

Croatia

Information provided further the statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chair and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

Considering that organizations worldwide have warned of a "epidemic of abuse" that could result from physical distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, the City of Zagreb's Child and Youth Protection Clinic and the Degordian Agency are jointly conducting a campaign "Behind the door". At the centre of the campaign is an imaginary girl, named Mia, who lives with the abusive household member "behind closed doors". The campaign aims to make citizens aware of the necessity and importance of reporting violence in their surroundings at all times, and especially in the current situation when children and young people, as especially vulnerable groups, are reduced in their ability to physically distance themselves from the abuser, or to confide in other adults of trust - teachers, doctors, psychologists. Please note that the campaign has also been recognized by international institutions and agencies such as Europol, which highlight it as an example of good practice, and by the European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN), which has also included this campaign on its website: <https://eucpn.org/document/behind-the-door>

We would also like to emphasize that, in the context of the measures of social exclusion taken to protect against COVID 19, the Police Directorate particularly takes into account the possible escalation of violence against children and the prevention of violence against children is one of the priorities of the police. Therefore, through campaigns like this, it further appeals to citizens that, when they perceive a risk or threat to the safety of a child or vulnerable family members, they respond and report to the police their knowledge or doubts. The police acts promptly on reports or information about the exposure of children to abuse and uses victim protection mechanisms.

The aforesaid campaign is also available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior: <https://policija.gov.hr/vijesti/iza-ovih-vrata-zivi-mia/4591>

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Responses to specific questions by the Bureau of the Lanzarote Committee on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

- 1. To what extent, if at all, has the threat of child sexual abuse/exploitation changed due to COVID-19? If so:**
 - **Please tell us about whether the level of risk has increased/decreased/remained the same and if possible specify this with regard to the various types of sexual offences against children (Articles 18-23 of the Convention);**
 - **You may also wish to indicate any emerging trends relating to child sexual abuse/exploitation, as the result of COVID-19, and point at measures taken to address them.**

The Ministry of the Interior assessed the risk from sexual abuse/exploitation of children during the COVID-19 pandemic as increased, however, the total number of the criminal offences of sexual abuse/exploitation of children was 60% lower in the first four months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

In the course of the criminal investigations of the criminal offences of sexual abuse/exploitation of children, police officials did not register "new" trends of perpetration of punishable acts that would occur as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the risk assessed, and in these extraordinary circumstances as well, all police administrations were given instructions to act urgently in cases of reports or information on exposure of children to physical violence, sexual abuse or other threatening behaviour, as well as reports on current exposure to domestic violence, aiming to take measures to prevent further abuse and protect the victims.

We place special importance on repeated and/or further victimization risk assessment and professional and thorough verification of direct reports on exposure of children to sexual abuse/exploitation as well as exposure to any form of violence.

- 2. Did lockdown cause child sexual abuse/exploitation cases (identified/reported) to increase, decrease or stay the same? Please submit data (number of victims/offenders) and highlight what you think may explain the trend.**

As previously stated, according to the data available to the Ministry of the Interior, the number of criminal offences relating to sexual abuse/exploitation of children in the first four months of 2020 declined compared to the same period in 2019 (January – April 2019 – 358 criminal offences, January – April 2020 – 142 criminal offences), which is a 60% decline. The biggest decline was found relating to the criminal offence of sexual abuse of a child aged under 15, by 51%, while at the same time the expected increase of the criminal offences of exploitation of children for pornography under Article 163 paragraph 2 of the Penal Code, which covers offering, obtaining, sale and distribution of child pornography (24 such offences were registered in the first four months of 2020, compared to 14 in the same period in 2019, constituting a 71% rise in such forms of sexual exploitation of children). The criminal offence of exploitation of children for pornography from Article 163 paragraph 1 of the Penal Code (enticing, recruiting or inciting a child to participate in child pornography) increased by 6.3%

(16 criminal offences in the observed period of 2019 and 17 criminal offences in the same period of this year).

3. Please also tell us whether and how general child safeguarding measures were, or are likely to be, affected by measures taken by governments in response to COVID-19. In addition, highlight any additional, specific measures put in place during lockdown to ensure reporting by victims of child sexual abuse/exploitation as well as to support and assist them, and whether these measures will be maintained even when the lockdown is lifted.

Aiming to raise awareness among the public, citizens, but also the victims themselves on the issues of sexual abuse/exploitation of children, as well as on other forms of violence against children and family members, the Ministry of the Interior has published releases encouraging citizens to report their knowledge of child abuse and domestic violence through ICT channels, in addition to calling the number 192, primarily through the Red Button *online* application.

In addition, the Ministry of the Interior has, in cooperation with the City of Zagreb Polyclinic for Children and Youth Protection and Degordian agency, launched the "Iza vrata" [Behind the Door] campaign, aiming to make all citizens aware that they should report any form of violence against children taking place in their vicinity. The goal is to act preventively in protecting children against abuse during the pandemic. Preventive activities have also been taking place through the media and social networks, including efforts to raise awareness about the problem and risks from abuse or any other form of threatening behaviour during the health crisis and in the conditions of isolation. Another goal of the campaign is to call for civil courage and the personal responsibility of individuals to prevent abuse with the aim of providing timely information to the system.

During the police procedure, a child victim is given information, in spoken and written form, on their rights, along with the list of institutions, organizations and civil society organizations that provide support to victims.

Further, during the pandemic, when children and youth spend more time online and using social networks, they need to be provided with the safeguards and knowledge to protect themselves from various forms of recruiting by those intending to abuse and exploit children. To this end, the Ministry of the Interior, in collaboration with the Croatian Personal Data Protection Agency and the Academy of Dramatic Arts of the University of Zagreb, created a video spot called "Što se Tini dogodilo?" [What Happened to Tina] (<https://youtu.be/ObEubdZnuY>), which points to the dangers of various forms of electronic violence (grooming, phishing, sexting, trolling, sextortion). In addition, at EUROPOL's initiative, and in cooperation with the Police Expert Network on Missing Persons and AMBER Alert Europe, a prevention and education video (<https://youtu.be/53QaQ1v0i04>) and a promotional leaflet entitled #NemojPostatiLovina (#DontBeAnEasyCatch) were created, which, alongside a promotional leaflet on *online grooming* dangers, also advises children on how to protect themselves. The prevention and education video is available to the general community and the media and can be publicly broadcast as one of the tools in raising the public awareness about this issue.

As part of the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, the social welfare system stands as a highly important aspect in the protection of victims of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. During the global health crisis, all recommendations underline the importance of staying at home and the necessity of social isolation. This is very challenging for all population groups, in particular the most vulnerable ones, including victims of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. In situations where family and/or partner relationships have been disrupted, staying in the same space with the abuser constitutes a domestic violence risk for the victims, and such various forms of violence can be witnessed or suffered by children as well.

With respect to all the changes that have occurred due to increased anti-COVID 19 and social isolation measures, the social welfare system has taken all prevention measures given the expected difficulties in family functioning during a crisis, increased number of conflicts and increased number of reports on violence or violation of children's rights.

The risks for children and domestic violence are not only limited to those families that have been monitored by the social welfare centres so far, as, in addition to stress due to isolation, job security concerns and financial issues, excessive alcohol intake and social isolation increase the risks and probability of difficulties with functioning within families.

Due to such increased risks of violence, all social welfare institutions and other social welfare service providers have received instructions to proceed, regardless of the coronavirus situation, with **urgency and without delay** in cases of domestic violence protection in response to any suspicion or report of violence or children abuse and neglect.

The social welfare centres act on reports by the police, citizens, victims themselves as well as anonymous reports, and they have also provided 24-hour support to act in emergency situations, such as domestic violence and abuse. Family centres also provide counselling and support to domestic violence victims. We urge domestic violence victims not to hesitate asking for help, and we call upon all those having witnessed violence to react and protect the victims by notifying the police or a social welfare centre. Violence can also be reported via the Ministry of the Interior's online application Red Button.

Other measures being implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in the social welfare system:

- Families that have been monitored and are known to social welfare centres due to risk for psychosocial development, safety, health and lives of children have been increasingly **monitored and controlled**. Given the increased security and safety measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic in accordance with the competent authorities' current recommendations and instructions, the family law measures (professional help and support, intensive professional help and supervision, court-instructed supervisions of contacts and the court measure of increased care and supervision) were not carried out by the external associates of social welfare centres by visiting the beneficiaries' homes in April 2020, but solely via the electronic media and/or communication devices (telephone, Skype, WhatsApp, Viber etc.) by the professional team of the social welfare centre that adopted such measures. In

April 2020, the competent social welfare centre team was required to contact parents and monitor family relationship dynamics by daily check via telephone or other telecommunication means, and, as necessary, to take emergency measures to protect children in situations threatening their lives and safety. With the easing of the anti-pandemic security and safety measures, as of May 2020 the administration of the family law protection measures has been taken over by the previously appointed external associates.

- The social welfare centres have formed **crisis intervention teams**, which, in situations where safety and life are threatened (domestic violence, child abuse and neglect), act urgently in the field and take all necessary measures.
- The social welfare centres have been sent several recommendations on how to proceed in relation to exercising parental care and personal relations between parents and children.
- A notice was published on the Ministry's website as an instruction to parents and other family members on how to proceed in such situations.
- A notice was published on the Ministry's website and concrete instructions were given to victims of domestic violence on how to protect themselves and children and seek help.
- Parents requesting professional assistance regarding the new situation were instructed to contact the family centres directly or indirectly through the competent social welfare centres.
- The services of counselling, assistance and family mediation at the family centres are available to children, youth and families that previously did not have functional difficulties as well as to families at risk and violence victims.
- Despite the COVID-19 circumstances, in those cases where the beneficiary's life and safety are under threat, the service provider cannot refuse accommodation in crisis situations.
- Accommodation providers are required to provide conditions to ensure mandatory isolation of victims in case of accommodation in crisis situations.

In cooperation with the UNICEF, the Society for Psychological Assistance and the Croatian Association of Social Workers, the Ministry, with the aim of improving the protection of children during the crisis, has also secured the following for the upcoming period:

- Support supervision for professionals at social welfare centres and childcare institutions as a form of support in dealing with ongoing crises.
- Professional support in the implementation of professional assistance and mediation in cases of parental conflicts.
- Training on play therapy at children's homes.
- Training on short "guided" online counselling for children, youth and families at risk.

There are 19 shelters for domestic violence victims open in the Republic of Croatia. The Ministry provides continuous financial support to 17 of the total number of shelters. The shelters are available to beneficiaries and their children in case of need, and accommodation can be provided at the request of the police, social welfare centres and victims themselves if they ask for accommodation in a crisis situation.

In addition to providing financial support to the shelters, the Ministry also financially supports counselling services for family violence victims run by civil society organizations. The received reports of Croatian shelters for domestic violence victims show that all planned activities relating to protection of women and children who are victims of domestic violence have been largely implemented, with adjustments to the new situation, in accordance with the instructions of all competent institutions. Taking into account and implementing all the anti-coronavirus measures adopted by the competent authorities, all counselling and informing is provided by telephone, e-mail or online services such as Zoom, Skype etc., to ensure the safety of beneficiaries and staff.

The Ministry's financial support to the shelters and counselling services has been secured and is continuous.

The Ministry of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy has been continually monitoring the situation in the field through its professional services, providing professional support and making sure that the system for protection of violence, abuse and neglect victims keeps functioning during this difficult and challenging time. With respect to that, we would like to emphasize that all actions regarding child safety and protection are urgent and immediate, regardless of the COVID-19 situation.

4. Finally, please tell us whether children have been duly listened to on decision-making concerning their protection against sexual abuse/exploitation during this period. Please also tell us whether and how children will be involved in decision-making on or assessing the impact of COVID-19 measures in the future.

In general, police officials treat children, including those who are victims of sexual abuse/exploitation, with urgency and care, considering the child's best interest. Interviews with children are conducted by specially trained youth police officers, typically on premises equipped with furniture adapted for children. In the course of procedures, police officers take all statutory measures and actions for which they are authorized to prevent further victimization, inform the child with their rights in a comprehensible manner and secure further support to the child.