

The Western Balkans and the European Union: National Systems for Combating Human Trafficking in Southeast Europe in the Context of the Accession Process

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Mr. / Ms. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the Bulgarian Presidency for the kind invitation to speak at this highly important conference. It is a great honour for me to address you today on behalf of the ICMPD, which had the honour and pleasure to organise the conference in partnership with the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and the Hanns Seidel Foundation. ICMPD has a long and rich history of working together with Bulgaria and the South-Eastern European partners on combating human trafficking in many initiatives related to research, capacity building and political dialogue. My colleague Elisa Trossero will present the findings of a current joint initiative in the afternoon. We at ICMPD are very proud to act as Secretariat of the Network of National-Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-Eastern Europe and of this long-standing and trustful cooperation with all of you. I sincerely hope that it will continue for many years to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, migration is higher on the European policy agenda than ever before. In a recently conducted survey, the respondents from almost all participating Member States ranked immigration as the most important challenge the EU has to deal with. We can argue whether migration is really more important than all other issues in Europe; but we cannot argue with the fact that the perception of migration is highly influential when it comes to European elections, policies and the future of the EU.

Flight and displacement are the main causes of the so called refugee crisis that started in 2015. More than 2.5 million persons had applied for asylum in the EU in 2015 and 2016, most of them originating from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq but also from conflict ridden countries in Africa. 2017 saw a significant reduction in numbers, but by the end of the year it were still more than 700,000 new applications for asylum. Thus, we need to acknowledge that many non-European countries have to shoulder an even heavier burden. Countries like Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan or Turkey host between 700,000 and 3 million refugees. Many of them will stay there for long time periods, often without any perspective for integration, education or gainful economic activity.

The international community and the European Union have reacted and started a number of initiatives, both at the global level and regional levels. In the European context there are many examples like the Valletta Declaration and Action Plan, the EU Emergency Trust Fund, the Migration Partnership Framework or the cooperation between the EU and Turkey in the framework of the “EU – Turkey Statement.” And of course we must not forget to mention the reinforced cooperation along the Western Balkans Route.

At the global level, the most important initiatives are the New York Declaration and the two global compacts on migration and refugees that should be agreed in the second half of 2018. We can be optimistic that all these initiatives are a real starting point for new and enduring structures of cooperation on migration and displacement. We also know, however, that it will take many additional efforts and many years of joint work before we reach our common goal of making migration a matter of choice rather than of necessity.

But before this vision becomes a reality we must not forget about those who are in a vulnerable situation and those who have become victims of trafficking already now. We have a moral and legal obligation to tackle the trafficking networks and to protect the victims following a human rights-based, gender-specific and child-sensitive approach. But we also have to be aware that the boundaries between irregular migration, human smuggling and trafficking are fluent. Labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced begging or forced marriages fuel the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable persons, but they also fuel irregular migration. Consequently, the effective fight against human trafficking and the effective protection of its victims are preconditions for better migration governance as well.

A look at available figures is deeply disturbing. Estimates speak about 21 million victims of trafficking around the world; ILO and IOM estimate more than 40 million victims of various types of human trafficking; ILO states that more than 150 million children are subject to child labour. The majority of victims are female; but the share of men and boys is constantly rising. The main purpose of trafficking is sexual exploitation; but forced labour, forced begging, forced marriages, removal of organs or selling children are gaining in importance.

All available evidence confirms that people fleeing from war and conflict run a high risk of becoming a victim of trafficking. ICMPD's own research on the impact of the Syrian War on Trafficking in Persons found clear indications for actual trafficking cases as a result of the conflict and displacement. It also revealed that when a conflict continues and savings become depleted, many people see no viable alternative for survival other than entering situations of exploitation and trafficking.

Increased vulnerability, however, does not only refer to the situation in the European neighbourhood but also to the situation within Europe itself. The Commission's

Communication on the follow-up to the “EU Strategy towards the Eradication of trafficking in human beings” states it very clearly: Since the adoption of the “Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings” and its implementing Strategy, we have witnessed a fundamental change of the socio-political context. The impact of the global financial crisis, which started ten years ago, is still felt and has left considerable segments of the European population exposed to the risk of poverty and exploitation. It is important to note that about 40 percent of all victims are trafficked at the domestic level and not across borders. Human trafficking is a European phenomenon as well; and the Communication is very much on point when it calls for even stronger action at national and at EU levels.

The Sofia Declaration from 17th of May reaffirmed the full support of the EU for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Thus, it acknowledged and welcomed the commitment of the Western Balkans partners to take firm action against human trafficking. Already two months earlier the Ministers of the Interior of South-East Europe had come together in Brdo, many of you here today were there as well, to reaffirm their commitment to the strengthening of regional cooperation to combat trafficking in human beings.

Strong regional cooperation is a vital factor as trafficking has no national boundaries. An effective counter-strategy will always require a lot of know-how, training and exchange. It also requires a comprehensive, coordinated and multi-stakeholder approach within countries and between them. The Brdo Ministerial Declaration lists a number of related priorities, such as the joint monitoring of the trafficking situation; effective identification, protection and assistance for trafficking victims; effective prosecution; raising public awareness, efficient interagency cooperation and – last but not least - the exchange of good practices.

And I think this is one of the main purposes of today’s conference – to share good practices and to transfer knowledge on investigation, victim support and prevention, but also on all the other aspects that promote mutual cooperation and coordinated policies. Your experience, insights and ideas are much needed for this. I am sure that we will learn a lot today and tomorrow and wish all of you an interesting and inspiring conference.

Thank you very much.