisting of more than 100 municipalities. Consequently, through focusing on increasing the number of victim support rapporteurs, the police managed to create a victim support network that is capable of reaching more victims of crime near to their place of residence. From this point forward, state actors only needed to work out an efficient form of cooperation to effectively channel victims of crime from the police to the Victim Support Offices and Victim Support Centers.

As indicated in the findings, quite elaborate institutional relations were developed between these actors. Many county police headquarters concluded agreements with Victim Support Offices and Victim Support Centers to be able to refer victims of crime to the competent authority. Additionally, the newly introduced opt-out scheme in the Hungarian state victim support system further enhanced cooperation between the competent state actors. These changes eventually lead to a significant increase in the outreach to victims by state victim support organizations. For example, while only 7238 victims requested victim support in

2021, in 2022, there was already a greater number of 14624 victims who contacted victim support offices and centers.⁵¹

Contrary to that, though, the financial compensation for damages provided to victims of crime has not changed since the adoption of the VSA in 2005. As a result, the Hungarian state victim support system still lacks meaningful ways to compensate financial damages of victims of crime. This shortcoming is only slightly mitigated by the fact that the police victim support networks cooperate with civil society organizations which are willing to provide aid even to those victims who do not qualify for state compensation for damage.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Hungarian state victim support system has undergone a great development in the past 10 years. With the gradual shift in the role of the police in victim support, and the establishment of a new actor, namely the Victim Support Center, some shortcomings of the Hungarian system have been mitigated. Victim Support Centers take over the provision of services in kind with specialized case management techniques tailored to the needs of victims from Victim Support Offices such as advocacy and emotional help – something for which Victim Support Offices lack the qualified staff. As a result, victims turn to the Centers in cases that differ from those for which they contact Victim Support Offices. This change in organization and in methodology yielded better outreach to victims supported by the partly introduced opt-out system.

In addition, the increased efforts of the police in this field resulted in reaching out and informing more victims about their rights in the victim support system. With the employment of victim support rapporteurs in every district police department by the Hungarian police, the lack of territorial coverage of the victim support system seems to be mitigated. This solution is surely not ideal, since the police cannot and do not take over the provision of victim support services, however – as demonstrated above – it has the possibility to become a single-point-of-entry where victims can turn to if they need assistance navigating the victim support system.

The single-point-of-entry model does not only mitigate the lack of territorial coverage of the dedicated state victim support organizations, but it also helps the efficient flow of information between these actors. With this, the need to individually reach out to every actor is mitigated. Therefore, the administrative process is shortened, and the victims do not have to recall the crime that was committed against them, thus decreasing the chances of secondary victimization. This methodology is reinforced by the newly introduced opt-out scheme as well. As such, it can be stated that the Hungarian state victim support system has gone through major development over the last eight years. It has taken significant steps in the direction of a general opt-out system with new organizations well suited for the emotional assistance of victims and the establishment of new roles for old actors such as the police with the necessary personnel. It would be best if the

⁵¹ Statistical data provided by the Ministry of Justices.

system is developed in the direction of an even closer cooperation of the above actors in the form of written institutional agreements which are still lacking though.

In addition to that, the legislator could also consider the further development of the current opt-out scheme, which only involves violent crimes against a person. If every other offense was incorporated, undoubtedly more victims could be contacted by Victim Support Offices and Victim Support Centers. However, this development has its challenges, because it would result in a significant increase in the number of victims who should be contacted by victim support officials. As of now, the state victim support system is not prepared for such a model, which is why the government should primarily focus on increasing the staff employed by Victim Support Offices and Victim Support Centers.

Finally, it would be worth considering abolishing the limitation placed on state compensation for damage. The state could provide full compensation for damage incurred by violent crimes against a person, especially because these crimes have severe consequences. Addressing those should not be a question of monetary issues.