
Network of Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-East Europe

Report of the Meeting of the NATC SEE

Skopje, North Macedonia

31 May 2023

The Network of the Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-East Europe (NATC SEE) held its 17th meeting on 31 May 2023 in Skopje, North Macedonia. The Network representatives discussed the new policy developments, trends, and priorities in combating trafficking in human beings (THB) in 2023-2024. The Ministry of the Interior of North Macedonia hosted the meeting, which was co-organised by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in its role as Secretariat of the Network and the Ministry of Interior of Slovenia as the Chair of the Network.

Representatives of the Migration Asylum Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) were also present at the meeting, which was held on the sidelines of the Regional Conference: *"Successful Together! Regional Insights and Approaches on Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings"* of the GIZ funded regional project "Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) in the Western Balkans (PaCT)".

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- ✚ To exchange views on the current proposal for a revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, as well as to explore the anticipated changes and their implications for the region of South East Europe (SEE);
- ✚ To present the new policy developments, trends, and priorities in combating THB in 2023-2024 in the SEE region;
- ✚ To reflect on the NATC SEE Strategy Paper 2020-24, provide a retrospective analysis of achievements, and outline the strategic priorities for the next strategic cycle.

The welcoming remarks were delivered by Ms. Svetlana Vlahovic Dimanovska (Deputy Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, Ministry of Interior of North Macedonia), Ms. Helga Dobrin (State Secretary, Ministry of Interior of Slovenia), and Ms. Melita Gruevska Graham (Head, Anti-Trafficking Programme, ICMPD). Ms. Vlahovic Dimanovska expressed her pleasure that the NATC SEE has become a platform for the exchange of views, experiences, and good practices in the SEE that has

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built beneficial, long-lasting partnerships in the anti-trafficking response. She stressed that the rapidly changing world affected by various crises increases the threat of THB, and thus the response needs to be multiplied and include more dynamic and comprehensive activities. Ms. Dobrin, as the newly appointed Anti-Trafficking Coordinator of Slovenia, highlighted the importance of her current role in coordinating the efforts to prevent THB, protect its victims, and prosecute perpetrators. She added that she is inspired by the commitment of all Coordinators within the Network and expressed her respect and gratitude for their involvement and all the efforts made against the trafficking phenomenon. Ms. Gruevska Graham expressed gratification to Slovenia for chairing the Network and the commitment to it, while reaffirming the importance of the NATC-SEE Network and the ICMPD's role as its Secretariat.

The opening remarks were followed by the first Session, dedicated to the proposed revisions of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and their implications for the NATC SEE members. During this session, Ms. Tjaša Škrebliin (Anti-Trafficking Service, Ministry of Interior of Slovenia) provided an *Overview of the amendments to the Anti-Trafficking Directive proposed by the European Commission (EC)* and presented the stands of Slovenia in this regard. The Directive 2011/36/EU, which since 2011 has created EU common minimum grounds for the 3 dimensions in the fight against trafficking, may not fully serve its purpose due to new forms of exploitation and modus operandi that have evolved since its adoption. Six main amendments to the Directive have been proposed, respectively:

1. *Amendment of Article 2(3)* - seeks to expand the non-exhaustive list of forms of exploitation explicitly mentioned in the Directive by including forced marriage and illegal adoption in order to ensure that national legal systems cover an increasing number of trafficking purposes. Slovenia, along with other MS supported this amendment.
2. *Introduction of new Article 2a* – the proposal refers to the online dimension of the THB crime and requires MS to take necessary measures to address intentional acts committed through information and communication technologies. The Amendment is proposed in order to ensure that the online dimension of the crime is taken into account for every element of trafficking offences. Slovenia was one of the few countries that supported the introduction of this article, which was withdrawn at a later stage and is included as a recital.
3. *Amendment of Article 6* - proposes the introduction of mandatory sanctions against legal persons and separates them according to the gravity of the offence, which should lead to a strengthened justice response against THB. Most MS, including Slovenia, asked for greater flexibility in this regard, as this is a sensitive issue that affects the national system of sanctioning legal entities.
4. *Amendment to Article 11(4)* - requires MS to take necessary measures to establish or formalise the existing National Referral Mechanisms (NRM) aimed at the early identification of, assistance to, and support for victims, in cooperation with relevant support organisations. Although almost

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all MS have established NRMs in place, the differences in structure and practices may hamper or slow down the referral of victims to adequate protection, assistance, and support services, especially in a cross-border context. This proposal could be implemented through the introduction of laws, regulations, or administrative provisions in the MS and by appointing a national focal point for the referral of victims. This modification is considered the first step towards the establishment of a European Referral Mechanism. Slovenia fully supported this amendment.

5. Introduction of new Article 18a – The proposal envisages a mandatory obligation for the MS to establish as a criminal offence the use of services, that are the object of exploitation with the knowledge that the person is a victim of THB. Slovenia supported this amendment, and this provision is already fully transposed into the national legislation.

6. Introduction of new Article 19a – Introduces requirements for the MS to collect and report to the EC disaggregated data on THB annually, by using specific reporting indicators. MS, including Slovenia, asked for more flexibility regarding the indicators, and the text was modified accordingly.

Following the presentation, Ms. Gruevska Graham provided the participants with information on the *perspectives of the International Organisations (IOs) on the potential revision of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive*. She highlighted that even prior to proposing the amendments, the EC identified key issues and challenges in fighting human trafficking in EU MS. ICMPD, as part of the Inter Agency Group of Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) and in the role of its co-chair for 2022, conducted its own evaluation and provided specific proposals and recommendations on the revisions of the Directive. These have been elaborated according to the identified challenges, including: persistence of perpetrators' impunity, the increased use of digital space by traffickers, the lack of systematic consideration for the specific needs of victims, and difficulties in accessing compensation, reintegration, and comprehensive data recording and reporting. ICMPD proposed *two priority issues* to be addressed in the Directive:

(A) Material Scope and Definitional Issues, recommending clear definitions for "*abuse of a position of vulnerability*" and "*abuse of a position of power*," as well as introducing further clarity on the purposes of exploitation, such as slavery and similar practices; and

(B) Geographic Scope and Jurisdiction, suggesting the inclusion of legal and natural persons in Article 10 of the Directive, along with provisions for establishing jurisdiction over offences committed outside a MS's territory, as well as providing assistance to victims regardless of the origin or location of trafficking and exploitation.

Beyond these two overarching areas of change, more targeted recommendations were also made that referred to tackling Demand, non-prosecution, or non-application of penalties to the victim

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(Article 8), addressing the status of third country nationals (Article 10), enabling effective coordination for an improved provision of assistance and support (Article 11), and including data collection and reporting (Recitals, Articles 19 and 23). Ms. Gruevska Graham shared that despite the fact that the EC's proposal reflects some recommendations from IOs, including the formalisation of NRMs and the introduction of indicators for data collection and reporting, there are concerns about the lack of clarity on the role of a National Anti-Trafficking Coordinators (NATCs) within NRMs and the omission of certain important changes. Thus, ICAT has called for stronger measures to uphold non-punishment standards, guarantees for assistance and support measures (including access to reflection and recovery periods for victims), and establishment of National Action Plans and the appointment of NATCs to combat THB, among other issues.

All NATC SEE members expressed their support for the proposed amendments to the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and indicated their willingness to adopt these changes into their national legislation if approved. It was stressed that the revision of the Directive is seen as crucial for both EU MS and those aspiring to join, as it addresses the need to enhance prevention and combat THB. Namely, the Anti-Trafficking Coordinator of Croatia, Mr. Alen Tahiri, shared that the country already has legislation in place that criminalises forced marriage, illegal adoption. The country also supports applying effective sanctions to legal entities. Mr. Tahiri believes that the amendments will greatly improve cooperation between the MS and harmonise the legislation, allowing for necessary corrections and improvements based on each country's relevant issues. The representative from Romania, Mr. Eliodor Tanislav (Head of the Project Management and International Relations Unit at the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons), informed that Romania supports the establishment of a Transnational Referral Mechanism (TRM) to enhance communication and coordination in handling cases. Romania shares the view on criminalising both, the demand and companies involved in trafficking as well. Notably, Romania was among the first countries to criminalise the demand and has set a legal precedent by indicting and convicting clients of victims of THB. Ms. Diana Doros, the Anti-Trafficking Coordinator from Moldova, informed that the country has not yet transposed the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive at the national level. The revised Directive is expected to facilitate collaboration in new areas such as the use of technology by traffickers, best practises for victim referral mechanisms, criminal justice responses involving legal entities, demand reduction methods, early victim identification, and data collection. Ms. Vlahovic Dimanovska stated that in North Macedonia, the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive has been largely incorporated into the national legislation and that the National Commission to Combat THB and Illegal Migration has already proposed further amendments to the Criminal Code for better harmonisation, in terms of including the online dimension of trafficking in the THB definition. This, according to Ms. Dimanovska, will enhance the criminal justice response, particularly in cross-border cases.

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The participants of the NATC SEE meeting in Skopje, 31 May 2023

The second Session, moderated by Ms. Gruevska Graham, provided the opportunity for all participants to provide brief interventions on the following topics: current trends in THB in their respective countries, including information on identification rates and victim profiles; notable recent developments in anti-THB policies, institutional frameworks, and legal frameworks; and national priorities for anti-trafficking responses for the current and upcoming years. The majority of the NATC SEE members reported an increase of the number in child victims, coupled with a decline in the identification rates. Additionally, some countries noted a new trend of victims originating from Latin America.

The ATC of Montenegro, Ms. Tijana Šuković, shared that the Ministry of Interior (Mol) of Montenegro actively monitors and adjusts institutional mechanisms for early detection and prevention of THB. In 2023, a total of 16 individuals were identified as victims of THB, including minors who were victims of forced begging, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation. The country has made significant progress in various areas, including the identification of victims and the establishment of teams for formal identification. Cooperation with NGOs and international organisations is an integral part of the country's efforts to combat THB. Ms. Šuković emphasised the importance of combating trafficking for labour exploitation, highlighting the cooperation between relevant authorities in the country and the state-owned shelter for child victims of THB. Montenegro also focuses on preventive activities, particularly targeting vulnerable individuals from Ukraine. Mr. Tahiri informed that in 2023, the Croatian Mol recorded a total of 13 THB victims, 5 males and 8 females. Among them, 7 victims were Croatian citizens, 2 were from Bosnia and

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Herzegovina, and 4 were from Brazil. Seven of the total number of victims were children. The types of exploitation included sexual exploitation, forced illegal acts, and forced marriage. Croatia is preparing a new National Plan for combating human trafficking for 2023-2027 to further enhance efforts in this area. Ms. Ana Burageva Aleksova (General Advisor from the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, Ministry of Interior, North Macedonia) notified that the National Commission for Combating THB and Illegal Migration and the relevant stakeholders have undertaken multidisciplinary activities to prevent and combat THB. The THB trends have shown a shift towards labour exploitation as the leading form, followed by sexual exploitation and forced marriages. Key achievements include establishing an Operations Team for coordinating and managing THB cases, enacting a law to provide monetary compensation to victims of crime, including THB victims, and enhancing cooperation between police officers and labour inspectors with a Memorandum of Cooperation. National priorities include strengthening inter-institutional cooperation, establishing new mobile teams, reviewing Standard Operating Procedures for trafficked persons, ensuring effective implementation of the compensation law, and addressing online trafficking challenges. A focus is also placed on establishing a new centre for victims of THB and planning activities to tackle emerging forms of trafficking. Mr. Tanislav informed that in 2022, Romania identified 500 victims of trafficking, with a balanced distribution between internal and cross-border cases. Male adult victims are often exploited in agriculture or construction, while minor male victims are typically exploited for sex or begging. Female victims, regardless of age, are predominantly exploited for sexual purposes. The lover boy method and false promises, such as job offers or sham marriages, are common recruitment tactics, and the main destination countries for Romanian victims are Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Austria, and France. So far, there have been no identified victims or traffickers from Ukraine. He explained that the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons in Romania, under the Mol, consists of a central unit in Bucharest and 15 regional centres. The agency employs career police officers as well as personnel with backgrounds in psychology or social services, focusing on victim support. Ms. Ankica Tomic (Representative of BiH to the MARRI) provided an overview of the status of TIP efforts, informing that in 2022, 38 victims of THB were identified, a decrease from the previous year. The dominant forms of exploitation were begging, sexual exploitation, and labour exploitation. Most victims were nationals, with some foreigners from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Safe houses provided accommodation for 28 victims, and a recent court verdict resulted in a 20-year prison sentence for THB. An electronic data portal has been developed for collecting data on human trafficking, accessible to coordinators at different levels, with the Ministry of Security responsible for analysis and reporting. She shared that the Strategy for Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking in BiH is expiring, and that the current priority is to evaluate its implementation and develop a new strategy. Ms. Dobrin stated that in 2022, the police identified 5 victims and 14 potential victims, primarily from Colombia, Venezuela, and Slovenia, who were exploited for prostitution and forced

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marriage. She stressed that Slovenia remains a destination and transit country for THB, with sexual exploitation as prevalent forms of trafficking. The criminal activity is becoming more sophisticated, making it challenging to prove and requiring covert investigative measures. Slovenia's efforts are guided by a two-year action plan, the current plan introduced new measures based on GRETA evaluations and includes training for military personnel on the dangers of trafficking. Recognising forced labour remains a challenge, and legislation is being developed for the establishment of an independent National Rapporteur on Trafficking. Amendments to the Criminal Code have transposed provisions of the EU Directive on trafficking, including recognising begging as a form of exploitation and qualifying offences by public officials. The last intervention during this session was by Ms. Doros who informed that in Moldova, in the first three months of 2023, 53 adult victims and 7 child victims were identified. Labour exploitation is the main form of exploitation for adult victims, while sexual exploitation remains predominant for child trafficking victims within the country. The emergence of online and technology-facilitated trafficking is a growing concern. Multinational criminal groups are involved in trafficking, and there has been an increase in cross-border cooperation, particularly involving South-Eastern and Northern European countries. Moldova faces challenges related to the conflict situation in Ukraine and the vulnerability of migrants, requiring joint coordination and capacity building efforts. Currently, a new policy document to strengthen the anti-trafficking system, focusing on prevention, victim services, punishment of traffickers, and partnerships, is being drafted, and efforts have been made to establish a National Referral Mechanism, create assistance centres for child victims, and reform the State Labour Inspectorate. The national priorities include harmonisation with EU directives, awareness campaigns, collaboration with the private sector, and strengthening the legal and institutional framework.

The final session of the meeting was dedicated to looking at the achievements of the NATC SEE Strategy Paper 2020-24 and defining the strategic priorities for the next cycle of the NATC SEE strategy. Ms. Gruevska Graham provided an overview of the joint achievements of the Network, stressing that the main goal for the period of 2020-2024 is maintaining and advancing regional cooperation in the fight against human trafficking, as well as developing cooperation vis-à-vis the actors outside the SEE region. She highlighted that, to achieve this goal, the sustained operational capability of the Network is crucial. She stressed that the Strategy defines a number of issues of joint interest through the main four strategic domains of prevention, protection, prosecution, and enhancing international cooperation. The Network has held four meetings since adoption of the Strategy, issued two joint statements (in 2021 and 2022, both issued on the occasion of the EU Anti-Trafficking Day) and developed action messages to address specific challenges, such as the vulnerability of refugees from the war in Ukraine. In 2021, under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Network conducted a targeted assessment among the NATC-SEE to gain insight into current region-specific challenges in addressing impunity and advancing the

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prosecution of offenders. The Network also revised the non-paper: *Beyond Joint Actions: Towards integrated anti-trafficking responses of European Union Member States and Western Balkans* (originally developed under the Bulgarian presidency with the EU in 2018), identifying avenues of collaboration between anti-trafficking stakeholders in the WB and the EU. In December 2021, the Network members held a joint meeting with the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and/or Equivalent Mechanisms against THB. In the role of the Network's Secretariat, ICMPD also maintained and revised the contact list of the professionals involved in the Transnational Referral Mechanism in SEE. Implemented and forthcoming activities of the Network include raising public awareness, addressing new technology-related trafficking, ensuring compensation for victims, expanding cooperation with countries outside the region, and improving the integration of the TRM.

This presentation was followed by a brief overview by Ms. Doroş who provided ideas that should be envisaged in the new Strategy Paper and highlighted the accomplishments of Moldova that contributed to the implementation of the objectives of the current one. At the national level, in terms of prevention, information and awareness campaigns targeting the general public have been conducted annually, in collaboration with development partners and civil society organisations. Training sessions for law enforcement institutions have also addressed the use of new technologies in human trafficking processes. Regarding protection, the focus has been on mixed migration flows, particularly in relation to the influx of Ukrainian citizens into Moldova. Training sessions have been conducted for specialists at the local level to address this issue. In terms of prosecution, efforts have been made to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement institutions through the systematic training of specialists. Agreements for Joint Investigation Teams have been concluded with Romania, France, Italy, and Ukraine to investigate human trafficking crimes. Looking ahead to the revised or new Strategy Paper after 2024, Moldova suggests continuing with public awareness measures with a focus on vulnerable groups. Addressing trafficking for the purpose of exploiting allowances and material aid, as well as its connection to criminal activities, was also highlighted as an important area of focus. Providing psychological assistance to victims outside of shelters and developing partnerships with the private sector to enhance victim identification and referral are also identified as priorities. Reflecting on the national achievements that contributed to the implementation of the Strategy, Mr. Tanislav informed that the National Agency Against Trafficking in Human Beings has transitioned to a new structure with the establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Inter-Sectoral Strategic Coordination of the Fight against Human Trafficking. This committee, led by the Chancellery of the Prime Ministry, aims to ensure a coordinated approach to implementing public policies and developing the national strategy for combating human trafficking. The agency continues to serve as the National Rapporteur and to work closely with the committee and other relevant institutions. The initial results of these changes include the creation of a mechanism for identifying and referring trafficking victims and involving a wide range of

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professionals from both the public and private sectors. Additionally, a national emergency fund for victims has been established, and efforts are underway to train frontline emergency physicians in identifying trafficking victims. Other initiatives include the establishment of hearing rooms for child victims and the signing of a Joint Action Plan with the United Kingdom. Ms. Šuković stressed the need to enhance activities in the field of identification, particularly focusing on labour exploitation. She emphasised the importance of utilising the existing agreements of cooperation to strengthen efforts in combating THB, as bilateral cooperation does not only facilitate the exchange of experiences but also supports the return of victims. Ms. Tomic stated that in BiH, the primary focus in the past has been on raising awareness about begging, which is a prevalent form of exploitation, particularly among children in schools. Moving forward, the ongoing focus will be on training and increasing awareness among police officers, with a specific emphasis on border police officers. Ms. Dobrin conveyed the priorities of Slovenia as the chair of the NATC SEE, stating that the country supports the preparation of a new strategy for combating THB. She emphasised the need to address challenges posed by modern technologies and online exploitation and added that training for criminal investigators is crucial for detecting signs of exploitation in online advertisements and gathering digital evidence. Sharing good practices on preventing forced labour in supply chains is also important for the country, and a victim-centred approach is necessary to prioritise the well-being and avoid re-victimisation of trafficking victims. Ms. Vlahovic Dimanovska supported the ideas mentioned by the other colleagues, highlighting the need for training on online aspects of THB and equipment for police officers in the Western Balkans. She emphasised the importance of asset confiscation as a priority from the EU perspective and suggested improving capacities for conducting financial investigations alongside criminal investigations to seize assets related to THB offences. The last intervention was made by Mr. Tahiri, who highlighted the joint meetings and exchange of information and experiences as one of the greatest successes in achieving the goals outlined in the strategic document.

Ms. Vlahovic Dimanovska delivered the final remarks, stressing that the meeting painted a clear overview of the THB situation in the region. Apart from sexual exploitation, it is evident that labour exploitation, begging, and forced marriages are widely present. The presence of THB victims originating from Latin America is an emerging trend, and the online dimension of the crime is an emerging focus in all countries in the region. She reaffirmed the dedication of the Networks' participants to harmonise national legislation with the latest developments at EU level. The Network Members agreed that the development of a new NATC SEE Strategy Paper would occur throughout 2024, utilising the previously employed methodology and involving comprehensive consultations with all Network members.

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