Improving the response and follow-up of victims and perpetrators of gender-based violence by police authorities in Estonia

101096908 – TACTICS - CERV-2022-DAPHNE
"Updated Regional Roadmaps to Improve DV Response System"

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TACTICS

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“Updated Regional Roadmaps to Improve DV Response System”

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1. Introduction

During the preparation of the updated roadmap, document analysis was conducted, meetings were held with experts in the field, and work commenced on developing a case-management model targeting low- and medium-risk domestic violence (DV) cases. Among other things, existing response mechanisms were mapped, bottlenecks were identified, and the practices of different countries were analysed.

An important input for preparing the roadmap was obtained from meetings with various agencies. The meetings brought together representatives of the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA), the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Social Insurance Board (SKA), local governments, and women's support centres. During meetings with PPA and ministry representatives, PPA's response mechanisms were examined in detail, with a specific focus on risk assessment, follow-up procedures, and principles of information exchange. One of the key documents underlying these discussions was the PPA's guideline for responding to DV cases, whose essential components are risk assessment and ensuring the victim's safety.

Additionally, meetings were held with child protection specialists, social workers, and other professionals with MARAC[1] experience to gather input for developing a case management model for low- and medium-risk cases. Implementing this model in parallel with Estonia's well-established MARAC model for high-risk DV cases would help ensure that victims do not get lost in the system.

An important part of the TACTICS project activities was also the testing of a new risk-assessment tool developed by SKA. Specifically, social counsellors of the Women's Support and Information Centre (WSIC) piloted the tool from March to May 2025 and provided feedback on its use, which has contributed to the development of the assessment tool. This tool has the potential to become an institutionalised solution for handling lower-risk DV cases.
In the summer of 2025, the University of Tartu consolidated the input received into an initial model version, which was then presented to the Ministry of Social Affairs and victim support services. During the meetings, it was agreed that addressing low- and medium-risk cases is an important principle for ensuring the safety of victims. The initial version of the model was seen as having potential for further development.

Throughout the entire process, outreach activities were conducted, including the introduction of the TACTICS project and participation in various thematic discussions. Among other things, meetings were held with policymakers, and project activities were aligned with national strategies and Estonia's cross-sectoral action plan for preventing DV. This plan highlights, among other priorities, the need for a trauma-informed, victim-centered, and coordinated approach.

As a result of the steps described above, an updated roadmap has been developed that considers the experiences of frontline workers, Estonia's practices in handling DV cases, and the perspectives of all key stakeholders responsible for preventing and responding to DV.

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1 Hädaohus oleva täiskasvanud perevägivalla ohvri abistamine (MARAC-i mudel), available at https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/MARAC

2. Description of the Estonian ecosystem

2.1 System response mechanisms and multi-agency collaboration

In Estonia, responses to DV cases are based on the principles of case management and multi-agency collaboration. In the social sector, this principle is regulated at the legislative level. Specifically, the Social Welfare Act[2] establishes the principle that if supporting a person requires the collaboration of specialists from multiple fields, a case plan and action plan must be prepared. These include assessing the need for assistance, planning support, and implementing support measures.

The Victim Support Act (OAS)[3] outlines the principles for working with DV cases and the foundations for applying multi-agency collaboration in high-risk situations. For adult DV victims, it is mandatory to assess the risk to the victim's life and health. If the assessment reveals a high level of danger, the OAS provides the basis for involving a multi-agency collaboration and for sharing case-related information among its members, if necessary, even without the consent of the victim or the perpetrator.

Thus, the law requires risk assessment in all DV cases and provides a clear framework for working with high-risk DV cases, ensuring coordinated intervention by law enforcement, social services, and support organisations.

There is no specific model in use for responding to medium- and lower-risk cases; instead, case handling is based on general principles used in the social or law enforcement sectors. In such situations, the composition and quality of multi-agency collaboration largely depend on local practices, the awareness of individual specialists regarding DV, and available resources. For high-risk DV cases, a MARAC-type case-management and multi-agency collaboration model is applied. Under the MARAC model, the legally established obligations, agreed-upon roles, information-sharing procedures, and decision-making responsibilities ensure that cases are addressed in a coordinated manner.

The core MARAC group comprises the Prosecutor's Office, the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA), the local government's social services department, women's support centres specializing in supporting victims of DV, the perpetrator intervention helpline, and victim support services. The latter also serves as the MARAC case coordinator. In many MARACs, a health-care-sector specialist is also part of the team. In addition to these core members, MARACs may involve representatives from the unemployment insurance fund, educational institutions, or other relevant agencies on a case-by-case basis.

In responding to DV cases, the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA) follows internal guidelines that establish the principles for working with such cases. The guideline prioritizes DV cases and emphasizes the need to assess risks and ensure the victim's safety. DV cases are primarily handled by patrol officers during call-outs, district police officers at the community level, and investigators during criminal proceedings related to DV. Multi-agency collaboration

2 Social Welfare Act, available at https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/504042016001/consolide/current
3 Victim Support Act, available at https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/513052020004/consolide/current

mainly involves district police officers; investigators may participate in the collaboration if the case is high-risk and handled within the MARAC framework.

Patrol officers, as first responders, play an important role in identifying potential DV cases. When a police patrol responds to a DV call, they complete a DV information sheet at the scene and ask the victim for consent to share personal data with victim support services and the local government. If the victim gives consent, the data are forwarded to the relevant agency, which will later contact the victim directly. This practice supports multi-agency collaboration and helps victims overcome the shame that may accompany seeking help.

Estonian social policy treats DV occurring in a family with children as domestic violence against the child, even if the violence is not directed at the child and the child is only a witness or aware of the violent incidents. This means that the local government child protection specialist is notified of every DV case to which the police patrol responds, regardless of whether the parents consent to the notification. This is achieved through a semi-automatic notification system within the STAR (Social Services and Benefits Registry) system, which features a dedicated interface linked to the PPA's own database. As a result, DV cases involving families with children always reach the child protection specialist's desk.

Cases in which the DV victim has given consent to share their personal data are also reported to the local government and victim support services through the database.

For all DV cases, district police officers carry out follow-up monitoring. The timing and method of the follow-up are determined based on the risk assessment conducted by the police. For low-risk cases, follow-up may be conducted by phone, whereas in higher-risk cases, a home visit is carried out. A good practice in interagency cooperation is the principle that, in DV cases involving families with children, the police involve the local child protection specialist in the follow-up process and conduct joint visits to the family.

Estonia's victim support system is built on general services and specialised services. Victim support is a free public social service aimed at maintaining or improving the victim's ability to cope. While victim support is a general service intended to support all crime victims – providing psychosocial crisis support and mental health assistance to anyone who has been victimized – women's support centres (WSCs) specialise in DV victims. WSCs provide round-the-clock psychosocial crisis assistance and safe accommodation for victims of DV. In addition, those who turn to a women's support centre can receive psychosocial, psychological, and legal counselling based on their needs.

2.2 National developments in the handling of DV cases

Active attention is being paid at the policy-making level to addressing persistent shortcomings in the system. Issues related to DV are addressed in several intra-sectoral and cross-sectoral agreements, guidelines, instructions, and other relevant sources. An anti-DV agreement has been signed for the period 2024–2027, with an action plan being a key component. The purpose of the agreement is to strengthen violence prevention, improve responses to DV cases, and develop services for both victims and perpetrators. The implementation of the action plan is jointly the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs, and the Ministry of Education and Research.

Prosecutors specialised in investigating DV cases have concluded an internal agreement on the principles to be followed when investigating crimes committed in domestic relationships. In recent years, there has been increasing discussion about the need to apply trauma-informed practices when working with DV victims. This approach highlights the importance of recognising the victim's experience and knowledge, as well as the need to involve the victim on an equal footing with other members of the support network.

Cross-sectoral training in trauma-informed practice is in high demand and fills up quickly. Estonia supports joint training for professionals from different sectors, which promotes multi-agency collaboration and helps members better understand one another, thus supporting one of the key principles of effective collaboration: a shared understanding of the nature of the problem.

An important development in the field of police education is strengthening Estonia's ability to respond to DV cases. In 2025, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences updated its curriculum, ensuring that DV is a mandatory topic in the basic training of all future officers, regardless of whether they later specialise in patrol policing, investigation, or border guarding. Representatives of the TACTICS project participated in designing the curriculum content, emphasizing that recognising DV cases and supporting victims should not depend on the cadet's chosen specialty. DV-related topics are integrated into the curriculum already in the first year of studies and are also woven into several other subjects, ensuring that every graduating officer can identify signs of DV, understand its dynamics, and provide appropriate initial support and referrals.

The topic has also been added to vocational study programmes, which are attended by individuals entering police work later in life, ensuring uniform preparation for all learners. In addition, a new in-service training course on DV has been developed for police officers already in service. The TACTICS project contributed to building capacity by developing and piloting specialised training modules that address coercive control, interagency cooperation, and effective work with both victims and perpetrators (www.dvknowledge.eu[4]).

Taken together, these changes represent a significant leap forward in the competence of frontline officers, supporting the development of a more consistent and systematic response to DV cases in Estonia.

Led by the Legal Affairs Committee of the Parliament (Riigikogu), proposals have been made for legislative amendments that would allow restraining orders to be applied more flexibly and at an earlier stage, including in situations where an immediate high level of danger has not yet been identified. The proposed amendments also foresee closer cooperation between the law enforcement, social, and healthcare sectors, as well as more consistent monitoring of perpetrators—for example, ensuring that probation officers receive information on whether an individual has attended the treatment assigned to them. The proposals also emphasize the need to strengthen interventions such as mandatory programs and therapies for perpetrators, improved mental health support, and integrated social services. These proposals form part of the broader national Action Plan for the Prevention of Domestic Violence for 2024–2027.[5]

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4 Strengthening Police Response to Domestic Violence, online training materials, available at https://dvknowledge.eu

5 Õiguskomisjon: lähisuhtevägivalla ohvreid on vaja paremini kaitsta 10.11.2025 / Pressiteated, Õiguskomisjon, available at: https://www.riigikogu.ee/pressiteated/oiguskomisjon-et-et/oiguskomisjon-lahisuhtevagivalla-ohvreid-on-vaja-paremini-kaitsta/

After lengthy debates, at the beginning of December 2025, the draft amendment to the Law Enforcement Act was submitted to the Parliament for consideration. The amendment extends the removal order in DV cases from 12 hours to 72 hours. The draft law would allow the police to apply a removal order against a perpetrator on broader grounds than is currently permitted. Whereas today the order can be applied only in conflicts that have already escalated to physical violence, in the future it may also be used in situations where no one has yet been struck, but there is a risk that violence may occur soon.

The 72-hour removal order period, during which the perpetrator is kept away from their family, is expected to give the police more time to assess the danger and gather necessary information. It also allows social services to be involved and enables a well-considered safety plan to be developed for the victim.

In summary, Estonia has a solid legal framework that enables case-based and systematic responses to DV cases. Ongoing reforms and discussions indicate movement toward a stronger, more preventive, and more flexible systemic response that is better adapted to the needs of the full spectrum of DV cases.

3. Structural and procedural barriers in multi-agency collaboration when handling cases of DV

However, it should be noted that although Estonia has several legal regulations that support responses to DV, and Estonia's social policy is oriented toward zero tolerance of DV—including treating DV as intrafamilial child abuse even in situations where the child is not a direct victim—the practical implementation of these principles and legal provisions is often problematic. Recent cases that have received nationwide attention have shown that shortcomings persist in protective measures and follow-up actions, especially in situations where the violence does not appear life-threatening, even though clear warning signs are present.

Cases of DV involve multiple stakeholders, such as the police, social services, healthcare providers, NGOs, and the judicial system. Each institution may have different guidelines, priorities, understandings of violence, and levels of resources. Such fragmentation creates gaps in information exchange, delays in response, and inconsistencies in case handling.

Coercive control is not a criminal offense in Estonia, but for certain offenses, it is considered an aggravating circumstance if the offense is committed within a close relationship[6]. The Supreme Court of Estonia has found that, within the meaning of the Penal Code, a close relationship presupposes cohabitation.[7] Although the Supreme Court of Estonias has also stated that the concept of a close relationship under the Penal Code is not synonymous with the concept of a close relationship under the Istanbul Convention,[8] this has led to a situation in which officials do not regard acts of violence between former partners as DV. Together with the fact that DV is not recognized and awareness of the comprehensive impact of violence on children is extremely low, this leads to situations in which children who have experienced violence do not receive the necessary attention. Although the Victim Support Act defines the concept of a victim of DV, some officials may interpret the refusal to initiate or the termination of criminal proceedings as a situation in which no violence occurred. In such cases, it may happen that violence within the family is not addressed in other proceedings, such as child protection proceedings or civil court proceedings in family matters, and incidents are overlooked.

There are also shortcomings in the implementation of trauma-informed practice. Specialists often do not understand the nature and impact of psychological trauma, or they do not associate experiences of DV with possible trauma. Institutions may have limited resources in terms of staffing, training, and funding, which can hinder effective cooperation in addressing cases of DV. For example, police officers and social workers are often overburdened, leading to inadequate responses. In some institutions, there is a lack of specialized staff trained in violence-related issues, or training may vary across institutions, resulting in knowledge gaps and inconsistent responses.

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6 The Estonian term that denotes "domestic violence" is *lähisuhtevägivald. Lähisuhe* literally means "close relationship," and vägivald means "violence."

7 Riigikohtu kriminaalkolleegiumi 09.03.2020 otsus 1-19-3377/32 p 11–12

8 Riigikohtu kriminaalkolleegiumi 06.12.2023 otsus 1-21-4285

Potential members of a multi-agency collaboration may work in isolation, each focusing on their own tasks, and may lack trust in one another's experience or capacity. This can lead to a reluctance to share information, coordinate efforts, or undertake joint interventions. Some professionals hold outdated or stigmatizing views on DV, seeing it more as a private family matter than as a serious crime. This can result in a lack of urgency or inappropriate handling of cases. Data protection and confidentiality requirements may restrict the sharing of sensitive information between institutions. While these rules are essential for protecting victims' privacy, they can hinder effective cooperation and information exchange between the various institutions involved in DV cases. Institutions use different systems to collect and store data on DV cases, making it difficult to ensure consistent case tracking across agencies and to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

Institutions also use different risk assessment tools for different purposes. The results of risk assessments may not be shared, or understandings of the risk posed to the victim may differ. There is no shared risk assessment tool that DV may be well developed, while in others, the necessary infrastructure is lacking, creating unequal access to services. In rural areas of Estonia, there are fewer resources available for response, including specialized services and trained personnel. This particularly affects the availability of psychological and psychosocial support, as well as healthcare services.

4. Suggestions/solutions for upgrading multi-agency collaboration in the management of DV cases in Estonia

During meetings with key actors in the system, a number of structural and procedural bottlenecks emerged, the resolution of which could help improve multi-agency collaboration and ensure that all cases of DV are treated as a priority, regardless of the risk level of the specific case. It was emphasized that every case is important; the risk level determines only the type and intensity of interventions.

The MARAC case management model, which focuses on high-risk cases, has been well-received in Estonia, and multi-agency collaboration is mandated by law. In lower-risk cases, however, cooperation is often specialist-driven and largely dependent on awareness and other available resources. As a way to address this disparity, the development of a case management model for medium- and low-risk DV cases was suggested.

Such a model would be implemented in parallel with the MARAC model, ensuring that victims remain consistently within the system's field of view and do not fall through the cracks without support or monitoring. The model should define clear roles, describe cooperation processes, and ensure that case management is applied consistently across all risk levels.

It was emphasized in the meetings that the presence of a designated case manager is essential, and that the responsible authority should depend on the nature of the case: child protection services in cases involving children, and specialized services—such as victim support services or women's support centres—in cases involving adult victims.

Specialists agreed that cross-institutional cooperation requires unified and coordinated risk assessment principles. Although the purpose of risk assessment may vary by sector—for example, the police use risk levels to determine, among other things, the timing and manner of follow-up—there is a need for a shared understanding of risk. In every DV case, risk level is inseparably linked to the violence itself, and one of the prerequisites for effective multi-agency collaboration is a common understanding of violence.

At the meetings, participants supported the development of a unified risk assessment tool, as well as the integration of sector-specific components. A standardized tool, ideally combined with a shared data environment, would help institutions understand risks on a common basis, facilitate consistent monitoring, and support the development of coordinated safety plans. Participants emphasized that risk must be treated as a dynamic phenomenon, requiring repeated assessments and regular reassessment of previous decisions.

During the meetings, insufficient trauma awareness and limited competence related to DV among first responders were identified as shortcomings. Specialists acknowledged that an inadequate understanding of DV, trauma, and the dynamics of coercive control directly weakens multi-agency collaboration. It was also noted that understandings of DV vary both between institutions and among individual professionals.

For this reason, cross-sector training initiatives (involving the police, social workers, victim support services, child protection, and women's support centres) were seen as a practical way to harmonize knowledge, reduce differing interpretations of the nature of DV, and align intervention principles.

In developing the draft case management model for medium- and low-risk cases, several systemic gaps emerged that required attention. These included, among other things, the need for improved case documentation to avoid situations where each specialist starts from a blank slate and overlooks the case history. Particularly important was also the need for mechanisms to coordinate intervention planning, implement agreed actions, and monitor outcomes.

5. Key recommendations for improvement

Improving multi-agency collaboration in Estonia requires systemic reforms in communication, coordination, resources, and a victim-centered approach.

- → **Introduce a multi-agency collaboration-based case management model** for medium- and lower-risk cases and establish a legal basis for activating multi-agency collaboration and for data exchange between members, analogous to the framework used for high-risk cases. Currently, in lower-risk cases, multi-agency collaboration depends on the willingness, awareness, and time resources of individual specialists; information exchange may be insufficient and cases may go unnoticed. Experience with the MARAC model shows that establishing clear rules helps enable more effective multi-agency collaboration in handling violence cases and thereby better ensures victim safety.

- → **Ensure a shared understanding of DV and the dynamics of violence across all relevant institutions**, particularly among frontline responders. A shared understanding is a prerequisite for effective multi-agency collaboration. Regular joint trainings play a key role in achieving this, as learning and discussion in active-learning formats support knowledge acquisition and the development of professional networks. In addition to the concept and substance of DV, cross-sector trainings should focus on trauma-informed practice, the legal framework, risk assessment, and inter-institutional cooperation protocols, ensuring consistent case handling across regions.

- → **Introduce standardized risk assessment tools** to be used by all institutions when handling DV cases. These tools should support the early identification of high-risk situations, enabling more coordinated and timely intervention across institutions.

- → **Conduct regular impact evaluations of case management models**, including both newly developed models and the MARAC model for high-risk cases. Regular reviews of multi-agency collaboration, with a focus on identifying bottlenecks, shortcomings, and areas requiring improvement, will help make responses more victim-centered and ensure the safety of all parties involved in the case.

- → **Establish specialized units for investigating DV offenses in all Estonian police prefectures**. DV is a specific and multifaceted phenomenon that requires particularly high levels of awareness and continuous practice, both procedurally and in interactions with victims. Professional experience plays a significant role in ensuring that cases are handled in a manner that protects victims' dignity and safety throughout the proceedings, including in situations where the available evidence is insufficient to reach a conviction.

Resources

Hädaohus oleva täiskasvanud perevägivalla ohvri abistamine (MARAC-i mudel), available at https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/MARAC

Social Welfare Act, available at https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/504042016001/consolide/current

Strengthening Police Response to Domestic Violence, online training materials, available at https://dvknowledge.eu

Victim Support Act, available at https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/513052020004/consolide/current

Õiguskomisjon: lähisuhtevägivalla ohvreid on vaja paremini kaitsta 10.11.2025 / Pressiteated, Õiguskomisjon, available at: https://www.riigikogu.ee/pressiteated/oiguskomisjon-et-et/oiguskomisjon-lahisuhtevagivalla-ohvreid-on-vaja-paremini-kaitsta/

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