

Informal Council of Ministers for Home Affairs

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International Protection of Children

International protection of children - recent development and current situation

International protection of children is one of the key priorities of the Czech Republic in the area of Justice and Home Affairs and it is directly related to the motto of the Czech Presidency „Open and Secure Europe”. With wide opportunities to travel and almost unlimited access to the Internet and other communication technologies which may be abused to commit crimes against minors, international protection of children remains a world-wide issue.

The much awaited openness of the Schengen Area we have enjoyed shall come hand in hand with the latter part of the motto – security. Protection of children shall be further improved in the light of the increasing number of cases of kidnapped children, which often happen across the border. So far, such cases have been investigated at the national level but, as shown by the debate on early warning systems to help solve cases of child abductions carried under the French Presidency, protection of children requires more of the Europe-wide attention.

The Czech Presidency strives to build on the achievements which have been already reached in this area and which are reflected in numerous documents of the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. The Czech Presidency appeals to all the Member States to remain focused on the issue of international protection of children and to concentrate on several points of view - improved use of police cooperation mechanisms and illegal on-line content as well as early warning systems to help find abducted children.

Police cooperation

To help increase protection of children, the Czech Presidency tends to further improve the use of currently available instruments of police cooperation, especially in the field of searching for missing and abducted children, strengthening protection of children against criminal offenders and against illegal on-line content.

Improvement in using the Schengen Information System in searching for missing children

The Czech Presidency activities to improve security of children will therefore focus on improved cooperation in the field of searching for missing children with the goal to adopt

a recommendation on future activities of SIRENE Bureaux and the use of SIS, including the interaction with the national early warning systems.

To reach this goal, the Czech Presidency proposes the following:

- recommendation for the immediate launch of the search for missing children into SIS, recommendation or guidelines to guide cases of international abductions of children based on the search for the missing child as well as the potential kidnapper;
- exchange of information on how individual countries launch their search for missing children followed by the recommendation of best practice;
- recommendation to pay increased attention to children in checks on the territory of the Member States as well as prudent broader controls of all children leaving the Schengen Area. Therefore it is necessary to make sure that the external border remains a real border and a significant barrier to any abduction attempts.

Fight against illegal on-line content

World-wide, the EU has been a significant promoter of safer Internet, especially for children. The Commission had introduced its first policies in this field back in 1996 and followed them up with two programmes: Action Plan for Safer Internet (1999–2004) a Safer Internet *plus* (2005–2008).

The Czech Presidency welcomes the fact that the new multi-annual European Community program to protect children using the Internet and other communication technologies (hereinafter only Safer Internet) has just been launched.

Besides the activities of the Commission, the Czech Presidency would like to discuss further deepening of police cooperation against illegal on-line content.

In this context, the Czech Presidency will, on 20 April 2009, in cooperation with the European Commission, host a ministerial conference "Safer Internet for Children – Together Against Illegal Content", which will focus especially on international police cooperation and the capacity of the law enforcement services to combat illegal on-line content. In reaction to the growing violence at schools, where new technologies, communications and entertainment (especially computer games and cell phones) play an important role, the Czech Presidency proposes to debate issues such as cyberbullying. The Czech Presidency appeals to the Member States to opt for a coordinated approach to the issue of illegal on-line content. The Czech Republic promotes cooperation of all relevant players and concludes that child protection is exactly the area where international cooperation going beyond the EU borders is much needed.

Where do you see an opportunity to improve coordinated approach of the European Union in the fight against illegal on-line content?

Early warning systems in cases of child abduction

International protection of children may be approached from several angles, one of which is the continuous discussion of the European protection of missing children, which had been debated already at the Informal Justice and Home Affairs Council under the Portuguese Presidency where the Ministers stressed the need of efficient networking of national warning systems. The French Presidency has continued in this discussion and initiated a text of the Council Conclusions in which it calls on the Member States to introduce early warning systems in cases of child abduction at the national level and to build on - in the process of launching such systems - a Commission staff working document "Best practice for launching a cross-border child abduction alert".¹

Only a few Member States have launched their early warning systems to help find abducted children. The activation of such emergency systems, in case of a cross-border abduction, simultaneously in a number of countries requires that all Member States have their national systems in place. In this context, the Czech Presidency will mainly aim to analyse the current situation in the Member States. First, the Czech Republic wants to determine whether all Member States have set their early warning systems to help find abducted children and, secondly, how these systems work. To follow up, the Czech Republic plans to trigger best practice sharing in order to help those Member States which have not yet introduced such systems, collect information and get inspired by foreign experience and expertise. Exchange of information among the Member States on properties of the national systems and sharing of expertise seem to be one of the key conditions for the future interconnection of the systems. In order to strengthen the exchange of information among the Member States, the Czech Presidency would like to perform a simulation exercise.

It is recommended that the early warning systems in individual Member States operate on the same concept and be compatible to allow for cooperation in practice. The question of the use of identical criteria to activate the emergency systems, i.e. to enter the missing child in the systems, remains a related issue.

¹ Doc. 15084/08 CRIMORG 177 CATS 87 SEC(2008) 2754 final.

The Czech Presidency will host an **expert conference on Best practice in the use of early warning systems to help find abducted children** focused on the exchange of best practices in the field of implementing and operating national early warning systems. The conference offers itself as a relevant platform for practical discussions of the Member States on their approach and challenges they may be facing. The conference will also present results of simulation exercises amongst the Member States. The Council will be duly informed on the Conference conclusions.

Would you support the idea to organize a simulation exercise and would your country take part in such exercise?

To facilitate Europe-wide exchange of information with the functioning of the national early warning systems, the Czech Republic proposes to launch a European web site to circulate information on all early warning systems operated throughout Member States and to allow for updating as new national mechanisms appear. This page may also include information for the public on missing children in the Member States together with Member States' contact points that may be contacted in order to help with investigation. It may also include information on individual Member States activities in this particular field (conferences, international seminars, invitations, awareness campaigns, etc.). The website administrator may regularly inform the Member States on various related activities (e.g. in a form of a newsletter).

Do you think that launching of the web site could bring a value to the investigation of missing children and exchange of information on early warning systems? Who should be administrating the web page?

The added value of the early warning systems is in their capacity to involve the public in the search for a missing child. The Czech Presidency proposes to make the issue of missing children more visible with the help of national awareness campaigns focused on active cooperation of the public with all the stakeholders involved (police, media, NGOs, volunteers, etc).