

EU STRATEGY ON VICTIMS' RIGHTS (2026-2030): INPUT FROM THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST IMPUNITY

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SUMMARY

In June 2020, the European Commission presented its first [EU Strategy on victims' rights](#) (the **Strategy**), which frames the Commission's work on victims' rights for the period 2020-2025. The Strategy is purportedly based on a double approach: empowering victims of crime to report such crime so their rights become effective, and enhancing "collaboration and coordination" around victims' rights. It outlines five priorities, which include: "(i) effective communication [...] and a safe [reporting] environment [...]; (ii) improving support and protection to the most vulnerable victims; (iii) [facilitating] access to compensation; (iv) [...] cooperation and coordination among all relevant actors; and (v) strengthening the international dimension of victims' rights."

This brief, submitted on behalf of the Global Initiative Against Impunity (**GIAI**), aims to assess gaps in the existing Strategy and make recommendations on the next EU Strategy on victims' rights (2026-2030), focusing on the rights of victims of serious international crimes in the EU. The GIAI is a consortium of eight leading civil society organisations with networks of local members and partners worldwide: the International Federation for Human Rights (**FIDH**), Coalition for the International Criminal Court (**CICC**), Civil Rights Defenders (**CRD**), the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (**ECCHR**), Impunity Watch, Parliamentarians for Global Action (**PGA**), REDRESS, TRIAL International, and Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice (**WIGJ**). The consortium aims to contribute to the fight against impunity by supporting a comprehensive, integrated, and inclusive approach to justice and accountability for serious human rights violations and international crimes.

The recommendations contained in the brief are based on the work of the consortium members and their partners with victims, survivors, and communities affected by serious international crimes, in the context of the investigation and prosecution of serious international crimes by EU Member States.

BACKGROUND

At the end of 2024, the UNHCR reported that 18.4 million people were forcibly displaced in Europe as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order. This represents an increase of 8.2 million people from 2021, largely due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has triggered one of the largest human displacement crises globally and the largest refugee influx in Europe in decades.¹ Germany alone hosted 3.48 million refugees by the end of 2024.² Many of those arriving to the EU are victims of serious international crimes, such as torture, enforced disappearance, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide, committed in their countries of origin or in transit, in particular when they arrive from countries that have become active war zones or countries with long-standing patterns of human rights abuses.

¹ UNHCR, 'Europe [Figures at a Glance 2023](#),' (accessed 14 November 2025).

² UNHCR, Europe 2024.; '[Germany: Number of refugees reaches new high in 2024](#),' DW, (20 September 2024), accessed 25 November 2025.

The EU has recognised the international dimension of crimes and victims' rights in its existing policy frameworks and cooperation mechanisms. The EU Victims' Rights Directive is an important tool, as it affirms that the rights it guarantees apply to all victims of crime, regardless of the victim's residence status in their territory or the victim's nationality.³ Moreover, all EU States are members of the European Network for investigation and prosecution of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes ('Genocide Prosecution Network'), which was established in 2002 to facilitate cooperation among national authorities when investigating and prosecuting the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (core international crimes), on the basis of universal jurisdiction, or any other extraterritorial jurisdictional basis. In its resolution of 19 May 2022 on the fight against impunity for war crimes in Ukraine, the European Parliament encouraged EU Member States to use universal jurisdiction to investigate serious international crimes committed abroad and to improve access to information and outreach to the victims of these crimes.⁴

This demonstrates the EU's commitment to addressing serious international crimes committed abroad and upholding victims' rights to access justice in EU jurisdictions. The EU strategy on victims' rights should be consistent with this commitment and specifically address the rights of victims of serious international crimes in the EU.

SPECIFIC NEEDS OF VICTIMS OF SERIOUS INTERNATIONAL CRIMES REMAIN UNADDRESSED IN THE EU STRATEGY ON VICTIMS' RIGHTS

As of 2024, there were approximately 61 cases of core international crimes being pursued in the EU, a number that is expected to rise as investigations advance and new proceedings are initiated.⁵ In many of these cases, victims participate in criminal proceedings as witnesses of a crime or join proceedings as participating victims (civil parties), depending on the national legal framework. For example, in 2013 and 2015, six Libyan victims joined proceedings initiated in France against French company Amesys, and its executives, who were subsequently indicted for allegedly selling surveillance technology to the Libyan government, and accused of complicity in torture.⁶ Also in France, in 2024, a Yazidi victim joined the proceedings as a civil party in a case against a couple accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, and terrorism, for allegedly enslaving a young Yazidi woman in Syria in 2015, and was heard by the investigative judges during the investigative proceedings.⁷ In Germany, 14 Syrian torture survivors were joint plaintiffs in a case against two former government officials in former President Bashar al-Assad's security apparatus.⁸

3 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, para. 10.

4 European Parliament Resolution of 19 May 2022 on the fight against impunity for war crimes in Ukraine (2022/2655(RSP)) [2022] OJ C479/68, paras. 17 and 28.

5 Eurojust, '[Casework](#),' accessed 14 November 2025.

6 Trial International and others, '[Universal Jurisdiction Annual Review 2025](#)' (Trial International 2025), p. 36, accessed 14 November 2025.

7 Ibid 52.

8 '[First criminal trial worldwide on torture in Syria before a German court](#)' (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights).

Despite the growing number of investigations and prosecutions focused on serious international crimes, victims of such crimes continue to face specific hurdles to access their rights as victims in the EU. The EU Strategy on victims' rights, which currently does not sufficiently address these specific challenges, presents an opportunity to improve access to rights for victims of serious international crimes, re-affirming the leading role of the EU in advancing justice and accountability globally.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH VICTIMS

The current Strategy recognises that often victims are “not aware of their rights” and that “persons in contact with victims (including the first contact authorities) who should inform victims about their rights are often not well trained to do so.”⁹ The Strategy proposes specific measures to address these challenges, such as: launching an EU awareness campaign on victims' rights; promoting specialist support and protection for victims with specific needs, such as victims of gender-based and domestic violence and victims of hate crimes; improve the quality and reliability of information about victims' rights on the e-Justice Portal and promoting it to a broad range of potential users; and promoting training activities for judicial and law enforcement authorities.

The challenges related to effective communication and outreach to victims are particularly severe for victims of serious international crimes. Materials and tools intended to communicate information to victims about their rights, and their availability, are rarely adapted to the situation of victims of serious international crimes. This is because of language barriers, lack of adequate outreach, or the absence of knowledge by victims on where to find information about their rights, among other factors. Many victims of serious international crimes are either located in the country where the violations took place, or in an EU Member State in which they have only recently arrived. When present in the EU, many have a legal status that may not allow them to fully access legal aid, support services, or compensation available to victims who are nationals or permanent residents. This creates additional confusion and uncertainty.¹⁰

Sweden: Sharing information with victims about their rights

In Sweden, the war crimes unit engages in ongoing dialogue with the Red Cross to support outreach, and as a result, the Swedish Red Cross prepared a leaflet with instructions on how to report international crimes to the authorities.

Serious international crimes are more than isolated acts against individual victims, and their nature, scope, and impact are very different to those of most ordinary domestic crimes. They are often characterised by widespread or systematic brutality, sexual or gender-based violence, ethnic or other targeting, and have long-lasting consequences for entire groups of individuals, communities, or countries. In the investigation and prosecution of core international crimes, a case pursued in a specific jurisdiction can serve as a landmark example – sometimes the only example – of accountability in a context where accountability gaps persist, and victims may otherwise never obtain justice. This means that even decisions that only address the harm suffered by a limited number of individual victims may attain significance for a much broader group of people.

Effective communication on the existence and outcomes of criminal proceedings to affected commu-

9 Commission, ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – EU Strategy on Victims' Rights (2020 – 2025) (Victims' Rights Strategy)’ COM 2020 258 final, 4.

10 FIDH, ECCHR and Redress, [Breaking Down Barriers](#): Access to Justice in Europe for Victims of International Crimes (September 2020), p. 114.

nities is key in this context. Yet, in many jurisdictions, national authorities consider outreach activities as falling outside of their role or mandate.¹¹ When they do carry out outreach activities, they are sometimes faced with challenges such as the lack of cooperation from domestic authorities in the location where the crimes took place, limited infrastructure, insufficient funding, or insecurity.¹² This limits both their ability to carry out investigations and outreach.

Netherlands: Outreach to affected communities

The Netherlands have on several occasions integrated outreach activities on cases. In 2013, the Dutch prosecution service publicly released evidence on killings and torture by Afghan security forces in the 1970s. In 2017, Dutch prosecutors used several means of communication to inform victims in Afghanistan of the closure of an investigation into the Kerala massacre.¹³ Following a guilty verdict in relation to the international crimes against a Syrian civilian, the Dutch prosecutor's office and the International Crimes Unit worked closely with civil society organisations to provide legal and logistical assistance to witnesses and a victim of the crimes. The Dutch authorities also provided in-court translation from Dutch to Arabic and vice versa for trial observers.¹⁴

In light of the above, the GIAI recommends the following amendments to the Strategy:

- Materials on victims' rights and electronic resources, such as information on the e-Justice Portal, should include targeted information for victims of serious international crimes, in accessible formats and languages, including on those crimes, their rights as victims, and when and how these crimes can be reported in EU jurisdictions.
- Such information should be promoted to relevant actors who come into contact with victims of serious international crimes, including all actors currently mentioned in the Strategy, but also migration authorities and administrations of refugee centers, who are well-placed to reach these categories of victims.
- Such information should be part of training programmes for law enforcement, migration authorities, and other actors.

¹¹ Ibid 117-118.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid 80-81, 85.

¹⁴ The Nuhanovic Foundation, '[Netherlands-based efforts to pursue justice and accountability in Syria: A Case Roundup](#)' (The Nuhanovic Foundation, 2024), accessed 14 November 2025.

- Training activities on outreach for law enforcement should include information on outreach to broader victims' communities in cases of serious international crimes. In particular, specialised law enforcement units should be encouraged to be creative in their approach to informing victims, witnesses and affected communities about their work and the possibility of reporting international crimes, and use a variety of ways of communication, involving existing networks and diasporas in their outreach activities.

IMPROVING SUPPORT AND PROTECTION OF THE MOST VULNERABLE VICTIMS

The current Strategy recognises that, while all victims need appropriate support and protection, "[...] because of their personal characteristics, the nature of the crime suffered or personal circumstances some victims are even more vulnerable than others." It also emphasises that "national support and protection measures need to be effective for all victims and at all times."¹⁵ The Strategy then proceeds to elaborate on the specific initiatives and policies addressing the needs of different categories of victims considered most vulnerable, such as victims of gender-based violence, child victims, victims of hate crime, terrorism, irregular migrants who become victims of crime, and some other categories.

While recognising that many victims face complex and intersecting layers of vulnerability, the GIAI would like to draw attention to the specific vulnerabilities of victims of serious international crimes, and the need for specialised measures to address their needs. Victims of serious international crimes often face heightened risks of retaliation against themselves or their relatives. Participating victims may reside in the country where the crimes took place, or third countries outside or within the EU, and only travel to the Member State where proceedings are taking place for the purpose of providing a witness testimony. This often puts them at a higher risk of retaliation. When victims taking part in proceedings as parties or witnesses reside in the State exercising jurisdiction, their relatives may still reside in the country where the crime took place and face high risks of retaliation.

In addition to putting them in a vulnerable position, these complications can discourage victims from reporting the crimes that were committed against them. Targeted protection and support measures can help mitigate risks. These include enhanced confidentiality guarantees and, where possible, anonymous participation in the proceedings. Many national legal frameworks provide specific measures aimed at protection of witnesses, such as omitting personal identifying information, closed (non-public) hearings, and anonymous testimonies. More complex measures such as relocation are generally only available to witnesses living in the EU, and few protection measures apply to victims who do not have witness status. In particular, victims who participate in proceedings as injured parties cannot benefit from measures such as anonymity.¹⁶

Protection and support measures to mitigate risks to victims of international crimes should be case and context-specific and designed in consultation with NGOs, affected individuals, and communities.

¹⁵ COM 2020 258 final, 8.

¹⁶ FIDH, ECCHR, and Redress (n 9), 124.

Secondary victimisation is an increased risk for victims of international crimes. It is not unusual for these cases to take decades, often with no indictment or conviction. This means that victims' expectations need to be carefully managed to prepare them for likely delays, absence of prosecution, or acquittals.¹⁷ In serious international crimes cases, victims are "sometimes witnesses and sometimes the proof themselves."¹⁸ The manner in which testimonies are gathered can have a negative impact on victims. Interviews often last hours or days, sometimes weeks, are conducted by police or magistrates with limited to no knowledge of the context, through interpretation, and are carried out by multiple justice actors across jurisdictions, or as proceedings advance, forcing victims to repeatedly recall the details of traumatic events. This is particularly daunting and can aggravate the psychosocial and medical condition of certain victims.

The Netherlands: Victims' protocol developed by the International Crimes Unit within the Dutch police

The Dutch war crimes police unit has developed a specialised protocol, addressing victims' rights and victim support. The protocol is specific to victims of serious international crimes present in The Netherlands or interacting with the Dutch unit.¹⁹

To compound this issue, general victim support structures in EU Member States, while effective in many States, are neither equipped nor trained to respond to harm associated with serious international crimes. These services often lack the specialised expertise needed to respond to the legal and psychological complexities of serious international crimes.²⁰

In light of the above, the GIAI recommends the following amendments to the Strategy:

- The Strategy should call for targeted protection and support measures for victims of crimes who face high risks of retaliation, including victims of serious international crimes.
- The Strategy should call on Member States to provide integrated and targeted protection and support to victims of serious international crimes, among other categories of victims with special protection needs.
- The Strategy should provide for the creation of a working group that will cooperate with EU Genocide Prosecution Network and its focal points, to develop good practices of providing targeted support to victim of serious international crimes at all stages of the criminal proceedings.
- The Strategy should encourage victim support organisations to formalise cooperation with police, prosecutors, and relevant social services and establish referral protocols that enable support.

¹⁷ Ibid 122.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ FIDH, ECCHR, and Redress (n 9) 90.

²⁰ FIDH, ECCHR and Redress (n 7) 119-120.

FACILITATING VICTIMS' ACCESS TO COMPENSATION

The Strategy contains specific provisions related to victims' access to compensation. It recognises that victims' access to compensation is difficult in many Member States, with underlying reasons including the "lack of sufficient information about victims' rights to compensation, numerous procedural hurdles including restrictive time limits, insufficient allocations from national budgets and complicated rules governing offender compensation and state compensation."²¹ It also specifically acknowledges that for victims in cross-border situations it is even more difficult to receive compensation from the State in which they were victimised.

These challenges are particularly significant for victims of serious international crimes. Even after the suspect is convicted, victims very rarely access compensation, as offenders rarely have the means to pay, and offenders who do possess assets often do not pay compensation due to indigence, or the difficulties associated with enforcing such awards.²²

Some countries have attempted to address this issue by setting up schemes where the State assumes responsibility for the enforcement of compensation awards and then recovers the debt from the offender, but this is often linked to the offender being found guilty.²³ Additionally, State-funded compensation schemes have been established pursuant to a 2004 EU Directive on compensation,²⁴ but the vast majority of victims of serious international crimes are effectively ruled out of such schemes due to the eligibility criteria based on the nationality or residence of the victim at the time of the crime and/or the place where the crime was committed. As a result, very few victims of serious international crimes prosecuted in the EU on the basis of extraterritorial jurisdiction receive compensation. The inability to access compensation can lead to re-victimisation or compound harm.

Country: good practice

In France, victims may obtain an advance payment of up to EUR 3,000 from the Crime Victims' Compensation Recovery Assistance Service (SARVI) if the victim has not received the full amount from the offender. The SARVI will then assist the victim in recovering the full amount from the offender.²⁵

In light of the above, the GIAI recommends the following amendments to the Strategy:

- The Strategy should call on Member States to evaluate national compensation schemes and other measures that ensure that victims of serious international crimes participating in proceedings can access compensation, including by advancing and enforcing compensation against offenders.

²¹ COM 2020 258 final 8.

²² FIDH, ECCHR and Redress (n 9) 126.

²³ FIDH, ECCHR and Redress (n 9) 126-127.

²⁴ Council Directive 2004/80/EC of 29 April 2004 relating to compensation to crime victims relating to compensation to crime victims obliges Member States to establish national compensation schemes for victims of violent intentional crimes committed on their territory. It also establishes an EU-wide system of cooperation to ensure victims of crime can access such compensation schemes regardless of where in the EU the crime was committed [2004] OJ L 261/15.

²⁵ FIDH, ECCHR and Redress (n 9) 59.

- The Strategy should call on Member States to sign, ratify, and implement the [Ljubljana-The Hague Convention](#) on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of the Crime of Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes and Other International Crimes to facilitate cooperation in the recovery of perpetrators' assets for the purpose of providing compensation and other reparation to victims of serious international crimes.
- The Strategy should call on Member States to ensure full and correct implementation of the [European Union Directives on Asset Recovery](#) and channel assets recovered from perpetrators of serious international crimes towards reparation for the victims of these crimes.



ABOUT US

The [Global Initiative Against Impunity for international crimes: Making justice work](#) (GIAI) is a Consortium of eight international NGOs and the Coalition for the ICC, co-funded by the European Union, which aims to contribute to the fight against impunity by supporting a comprehensive, integrated and inclusive approach to justice and accountability for serious human rights violations and international crimes.