

VSE GENERAL MEETING 2023

01/12/2023, 10:00 – 13:00 CEST

Online

Minutes

KEY		
Rosa Jansen	RJ	President
Petra Klein	PK	Vice-President
Carmen Rasquete	CR	Treasurer
Levent Altan	LA	Executive Director
Marina Kazakova	MK	Senior Communications Officer
Iris Lokerse	IL	Junior policy officer
Keti Varoshlija-Botterman	KVB	Junior Administrative Officer

Opening and Welcome by VSE President Rosa Jansen

RJ opened the General meeting by expressing gratitude to the entire membership for their work. In addressing the current global situation, the challenges we face due to existential threats, from the climate crisis to destructive wars as well as the future strategies facing the new Victims right directive. She said that in 2023, VSE focused on the organization's long-term strategy: implementing and strengthening victims' rights, facilitating full access to support for victims within a national framework, working towards victim-centered justice systems, and growing VSE within the EU and beyond. She reflected on the amount of activities delivered this year, VSE's growth and work publication of three policy papers, secured several new EU projects, and witnessed the addition of numerous new members to the VSE community. Notably, we achieved a new record in terms of victims supported by our members, surpassing 3 million—a substantial increase from the previous years' 2 million. Additionally, we initiated crucial discussions aimed at supporting the establishment of 'Victim Support Americas' and 'Victim Support Morocco.

She outlined the day's programme, focusing on VSE's priorities for 2023.

Minutes from previous meeting:

Members approved the minutes from the AGM from 6th June 2023.

Presentation of new VSE Staff Members

LA gave the floor to the new VSE staff members:

- Marina Rota, Senior Training and Capacity Building Officer
- Dylan Power, Communications Assistant Internship
- Paula Peralta Agustí, Policy & Project Assistant Internship
- Sara Fontanot, Project Assistant Internship
- Larisa Spahic, Project Assistant Internship
- Aymen Abbasi, Capacity Building Assistant Internship

Presentation and short introduction of VSE's new members

IL presented VSE's new members with the support of their representatives:

1. Victim Support Foundation Poland (Poland)
2. Medical Innovative Interventions Medinnovint (Cameroon)
3. Opferhilfe Berlin (Germany)
4. The Smile of the Child (Greece)
5. Victim Support Morocco (Morocco)

Voting for re-election of Board member

KVB introduced the process and gave the floor to Silvia Taravan (Refe Dafne- Italy) to present herself. Before the voting started, she introduced the voting practicalities. At the meeting, 15 full members out of 17 were represented, which means a quorum was met. The candidate was voted in with full support from the members present.

Update on Finances and Future look

RJ thank everyone for the patience and trust given the delay of the closure of our 2022 accounts until this week. This was initially delayed in June due to problems with the change in our accountant. However, over the summer, we identified a series of financial issues which required a significant effort from VSE office and from the Board to resolve. With respect to our discoveries, in August we found out that we had been exposed to fraudulent activity (by an employee) resulting in financial loss.

The office reacted immediately

- first of all to prevent any risk of further fraud.
- Passwords were changed,
- relevant payment cards were cancelled,
- access to accounts were closed.
- The management team and Board were informed and
- a police report was filed.
- New measures were also put in place to ensure that continued operation of the organisation in a financially secure way. Those measures were in part determined by the methods used for the fraud.

She further explained that a system is in place to protect any further problems.

Actions over next weeks

Over the next weeks, the Office set up a meeting with the European Commission to keep them informed and to ensure full transparency. This was considered essential to maintain their trust and to anticipate any risks that our reporting to the Commission had been compromised.

We also contracted a large international forensic accounting service to review all our accounts from 2018 to 2022. Accounts for 2023 have been reviewed fully by VSE office and the new accountant.

Additionally there have been no implications for our reporting to the European Commission.

We received the final conclusions of the forensic accounting only last week. The VSE office, the accountant and the auditor's therefore moved as fast as possible to reconcile all accounts, close the 2022 accounts and complete the audit for today.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall, the situation has been extremely difficult and shocking for staff and the Board. We have all recognised that the financial management system we had in place relied too heavily on trust and did not have sufficient verification mechanisms in place.

In early 2022, it was agreed to introduced new finance management rules and this process was started. Unfortunately, the adoption of that process was delay – it seems now deliberately to avoid identification of the fraudulent activity. In 2023, new procedures were introduced such as double verification of payments, which ultimately identified the fraud.

Our transparency and close engagement with the European Commission paid early dividends as we received our 2024 operating grant in full just a few weeks ago. This demonstrates the continued trust the Commission has in us.

We have carried out the following actions for a financial management:

New control measures continue to operate re payments, verifications etc. - We have commissioned our Belgian accountant to make recommendations for the full overhaul of our financial management procedures which will include a review of staff requirements, skills and training, software and rules and procedures, and oversight mechanisms.

We expect the accountant to provide recommendations in the next one to two weeks. These will be discussed with the Board and finance experts to decide on the best approach after which VSE staff will implement the recommendations including with respect to internal staff and external accounting.

The majority of the measures will be in place by the end of the year with completion aimed for 1st quarter 2024. The aim is to both minimise fraud risks through a very strong management of payments but also to greatly improve the way we manage the accounting and budgeting system.

Priorities

She concluded that our priorities are:

- Streamline project management
- better reporting of projects,
- enable senior staff + Board Members to obtain reports (verification and oversight), and

- ensures compliance with current regulations

Finance overview 2022/ 2023 and forecast 2024

CR confirmed that we have experienced fraud in the last years and at the same time our income has been underreported. This means that the last financial information you receive in June was not correct.

Reserves

Our reserves at the end of 2021 were actually 344, 980, 16 EUR which compares to our report in June 2023, where we indicated reserves of 299,567 EUR. The reason for the difference is that the fraud was being hidden by underreporting of income. The accountant together with the financial audit has reconciled the accounts from 2018 – end 2022 to establish the current figures.

Expenditure and Income

We have produced the usual summary of income and expenditure In 2022 we had a total expenditure of 2,234,544.59 – This includes the fraud which amounted to 102.517,55 EURs up to year ending 2022. Our total income for 2022 was 2,123,333.98

This means that for 2022, we recorded a loss of 111.211 EURs with the majority of that loss being associated with fraud. This significant loss reduced our reserves to 233,770.00 EUR.

Importantly, no external organisations have been affected by our losses; we have remained fully operational and had a balance at the end of 2022 of 2,186.787 EUR.

This liquidity ensured that no payments or deliverables were put at risk. I would also note that our reserves remain higher than our target figure of 223,000 for reserves that was set for 2021. Having said that, we are also conscious that the organisation is much larger now and we must review the reserves target to ensure it remains appropriate

Financial Forecast for 2023

Unfortunately, in 2023, we also experienced ongoing fraud. The total loss from fraud in 2023 amounted to 58,973.55 EUR. We are projecting to record costs of 1,900,682 with an income of 1,897,342. On that basis, we would record a loss in 2023 of 3340 EUR bring our reserves down to 230, 430 EUR. However, as I said, we expect to optimise the registration of costs and income with the aim of ultimately registering either a balanced account or a small surplus.

Financial Forecast for 2024

With respect to 2024, we have done some basic forecasting. Here we have looked at already confirmed income as well as estimated additional incoming from proposals that we have already submitted to establish a best minimum estimate for income in 2024. For expenditure, we have based it on 2023 expenditure. As such, as you can see we have confirmed income already of 1.65 million euros. Expenditure is estimated to be around 1.9 million euros, which leaves us with a gap of 250, 000 euros.

We have 8 proposals that are still awaiting results and based on past success we can anticipate that at least two of those will be successful and likely to bring in a further 500, 000 euros of income.

She concludes that VSE have been through a significant shock financially. However, nine years of building reserves and careful decisions about growth and spend put VSE in a strong position to manage this crisis. In 2024, we will reorganize and will enter the year in a much stronger state ready to continue our work and to continue delivering for you and for victims.

Next steps

LA mentioned that this was very difficult period for VSE. However, we will secure the organisation, reassure the staff and continue to deliver.

He appreciated the support of the Board and staff in the time of crisis. He said that in this period we have learned many lessons and we will make sure that we don't make these mistakes again even recognising that no one is fully immune from the crime.

Concluding that VSE will focus on the future where we consolidate our position and really focus on putting in place all the right mechanisms so the next 10 years are even more successful.

Voting on annual accounts

KVB conducted the voting for the approval of the annual accounts. She introduced the process and requested all full members to cast the vote according to the constitution, 15 full members out of 17 were represented and the majority for the voting was 8.

The annual accounts were approved by receiving 12 yeses and 3 abstained.

Activities 2023-2024

MK presented the current activities that include the planned future events and activities as well as achievements in 2023:

“VSE Annual Conferences 2025-2028”:

- 2025: Lisbon, Portugal – APAV
- 2026: France – France Victimes
- 2027: The Netherlands – Slachtoffer HULP
- 2028: Italy – Rete Dafne

Planning of 2024 Events:

She updated the members on few of the planned events for the first half of 2024:

- 22nd February - 13:30 to 17 CET - Brussels Press Club
- Symposium: “Leave no one behind: victims’ rights and the sustainable development goals” (Linked to VRD + sustainable development goals)
- VSE Annual conference 2024: Zagreb, 22-23 May

2024 elections campaign toolkit

- Elections toolkit has already been finalised
- Communication to all members next week to explore victims support manifesto

- Third part is a guide for activists to communicate and explore the issue of victims with politicians and stakeholders.
- Members can use the manifesto or all documents.

She explain that the next steps are to run sessions to understand how the members can use the toolkit.

Achievement of 2023:

Policy & Advocacy

She said that in the past year we have produced 3 policy papers and social media campaigns each averaging a reach of 15 thousand accounts across several platforms (based on evidence collection through member consultation and projects)

Further, we have strengthen this with Victims of crime model provisions paper website: tool for politicians and policy makers.

Additionally we have published a report including MPP amendments and Advocacy toolkit re. Violence against women and we have participated in Victim's rights platform meetings

For the next year next year, we will focus on the:

- o European Victims Support Strategy
- o Parliament elections
- o Victims' rights platform
- o EUCVT project
- o Expansion of 111666 helpline

Capacity-building and training

In the last 6 months, 5 new members have joined VSE which takes us to 78. We have developed, delivered or participated in 9 training activities and organised 4 national meetings.

Projects

We have implemented different projects and involved 36 partners in 30 countries supporting all victims of all crimes.

Events

In the past months, we have hosted different online and in person events:

- European Day for victims of crime: gathered major EU level stakeholders, broadcasted live to members
- Protecting fundamental freedoms, a victim's perspective (VSE Annual Conference 2023)
- Victims' rights communications network: working group communication officers of VSE members
- FYDO Network: organic continuation within FYDO project, the network exists, developing the network in the next year.

Future Vision

RJ underlined that beyond these crucial growth initiatives, we recognize the significance of global partnerships.

We are committed to developing connections with entities like INVICTM, Victim Support Americas, and Victim Support Morocco, fostering collaborations that transcend borders.

Further our focus on youth engagement is vital, and we'll draw on the best practices of our members to develop effective strategies for this demographic.

Additionally, we acknowledge the need to reframe societal perceptions of victims. Collaborative campaigns and advocacy efforts will be our tools in reshaping the narrative and creating a more empathetic and understanding society. In closing, this past year has underscored the importance of being a purpose-led organization.

As we gaze into the future, we do so with unwavering confidence. In the midst of economic volatility, we stand as a testament to the strength and resilience of our victim support family. We've not only delivered a robust organisational performance but have also proactively supported our communities, laying the foundations for further growth.

LA connected to **RJ** vision he said that building this vision is developing our strategy and vision. There are some important trends and areas of focus for 2024, which will help define VSE's path next year which are fundamentally bound in the aim to ensure improved situation for victims and better support and services to Member

Our Vision for 2024 and what should change + improve

- Embedding/prioritising the victims' agenda
- EU elections but also national/regional
- Political commitment to victim's agenda = understood not as a niche topic
- Fundamental to democracy + construction of society = changes how we see victim's rights
- EC strategy until 2025
- Trustworthy institution - good reputations in building/developing solutions = more opportunities
- knowing what to choose
- Proactive organisation-pushing for change- BUT very agile organisation
- **VSE foundational/specialised approach for victims = recognition of specialised responsible capability -addressing the different needs of victims**
 - Fully inclusive - recognises everyone's needs
- Need to use better what we know/have - accessible knowledge
 - E.g. microsite example to share the knowledge
 - Make more accessible and usable what we have
 - Improve access to what we already produced - **BIG FOCUS FOR NEXT YEAR**
- Training academy: significant demand for training provision
 - Minimum necessary core training for anyone engaging with victims
 - Ensuring that the academy is self-sustaining
 - Enable all Members to support training efforts + learn from each other

- Transforming policies into practice = convert policy framework into projects on the ground-relevant to circumstances/cultures/legal situations
- Build on the Victims' voice = we're ok at listening to victims but it needs to be at the heart of what we do
 - Higher victim involvement
 - Genuine participation of victims within the thinking/delivery of VS Europe
- Continue to grow, deliver, and listen to members
- All our improvements at the core of Victim Support

Closing remarks

PK thanked all attendees for their attention and for their contribution to the meeting. She expressed his enthusiasm for next year's work and looks forward to continuing to work with VSE's members. She congratulated the Board member for the re-election. She thanked the members for their trust and expressed her excitement for the next year summarising the main activities and events. She invited all the members to join next year conference and thank them for their commitment even in the difficult times.