



**Fostering Child-Friendly Legal Environments
through collaborative networks**

Policy paper

**Child Protection in Criminal
Proceedings**

**Safeguarding the Rights of
Child Victims of Crime**



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



Project FOSTER - Fostering Child-Friendly Legal Environments through collaborative networks
(101160568 — FOSTER — JUST-2023-JACC-EJUSTICE)

Deliverable D4.2 Policy Paper

Author: Natasha (Anastasia) Alexopoulou, Centre for European Constitutional Law, Greece

Contributor/s - Reviewers:

Maria Doichinova, Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria

Agnes Lux, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Szontagh Veronika Anna, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Panagiota Fitsiou (Society of Social Psychiatry P. Sakellaropoulos), Greece

Miha Hafner, Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana, Slovenia

June 2026



Co-funded by
the European Union



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission (granting authority). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Contents

Table of Contents	3
Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	6
1.1 Purpose and Scope	6
1.2 The FOSTER Project and the Evidence Base	6
2. International and European Legal Framework for the Protection of Child Victims	7
2.1 United Nations Standards	7
2.2 Council of Europe Standards	7
2.3 European Union Standards	8
3. Common Core Principles of Child-Friendly Criminal Proceedings.....	10
3.1 The Child as a Rights-Holder	10
3.2 Child-Friendly Information and Communication	10
3.3 The Right to Be Heard	10
3.4 Preventing Secondary Victimisation	11
3.5 Multiagency Cooperation	11
3.6 Legal Assistance.....	11
3.7 Privacy and Responsible Media Conduct.....	12
3.8 Recovery.....	12
4. Insights from the FOSTER Roundtables	12
4.1 Overview of the Roundtables	12
4.2 Cross-Cutting Findings	13
Vulnerable Groups Requiring Tailored Responses	13
4.3 Promising Practices Identified.....	14
5. Country-Specific Considerations	14
5.1 Bulgaria	14
5.2 Greece	15
5.3 Hungary.....	16
5.4 Slovenia	16
6. Policy Recommendations	17
6.1 Common Core Recommendations	17
6.2 Country-Specific Recommendations.....	20



Bulgaria	21
Greece	21
Hungary.....	21
Slovenia.....	22
7. Conclusion.....	22
References	24



Executive Summary

Children who come into contact with criminal justice systems as victims of crime face risks and needs that are fundamentally different from those of adult victims. Their dependence on adults, evolving capacities, and heightened vulnerability to trauma require procedures that are specifically designed around them, rather than adapted as an afterthought from adult criminal procedure.

Over the past three decades, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union have built an increasingly dense body of standards intended to guarantee that child victims are treated with dignity, kept informed, allowed to participate, and protected from further harm throughout criminal proceedings. Translating these standards into everyday practice, however, remains uneven across Europe.

This policy paper sets out a common core of principles for child-friendly criminal proceedings, grounded in international and European law, and examines how these principles are being implemented on the ground in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia. The analysis draws on the international and European legal framework for the protection of child victims and on first-hand evidence gathered through eighteen national and international roundtables organised between September 2025 and April 2026 under the FOSTER project, which brought together judges, prosecutors, lawyers, police officers, psychologists, social workers, academics, journalists, policymakers and civil society representatives from across the four participating countries.

The evidence shows considerable convergence in the challenges practitioners face: a persistent gap between legal standards and everyday practice; the continued risk of secondary victimisation through repeated interviews, delays and inadequate communication; weak interdisciplinary cooperation between justice, child protection, education, health and civil society actors; and insufficient specialised training for professionals working with child victims. At the same time, challenges at national level, differ: Bulgarian discussions focused on media representation, Roma children and access to justice; Greek discussions centred on the operation of Children's Houses and the interplay between civil and criminal proceedings; Hungarian discussions examined how professionals from different sectors conceptualise the child and cooperate with one another and Roma children; and Slovenian discussions highlighted the overlap between juvenile victimisation and offending, online risks, and the situation of Roma girls facing early and forced marriage.

The paper concludes that strengthening child-friendly justice requires more than further legislative reform. It requires sustained investment in professional training, the consolidation of multidisciplinary child advocacy models such as Children's Houses (following the Barnahus model), stronger mechanisms for interagency cooperation, targeted responses for children exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, and a shared European commitment to treating children not merely as objects of protection but as rights-holders whose views must shape the proceedings that affect them. A set of common core recommendations, complemented by country-specific proposals for Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia, is presented in the final sections of this paper.



1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This policy paper examines how the rights of child victims of crime can be more effectively safeguarded within criminal proceedings. It pursues three related objectives: first, to set out the international and European legal framework that establishes minimum standards for the treatment of child victims; second, to distil from that framework a common core of principles that should underpin child-friendly criminal proceedings in any national context; and third, to examine how these principles are being applied in practice in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia, drawing on direct evidence gathered from practitioners through the FOSTER project's national and international roundtables.

The paper is deliberately structured around a common core and country-specific layer. Legal obligations stemming from United Nations, Council of Europe and European Union instruments apply across all four countries and indeed across the European Union as a whole; the principles distilled from them in Section 3 are presented as standards of general application. Section 5 then turns to the specific institutional arrangements, achievements and gaps identified in each country, recognising that effective implementation depends on national legal traditions, institutional capacity and resources. The recommendations in Section 6 follow the same logic, separating measures that should apply across all national contexts from those addressed to specific countries.

1.2 The FOSTER Project and the Evidence Base

The FOSTER project seeks to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration of actors responsible for protecting and supporting child victims, bringing together professionals from the justice sector, child protection services, healthcare, education, and civil society.

Between September 2025 and April 2026, FOSTER partners organised sixteen national roundtables across Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia – four in each country – together with two international roundtables bringing experts from all four countries into direct dialogue. The events addressed child-friendly justice, multisectoral cooperation, victimisation and juvenile offending, vulnerable groups, media representation, online risks for children. This policy paper relies heavily on the findings consolidated in the FOSTER report on national and international networking activities, which constitutes the principal evidentiary basis for Sections 4 and 5 below, read alongside the applicable international and European legal instruments discussed in Section 2.



2. International and European Legal Framework for the Protection of Child Victims

Child victims of crime are protected by an increasingly comprehensive, multi-layered body of international and European law. United Nations instruments establish the foundational principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child and the right to be heard; Council of Europe conventions and guidelines translate these principles into operational standards for justice systems; and European Union directives impose binding minimum standards that must be transposed into the domestic law of all Member States, including Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia. This section summarises the instruments most directly relevant to child victims in criminal proceedings.

2.1 United Nations Standards

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) remains the foundational instrument for the protection of children, including child victims of crime. **Article 3** requires that the best interests of the child be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children; **Article 12** guarantees the right of the child to express views freely in matters affecting them, including judicial proceedings; **Article 19** obliges States to protect children from all forms of violence; **Article 34** addresses sexual exploitation and abuse; and **Article 39** requires States to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims.

These general principles were developed into detailed operational guidance through the UN Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime (2005)¹, which set out the rights of child victims to be treated with dignity and compassion, to be protected from discrimination, to be informed, to be heard and to express views and concerns, to effective assistance, to privacy, to be protected from hardship during the justice process, to safety, and to reparation. These rights, taken together, anticipate much of what later European instruments would make legally binding.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000)² adds specific safeguards for victims of these forms of exploitation, including protection throughout the criminal justice process.

2.2 Council of Europe Standards

¹ ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/event_2006-11-27_1/res_2005-20_en.pdf

² United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-sale-children-child>



At the regional level, the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Lanzarote Convention, 2007)³ requires States Parties to adopt child-friendly investigative and judicial procedures, including specially trained interviewers, recorded interviews admissible as evidence, measures to avoid contact between the child and the alleged offender, and protection of the child's privacy and image. The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005)⁴ and the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention, 2011)⁵ provide complementary protection for children who are victims of trafficking or who experience or witness domestic violence.

The Council of Europe Guidelines on child-friendly justice (2010)⁶ remain the single most influential regional instrument shaping the concept of child-friendly justice in Europe. They articulate four overarching principles – participation, the best interests of the child, dignity, and protection from discrimination – together with detailed guidance covering every stage of proceedings, from the first contact with the justice system through to the aftermath of trial. The Guidelines explicitly endorse multidisciplinary, one-stop models for interviewing and supporting child victims, an approach later operationalised across Europe through the Barnahus model.

2.3 European Union Standards

Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁷ provides an important normative starting point. It anchors child-friendly justice in the broader EU framework on children's rights and requires that, in all actions concerning children, their best interests are treated as a primary consideration by both public authorities and private institutions.

Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (the Victims' Rights Directive)⁸ has, since 2012, provided the central EU-level framework for all victims of crime, with Article 24 setting out specific safeguards for child victims, including the possibility of audio-visual recording of interviews for use as evidence, a presumption that the child victim is in need of special protection measures, and the appointment of a special representative where holders of parental responsibility are precluded from representing the child because of a conflict of interest.

The Directive is currently undergoing a significant revision. Following the Commission's legislative proposal⁹, the European Parliament formally adopted the revised Directive in plenary in May 2026. The revision strengthens the framework specifically for children: it requires Member States to ensure the availability of child-friendly services offering age-appropriate support and protection, including medical examinations, psychological support, an individual

³ Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse/1680794e97>

⁴ Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/anti-trafficking-convention>

⁵ Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/the-convention-in-brief>

⁶ Council of Europe, [https://search.coe.int/cm/#{%22CoEIdentifier%22:\[%2209125948801c1f0f%22\],%22sort%22:\[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22\]}](https://search.coe.int/cm/#{%22CoEIdentifier%22:[%2209125948801c1f0f%22],%22sort%22:[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22]})

⁷ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/24-rights-child>

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012L0029>

⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023PC0424>



assessment of protection and support needs, and the possibility of video-recorded testimony; it introduces EU-wide victim helplines and the possibility of reporting crimes online; and it restricts offenders’ access to a victim’s personal data during proceedings. At the time of writing the revised Directive awaits formal adoption by the Council before entering into force.

Directive 2011/93/EU¹⁰ on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography sets minimum rules on offences, sanctions, prevention and victim assistance specific to child sexual abuse. A recast of this Directive, proposed by the Commission in February 2024 to address online and AI-generated forms of abuse and to strengthen victim support and limitation periods, remains under negotiation between the co-legislators as of mid-2026¹¹.

Directive (EU) 2024/1385¹² on combating violence against women and domestic violence, adopted in 2024, is also directly relevant to child victims who experience or witness domestic violence, requiring Member States to ensure that children receive age-appropriate support and protection alongside adult victims. These instruments sit within the broader EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021–2024) and the European Child Guarantee (Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004)¹³, both of which call for child-friendly justice systems and for the consolidation of integrated, multidisciplinary child protection services across the Union.

European Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238¹⁴, adopted in April 2024, urges EU Member States to develop and strengthen integrated child protection systems. It aims to safeguard children from all forms of violence, adapting protections to both physical and digital environments and prioritising children’s best interests in all decisions. An important aspect of the Recommendation is that it highlights the need to protect children’s integrity and mental health and to help prevent and fight (cyber)bullying by encouraging Member States to develop national mental health strategies, with children as the priority target group.

Level	Key Instrument(s)	Core Contribution for Child Victims
United Nations	Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); UN Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime (ECOSOC Res. 2005/20)	Establishes the best interests principle, the right to be heard, protection from violence and exploitation, and a detailed catalogue of child victims’ rights in justice processes.
Council of Europe	Lanzarote Convention (2007); Istanbul Convention (2011); Guidelines on child-friendly justice (2010)	Requires child-friendly investigative and judicial procedures, specially trained interviewers, and endorses multidisciplinary one-stop models such as Barnahus.
European Union	Directive 2012/29/EU (Victims’ Rights Directive), under revision; Directive 2011/93/EU (child sexual	Imposes binding minimum standards on information, protection, support, special

¹⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2011/93/oj/eng>
¹¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/package-security-union/file-revision-of-the-combating-child-sexual-abuse-directive>
¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj/eng>
¹³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en
¹⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2024/1238/oj/eng>



Level	Key Instrument(s)	Core Contribution for Child Victims
	abuse), recast in progress; Directive (EU) 2024/1385; EU Recommendation 2024/1238	measures and compensation, with dedicated child-specific safeguards.

3. Common Core Principles of Child-Friendly Criminal Proceedings

The instruments summarised in Section 2 converge on a recognisable set of principles that should guide criminal proceedings involving child victims, irrespective of the national legal system in which they operate. This section sets out that common core, drawing both on the legal framework and on the practical experience reported by professionals during the FOSTER roundtables and the final conference.

3.1 The Child as a Rights-Holder

Child-friendly justice begins with how the child is conceptualised. Both the international legal framework and the FOSTER roundtables point to the same underlying tension: justice and protection systems tend to view children primarily through the lens of vulnerability, while paying insufficient attention to their status as rights-holders with evolving capacities. An exclusive focus on vulnerability, however well-intentioned, risks reducing the child’s agency and participation. A genuinely child-centred approach requires moving beyond a purely protective framework to recognise children as holders of rights whose voices must be heard throughout judicial and administrative processes, while still accounting for their developmental stage and need for protection.

3.2 Child-Friendly Information and Communication

Children are entitled to receive information about proceedings, decisions and outcomes in language appropriate to their age and maturity. This is a precondition for meaningful participation: legal terminology and formal procedures, designed with adults in mind, are frequently inaccessible to children and can themselves be intimidating. Effective communication must also account for the impact of trauma on memory, concentration and trust, and for the fact that children who have experienced abuse or neglect may be reluctant to disclose victimisation, particularly where disclosure is delayed. Delayed or partial disclosure should never, by itself, be treated as evidence that abuse did not occur.

3.3 The Right to Be Heard



Children have the right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them, including criminal proceedings arising from their own victimisation. The central challenge is not whether children should participate, but how participation can be organised in a manner consistent with their age, maturity, circumstances and best interests. Child-friendly systems should therefore create safe conditions that enable participation while minimising the risks that participation can entail.

3.4 Preventing Secondary Victimisation

Secondary victimisation occurs when children experience additional harm through their interactions with the very institutions and procedures intended to protect them. It typically results not from individual misconduct but from systemic shortcomings: repeated interviews with different professionals, prolonged proceedings, inappropriate questioning techniques, intimidating physical environments, breaches of privacy, and insensitive communication. The common core response, reflected in the Lanzarote Convention and in the Victims' Rights Directive alike, rests on a small number of concrete measures: minimising the number of interviews a child must undergo; making use of video-recorded testimony admissible at trial; ensuring that interviews take place in child-friendly, purpose-designed premises rather than police stations or courtrooms; reducing unnecessary procedural delay; and safeguarding the child's privacy and confidentiality throughout.

3.5 Multiagency Cooperation

No single professional group or institution can adequately respond to the complex needs of child victims. Effective child-friendly justice depends on cooperation between the judiciary, law enforcement, child protection services, healthcare providers, educational institutions, mental health professionals and civil society organisations. The PROMISE Barnahus Network¹⁵ operationalises this principle by co-locating forensic interviewing, medical examination, psychological support and judicial cooperation within a single child-friendly facility. Such models reduce institutional fragmentation, limit the number of times a child must recount their experience, and have demonstrated considerable potential for improving both children's experiences and the quality of evidence obtained. Sustainable cooperation must be embedded in institutional structures through clear protocols, shared procedures, regular interagency communication and joint training.

3.6 Legal Assistance

Child victims are entitled to legal assistance and, where the holders of parental responsibility cannot represent the child's interests because of an actual or potential conflict of interest, it is necessary that a special representative is appointed, as required under Article 24 of the Victims' Rights Directive. During trial, protective measures, including the avoidance of contact between the child and the alleged offender, the use of communication technology to enable testimony without the child being present in the courtroom, and the exclusion of the public and press from

¹⁵ <https://barnahus.eu/>



hearings or parts of hearings, should be available as a matter of course rather than by exception. These measures must, however, be designed so as to strengthen rather than weaken the procedural fairness owed to all parties to the proceedings, including defendants.

3.7 Privacy and Responsible Media Conduct

The right to privacy is a recurring thread across all the instruments reviewed in Section 2, and is reinforced by the practical evidence reviewed in Section 4: sensationalist media coverage, breaches of confidentiality and the publication of identifying information about child victims contribute directly to stigmatisation and long-term harm. Protecting children's privacy is not a limitation on media freedom but an ethical and, increasingly, a legal responsibility. Effective responses combine legal safeguards against identification with professional standards for responsible journalism, developed in cooperation between media organisations, child protection experts and public authorities.

3.8 Recovery

Finally, the common core requires that child victims receive support extending beyond the conclusion of criminal proceedings, including psychological and medical care, social support and, where appropriate, access to compensation. Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child frames this as an obligation to promote recovery and reintegration; the Victims' Rights Directive, as revised, frames it as a concrete entitlement to individualised needs assessment and to support services structured around the child rather than around institutional convenience. Long-term follow-up, frequently identified in the FOSTER roundtables as the weakest link in existing support structures, should be treated as an integral part of the justice process rather than an optional extra.

4. Insights from the FOSTER Roundtables

The principles set out in Section 3 describe how criminal proceedings involving child victims ought to function. This section examines how they are functioning in practice, drawing directly on the discussions held during the FOSTER national and international roundtables, as well as the final conference. These events were aimed to generate a comparative, qualitative picture of recurring themes, differences, dilemmas and promising practices across Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia.

4.1 Overview of the Roundtables

Between September 2025 and April 2026, FOSTER partners organised sixteen national roundtables – four in each participating country – and two international roundtables conducted online and bringing together experts from all four countries. The events involved judges, prosecutors, lawyers, police officers, child protection professionals, social workers, psychologists, medical practitioners, academics, journalists, policymakers and civil society representatives.



4.2 Cross-Cutting Findings

Across all four countries and at both international roundtables, participants converged on a set of shared findings that echo the common core set out in Section 3.

First, there is a persistent implementation gap: legal frameworks increasingly reflect international and European standards, but their everyday application depends on the availability of trained professionals, institutional resources and supportive organisational cultures that are frequently lacking.

Second, the victim-offender overlap emerged as a striking and consistent theme, particularly in Slovenia and Greece: many children who come into contact with justice systems as offenders have previously experienced victimisation, and aggressive or antisocial behaviour is often better understood as a coping mechanism than as straightforward evidence of criminal intent.

Third, interdisciplinary cooperation remains weak in practice despite being universally endorsed in principle, hindered by differences in professional cultures, terminology and institutional priorities between legal, psychological, social and educational actors.

Fourth, communication with child victims continues to be shaped by procedures primarily designed for adults, further complicated by the impact of trauma on memory, disclosure, and trust. Moreover, the specific needs of very young children (under six), as well as those of children with additional vulnerabilities, are often overlooked, resulting in inadequate responses.

Fifth, secondary victimisation – through repeated interviews, prolonged proceedings and, in Bulgaria and Greece particularly, harmful media coverage – was identified as one of the strongest and most consistent concerns across every roundtable.

Vulnerable Groups Requiring Tailored Responses

The discussions also identified specific groups of children whose experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities and who require responses tailored to their particular circumstances:

- **Roma children:** prominent in Bulgarian, Hungarian and Slovenian discussions, where poverty, discrimination and social exclusion were found to increase vulnerability to victimisation while simultaneously reducing access to protection and justice, including through widespread distrust of institutions and underreporting.
- **Children living in poverty and social exclusion:** identified across all four countries as a significant risk factor that intersects with educational disadvantage, inadequate housing and limited access to support services.
- **Children in conflict with the law:** highlighted in Slovenia, Greece and Hungary as frequently carrying histories of victimisation, trauma and educational exclusion that challenge a simple victim/offender distinction.
- **Children exposed to online risks:** a particular focus of the Slovenian discussions, covering grooming, sexual exploitation and extortion facilitated by increasingly sophisticated online offenders.



- **Migrant and refugee children:** raised in the Bulgarian and the Greek discussions as facing linguistic barriers, legal uncertainty and limited access to support that compound both vulnerability to victimisation and difficulties in accessing justice.

4.3 Promising Practices Identified

Despite the challenges described above, the roundtables also identified a range of promising practices already in use across the four countries, offering a practical foundation for the recommendations developed in Section 6:

- **Multidisciplinary child advocacy models:** Barnahus-inspired structures bringing law enforcement, prosecution, psychology, social work and healthcare together within coordinated frameworks that reduce fragmentation and the need for repeated disclosure. In addition, adopting specialised interview protocols, video-recorded testimonies and creating environments designed to reduce stress, alongside a growing professional understanding of children's behaviour through the lens of trauma and recovery are recommended as the right approach, with adaptations to optimise the response.
- **Rehabilitation-oriented responses to juvenile offending:** individualised assessments, probation services and restorative practices in Slovenia and Greece that address the social and psychological roots of offending alongside accountability.
- **Community-based and culturally sensitive interventions:** the involvement of community mediators, local leaders and culturally competent professionals in Bulgaria and Slovenia, demonstrating that cultural sensitivity and children's rights can be pursued together rather than traded off against one another.
- **Responsible media engagement:** ethical journalism guidelines, anonymisation procedures and cooperation between journalists, child protection experts and legal professionals in Bulgaria and Greece.

5. Country-Specific Considerations

This section summarises, for each of the four FOSTER countries, the principal roundtable themes, the main challenges identified, and the promising practices already in place, situating these findings within the relevant elements of the institutional framework.

5.1 Bulgaria

Bulgarian roundtables addressed the rights and support available to children in contact with the law, media coverage of cases involving children, the protection of Roma children who are victims of crime, and institutional cooperation in cases of domestic violence. Bulgaria's child protection framework rests primarily on the Child Protection Act, incorporating a Coordination mechanism for multisectoral response to child violence and complemented by specialised child-friendly



interview facilities – commonly referred to as “blue rooms” – that have been used for some years to reduce the number of times a child must recount traumatic experiences during criminal investigations. Although legal and child protection practitioners are increasingly aware of the need for child-sensitive approaches, and specialised training opportunities are gradually expanding, important gaps remain. These concern the uneven availability of training, inconsistent application of the model of multisectoral cooperation, and the limited reform of systems dealing with children in conflict with the law.

Participants identified media representation as a particularly pressing concern: sensationalist reporting, privacy violations and the publication of identifying information were repeatedly linked to stigmatisation and long-term harm for child victims and their families. Roma children featured prominently in the discussions, with participants describing widespread distrust of institutions within some Roma communities, underreporting of victimisation, and the normalisation of violence as particularly significant obstacles to protection and justice. Fragmentation between education, justice and child welfare systems was identified as a further obstacle to effective cooperation. Promising practices discussed included the expansion of child-friendly infrastructure across the country and the involvement of community mediators and culturally competent professionals in building trust with marginalised communities.

5.2 Greece

Greek roundtables focused on the operation of Children’s Houses, the way in which juvenile delinquency can conceal underlying victimisation, the intersection of civil and criminal proceedings affecting the same child, and the representation of child abuse cases in the mass media. Greece has been developing a network of Children’s Houses (Spitia tou Paidiou), inspired by the Barnahus model. Participants identified both the achievements and the limitations of the Children’s Houses model: while the multidisciplinary, child-friendly approach was widely endorsed, staffing shortages, unequal regional access and the absence of long-term follow-up support remained significant concerns, and interviews were reported still sometimes to take place outside specialised Children’s Houses, in police stations or other unsuitable environments.

In addition, one national roundtable explored the complex relationship between juvenile delinquent behavior and prior or concurrent experiences of victimisation, highlighting the need for a holistic and child-centered approach. Emphasis was placed on the importance of safeguarding children’s rights through prevention, early intervention, and restorative responses that address the root causes of offending behaviour. Participants discussed how aggressive behaviour is often a defence or survival mechanism through which children attempt to maintain their place within family or school environments that do not respect them or fail to respond adequately to their emotional and developmental needs.

The intersection of civil proceedings, such as custody and parental responsibility disputes, with parallel criminal proceedings concerning the same child was identified as a distinct source of complexity, requiring stronger cooperation between judicial authorities and mental health professionals.

In the final roundtable in Greece, ethical considerations in relation to the disclosure of information about children were discussed focusing on the role of journalists and lawyers representing the child victim of crime. Any publication of personal details or contextual information should not lead to the direct or indirect identification of the child. The material



presented in the media should respect the child's dignity and future, not cause feelings of shame, discomfort, or distress either immediately or later in life.

5.3 Hungary

Hungarian roundtables included a dialogue with state stakeholders, a judicial expert roundtable, a broader multi-agency discussion on working together for child victims, and a session on protection, recognition and support. Hungary's child protection system is grounded in Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and Guardianship Administration, which establishes the institutional architecture for child welfare services operating alongside the justice system.

The Hungarian discussions were particularly explicit in examining how professionals from legal, social, psychological and educational backgrounds operate with different, sometimes competing, implicit assumptions about children's competence, autonomy and capacity for participation – a conceptual divergence that was identified as a root cause of practical cooperation problems. Participants reported persistent communication difficulties between child protection institutions, law enforcement authorities and social services, and noted that children with a dual status as both victims and offenders frequently receive interventions addressing only their offending behaviour, leaving their own experiences of harm unrecognised. Joint, multi-stakeholder dialogue of the kind convened through the FOSTER roundtables was itself identified as a valuable and replicable mechanism for narrowing these gaps.

5.4 Slovenia

Slovenian roundtables examined the position of juveniles as both perpetrators and victims of criminal offences, criminal offences against children in virtual environments, forced and early marriages of Roma girls, and the broader dual status of children as offenders and victims. Slovenia's framework for vulnerable witnesses and child victims operates principally through the Criminal Procedure Act and the Family Code, supplemented by growing institutional interest, supported by the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana, in multidisciplinary, Barnahus-inspired approaches to supporting child victims.

The victim-offender overlap emerged with particular force in the Slovenian discussions, with participants stressing that offending behaviour among young people frequently follows prior experiences of abuse, neglect or family instability, and arguing for rehabilitation-oriented responses over purely punitive ones. The Slovenian roundtables also provided the most detailed discussion of online risks across the FOSTER project, examining grooming, sexual exploitation and extortion facilitated by increasingly sophisticated online offenders, and underlining the need for prevention, digital literacy and specialised investigative expertise. Discussions concerning early and forced marriage among Roma girls emphasised that such practices must be understood as violations of children's rights rather than as cultural tradition, while stressing that effective responses require culturally sensitive, community-based engagement rather than purely punitive intervention.



6. Policy Recommendations

The recommendations below translate the legal framework, the common core principles and the evidence gathered through the FOSTER roundtables and the final conference into concrete proposals for action. They are organised in two layers: common core recommendations addressed to policymakers, justice institutions, child protection authorities and civil society organisations across all participating countries, and country-specific recommendations addressing the particular gaps identified in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Slovenia.

6.1 Common Core Recommendations

1. Recognise Children as Rights-Holders Across All Systems

The principle that children are active holders of rights must be embedded into the foundational frameworks governing how professionals across all sectors engage with them. This means going beyond child-friendly rhetoric and ensuring that professional guidance, institutional standards and training curricula across justice, child protection, health and education sectors explicitly incorporate the concept of evolving capacities as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁶.

In practice, this requires a shift in institutional culture: professionals should be equipped not only to protect children from harm but to facilitate their genuine participation in decisions that affect them. Balancing protection with participation is a legal and ethical imperative recognised in the Council of Europe's Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice.¹⁷ Guidance documents, standard operating procedures and codes of conduct should reflect this dual obligation, and compliance with it should be subject to supervision and accountability mechanisms.

2. Make Specialised, Interdisciplinary Training a Professional Standard

Isolated or one-off training initiatives are insufficient to equip practitioners with the knowledge and skills required to work effectively and safely with child victims. Specialised training in child development, trauma-informed practice, child-friendly communication, children's rights, cultural competence and digital risks must become a standard, recurring component of professional development for the full range of professionals who may come into contact with child victims, including judges, prosecutors, defence lawyers, police officers, psychologists, social workers, educators, healthcare professionals and journalists alike. This obligation is reflected in the requirements of the Victims' Rights Directive¹⁸ and the Lanzarote Convention.¹⁹

¹⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 12 (2009): The Right of the Child to be Heard*, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/12 (20 July 2009).

¹⁷ Council of Europe, Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 17 November 2010.

¹⁸ 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 [2012] OJ L315/57, Art. 25.

¹⁹ Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention), CETS No. 201 (Lanzarote, 25 October 2007), Art. 36.



Training programmes should be interdisciplinary in design, encouraging professionals from different sectors to develop shared frameworks and mutual understanding of each other's roles, constraints and responsibilities. Competency standards should be established at national level, with training delivery monitored, evaluated and updated in line with emerging evidence on best practices and evolving forms of child victimisation, including online and technology-facilitated abuse.

3. Institutionalise Multidisciplinary and Multiagency Cooperation

Effective responses to child victimisation consistently depend on the coordinated action of multiple agencies and professional disciplines. Yet in many countries, such cooperation remains ad hoc, contingent on the goodwill or personal initiative of individual practitioners rather than embedded in institutional structures. Joint protocols, coordinated referral pathways and regular interagency meetings should be established as standing requirements between justice, child protection, education, healthcare and civil society actors, consistent with the obligations set out in the Lanzarote Convention and Directive 2011/93/EU²⁰.

Cooperation frameworks should clearly define roles and responsibilities, set timelines for information-sharing, and designate lead agencies for specific categories of case. They should also include mechanisms for resolving inter-institutional disagreements and for monitoring whether collaboration commitments are being honoured in practice. Civil society organisations working directly with child victims should be formal partners in these structures, given the frontline knowledge and trust relationships they bring.

4. Prevent Secondary Victimisation as a Matter of Routine Practice

Every encounter a child has with justice or protection systems carries the risk of compounding the harm already suffered. Secondary victimization, caused by repeated interviews, intrusive questioning, procedural delay, exposure to alleged perpetrators, or breaches of confidentiality, is not an unfortunate inevitability but a preventable outcome of poor system design. Minimising it must be treated as a routine professional obligation, not an exceptional accommodation.

Concrete measures include: strict limitations on the number of times a child is required to recount their experience; expanded use of recorded testimony and video-link evidence to reduce court attendance; guaranteed access to child-friendly premises that are physically and psychologically distinct from standard police or court environments; and enforceable confidentiality protections throughout proceedings. These measures are consistent with the obligations set out in the Victims' Rights Directive²¹.

5. Expand and Sustain Multidisciplinary Child Advocacy Services

The Barnahus model has demonstrated that integrating forensic, judicial, medical and therapeutic services under one child-centred roof significantly improves both child welfare outcomes and the quality of evidence gathered in criminal proceedings. The quality standards developed through the PROMISE project provide a benchmark for the design and evaluation of

²⁰ Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography [2011] OJ L335/1, Art. 20.

²¹ [7] Directive 2012/29/EU (n 3), Arts. 20–24.



such services²². Continued investment in these structures is essential but investment must address the long-term sustainability, staffing and reach of existing ones, as highlighted in the monitoring work of the Lanzarote Committee.²³

Particular attention must be paid to geographical accessibility: children in rural or remote areas, or in regions with under-resourced local authorities, must not be systematically excluded from integrated services by virtue of where they live. Staffing levels must be adequate to prevent burnout and ensure continuity of care, and services must incorporate robust long-term follow-up support and mental health provision, recognising that recovery from abuse and exploitation is rarely a linear or time-limited process.

6. Design Tailored Responses for Children Facing Multiple Vulnerabilities

Universal approaches to child protection risk failing the children who are most at risk precisely because their circumstances fall outside the assumptions on which mainstream services are designed. Roma children, children living in poverty, children in conflict with the law, children exposed to online exploitation, and migrant and refugee children face intersecting vulnerabilities that can amplify harm, reduce access to services and undermine trust in institutions. The EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020–2030²⁴ underscores the need for policy and practice designed with their specific circumstances from the outset.

Particular attention should be paid to children with disabilities and children in institutional or alternative care, who face disproportionate risks of victimisation and significant obstacles in accessing protection and support services. Special protection measures should ensure that children with disabilities and children in care are not only safeguarded from harm but are meaningfully heard, supported and included in decisions affecting their lives.

This means commissioning needs assessments that disaggregate data by vulnerability category, designing referral and support pathways accessible to children who may distrust authorities or face language barriers, and ensuring that professionals working with these groups receive targeted training in culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approaches. It also means involving children from these communities, and the organisations that work with them, in the design and evaluation of the interventions intended to serve them.

7. Strengthen Data Collection and Evidence-Based Policy Development

Sound policy on child protection and justice cannot be built on incomplete or fragmented data. In many European countries, national data collection systems fail to capture the full picture of child victimisation: forms of abuse that are underreported, including online exploitation, domestic violence, trafficking and abuse within institutional settings, remain largely invisible in official statistics, distorting the allocation of resources and the design of interventions. The EU

²² PROMISE, Barnahus Quality Standards: Guidance for Multidisciplinary and Interagency Response to Child Victims and Witnesses of Violence, 2017, <https://barnahus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PROMISE-Barnahus-Quality-Standards.pdf>

²³ Council of Europe, Lanzarote Committee, Thematic Monitoring Reports on the Implementation of the Lanzarote Convention, available at www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-committee.

²⁴ https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/99cc0720-68c2-4300-854f-592bf21dceaf_en?filename=eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030.pdf



Strategy on the Rights of the Child explicitly acknowledges these gaps and commits member states to strengthening data collection and monitoring mechanisms.

National authorities should invest in standardised, disaggregated data collection systems that allow for monitoring of prevalence, reporting rates, prosecution outcomes and the experiences of child victims across different categories of offence and vulnerability. These systems should be complemented by independent research capacity and regular evaluations of policy effectiveness, of the kind tracked in the FRA's annual Fundamental Rights Report. European-level coordination of data standards, supported by EIGE, FRA and Eurostat, can enable meaningful cross-country comparisons and identify where common challenges require common solutions.

8. Promote Responsible and Rights-Based Media Practices

Media coverage of cases involving child victims can either reinforce public understanding of children's rights or cause direct harm through identification, sensationalisation or the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. UNICEF's Guidelines for journalists reporting on children²⁵ and the Council of Europe's Recommendation on children's rights in the digital environment²⁶ both provide authoritative reference points for the development of professional standards that balance the public interest in transparency with the child's right to privacy and protection from further harm.

These standards could be developed collaboratively by media organisations, child protection experts, legal practitioners and public authorities, ensuring they are practically grounded and professionally credible. They should address digital and social media environments specifically, given the speed and permanence with which identifying information can spread online.

9. Sustain Cross-Border Collaboration and Exchange

The challenges facing child victims in European countries are deeply interconnected: online exploitation crosses borders by definition, trafficking networks span multiple jurisdictions, and gaps in one country's legal or procedural framework can create vulnerabilities that affect children across the region. Initiatives such as the FOSTER project roundtables have demonstrated the value of bringing together practitioners, researchers, policymakers and civil society from multiple countries to share evidence, identify common barriers and develop shared solutions. These formats should be supported and replicated, with outcomes systematically documented and fed into EU-level policy processes. The European Commission, Council of Europe and relevant agencies including FRA and EIGE have a central role to play in facilitating and financing this kind of structured professional community, ensuring that lessons learned in one country contribute to progress across all.

6.2 Country-Specific Recommendations

²⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines>

²⁶ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation CM/Rec(2018), <https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-rights-of-the-child-in-th/16808d881a>



Building on the common core, the following recommendations address the specific gaps identified in each of the four countries involved in the FOSTER initiative.

Bulgaria

- Introduce professional standards for lawyers who work with children and offer them equal access to initial and ongoing specialised interdisciplinary training.
- Consistently use the available infrastructure and methodology for child-friendly interview facilities (“blue rooms”).
- Address barriers to reporting and access to support among Roma communities through sustained engagement with community mediators, targeted outreach initiatives, and culturally competent service provision.
- Strengthen formal cooperation mechanisms between the education, justice and child welfare sectors to reduce fragmentation in the response to child victims.
- Strengthen the implementation and oversight of ethical reporting standards in cases involving children by working with media regulators, journalists’ associations, and relevant professional bodies to promote child-sensitive reporting practices.
- Integrate the child offending response system into the overall child protection infrastructure by either strengthening or reforming it.

Greece

- Expand staffing and geographical coverage of the Children’s Houses network so that forensic interviews of child victims consistently take place within specialised facilities rather than police stations.
- Develop structured long-term follow-up support for children after the conclusion of the Children’s House process, including continued access to mental health services.
- Clarify procedural coordination between civil proceedings, such as custody disputes, and parallel criminal proceedings concerning the same child, to reduce inconsistency and delay.
- Deliver systematic training to justice sector professionals, including lawyers and child protection practitioners, to clarify roles and strengthen coordinated responses. This should include the development and formalisation of inter-agency collaboration protocols to ensure timely, efficient, and consistent support, regardless of whether the child is a victim or in conflict with the law, and
- Strengthen access to legal aid and quality legal representation for children, ensuring the provision of immediate, specialised support tailored to their individual needs.

Hungary



- Develop joint, cross-sectoral training to harmonise how legal, social, psychological and educational professionals conceptualise children's competence, autonomy and participation rights.
- Establish clearer formal communication protocols between child protection institutions, law enforcement authorities and social services to reduce reliance on informal, personal channels.
- Ensure that children with a dual status as both victims and offenders receive interventions that address their own experiences of harm, not only their offending behaviour.
- Institutionalise multi-stakeholder dialogue mechanisms, building on the model of the FOSTER roundtables, as a recurring feature of national child protection policy development.

Slovenia

- Continue developing multidisciplinary, Barnahus-inspired structures for child victims.
- Expand rehabilitation-oriented responses to juvenile offending that address the social and psychological roots of behaviour, building on the recognised overlap between victimisation and offending.
- Invest in specialised investigative expertise, prevention programmes and digital literacy initiatives to respond to the increasing sophistication of online grooming and exploitation.
- Develop dedicated, culturally sensitive protocols for addressing early and forced marriage among Roma girls that firmly uphold children's rights while engaging constructively with affected communities.

7. Conclusion

Safeguarding the rights of child victims of crime in criminal proceedings is, at its core, a matter of consistently applying principles on which there is already a remarkable degree of international, European and professional consensus: that children are rights-holders, not merely objects of protection; that they must be informed, heard and allowed to participate in proceedings that affect them; that they must be protected from secondary victimisation; and that effective protection depends on sustained cooperation between justice, child protection, health, education and civil society actors.

The evidence gathered through the FOSTER roundtables and the final conference shows that the principal obstacle to realising these principles is not, in most cases, the absence of legal standards, but the persistent gap between those standards and everyday institutional practice. Closing that gap will require sustained investment in professional training, the consolidation and expansion of multidisciplinary child advocacy models, stronger and more formalised interagency cooperation, and targeted responses for children facing multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities. It will also require continued international dialogue of the kind fostered by this



project, allowing professionals across different legal systems to learn from one another's experiences and to develop, together, a more consistent and genuinely child-centred approach to criminal proceedings involving child victims across Europe.



References

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- UN Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime, ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20.
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000).
- Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention, 2007).
- Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005).
- Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011).
- Council of Europe Guidelines on child-friendly justice (2010).
- EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (article 24).
- Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, as revised (political agreement of 10 December 2025; European Parliament plenary adoption, May 2026).
- Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography; recast proposal COM(2024) 60 final, under negotiation as of mid-2026.
- Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- European Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238.
- European Commission, EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, COM(2021) 142 final.
- Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee.
- FOSTER Project, Report on the National and International Networking Activities (2026, confidential document).
- [FOSTER Training Needs Assessment Consolidated Report, 2025.](#)
- [UNICEF, Guidelines for journalists reporting on children.](#)



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission – Directorate General for Justice and Consumers (granting authority). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.