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# Network of Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-East Europe

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## Report of the Meeting of the NATC SEE

Budva, Montenegro

2 June 2022

On 2.06.2022 representatives of the Network of Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-East Europe – NATC SEE (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Kosovo\*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia), as well as from the Migration Asylum Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), gathered in Budva, Montenegro, to discuss the risks and vulnerabilities to trafficking in human beings (THB) in the context of the Ukrainian crisis.

The meeting was co-organised by the ICMPD in its role as Secretariat of the NATC SEE and the Ministry of Interior of Slovenia. The meeting was held on the sidelines of the *Regional Workshop* for the anti-trafficking practitioners of the MARRI Participants (1-2 June 2022), organised by the ICMPD in the framework of the project "*Developing Approaches for Enhancing the Functionality of the Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) in the MARRI Participants*". The project is funded by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) and implemented in partnership with the MARRI, as part of the wider regional project "*Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans*" (PaCT). The Ministry of the Interior of Montenegro (Department for Fight against THB) hosted the meeting.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- ✚ Provide a platform for discussion on the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on THB in NATC SEE members, particularly on the current situation and mitigating the risks of THB amidst mass displacement from Ukraine in the neighbouring countries and beyond;
- ✚ Exchange good practices in identification and referral of victims of THB in the context of mixed migration flows;
- ✚ Strengthen the partnerships of Anti-Trafficking Coordinators (ATC) to work together in sharing information and increase cooperation.

The welcoming remarks were delivered by Ms. Tijana Šuković (Head of the Department for Fight against THB, Ministry of the Interior of Montenegro), Ms. Tina Princes Damjanović (Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, Secretary of the Cabinet of the Minister, Ministry of Interior of Slovenia) and Ms. Melita Gruevska Graham (Head of the Anti-Trafficking Programme, ICMPD). Everyone expressed their delight for being able to meet in person after a long pause. Ms. Gruevska Graham highlighted the

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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important milestone - the 10-year anniversary of NATC SEE, in light of which the *Non-Paper: Beyond Joint Actions: Towards integrated anti-trafficking responses of European Union Member States and Western Balkans* was adopted highlighting the importance and relevance of the existing and ongoing multilateral cooperation in the region and beyond. Ms. Šuković, stressed the importance for all stakeholders who are dealing with the THB phenomena, to focus on the vulnerability to THB among the persons seeking refuge. Moreover, the Montenegro's ATC expressed the Ministry of Interior's strong commitment towards intensifying regional cooperation and coordination both through existing projects as well as new initiatives that respond to the problem of THB. Ms. Damjanović informed about the achievements of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), highlighting that the international cooperation with the special focus on Western Balkans region in the fight against THB remains a priority of the Slovenian government. In this regard, the greatest achievements in 2021 were the joint informative campaign on the occasion of the EU anti-trafficking day (which focused on the issue of impunity of perpetrators), the publication of the non-paper on combating THB in the Western Balkans, and the Joint Meeting of the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and/or Equivalent Mechanisms against THB and the NATC SEE, strongly supported also by the EU Commission.

The opening remarks were followed by a *tour-de-table* of introductions and expectations by the participants moderated by Ms. Šuković. The next session focused on the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on THB in the NATC SEE members. An estimated total of 4.7<sup>1</sup> million people from Ukraine have been recorded as refugees across Europe since the beginning of the conflict on 24.02.2022 until 30.05.2022. Ms. Cristina-Maria Stepanescu (Head of the Unit for Monitoring, Evaluation and Victim Coordination of the Agency against Trafficking in Persons – NAATIP, Romania) and Ms. Diana Doros (Head of the Permanent Secretariat and the Secretary of the Committee to Combat THB, Moldova), shared their respective countries' experience and burden in receiving the people that fled the war in Ukraine.

Ms. Stepanescu presented Romania's coordinated response to the increased influx of refugees from Ukraine. Romania's response is structured on two layers of intervention - an Emergency response and a Protection response. The country has established a high-level decision making Task-Force, coordinated by the Prime Minister, an operational Task-force (named the 'Ukrainian Commission') responsible to oversee the activities of the ministries involved in the management of the refugee influx, led by the Chief of Prime Minister's Chancellery, and a Humanitarian Assistance Strategic Coordination Group, led by the Counsellor of State to ensure the strategic framework of humanitarian response and to facilitate the inter-agency cooperation among national, European and international partners. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the situation, the Government issued two ordinances granting a minimum package of services and protection to the displaced persons from Ukraine in order to accommodate their needs in the emergency response phase. In accordance with the EU Council Decision 2022/382, temporary protection is granted to the persons

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<sup>1</sup> Data according to UNHCR as of 30.05.2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/93271>

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displaced from Ukraine, thus providing them with adequate protection and services such as free access to health and social services, housing, internal transportation and financial support. In addition to this, a simplified mechanism for identification of THB cases was set up and identification indicators and direct referral procedures have been disseminated to the border police officers and to asylum reception facilities. Since 24.02.2022, the Romanian Government has issued over 20 acts of legislation, adapted existing policy measures and developed new mechanisms in order to respond to the needs of the people that fled the war in Ukraine. Until 31.03.2022, a total of 587,413 such persons had entered Romania, 50% of whom were women and 32% children.

Ms. Doros explained the situation in the Republic of Moldova where a total of 438,589 people had arrived since the beginning of the war on Ukraine. On 24.02.2022, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova declared a state of emergency for a period of 60 days which was extended on 21.04.2022 for another 60 days. On 28.02.2022, a Single Crisis Management Centre was established with a task to coordinate the efforts of the Government, International Organizations, private initiatives and volunteers who provide assistance to the refugees. A single information platform was developed by the Government, aiming to provide Ukrainian refugees with information about their rights in Moldova and to inform about the various services available (such as provision of National Identification Number, emergency flights from Moldova, cash assistance offered by UNHCR, distribution of food packages, and other useful information on transport and accommodation services, humanitarian, legal, and physiological aid). The Moldovan authorities have developed a coordinated response to manage the variety of issues faced by refugees at all levels, including THB. Information materials in Ukrainian and English languages were developed, indicating the contact numbers of the hotlines of the Centre for Combating THB and the International NGO La Strada. In addition, trainings were organized for the frontline workers, border officers and police, flight and cabin crews, social workers, psychologists, volunteers. Information activities were carried out to prevent the involvement of the Ukrainian refugees in begging, labour and other situations that could lead to the exploitation. In addition, regular checks were being conducted through international police cooperation channels of the volunteers working with the refugees in the accommodation centres, including volunteers involved in transportation services in terms of criminal background. No cases of THB had been identified until the end of May 2022, but Ms. Stepanescu highlighted that the upcoming months to be of crucial importance as the depleting financial resources of the refugees were expected to increase their vulnerabilities to THB, and everyone involved at national and international level must work together to mitigate this risk.

In response, Ms. Damjanović reiterated that the main task for the future should be to strive to raise greater awareness among the general public, the risk groups as well as the expert community on the THB phenomenon. She proposed to carry out an online information campaign related to the Ukrainian crisis with the support of ICMPD, similar to the one done in 2021. Ms. Gruevska Graham welcomed the proposal and called on the participants to express their interest in drafting a joint

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statement for this year's EU Anti-Trafficking day, October 18th, and stressing that this meeting's topic shall remain the topic of discussion for the rest of the year.



*The participants of the meeting in Budva, 2.06.2022.*

The participants resumed after a short break with a *tour de table* focusing on the situation in the rest of the NATC SEE members and the potential risks to THB among people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The overall conclusion was that there were no reported potential or identified cases of THB in the ten NATC SEE members present at the meeting. In Montenegro, the Government had decided to grant temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees for up to one year. A specific coordination body was established whose main task is to monitor and coordinate the activities and measures taken by relevant institutions with the goal to assure the refugees exercise their rights to adequate accommodation, healthcare, primary and secondary education, access to information (on rights about work, family reunification, documents and the rights to apply for international protection), as well as coordination with International Organizations. In total 22,492 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in Montenegro, and the largest number accommodated with family members and friends. Until May 2022, 2,530 temporary protection applications were submitted and 434 were granted.

Ms. Magdalena Nestorovska (ATC of North Macedonia), informed that no significant changes had been registered in the country related to the war in Ukraine. Most persons arriving from Ukraine

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preferred to stay in private accommodation or to transit through the country. The sets of measures in force in North Macedonia related to people from Ukraine included a simplified procedure for entry and temporary stay on humanitarian grounds. Thus far only one application (regarding four persons) was submitted and was withdrawn shortly after, and at the time there were no active asylum requests. However, the interest for temporary stay had increased and out of 7,266 Ukrainian nationals that had entered in North Macedonia since 24.02.2022, 179 had received permits for temporary stay on humanitarian grounds as of 19.05.2022.

Mr. Alen Tahiri (ATC Croatia, Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities) informed that Croatia had developed a designated Website only for the people fleeing the war in Ukraine, available in Croatian and Ukrainian, including all the information necessary when arriving and residing in Croatia. Mr. Tahiri concluded that in order to effectively prevent and fight THB among the Ukrainian refugees disaggregated data collection and rapid exchange among relevant state holders is crucial.

Mr. Samir Rizvo (ATC BiH) shared that BiH had a very small number of Ukrainian nationals that had arrived in the country. Similarly to other countries in the region, those arriving in BiH were mostly accommodated in private arrangements. The Council of Ministers had adopted a special decree facilitating the entry and stay of persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, with option to apply for temporary protection or asylum.

The afternoon session saw Ms. Gruevska Graham give a short overview of the main findings of recent assessments conducted by ICMPD on good practices in managing mixed migration flows and identification and referral of victims of THB. ICMPD has been looking into the nexus between THB and migration since 2014, first in the context of the Syrian crisis. She highlighted that similarly to the vulnerabilities to THB and exploitation that were identified within the Syrian refugee communities in the Targeting Vulnerabilities study (2015), such vulnerabilities existed in the case of the Ukrainian refugees today in 2022. The subsequent study, Trafficking along Migration Routes to Europe (2018) identified a disconnect between migration and asylum authorities and anti-trafficking stakeholders, leading to gaps in protection. The latest study (STRIVE, 2019) concluded that in order to prevent THB, the focus should be on how people can remain resilient to THB and other abuses, and on mitigating vulnerabilities and exposure to dangers. The biggest challenges to identification of trafficked people in the mixed migration context are: massive and rapid transit of people, lack of capacity and tools for identification, extraordinarily high number of vulnerable people with cultural backgrounds, and lack of harmonization and incorporation of anti-trafficking procedures into the reception and asylum systems. Ms. Gruevska Graham stated that a lot had been done in the Western Balkan countries over the past years to respond to the mixed migration flows, but not a lot was documented. Therefore she was glad to highlight that an assessment carried out within the project "Information measures and capacity building on asylum, legal and irregular migration in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans" (IKAM) finally documented the good practices in the Western Balkans.

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During the final session, Mr. Rizvo and Ms. Nestorovska shared the good practices on identification of THB victims in humanitarian crisis and mixed migration context (detailed in the IKAM Assessment). Namely, North Macedonia is among the first countries in the region that started legal reforms for effective fight against THB, and in 2018 the principle of non-punishment of THB victims was incorporated in the country's Criminal Code. Moreover a National Rapporteur on THB was established in 2019 as well as mobile teams and a National Task Force for the identification and referral of victims. Furthermore, continuous multidisciplinary trainings to strengthen the capacities of professionals on identification, referral and assistance of THB victims have been held. Lastly in order to strengthen international cooperation, Agreements of Cooperation between the Macedonian National Commission and those of Montenegro, Kosovo\*, Serbia and Slovenia were signed, and negotiations have begun with Greece. Mr. Rizvo, agreed with all the challenges identified in ICMPD's research and pointed that those were exactly the challenges and limits BiH faced with in the past. Also, the limitation of the capacities of the accommodation centres was a factor preventing the identification of potential victims, as well as the cultural differences existing between the front-line responders and the arriving migrants. These differences in values, understandings and beliefs prevent the successful communication between the potential victims of THB and the front-line workers. Based on the request of the BiH, ICMPD organized targeted training sessions that focused precisely on these cultural differences and brought experienced professionals from countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, to elaborate the cultures and understandings (including specific push factors, the religious beliefs and customs) with the idea to bring closer and eliminate differences between the front-line workers and potential victims. As a result of these training events, soon after one case of THB was identified and the front-line worker tested some of the material that acquired during the training.

Ms. Šuković summarized that it is important to remember that although no member of the NATC SEE had so far identified any potential THB victim from Ukraine, everyone needed to step up to respond adequately to the challenges that lay ahead. She closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their participation, expressing that Montenegro looked forward to the continued cooperation with all the NATC SEE members and beyond.

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