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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE  
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE  
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the progress made in the European Union in combating trafficking in human beings  
(Fifth Report)**

{SWD(2025) 4 final}

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in human beings is a crime that devastates individuals' lives, depriving them of dignity, freedom and fundamental rights. According to Europol, 55 of the reported most threatening criminal networks engage in trafficking in human beings as (one of) their main activity(-ies)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons<sup>2</sup> revealed that 74% of traffickers operate as groups and networks loosely connected in a business-type criminal relation or as structured criminal organisations, highlighting the predominant role of organised crime groups in trafficking activities. Trafficking is also often linked to other crimes, such as drugs trafficking, migrant smuggling, organised property crime, money laundering and document fraud.

Moreover, trafficking in human beings constitutes the second most widespread illicit economy in the world<sup>3</sup>. The annual profit generated by forced labour globally is estimated at USD 236 billion annual profit for traffickers, representing almost USD 10 000 profit per victim. The exploitation of victims in Europe and Central Asia is the most profitable, reaching USD 20 000 profit per victim a year<sup>4</sup>. While the **profits are high** and have increased by 37% since 2014, the **risks for perpetrators remain low**.

A fundamental challenge brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and further exacerbated in its aftermath is the **shift of trafficking in human beings into the digital space**. Difficulties continue to be encountered in the **detection and referral of victims** for assistance and support.

The EU legal framework on trafficking in human beings is anchored in the **Anti-Trafficking Directive**<sup>5</sup>, which was **modified by Directive 2024/1712/EU**<sup>6</sup> (hereafter “the amended Directive”) and entered into force **on 14 July 2024**. The modifications introduce stronger rules to fight trafficking in human beings and provide reinforced tools for public authorities to investigate and prosecute trafficking offences. It introduces new forms of exploitation and makes sexual exploitation committed online an aggravating circumstance. It also provides for better support to victims and is one of the major actions foreseen in the **EU Strategy on combating trafficking in human beings 2021-2025**<sup>7</sup> (hereafter “the Strategy”), which includes a comprehensive approach built on four pillars<sup>8</sup>.

In accordance with Article 20 of the Directive, with the support of the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (EU ATC), every two years the Commission reports on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings. This report is based on contributions from Member States through the EU Network of National Coordinators and Rapporteurs,

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<sup>1</sup> [Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#)

<sup>3</sup> For more information please see [The Global Organized Crime Index 2023 | Global Initiative](#).

<sup>4</sup> For more information please see [Profits and poverty: The economics of forced labour | International Labour Organization \(ilo.org\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (OJ L 101, 15.4.2011, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2011/36/oj>)

<sup>6</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (OJ L, 2024/1712, 24.6.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1712/oj>).

<sup>7</sup> [EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025](#).

<sup>8</sup> (i) reducing demand that fosters trafficking in human beings (ii) breaking the business model of traffickers (iii) protecting and empowering victims and (iv) promoting international cooperation.

independent bodies, EU Agencies<sup>9</sup>, members of the EU Civil Society Platform against trafficking in human beings, as well as other documents from EU Agencies, EU institutions and International Organisations.

The report i) identifies key trends, ii) outlines the main anti-trafficking actions from 2021 to 2024 and iii) provides an analysis of statistics for the period of 2021-2022, which is included in a Staff Working Document<sup>10</sup>. The data used in the report was gathered by EUROSTAT from all the Member States via the national statistical authorities and is available in Eurostat's database under 'Crime and criminal justice' statistics<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. TRENDS IN TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS IN THE EU

### 2.1. Victims (sex, age, citizenship)

During the reporting period of 2021-2022<sup>12</sup>, **17 248 victims of trafficking** were registered in the EU. This represents an **increase by 20.5%** compared to the 2019-2020 period (14 311)<sup>13</sup>. In 2022 alone, the number of registered victims was 10 093, a 41% increase compared to 2021 (7 155) and the highest figure since 2013. This was likely due to the overall awareness raised on trafficking. The concerted multi-agency efforts in Member States to protect people fleeing the military aggression against Ukraine produced an unexpected positive impact on the detection of victims of trafficking of different nationalities.

As in previous years, **the actual number of victims is likely to be significantly higher** than reported data suggests, as the statistics only capture victims that become known to one of the registering entities, and many victims remain undetected.

Trafficking in human beings remains a crime with a **significant gender dimension**. In 2021-2022, 65% of all the victims in the EU were women and girls<sup>14</sup>. The vast majority of the victims of sexual exploitation are female (92%). 68% of them are women and 24% are girls. Men represent the majority of the victims trafficked for labour exploitation (70%).

**46% of the registered victims were EU citizens and 54% were third country nationals.** This is a shift compared to 2019-2020 when the majority of registered victims was EU citizens (55% EU citizens). The top-five EU citizenships of trafficking victims by numbers were Romanian, French, Hungarian, Bulgarian and German. The top-five non-EU citizenships were Nigerian, Ukrainian, Moroccan, Colombian and Chinese. 34% of all victims were citizens of the country in which they were registered (internal trafficking).

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<sup>9</sup> The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA), EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA), the European Labour Authority (ELA).

<sup>10</sup> SWD(2025)4

<sup>11</sup> Since 2021, data is collected by Eurostat every year.

<sup>12</sup> Note: The figures have been adjusted to reflect only the known values in the dataset, excluding estimates or unknowns. This adjustment ensures the accuracy and reliability of the data presented. Any discrepancies between previous reports and the current figures are due to this refinement process.

<sup>13</sup> A 25% increase of detected victims was recorded in 2022 compared to 2019 at global level.

<sup>14</sup> Same trend worldwide with women and girls making up the majority of trafficking victims, representing 61% of victims detected in 2022.

Nearly all victims in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Latvia were their own citizens.

## 2.2. Trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation

Trafficking for the purpose of **sexual exploitation** continued to be the **most prevalent form of exploitation** in the EU during 2021-2022 (49% of victims) although it shows a slightly diminishing trend (from 51%).

The most common method to recruit young women and girls for sexual exploitation continued to be the ‘lover-boy method’<sup>15</sup>. Traffickers often engage in romantic relationships online, create emotional dependence and lure the victims into exploitation. Most Member States and Europol confirmed the prevalent role of social media, especially dating apps, escort sites and adult websites, for the recruitment for sexual exploitation.

Victims are also recruited from non-EU countries for seemingly labour activity and after arrival are forced into prostitution. For example, trafficking for sexual exploitation of Chinese women was organised via decentralised call centres operating in some EU countries and in China. Call centres act as hubs for managing the victims’ online advertisement across countries, setting appointments and prices for sexual services, and transferring money to those members in charge of laundering illegal proceeds<sup>16</sup>.

The increase of Latin American women and transgender people, being trafficked for sexual exploitation was reported in more Member States<sup>17</sup> than in the previous reporting period. According to Europol, victims from Latin America enter the EU from different entry points, sometimes taking advantage of visa liberalisation regimes, and are then moved further to the locations where exploitation takes place. In Poland for example, the 2022 statistics show a 476% increase in identified victims of human trafficking from Latin-America compared to 2021 (mostly from Colombia, Guatemala, Venezuela, Mexico and Peru). Victims of sexual exploitation of sub-Saharan origin, for example from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Somalia, Ivory Coast and Kenya, also appear in many Member States<sup>18</sup>.

## 2.3. Trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation

Trafficking for the purpose of **labour exploitation** remains the **second most prevalent** form of trafficking in human beings in the EU during 2021-2022 (37% of the victims). It is the predominant form of exploitation in four Member States<sup>19</sup>. There is a **51% increase** in victims of labour exploitation 2021-2022 (5 940), compared to the previous period (3 940)<sup>20</sup>. In 2022, the shares of sexual exploitation and labour exploitation were even (41%). Men represent the majority of the victims (70%). Nearly the same share of EU (46%) and

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<sup>15</sup> Hungary, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Greece, Bulgaria, Eurojust, Europol, EMPACT.

<sup>16</sup> For more information please see [First forensic sprint at Europol to speed up human trafficking investigations | Europol \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europol.europa.eu/news-room/2022/08/first-forensic-sprint-at-europol-to-speed-up-human-trafficking-investigations).

<sup>17</sup> Estonia, Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Malta Spain and Europol.

<sup>18</sup> Austria, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Malta, Denmark.

<sup>19</sup> Belgium, Latvia, Luxembourg and Portugal.

<sup>20</sup> At global level, between 2019 and 2022, the number of victims detected for trafficking for forced labour rose by 47%.

non-EU (54%) victims was registered in the EU in 2021-2022, compared to the previous period<sup>21</sup>.

Many Member States and Europol highlighted that recruitment is carried out online with fraudulent job advertisements. Germany observed the use of the ‘lover-boy method’ for recruitment of victims also for the purposes of labour exploitation.

**High-risk sectors for exploitation** include construction, agriculture, forestry, food processing, assembly lines, hospitality, retail, carwashes, beauty and cleaning services, transportation and housekeeping<sup>22</sup>. The newly emerging sectors are, for example domestic care and nursing services and parcel delivery. The football sector has emerged as a special area for exploitation in Portugal and Belgium<sup>23</sup>. Young football players were lured with the promise of a contract, development opportunities and future perspective in football career. They received very little or no salary, forced to work, stayed in precarious circumstances with their passports retained and they were not allowed to leave the premises<sup>24</sup>.

While in the construction sector, in food processing and in transportation, large and medium-size companies are involved and the exploitation can lead to significant number of victims, beauty services, hospitality and carwashes are often run by small and micro-enterprises and family businesses with fewer victims. The high number of victims in the reporting period was also due to some high-profile investigations having led to a significant number of potential victims, primarily in Belgium at the construction site of a multinational chemical company<sup>25</sup> and in Germany in the drink logistic sector where 555 potential victims were rescued<sup>26</sup>.

The nationality and the profile of the victims largely depends on the sector of exploitation. Male workers from Asia<sup>27</sup>, North-Africa<sup>28</sup> and Eastern Europe<sup>29</sup> are typically employed at construction sites and in agriculture, while Eastern-Europeans (Belarus, Ukraine, Poland) are employed in the transportation sector. Vietnamese and Thai women are exploited in beauty and nail salons, while Indian and certain African nationalities suffer exploitation in the domestic care industry. Child labour in the EU is typical within the family or in family businesses. Children are exploited in the hospitality, agriculture, construction, or cleaning services. Many children also carry out domestic care of their old or ill family members<sup>30</sup>.

Member States indicated the specific vulnerabilities of seasonal workers<sup>31</sup>. Victims are taken to remote agricultural sites, where they live and work, paying for the accommodation that is in most cases precarious and overcrowded. They fall in a situation of total dependence due to scarce economic resources, and the lack of language knowledge. The

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<sup>21</sup> The citizenship of 5% of registered victims of trafficking for labour exploitation was reported as ‘other’.

<sup>22</sup> Europol.

<sup>23</sup> El Dourado case Portugal and Corr. Bruxelles francophone, 4 novembre 2019, 69ème ch. (par défaut et appel). Voy. Myria, Rapport annuel Traite et trafic des êtres humains 2020, Derrière des portes closes, pp. 90-91 et le site internet de Myria (jurisprudence), Bruxelles, 27 juin 2022, 11ème ch.

<sup>24</sup> In order to reduce trafficking in 2022 FIFA reformed the transfer system, which includes the issuing of an electronic passport that provides a player's registration history from the age of twelve.

<sup>25</sup> [Rapport annuel d'évaluation 2023 | Traite et trafic des êtres humains \(myria.be\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> [BKA - Bundeslagebilder Menschenhandel - Bundeslagebild Menschenhandel und Ausbeutung 2022](#).

<sup>27</sup> Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, Nepal.

<sup>28</sup> Morocco.

<sup>29</sup> Ukraine, Hungary, Bulgaria.

<sup>30</sup> Kinderarbeit - Fakten und Forderungen | terre des hommes (tdh.de).

<sup>31</sup> Austria, Finland, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden and Europol.

limited accessibility and remoteness of the sites make labour inspections and the detection of victims challenging<sup>32</sup>.

The occurrence of exploitation does not depend on the size, profit and the organisation of the companies. Investigations have demonstrated that traffickers act with very high sophistication in complex business structures and specialisation in organising the recruitment, travel and accommodation with identification documents of hundreds of people originating from nearly all continents. Trafficking for labour exploitation is often intertwined with other crimes, such as tax and social security fraud, document fraud, severe violations of employment and social security legislation. Organised criminal networks also use physical or psychological threats to control the victims, combined with the dispossession of identification documents and phones. The majority of the victims do not speak the language of the hosting country, they are reluctant to cooperate with the authorities and they may not necessarily identify themselves as victims. Exploiters often force their victims to open bank accounts, over which they take control to access victims' wages and finances<sup>33</sup>.

#### **2.4. Trafficking in human beings for other forms of exploitation**

During the reporting period, forms of trafficking in human beings, other than sexual and labour exploitation, **accounted for 14%** of all victims<sup>34</sup>. Such forms of exploitation include forced criminal activities, forced begging, illegal removal of organs and “other” forms.

While **forced criminality** only accounted for 3% of all registered victims in the EU for 2021-2022, some Member States<sup>35</sup> reported an increase in this form of exploitation. Forced criminality is often associated with theft, petty crime, pickpocketing, shoplifting and selling drugs. Member States also reported about increasing online fraud committed through forced criminality and about social security fraud<sup>36</sup>. They have also reported that the exploitation of children by criminal gangs for pickpocketing, robberies and acting as drug mules, has escalated<sup>37</sup>. Criminal gangs are using young vulnerable boys (mainly with a migration background) to serve as drug mules, work on cannabis plantations, commit robberies or even shootings and other violent acts. In October 2023, Europol supported the Serbian Police in dismantling a criminal network involved in child trafficking for the purposes of forced marriage, forced begging and forced criminality. The family-based criminals and victims were between 5 and 17 years old. Austria, France and Germany were involved in the investigation<sup>38</sup>.

**Forced begging** (2%) remains present in several Member States as a form of exploitation. In Portugal, it represented the third main form of exploitation. Mainly underage Romanian, Bulgarian, Slovakian and Hungarian nationals were represented amongst the victims, including Roma ethnicities.

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<sup>32</sup> Finland, Sweden, Portugal the Annual Security Report 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Europol.

<sup>34</sup> In 2019-2020, other forms of exploitation represented 11% of cases of trafficking in human beings in the EU.

<sup>35</sup> For example Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Latvia, Spain.

<sup>36</sup> Ireland and Slovenia.

<sup>37</sup> For example Estonia, France.

<sup>38</sup> For more information please see [Human trafficking ring exploiting children halted in Serbia | Europol \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/europol/en/news/2023/10/human-trafficking-ring-exploiting-children-halted-in-serbia).

Several Member States<sup>39</sup> reported cases of trafficking for **forced and sham marriages**, which affect ethnic minorities, such as Roma people and children (primarily girls) with a migration background. Forced marriage is often also linked to multiple forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, labour exploitation or forced begging<sup>40</sup>.

**Exploitative surrogacy** is an emerging form of trafficking. Criminals exploit vulnerable women for the purposes of exploitation of surrogacy. Intermediaries (such as reproductive clinics) are engaging in organised, cross-border crime for obtaining very large profits. The Hellenic Police dismantled an organised criminal group exploiting women from Eastern European countries<sup>41</sup> for the removal of ova and surrogacy services.

Suspected trafficking for the purpose of **removal of organs** was reported by Bulgaria, Greece and Slovakia, which also included the exploitative removal of cells, tissues and blood as organ trafficking. In addition, Greece considered the removal of ova related to medically assisted reproduction as organ removal. This form of exploitation represented less than 1% of registered cases in the EU in 2021-2022.

## 2.5. Child trafficking

Child trafficking is a rapidly evolving and multi-faceted form of trafficking in human beings, which is a severe form of human exploitation, violence against children, child abuse and violation of children's rights. In 2021-2022, 81% of the child victims were EU citizens (2 401 children) and 88% of them (2 120 children) were exploited in their own Member State. Child victims constituted almost one-fifth of all registered victims in the EU (19%). The share of child victims in 2021-2022 decreased by 3% compared with the share in 2019-2020<sup>42</sup>. Some Member States report very low number of child victims<sup>43</sup>. The decreasing trend of the number of registered child victims may be linked to the increase in online sexual exploitation, where many victims remain hidden. In some Member States, child victims are not registered as trafficking victims in order to provide them with a more comprehensive support available for children. Therefore, the real number of child victims of exploitation remains unknown and might be underreported. The victims in general have a weak social and family background. They suffer from low self-esteem, psychological problems, often try drugs, and are exposed to short- and long-term physical, mental, psychological, and other profound development problems. Children in residential or institutional care are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.

Children in the EU are trafficked for **all forms of exploitation**, mainly sexual exploitation, but also for forced criminality, forced begging, forced marriage and labour exploitation<sup>44</sup>. Digitalization has led to a worrying increase in cases of underage prostitution leading to trafficking. In many cases, these are young children, who are very active on social networks and gaming sites and thereby attract the attention of traffickers. “Pocket money” exploitation emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traffickers convinced young girls online to top-

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<sup>39</sup> Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Croatia, Latvia, Greece and Lithuania.

<sup>40</sup> Greece.

<sup>41</sup> Mostly Georgia and Albania.

<sup>42</sup> In contrast, at global level, the number of detected child victims increased by 31% in 2022 compared to 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Austria.

<sup>44</sup> Europol and EMPACT OA 2.8.

up their pocket money by prostitution leading them into sexual exploitation. The crime became so widely spread in Germany that law enforcement gave a special name to it<sup>45</sup>.

The Trocadero case in France is an example where forced criminality was recognized by the Tribunal in the first instance as a purpose of trafficking in human beings. Seven Algerian traffickers created a drug addiction/dependency on seventeen unaccompanied minors and forced them to commit crime, including stealing, on the famous Trocadero square in Paris<sup>46</sup>.

## **2.6. Trafficking in human beings in the context of migration**

In the reporting period, the share of non-EU nationals became higher and constituted the majority of trafficking victims. In 2021-2022, 46% of the registered victims were EU citizens while **54% had non-EU citizenship**. This demonstrates a shift compared to 2019-2020 when the majority of registered victims was EU citizens (55% EU citizens and 45% third country nationals).

The nationality and gender of non-EU victims largely depends on the form of exploitation. While victims from Nigeria, Cameroon, China and Latin American countries are mainly female and trafficked for sexual exploitation, victims from Morocco, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Algeria and India are mainly male and subjected to labour exploitation.

During the past years, many African women and girls among the migrants arriving in Cyprus and countries in southeast Europe were reportedly forced into prostitution by violent African criminal groups. For example, Nigerian, Congolese, Cameroonian and other African women arrived on student visas in the non-government controlled area of Cyprus and ended up forced into prostitution in private apartments, bars, and nightclubs.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, women from Latin America and Ukraine arrive legally in the EU for a short stay, and engage in prostitution with seemingly legal contracts, which often lead to exploitation under strict surveillance and restrictions to leave the premises. Trafficking victims from China and Latin-American countries not only reach the Member States of destination directly by air, they also often arrive via the Western Balkan route<sup>48</sup>.

Unaccompanied minors are at particular risk and vulnerable to traffickers. Between 2018 and 2022, the number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe has increased significantly each year, reaching 15 928 in 2022. North African and Afghan smuggling and trafficking networks exploit young Afghan, Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian boys, forcing them into prostitution or sexual violence along their migratory route to the EU. The exploitation is often broadcasted on social media with the objective to blackmail their families for money<sup>49</sup>.

## **3. EU AND MEMBER STATES ACTIONS TO ADDRESS TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS**

### **3.1. A comprehensive approach to addressing trafficking in human beings**

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<sup>45</sup> 2022 Bundeslagebild des Menschenhandels (Bundeskriminalamt).

<sup>46</sup> [L'Avis sur la traite à des fins de contrainte à commettre tout crime ou délit \(A - 2024-2\) \(cncdh.fr\)](#).

<sup>47</sup> Frontex contribution.

<sup>48</sup> Europol contribution.

<sup>49</sup> EMPACT 2.8.



During the reporting period, the **legal, financial, operational and policy initiatives** announced in the four areas of the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025 have significantly advanced, are ongoing or have already been implemented. One of the priority actions of the EU Strategy was the evaluation and **revision of Directive 2011/36/EU**<sup>50</sup>. The Commission addressed the major shortcomings in a legislative proposal presented on 19 December 2022<sup>51</sup>, which was adopted by the co-legislators on 13 June 2024 and entered into force on 14 July 2024. Member States will have to transpose and implement the new provisions by 15 July 2026.

The Commission will launch an **Anti-trafficking Hub**, which will act as an umbrella platform to support Member States in the implementation of the amended Directive and the Strategy, to develop guidelines, to exchange best practices, and to reinforce cooperation.

The **collection and sharing of statistics** with the Commission (EUROSTAT) becomes mandatory under the amended Directive. Data allows to understand the situation and actions needed and feeds into the preparation of EU and national priorities reflected in **National Strategies and Action Plans**<sup>52</sup>, as well as **guidelines, protocols and procedures**<sup>53</sup> aimed at supporting the relevant stakeholders in detecting, identifying and protecting victims. The amended Directive also includes a new obligation for Member States to adopt and implement every five years a **national Anti-trafficking Action Plan**.

Data also feeds into the allocation of **financial resources** for combatting trafficking in human beings. Funding planned during the reporting period through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)<sup>54</sup> and the Internal Security Fund (ISF)<sup>55</sup> amounts to a total budget of about EUR 25 million in 2021-2024<sup>56</sup>. For example, out of the EUR 25 million, about EUR 3.8 million were awarded under ISF to five transnational actions aiming at breaking the criminal business model of traffickers in human beings by strengthening the law enforcement and judicial responses against trafficking in human beings, in particular as regards children and labour exploitation<sup>57</sup>. Also, as an example, about EUR 4 million were awarded under AMIF to six transnational projects dealing with assistance, support and integration of third country national victims of trafficking in human beings.

From an **operational** point of view, the fight against trafficking in human beings is fully integrated in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), which support multidisciplinary actions against ten crime priorities identified

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<sup>50</sup> SWD/2022/427 final

<sup>51</sup> Proposal of the Commission for the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combatting trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (COM/2022/732 final).

<sup>52</sup> Romania, France, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Czechia, Netherlands.

<sup>53</sup> Germany, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia.

<sup>54</sup> AMIF - Thematic Facility Work Programme for 2021-2022 and 2023-2023 are available of DG HOME website: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027_en).

<sup>55</sup> ISF - Thematic Facility Work Programme for 2021-2022 and 2023-2025 are available on DG HOME website: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/internal-security-funds/internal-security-fund-2021-2027\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/internal-security-funds/internal-security-fund-2021-2027_en).

<sup>56</sup> EUR 25 million correspond to what was planned, but the implemented or committed amount might be different. This amount covers different types of actions i.e. Union actions, specific actions and procurement.

<sup>57</sup> The list of EU grants financed under AMIF and ISF is available on the [EU Funding &Tenders Portal, under the section EU Funded projects](https://eufunding.eu/) (europa.eu).

by the Council in the context of the EMPACT Cycle<sup>58</sup>. Its aim is to disrupt criminal networks engaged in trafficking in human beings for all forms of exploitation. During the period 2022-2025, in total 70 operational actions, supported by the EU Agencies, are being carried out to implement strategic goals, such as joint investigations on labour and sexual exploitation, forced criminality, child trafficking, financial investigations related to trafficking in human beings as well as collection and exchange of operational and strategic information on trafficking in human beings.

Eurojust supported 66 Joint Investigations Teams (JITs) in trafficking cases<sup>59</sup>. Several Member States<sup>60</sup> reported on participating in JITs coordinated by Eurojust, with both EU and non-EU Member States.

Finally, trafficking in human beings requires a **multi stakeholder, coordinated approach**. Coordination at the EU level by the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator<sup>61</sup> (EU ATC) has been reinforced in the amended Directive<sup>62</sup>, which explicitly foresees coordination with national anti-trafficking coordinators, independent bodies, EU Agencies, and with relevant civil society organisations active in the field.

Coordination is also addressed at national level. The amended Directive makes the function of **national anti-trafficking coordinators** mandatory, requires adequate resources and describes the tasks<sup>63</sup>. Moreover, Member States are encouraged to establish **independent national bodies** for monitoring the implementation and impact of anti-trafficking actions. For instance, Germany designated the German Human Rights Institute to fulfil the role of an independent national rapporteur for trafficking in human beings, which brings the number of national rapporteurs in the EU to 16<sup>64</sup>.

## 3.2. Preventing trafficking in human beings

### 3.2.1 Reducing the demand that fosters the crime

Demand fosters all forms of exploitation of people in vulnerable situation, which traffickers take advantage of. **Legislative changes** in several Member States criminalised the use of sexual services or any services provided by victims of trafficking<sup>65</sup>, while other Member States were debating about the introduction of such criminalisation.

In 2022, four Member States reported a total of 51 suspects and 8 prosecutions in relation to the use of services of victims. During the reporting period, Cyprus reported that one user was convicted to 3 years imprisonment for the offence of receiving sexual services from a victim of human trafficking, while Hungary reported one conviction for the exploitation of child prostitution.

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<sup>58</sup> Council Conclusions setting the EU's priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime for EMPACT 2022-2025, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8665-2021-INIT/en/pdf>. Also see [EU Policy Cycle - EMPACT | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>59</sup> For more information, visit [Joint investigation teams | Eurojust | European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>60</sup> Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Ireland, Malta, Spain and Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

<sup>61</sup> [EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>62</sup> Article 20 of Directive 2024/1712/EU.

<sup>63</sup> Article 19 of Directive 2024/1712/EU.

<sup>64</sup> Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden.

<sup>65</sup> Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands.

In order to develop a coherent policy response to tackle demand that fosters trafficking in human beings, and to further reinforce and harmonize the criminal justice efforts across Member States, the amended Directive made it mandatory for Member States to **criminalise the knowing use of exploited services**<sup>66</sup>. The amended Directive provides guidance in the recitals with indicators to infer the “knowledge” based upon objective and factual circumstances<sup>67</sup>. The Directive encompasses all forms of exploitation, where a service is delivered by a victim of trafficking. It does not apply, however, to customers purchasing of goods produced by victims of trafficking.

### 3.2.2 Preventive measures targeting legal persons

Several legislative measures were adopted at EU level, aiming at addressing the responsibility of companies, including online platforms, to reduce demand and detect potential cases of trafficking in human beings in their activities and supply chains.

The **Digital Services Act**<sup>68</sup>, adopted on 19 October 2022, will contribute to detecting, monitoring and removing online content related to trafficking in human beings<sup>69</sup>. The Commission designated “Very Large Online Platforms” and “Very Large Search Engines”, including four adult websites<sup>70</sup>, which are subject to strict obligations concerning the identification, assessment and mitigation of systemic risks as well as transparency measures, accessible reporting tools and complaint mechanisms. In addition, all online platforms and search engines must put in place appropriate measures to ensure high level of privacy, safety and security of minors and notify illegal content to law enforcement if they become aware of suspected criminal offences. Moreover, with the **amended Anti-Trafficking Directive**, sexual exploitation committed or facilitated by information and communication technologies became an **aggravating circumstance** potentially leading to higher penalties, taking into account the amplification of the offence committed by such technologies and the possible long-lasting impact on the victims.

The **Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence**<sup>71</sup> of 13 June 2024 is complementary to Directive 2011/36/EU. It sets out a horizontal framework to foster the contribution of businesses and their subcontractors operating in the single market to the respect of human rights and the environment through their own operations and through their supply chains. Businesses in scope of the Directive must engage in identifying, preventing, mitigating and accounting for their adverse human rights and environmental impacts, including trafficking in human beings.

On 27 November 2024, the **Regulation on prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market**<sup>72</sup> was adopted. It covers domestic and imported products that are produced by forced labour. Building on international standards and complementing

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<sup>66</sup> Article 18a of Directive 2024/1712/EU.

<sup>67</sup> Recital 27 of Directive 2024/1712/EU.

<sup>68</sup> Regulation 2022/2065/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p.1, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj>).

<sup>69</sup> Recital 56 of the Digital Services Act.

<sup>70</sup> Pornhub, Stripchat, XVideos, and XNXX.

<sup>71</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1760 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on corporate sustainability due diligence and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 and Regulation (EU) 2023/2859 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L, 2024/1760, 5.7.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1760/oj>).

<sup>72</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/3015 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 on prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 (OJ L, 2024/3015, 12.12.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/3015/oj>).

existing horizontal and sectoral EU initiatives, in particular the due diligence and transparency obligations, the Regulation is expected to combine a prohibition with a robust, risk-based enforcement framework.

In October 2023 the Commission presented the EU **Roadmap on the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime**<sup>73</sup>, which proposes 17 operational actions along four pillars, one of which relates to crime prevention. Here, the Roadmap prioritises the promotion of measures to prevent young people and children from being recruited by criminal gangs, since criminal networks, including drug traffickers, exploit vulnerable young people or even children to carry out criminal activities, in particular drug trafficking<sup>74</sup>. At national level, Member States have already taken measures for companies to carry out due diligence throughout their supply chain to detect and prevent potential labour exploitation<sup>75</sup>. Some Member States adhered to or updated<sup>76</sup> the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises for Responsible Business Conduct or included special provisions on this matter in their National Action Plans on combating trafficking in human beings<sup>77</sup>. Some Member States<sup>78</sup> organised conferences and training for companies on corporate due diligence, while others adopted stricter rules penalising businesses for exploitative behaviours<sup>79</sup> or published online guidance on how to minimise the risk of labour exploitation<sup>80</sup>.

With regard to offences of labour exploitation, France put in place a ‘blacklist’ scheme, i.e. a publication on a dedicated website of the Ministry of Labour<sup>81</sup>, which contains final Court decisions condemning a legal person.

### 3.2.3 Awareness raising campaigns

On 18 October 2023, on the EU Anti-trafficking Day, the European Commission launched the **campaign “End human trafficking. Break the invisible chain”**<sup>82</sup>. This campaign aims to raise awareness on trafficking in human beings, including both sexual and labour exploitation. In the first phase, the Commission created a campaign page, where it made available an online video and online materials in all official languages that can be freely used by everybody. The second phase is in preparation. The focus will be on Member States where the number of victims is the highest and represents the various forms of trafficking<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> [EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-operations/infoboxes/2023/10/roadmap-against-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime).

<sup>74</sup> [EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION CONFERENCE 2024 | EUCPN](#) addressed the exploitation of young people for criminal purposes, in particular for trafficking of drugs.

<sup>75</sup> In Germany, the Act on Corporate Due Diligence in Supply Chains entered into force on 1 January 2023. Ireland is working towards adopting similar legislation. In addition, Germany established a Service Centre within the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which regularly provides inputs on the risk of labour exploitation, forced labour and trafficking in human beings to companies established in Germany.

<sup>76</sup> Czechia, Finland.

<sup>77</sup> Slovenia.

<sup>78</sup> Bulgaria, Finland, Poland.

<sup>79</sup> Bulgaria.

<sup>80</sup> Denmark.

<sup>81</sup> [List of convicted individuals \(travail-emploi.gouv.fr\)](https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/).

<sup>82</sup> [End human trafficking. Break the invisible chain - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#). Its objectives are (i) to educate the public to recognize and report trafficking in human beings and discourage from using the services of trafficked people; (ii) to make potential victims aware about the threats and risks of trafficking in human beings and prevent them from falling victims; (iii) to inform employers about trafficking in human beings and deter them from hiring trafficked people; and (iv) to inform trafficking victims about their rights and available help.

<sup>83</sup> Bulgaria, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and the Netherlands.

EU Agencies also engaged in awareness-raising during the reporting period. Europol published a guide on how not to fall for lover boys<sup>84</sup>, while the European Labour Authority (ELA) produced a video and several leaflets<sup>85</sup> to raise awareness on the risks of trafficking in human beings for labour exploitation while highlighting its support for the enforcement of applicable EU labour law through coordination of concerted and joint inspections.

Member States<sup>86</sup> carried out awareness raising campaigns on trafficking in human beings through social media, videos, leaflets, posters, media, as well as in schools, among others. Some Member States<sup>87</sup> carried out awareness raising campaigns on labour rights and safe work opportunities, as well as on the risks of trafficking for labour exploitation in various sectors. Several Member States<sup>88</sup> put in place awareness campaigns targeting clients on social media, dating websites and advertising platforms for sexual services. For example, Romania launched an international prevention campaign "Without clients, there's no trafficking!", carried out in partnership with the Romanian and Spanish Police. Slovakia specifically addressed the Roma community in Roma language on the risks of forced marriage.

In the context of the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Inter-ministerial Mission of the Protection of Women against Violence and the Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings (MIPROF) took comprehensive measures to prevent trafficking in human beings, including: (i) training built in collaboration with the National School of Magistracy with the objective to educate all those who come into contact with potential victims, and ensure they are well-informed and ready to act; (ii) engagement with the private sector, especially short-term rental platforms and transport companies<sup>89</sup> to raise awareness on the risks and forms of trafficking in human beings and sensitize them on due diligence; (iii) a communication campaign to raise awareness among foreign tourists of the risks of trafficking in human beings<sup>90</sup>.

### 3.2.4 Training

Specialised training is further encouraged by the amended Directive, which requires Member States to promote regular and specialised training to professionals likely to come into contact with potential victims of trafficking in human beings, to enable them to prevent and combat trafficking and avoid secondary victimisation. During the reporting period, Member States offered a broad range of training activities to various stakeholders, including law enforcement and judicial authorities, border guards, asylum and immigration officers, health professionals, social workers, social and labour inspectors, consular staff, municipalities staff, as well as flight attendants, in order to enable them to detect cases of trafficking, identify possible victims, carry out the interviews and inform them about support measures and the referral systems.

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<sup>84</sup> [How not to fall for the lover boy scam | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>85</sup> [Road to fair transport | European Labour Authority \(europa.eu\)](#), [EU for fair construction | European Labour Authority \(europa.eu\)](#), [Rights for all seasons | European Labour Authority \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>86</sup> Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

<sup>87</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

<sup>88</sup> Romania, Hungary, Spain, Sweden, Ireland, Romania, Poland.

<sup>89</sup> Airbnb, Gîtes de France, AirFrance, Vinci, Volotea.

<sup>90</sup> [Awareness campaign: Fighting the purchase of sexual acts and human trafficking during the Olympic and Paralympic Games Paris 2024 | Gender equality \(egalite-femmes-hommes.gouv.fr\)](#).

At EU level, several EU Agencies developed targeted training activities. The European Agency for law enforcement training (CEPOL) continued to provide training activities to foster a network of criminal investigators across the EU Member States and directly enhance the effectiveness of cross-border operational cooperation. Multifaceted training activities cover the main aspects of criminalistics as regards the fight against trafficking in human beings, notably sexual exploitation, including online trafficking, labour exploitation, as well as integration of special investigation techniques and financial and online investigations. The ELA also delivered several training modules and developed training manuals on labour exploitation for labour inspectors. The Fundamental Right Agency (FRA) also produced a training manual for the training of labour inspectors and other workplace inspection bodies, focusing on the protective standards in EU law that safeguard the rights of third-country workers, including seasonal workers, migrant workers with temporary permits and migrants in an irregular situation<sup>91</sup>.

The European Judicial Training Network (EJTN)<sup>92</sup> offered training to judges and prosecutors on the judicial aspects of labour exploitation and the particular challenges for the criminal proceedings.

CEPOL, the ELA and the EJTN also combined efforts in training interventions with special attention to victim protection and fundamental rights.

### 3.3. Breaking the criminal business model of traffickers

#### 3.3.1 Investigations

Trafficking in human beings is committed by larger organised crime groups as well as by smaller networks or even by individuals. In its report on the most threatening criminal networks in the EU<sup>93</sup>, Europol identified sexual exploitation as the sole core business for eighteen criminal networks, labour exploitation for thirteen networks<sup>94</sup> and other forms of trafficking for five networks. Numerous criminal networks combine trafficking in human beings with other crime areas, such as drug trafficking, organised property crime, document and identity fraud and migrant smuggling. The operational actions set out in the **EU Roadmap on the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime**<sup>95</sup> aim at tackling these high-risk criminal networks, including those involved in trafficking in human beings.

To respond to other emerging developments, the **amended Directive** introduces several novelties with the aim to criminalize **new forms of trafficking**, set more severe penalties and increase the expertise and capabilities of law enforcement and prosecution in Member States. The exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage and of illegal adoption are explicitly mentioned as forms of exploitations that may qualify as trafficking in human beings as far as the other elements of the definition (conduct and mean) are met.

**Law enforcement cooperation** remained intensive during the period 2021-2024<sup>96</sup>, both at EU and national level, which is reflected in the continuous **increase of 16%** in the total

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<sup>91</sup> [How workplace inspectors can protect third-country workers' rights - Training manual](#)

<sup>92</sup> [European Judicial Training Network \(EJTN\)](#).

<sup>93</sup> [Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>94</sup> Criminal networks active in trafficking for labour exploitation mainly operate in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Ukraine. The most represented nationalities within networks engaging in this form of trafficking are Georgian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and Uzbek.

<sup>95</sup> [EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>96</sup> Europol supported 80 operational meetings in 2023, 23 Joint Operational Action Days and 2 Operational Task Forces.

number of **individuals suspected** of trafficking in human beings, as compared to the previous reporting period<sup>97</sup>. The share of EU citizens accounted for 72% of all suspects registered in the EU in 2022.

Trafficking in human beings is one of the priorities of the **European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)**. In 2024, EMPACT THB consists of 22 operational actions. In 2023 EMPACT operational actions proved to be a major success and resulted in steadily improved outcomes in terms of the increasing number of joint action days, operational task forces and operational results, namely the identification of 7 536 (potential) victims and over 5 000 suspects as well as the launch of 103 financial investigations and the seizure of EUR 4 108 670<sup>98</sup>.

EMPACT also supported innovative approaches to **digital investigations**, in particular in the forms of **Hackathons**, which helped to identify online platforms where sexual or labour exploitation took place and assisted Member States in the analysis of large amount of digital data from media confiscated during investigations. From 20 countries joining in 2022, the action included 26 countries in 2023 and 27 countries in 2024, including partners from non-EU neighbouring countries<sup>99</sup>. The action established a structured approach to the online dimension of human trafficking, from recruitment through the identification of potential victims and their exploitation to the detection of traffickers and criminal groups. They proved highly useful, as following the Hackathon, the traffic significantly diminished on the checked websites.

The Hackathon is instrumental to train anti-trafficking specialists in Member States with digital tools they can use in their daily work. Member States<sup>100</sup> adopted various strategies to detect and investigate cases of trafficking in human beings facilitated by the use of technology. These include monitoring the internet (both the surface web and the dark web) combined with real-time open-source intelligence analysis, the deployment of web-crawlers, covert operations, but also the creation of public private partnerships with adult website providers and short-term rental companies<sup>101</sup>.

Efforts were made at European level to improve the use of **financial investigations**. Within the EMPACT framework, Member States together with Europol developed a handbook dedicated to financial investigations in human trafficking investigations. Moreover, the Europol Financial Intelligence Public Private Partnership (EFIPPP) launched a workstream on developing indicators for automatic transaction monitoring<sup>102</sup>. Despite confiscation increasing, Europol considers the absence of comprehensive financial data related to human trafficking offences as a major intelligence gap. To address this challenge, law enforcement agencies must enhance their understanding, improve international cooperation, invest in specialised resources, and raise awareness among financial institutions and communities<sup>103</sup>. At national level, Member States reported stronger

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<sup>97</sup> 17 711 suspects were registered in 2021-22 as compared to 15 214 suspects in the period 2019-2020 and 11 788 in 2017-2018.

<sup>98</sup> [empact-factsheets-2023.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>99</sup> Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, United Kingdom, Kosovo, Serbia.

<sup>100</sup> Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia and Netherlands.

<sup>101</sup> Austria, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Finland, Croatia, Slovakia

<sup>102</sup> [EFIPPP Homepage - EFIPPP](#).

<sup>103</sup> Europol contribution.

cooperation with the financial sector, by establishing indicators for trafficking, creating public-private partnerships or through more regular cooperation<sup>104</sup>.

At EU level, in order to prevent **labour exploitation and detect fraudulent job advertisements**, Europol published a guide explaining the most common indicators<sup>105</sup>. ELA supported Member States' labour authorities in carrying out cross-border, concerted, and joint labour inspections with law enforcement to tackle undeclared work. Two EMPACT operational actions focused exclusively on labour exploitation, in particular on victim support and the agriculture as a high-risk sector.

**Directive 2024/1260 on asset recovery and confiscation of 24 April 2024**<sup>106</sup> reinforces the capacity of police, prosecutors and judges to trace and confiscate the profits that organised criminal groups gain through their illicit activities, including through trafficking in human beings. The Directive will also strengthen cross-border police cooperation by making the launch of asset tracing investigations in organised crime cases mandatory. It will extend the possibilities for courts to confiscate illicit assets, including through the confiscation of unexplained wealth without a conviction where a court is satisfied that the property in question is derived from criminal conduct. All this should allow to disrupt the business models of organised criminal groups, dismantle their structures and prevent them from carrying out further criminal activities.

The renewed **Schengen Information System (SIS)**<sup>107</sup> entered into operation on 7 March 2023<sup>108</sup> introducing new alert categories, one of which are the so-called 'preventive alerts' on vulnerable persons who need to be prevented from travelling<sup>109</sup>. The alerts on vulnerable persons of age and children, are to be entered in the SIS following a decision by competent national authorities, including judicial authorities. In case a vulnerable person of age or a child is at risk of being trafficked, his/her travel can be prevented, and the person should be placed under protection. Another important feature of the SIS is the addition of new types of biometrics (such as palm prints, finger marks, and palm marks, as well as DNA records connected to missing persons) to help locate and identify persons entered in the system<sup>110</sup>.

Finally, despite the intensified cross-border cooperation and involvement of Europol in some more complex investigations in 2021 and 2022, there is a significant difference between the statistics produced by Europol and the official statistics published by EUROSTAT, in particular concerning the number, age and nationality of the victims, forms

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<sup>104</sup> Helena project in Hungary, Denmark, Belgium, Austria.

<sup>105</sup> [How to spot fake job adverts | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>106</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1260 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on asset recovery and confiscation (OJ L, 2024/1260, 2.5.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1260/oj>).

<sup>107</sup> [Schengen Information System - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>108</sup> Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2023/201 of 30 January 2023 setting the date on which operations of the Schengen Information System start pursuant to Regulation (EU) 2018/1861 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EU) 2018/1862 of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 27, 31.1.2023, p. 29, ELI: [http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec\\_impl/2023/201/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2023/201/oj)).

<sup>109</sup> Regulation (EU) 2018/1862 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending and repealing Council Decision 2007/533/JHA, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1986/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Decision 2010/261/EU (OJ L 312, 07/12/2018, p. 56, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1862/oj>)

<sup>110</sup> The SIS is operated by eu-LISA.



of exploitation and the number of suspects. While there are objective reasons for these discrepancies<sup>111</sup>, it is necessary to underline the requirement for Member States of the timely sharing of the relevant information and data with Europol.

### 3.3.2 Prosecutions and convictions

The total number of individuals prosecuted and convicted for trafficking in human beings has increased. In 2021-2022, in total 8 804 persons were prosecuted and 4 728 persons were convicted for trafficking in human beings. Prosecutions have increased by 35%<sup>112</sup> and convictions have increased by 57%<sup>113</sup>, compared to previous reporting period 2019-2020. EU citizens accounted for 81% of all prosecuted individuals and 74% of all convicted individuals in 2022. Nevertheless, **despite the overall increase, the absolute number of prosecutions and convictions remains low**, especially as compared to the number of registered victims and suspects.

The number of investigations and prosecutions coordinated by Eurojust shows a decreasing trend since 2019<sup>114</sup>, which may highlight difficulties or a lack of Member States' awareness in referring cases to the EU Agency. It can also be due to the fact that gathering evidence to identify a crime as trafficking in human beings is time- and resource-consuming, which might result in Member States privileging the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators under other offences.

Some Member States implemented measures to increase the effectiveness of prosecution by training, guidelines, and uniform practices<sup>115</sup>. At the EU level, during the reporting period, the **Focus Group of specialised prosecutors** met three times (once a year)<sup>116</sup> since it was established, under the co-chair of Eurojust and the EU ATC. The meetings brought together prosecutors from Member States and third countries to build expertise and intensify judicial cooperation against trafficking in human beings, in particular in digital and financial investigation, in labour and sexual exploitation as well as in the exploitation of surrogacy. The training of prosecutors and judges was also discussed with the presence of CEPOL and the European Judicial Training Network.

### 3.4. Early identification, assistance and protection of the victims

The **Anti-trafficking Directive** provides for a victim-focused, gender- and child- sensitive approach, which benefits the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities and migrants. The **amended Directive** introduces a number of novelties which significantly **foster victims' rights**. Among others, it requires Member States to establish national referral mechanisms, which should constitute a transparent, accessible and harmonized

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<sup>111</sup> The registration of victims is carried out by various authorities and organisations in Member States, which form part the official collection of statistics, while only law enforcement authorities report cases to Europol. National law enforcement authorities normally do not report domestic cases to Europol but cases with cross-border dimension.

<sup>112</sup> 6 539 persons in 2019-2020 and 8 804 in 2021-2022. The number of prosecuted persons was not available for Germany and Italy for the whole period, and for Cyprus for 2019 and 2020.

<sup>113</sup> 3 019 persons in 2019-2020 and 4 728 in 2021-2022. The number of convicted persons was not available for Belgium for 2020 and 2022, and for Italy for 2019 and 2020.

<sup>114</sup> 183 in 2019, to 163 in 2020 and to 140 in 2021, 122 new THB cases in 2022 and 113 new THB cases in 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Croatia, Hungary.

<sup>116</sup> 14 June 2022, 28-29 June 2023 and 26-27 June 2024.

framework facilitating and enhancing victims' referral to the responsible national organisations and bodies. A referral mechanism should apply to all victims and to all forms of trafficking offences, taking into account the individual specific vulnerability of the victims. Moreover, Member States are required to designate a focal point for the cross-border referral of victims. The amended Directive requires Member States to ensure that victims of trafficking are able to exercise their right to apply for international protection or equivalent national status. Therefore, Member States must ensure that the assistance system for victims of trafficking and the asylum procedures are complementary and do not preclude one another. Referral mechanisms must cooperate with asylum authorities to ensure that assistance, support and protection are provided to victims of trafficking who are also in need of international protection.

While the Anti-trafficking Directive addresses the specific needs of victims of trafficking in human beings, the **Victims' Rights Directive**<sup>117</sup> is the main horizontal instrument on victims' rights, which applies to all victims of all crimes. Based on a careful assessment of the EU rules on victims' rights and their implementation, the Commission proposed a revision of the Victims' Rights Directive on 12 July 2023<sup>118</sup>. The proposal aims to further strengthen the rights of victims in the EU, including the rights of the most vulnerable victims, such as victims of trafficking in human beings. The negotiations by the co-legislators are ongoing. Moreover, the Commission continues working on the implementation of the **EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025)**<sup>119</sup> and has already achieved most of its horizontal actions.

Additionally, the **Directive 2024/1385/EU on combating violence against women and domestic violence**<sup>120</sup> acknowledges that the offence of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a form of violence against women. The specific prevention, protection and support measures envisaged in the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence complement the measures laid down in Directive 2011/36/EU.

On 23 April 2024, the Commission adopted a **recommendation on integrated child protection systems**<sup>121</sup>. The recommendation aims at supporting Member States to develop and strengthen their child protection systems according to children's needs and in their best interests. It especially encourages coordination among authorities at different levels, professionals across sectors, international and civil society organisations. All these child protection actors need to work together to protect children from any form of violence (physical, mental, including in the digital world), including trafficking in human beings, in a coherent and systemic way.

Beyond the legislative framework, EU agencies reported on their respective actions for the early identification and protection of victims. The EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) continued

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<sup>117</sup> Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA (OJ L 315, 14.11.2012, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2012/29/oj>).

<sup>118</sup> COM(2023) 424 final.

<sup>119</sup> COM(2020) 258 final

<sup>120</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence (OJ L, 2024/1385, 24.5.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj>).

<sup>121</sup> Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 of 23 April 2024 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (OJ L, 2024/1238, 14.5.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2024/1238/oj>).

to provide training to Member States' asylum and reception authorities, as well as to other stakeholders working on their behalf. Such training focused, among others, on the prevention of trafficking by preparing officials and other relevant actors on how to identify risk and push and pull factors for trafficking, and on how to communicate with potential victims, including through digital channels<sup>122</sup>. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) also provided multiple training activities to border guards and developed cooperation with transportation and short-term rental companies<sup>123</sup>. In the context of this cooperation, the companies will be invited to join Frontex training activities for awareness sessions on how the private sector can support the law enforcement community.

At the national level, all Member States indicated measures to ensure that all victims identified are provided with assistance, support and protection, taking into account gender and child-specific needs. Such measures included structured cooperation with airlines and airports, including training airline staff<sup>124</sup>. They also established bilateral cooperations in specific fields, such as the German-Bulgarian cooperation on the referral of victims of labour exploitation. Furthermore, Member States ensured additional funding was available to improve informal or formal national referral mechanisms<sup>125</sup>, or to establish specialised shelters for victims of trafficking, including specialised shelters for males<sup>126</sup>. Finally, several Member States strengthened legal assistance for victims to obtain compensation and developed brochures and guidelines<sup>127</sup>. Several Member States<sup>128</sup> awarded compensation to victims of trafficking in human beings, ranging from EUR 250 to EUR 65 000 for physical injuries, material damages, including unpaid wages, and moral damages.

Civil society organisations also offered a diverse range of legal counselling services for potential victims of trafficking, protection, shelter, medical, psychological and psychiatric support, as well as education.

### **3.5. International dimension**

Partnerships with third countries and international organisations are indispensable to fight transnational criminal networks engaging in trafficking in human beings. They allow to identify common challenges and solutions that require stronger cooperation and joint actions. 54% of the victims in the EU are non-EU nationals, which represents a changing trend compared to previous years. In 2022, the share of non-EU victims was 63%. This increase can likely be linked to more trafficking cases involving migrants, to migration flows and/or to an improvement in the detection of migrant victims due to higher awareness on trafficking in human beings and more investigations.

During the reporting period, the external dimension was further strengthened: anti-trafficking policies were included in actions on fighting migrant smuggling, in the enlargement process with candidate and pre-accession countries and in human rights, security and migration dialogues with third countries, as well as through a range of foreign policy instruments and operational cooperation with partner countries.

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<sup>122</sup> EUAA contribution.

<sup>123</sup> FRONTEX organised meetings with UBER, Airbnb and Railways Associations.

<sup>124</sup> Austria, Latvia, Poland, Romania and the Netherlands.

<sup>125</sup> Finland.

<sup>126</sup> Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Ireland, Latvia, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain.

<sup>127</sup> Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Ireland.

<sup>128</sup> Belgium, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Italy, Romania, Finland.

The international dimension was also the focus of the biannual meetings of the EU Network of National Coordinators and Rapporteurs on 25-26 April 2023<sup>129</sup> and on 2-3 December 2024<sup>130</sup>. As a follow-up to the discussions on 25-26 April 2023, the European Migration Network is carrying out a study with the aim to analyse anti-trafficking policies with third countries. The focus of the meeting on 2-3 December 2024, including in a joint session with the EU Civil Society Platform against trafficking in human beings, was the link between trafficking in human beings and migration, including migrant smuggling. One session was dedicated to the prevention and protection of people fleeing the military aggression against Ukraine.

Trafficking is closely linked with **migrant smuggling**, as migrants or their families often end up in debt bondage to pay the smugglers, which results in exploitation. Migrants can also be smuggled for the purposes of exploitation. Therefore, it is necessary to address the legislative, operative, and funding measures related to the fight against migrant smuggling jointly with combating trafficking in human beings in the context of irregular migration<sup>131</sup>. The EMPACT Operational Actions on Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings foresee the participation of several third countries<sup>132</sup> and include actions with a focus on some of the main non-EU areas or countries of origin of victims and traffickers identified in the EU.

Moreover, on 28 November 2023, the Commission presented a package to counter migrant smuggling consisting of a proposal for a new Directive laying down minimum rules to prevent and counter the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and stay in the Union<sup>133</sup>, a proposal for a Regulation to reinforce police cooperation and Europol's role in the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings<sup>134</sup> and a call to action on a global alliance to counter migrant smuggling. The proposal for a Directive includes an aggravating circumstance for smuggling offences that entailed or resulted in exploitation. The proposal for a Regulation reinforces the European Centre Against Migrant Smuggling within Europol to build further capacities for cross-border investigation both in migrant smuggling and in trafficking in human beings. The reinforcement seeks to improve inter-agency cooperation, strengthen coordination at EU level by setting out specific strategic tasks, improve information sharing with the agency, reinforce Member States' resources to prevent and combat these crimes, and reinforce Europol's support through operational task

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<sup>129</sup> [Meeting of the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and Equivalent Mechanisms against trafficking in human beings - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>130</sup> [EU Network of National Coordinators and Rapporteurs and EU Civil Society Platform join efforts against trafficking in human beings - European Commission](#).

<sup>131</sup> The 2024 report by Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) includes latest developments on migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings and the current criminal landscape. [Tackling threats addressing challenges - Europol's response to migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in 2023 and onwards.pdf](#).

<sup>132</sup> Morocco, Tunisia, Gambia, West and Central Africa, Türkiye, Western Balkans, Albania, Moldova, Pakistan.

<sup>133</sup> Proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL laying down minimum rules to prevent and counter the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and stay in the Union (COM(2023) 755 final) [EUR-Lex - 52023PC0755 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>134</sup> Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on enhancing police cooperation in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and on enhancing Europol's support to preventing and combating such crimes and amending Regulation (EU) 2016/794 [EUR-Lex - 52023PC0754 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

forces and deployments for operational support. The proposals are being discussed by the co-legislators.

Alerted by the unprecedentedly high risk of trafficking following the beginning of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against **Ukraine** on 24 February 2022, a **Common Anti-Trafficking Plan**<sup>135</sup> was developed by the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator. The implementation of the Plan contributed to preventing that crime and keeping the number of confirmed trafficking investigations low. The rapid and effective emergency response inspired a modification of Article 19 of the amended Directive, which foresees contingency response plans in order to prevent the threat of trafficking in human beings in the event of major emergencies. Vulnerabilities of those fleeing the war of aggression were also considerably reduced by the activation of the **Temporary Protection Directive** which granted immediate protection and access to rights in the EU<sup>136</sup>. Based on a proposal from the Commission, the Council decided its prolongation until March 2026<sup>137</sup>.

In 2022, Ukrainian nationals were the second most prevalent non-EU nationalities amongst victims of trafficking registered in the EU (421 victims). 85% were subjected to labour exploitation and 13% to sexual exploitation. Member States and Europol confirmed that investigations related to these Ukrainian victims started in the EU already before the beginning of the full-scale war of aggression and/or are linked to victims already present in the EU. However, this confirms that the risk of trafficking in human beings for the Ukrainian nationals, including those who flee the full-scale war of aggression, remains high, has to be closely monitored by Europol with the support of Ukraine and requires the continuous implementation of the Common-Anti-Trafficking Plan.

Operational cross-border cooperation with Ukraine was already enhanced with the support of EU agencies. In 2024, Ukraine participates in 19 EMPACT operation actions. In 2023, Europol coordinated a three-day Hackathon targeting online criminal activities involving Ukrainian victims and, in March 2024, 11 countries launched an operational task force coordinated by Europol to fight sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women and girls in the EU. In May 2024, Europol supported the Spanish National Police in dismantling a criminal group involved in the trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation. The suspects lured Ukrainian victims with promises to arrange for them protection, financial support and work.

During the reporting period, the Commission, together with the European External Action Service, continued **engaging with other main countries of origin and transit of victims and traffickers**<sup>138</sup> through involvement in operational actions, policy dialogues and targeted funding. The EU Agencies have undertaken capacity building, operational cooperation, and technical assistance in partner countries.

The EU funded a regional programme with anti-trafficking and migrants smuggling impact for EUR 36 million under IPA III in the Western Balkans. The EU contracted further around EUR 84 million under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) 2021-2022 in order to address the growing involvement

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<sup>135</sup> [An Anti-Trafficking Plan to protect people fleeing the war in Ukraine - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>136</sup> Residency rights, access to the labour market, accommodation, social welfare assistance and other assistance.

<sup>137</sup> [Ukrainian refugees: Council extends temporary protection until March 2026 - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>138</sup> Latin-America, Nigeria, China, Pakistan, Morocco, Bangladesh, Western Balkans, Türkiye, etc.

of organised crime groups in irregular migration, which leads to an increasing threat of trafficking in human beings along migration routes, especially in the EU's neighbourhood.

Under the EU Trust Fund for Africa, the EU funded a regional programme worth EUR 15 million between 2019 and July 2024 to support North African countries in dismantling organized criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking.

In the Horn of Africa, the NDICI is currently supporting two major regional projects tackling Trafficking and Smuggling, the Better Migration Management Project (BMM), which aims at strengthening the cooperation of Law Enforcement Agencies, border/immigration officers and protection service providers. Another NDICI funded programme (EUR 5 million), the Regional Operational Centre in Khartoum (ROCK), started its 2nd phase in 2022. It aims at reducing the number of incidents of trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants in East Africa, and enhancing victims' protection. On 7 May 2024 the Commission launched a new call for proposals which also defines the fight against trafficking in human beings as one of its objectives and earmarked EUR 15 million to set up common operational partnership projects (COPs) against migrant smuggling in third countries<sup>139</sup>.

West Africa remains a pivotal origin and transit region for migrants making irregular journeys to the EU through the Central Mediterranean Route and the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean Route. The EU is supporting Common Operational partnerships (COPs) to increase the ownership, impact and long-term sustainability of our partners' efforts in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mauritania and The Gambia (notably financed under ISF). The EU launched a migration partnership and dialogue with Mauritania on 7th March 2024, also covering trafficking and smuggling. In addition, the risks of criminal activities having an impact on development and security, in particular in most affected countries, are serious, posing an additional threat to the governance and stability in the entire region and beyond. In this context, trafficking and smuggling of migrants have been key components of Security programmes in Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania.

In Asia, the successful project "Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants - Asia and the Middle East - GLO.ACT", ended in March 2024. One of the components of the PROTECT "Improving Migration Management & Migrant Protection in Selected Silk Route Countries" programme, implemented by the UNODC builds on the success and lessons learnt of GLO.ACT, and focuses on fight against trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the EU has been supporting the EUROFRONT Programme since 2020. The component on Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants covers four border crossings involving seven countries in South America. In the near future, the goal is to implement the national action plans that resulted from the bi-national and regional mechanisms in place, such as in Paraguay, in Brazil or in Ecuador. The EU also supports the EL PACCTO programme against transnational organised crime and its specialised police cooperation networks, against human trafficking and smuggling.

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<sup>139</sup> ISF-2024-TF2-AG-COP Call template updated version (europa.eu).

At the global level, the NDICI (EUR 5 million) is starting the Project “Promoting Action and Cooperation among countries at global level against Trafficking in Human Beings and the Smuggling of Migrants (PACTS)”. PACTS will support South-South cooperation, and has a strong survivor engagement component.

Furthermore, the EU continued the close cooperation with **international and regional organisations** active in the area<sup>140</sup>, including in the context of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). It also carried on its engagement with the Council of Europe and its Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA).

At national level, Member States have contributed to strengthen the relations with third countries and international organisations including through awareness raising campaigns, training (including of Consulates staff), operational law enforcement and judicial cooperation, the exchange of information and best practices, technical assistance, and targeted funding<sup>141</sup>. For instance, Italy has established bilateral agreements or protocols with countries of origin or transit for victims of trafficking, notably Nigeria, Libya, and Egypt, facilitating direct information exchange. The National Rapporteur Office in Portugal developed training sessions with the authorities of Tunisia during the period 2021-2023.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of trafficking in human beings continues to require a **comprehensive response**, which involves a wide range of actors at national, European, and international level, demands adequate capacity and resources, as well as a well-functioning coordination mechanism.

In order to provide adequate legal, operational and policy responses, the **EU has reinforced its policies to combat trafficking in human beings**. The EU Strategy on combatting trafficking in human beings constitutes a robust framework with concrete actions, which have been implemented or are ongoing. The amended Anti-Trafficking Directive further strengthens the legal response to the crime, by introducing new forms of exploitation, stricter penalties, stronger rules to fight trafficking in human beings, including online, as well as reinforced provisions on the assistance and protection of victims. Furthermore, during the reporting period, the legal framework has also been substantially strengthened by numerous other new EU laws and instruments.

At national level, Member States have taken measures to coordinate and intensify anti-trafficking measures, including through new or updated National Action Plans and Strategies, which contribute to the comprehensive approach to combatting the crime.

Despite progress in the legal, policy and operational framework, the number of registered victims of trafficking has increased and some of the known challenges persist, while new challenges emerge, including **new forms of exploitation**. Moreover, **modifications in trends** have been observed, such as an increase of labour exploitation and forced

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<sup>140</sup> the United National Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

<sup>141</sup> Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland Hungary, Italy, Ireland Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden and Spain.

criminality, trends also confirmed worldwide<sup>142</sup>, as well as changes in the citizenship of victims with a majority of non-EU citizens being victims of trafficking. These challenges require an immediate response to break the business model of traffickers. The **most threatening criminal networks** are involved in trafficking in human beings and make **huge profits** through trafficking in human beings, often linked to **other criminal activities**. **Prosecutions and convictions remain low** compared to the number of suspects, with often lenient **sentences** due to prosecution of offences other than trafficking. Collection of evidence is time and resource intensive and often based solely on victims' testimonies. The increasing shift to the **online dimension** continues to be a challenge, which could in the future be aggravated by artificial intelligence.

The EU Anti-trafficking Hub will support the implementation of the Strategy and the legal provisions, in exchanging best practices, in fostering dialogue amongst anti-trafficking professionals and in ensuring a better understanding of certain concepts, definitions and requirements.

Building on the current Strategy, a new EU Strategy on combatting trafficking in human beings will contribute to addressing emerging challenges beyond 2025. This new Strategy will be the counterpart at EU level of the National anti-trafficking Plans that Member States have to adopt by 15 July 2028 in line with the amended Directive. The EU Strategy will help to steer the priorities from prevention to conviction with a victim-centred approach, across the EU, with non-EU partners and at global level in a coherent manner.

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<sup>142</sup> [2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#)