

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

INNOVATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES IN COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Preface

The Research Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the University of Pécs, Faculty of Law has organised an international conference between 14-16 May 2025. The conference was financed by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation through the National Research, Development and Innovation Office as the managing body, under the MEC_SZ_24 sub-programme of the “Tudományos Mecenatúra Pályázat Call”, MEC_SZ_24, with the support of the winning application no. MEC_SZ 149138. Additionally, the conference was organised in cooperation with the National Police of the Netherlands, the Embassy of the Netherlands in Budapest, Hungary and the Embassy of Hungary in the Hague, the Netherlands.

The conference, called “Innovative Research Approaches in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings” featured presenters and participants from 14 European countries including the Netherlands, Moldova, Slovenia, Poland, Georgia, Northern Ireland, Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Germany, Lithuania, Austria, Malta and Hungary. Researchers presented their findings about various aspects of human trafficking such as novel crime prevention programmes, efficient victim identification methods, legal and practical challenges in the fight against human trafficking and even methods which could help stakeholders, such as authorities, NGOs and the academia work together for the efficient combating of this offense.

This conference proceedings consist of the extended abstracts of the presentation which were delivered on the conference. The presentations can be accessed on the [website of the conference](#).

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1. How to involve third parties in preventive policing in combating trafficking in human beings; opportunities and challenges

*Jorn van Rijn**

Human trafficking or modern slavery is defined in Article 3, paragraph A. of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime of 15 November 2000 and in addition on a European level in

Article 2 of 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, including its revision of July 2024.

These definitions consist out of three core elements, knowingly:

- The act which refers to what is done by the trafficker to the victim and consist out of the recruitment, transportation, transferring and harboring or receipt of a person.
- The means, which looks at the how, which methods are used so to speak. This consist of applying threat, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud or deception
- The purpose addresses the question why did it happen? The reason for the act and means to be implemented is always for the purpose of exploitation. including sexual exploitation, forced slavery and slavery like practices.

A closer inspection of the concept of exploitation shows that this is one out of the two components which need a closer examination and clarification to discuss the concept of human trafficking. Exploitation is 'prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, including begging, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the exploitation of criminal activities or the removal of organs'. But exploitation can only exist if certain vulnerabilities are present. A vulnerability is 'a situation in which the person concerned has no real or acceptable alternative but to submit to the abuse involved'.

While going over all these different parts of the definition one must conclude that human trafficking is a crime with a very wide scope and therefor needs a

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narrowed down approach as discussing human trafficking needs clarification out of a crime orientated perspective.

There is no single type of human trafficking, but rather different crimes connected by the concept of exploitation as this is the goal of the crime itself. Therefor one must use a narrowed down terminology addressing the specific type of exploitation. The more commonly known and referred to types being sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and criminal exploitation. Each of these types have their own specific characteristics regarding the victims involved, the modus operandi applied and the criminals behind the crime. The expansion of crimes under the concept of human trafficking as accepted within the revision of July 2024, means this becomes even more difficult as it is likely that the exploitation of surrogacy, forced marriages and illegal adoption will expand the focus and requires a new adaption of what is known from the other types of exploitation.

The increase of knowledge, the expansion of the types of exploitation and social developments are challenges in the fight against human trafficking led by the police and other law enforcement agencies. One can ask if all these types of exploitation should be investigated by the police or maybe other organizations and institutions need to take responsibility.

At the center of the fight against human trafficking stand the four P's paradigm. The P's paradigm consists out of the following focus points: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships. One returning problem however is the way in how these focus points are being used, knowingly in a reactive way. They are all focused on what is currently known on the crime, its modus operandi, victimization and perpetration rather than having a proactive approach looking at what is not yet known and what it is the ones involved in the fight against human trafficking need to know to become more effective.

But let start with some existing problems in policing strategies as the police holds a central position in the fight against human trafficking. These problems are diverse and include the use of reactive (classic) policing styles, where the police wait for signs and signals to be reported. Next to this there are many conceptual difficulties on what exploitation is and who needs to take responsibility but there are also convergency issues and there is only a limited amount of non-legal research available which is properly validated, uses up-to-date information and investigates the nature and extent of the exploitation.

To overcome the beforementioned shortcomings a combined approach is suggested. This strategy combines the use of traditional policing strategies, which should be evidence based & intelligence led, with online investigations for proactive information gathering and data sharing with a focus towards upstream disruption of the crime by including preventive measures/programs & trainings.

Finally, the police should also invest in partnerships with both public and private partners to support this new approach and style of work.

A better understanding and acceptance of the use of partners is crucial and this requires a closer examination from a governance perspective as this focusses on the short-term, mid-term, and long-term perspective strategies in how the police should select its partners, utilize the partners specific value and input and finally implement this in the work of the police. Short-term focus addresses the operations and the execution of police, while mid-term focusses on management and the way in which the shape the tactics to fight human trafficking. Long-term has a more strategic focus which should become part of the policy within policing human trafficking and only when all three are clear they can be used as part of the partner selection criteria assessment.

Next to the specific needs and requirements out of the police one should always accept a cooperation and partnership based on equality, trust, honesty, loyalty and respect. But this has its challenges as you will have to deal with regulatory limitations, cultural differences, a lack of intrinsic motivation and different interpretations of results. In general cooperation can be sought based on common goals, technological advancements, reciprocity and sustainability but when this is not enough and relevant private partners refuse, evade responsibility or frustrate the process there should also be the *nolens volens* option to force them to cooperate as all have to take their responsibility in the fight against human trafficking.

The Netherlands National Police has embraced the concepts of proactivity, upstream disruption and partnerships. Therefore, the Netherlands National Police reached out to different partners both domestically as on a European level to work together. These partners also include universities who can play a key role in the training of future practitioners, research real-time crime trends, create consortia of like-minded partners and actively contribute to raising awareness and knowledge on the topic of human trafficking. These partners cooperate with the Netherlands National Police in research, the development of new innovative tools and practical events and initiatives focusing on prevention and protection of possible victims. Investing in the future and prevention on the long-term minimizes the risks of falling victim and supports the new style and strategy of policing human trafficking by the Netherlands National Police.

2. Leveraging educational platforms and AI-driven tools to mitigate the risks of human trafficking through awareness, prevention, and intervention

*Mariana Catruc**

*Gabriel Zaharia***

This article analyses the impact of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies into the educational platform Trafficking Escape, a digital simulation designed to raise awareness among teenagers about the dangers of human trafficking in the online environment. The benefits of AI in terms of interaction realism, personalisation of educational content, dynamic risk management, system scalability and operational efficiency are highlighted. The results suggest that AI integration offers a sustainable, engaging and effective solution for digital prevention education.

The deep integration of the Internet into children's daily lives opens up numerous educational and social opportunities, but at the same time generates a number of significant risks, such as cyberbullying, fraudulent commercial practices, sexual abuse and exploitation. At the same time, recent technological developments, such as generative artificial intelligence, exacerbate these risks by facilitating the production and dissemination of false information. This article examines the European Union's (EU) response to these challenges through a comprehensive legislative framework and policy initiatives dedicated to the online safety of minors.

Human trafficking, especially of minors, remains a major threat in the digital age. Preventive education through innovative methods is becoming essential, and the integration of technology in this process is a crucial step. This article proposes an interactive educational model through the game "Trafficking Escape", which uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to simulate realistic scenarios and raise awareness among teenagers.

In an age of accelerating digitalization, children spend more and more time online, exposing them not only to educational and social opportunities, but also to real dangers such as human trafficking. Given this reality, preventive education must adapt to the needs and digital naivety of children. Learning through digital games and the use of serious games provide an innovative, engaging and effective educational framework for raising awareness and educating students about the risks associated with human trafficking.

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The alarming increase in cases of human trafficking involving minors, especially through online recruitment, calls for the development of innovative educational methods adapted to digital realities. Children and adolescents are exposed to increasingly sophisticated risks hidden in seemingly harmless interactions in social networks, online games or streaming platforms. Against this backdrop, Trafficking Escape stands out as an interactive educational initiative aimed at educating students about the dangers of human trafficking using experiential learning methods.

The integration of artificial intelligence within this platform is not just a technological choice but also a pedagogical necessity. It allows not only the simulation of realistic contexts, but also the continuous adaptation of the content to the user's individual needs. This article explores the impact and benefit of artificial intelligence in enhancing the effectiveness of digital education in the field of human trafficking prevention.

3. Legal issues of the victim protection system for human trafficking in Polish law

Liwia Palus*

It might seem that legislative actions, resulting in the development of numerous international regulations, as well as guarantees of victim protection at national levels, would be sufficiently effective in countering the problem of human trafficking¹. Unfortunately, as a result of rapid technological development, and consequently - civilizational changes - we are witnessing the development of crime. All these changes have made human trafficking one of the greatest civilizational threats. The phenomenon of “modern slavery” undoubtedly differs from the historical one that existed already in ancient times, nevertheless, based on current scientific research and achievements in the field of law and criminology, it is possible to identify characteristic features. The very issue of the above-average level of organization of criminal groups allows for distinguishing it from other crimes with similar characteristics, however, it is primarily the transnational nature of the act that testifies to its complexity. Furthermore, the consequences resulting from this crime often effect several countries, which in turn involves the plural jurisdiction². From a crime-fighting perspective, multiple jurisdictions do not seem helpful, as law enforcement becomes significantly more difficult, and perpetrators exploit legal loopholes resulting from different national regulations or avoid responsibility due to insufficient cooperation between countries³.

All these factors undoubtedly indicate that the problem of human trafficking in Poland is becoming more serious each year, especially since Poland's role in this criminal activity is particularly significant. Due to its geographical location, Poland serves simultaneously as a transit country, a country of origin for victims of human trafficking, and a destination country. What is extremely important is that the area requiring fundamental change in the legal-criminological field is the protection of human trafficking victims. There is no doubt that human trafficking is a particularly harmful crime for victims, as it violates fundamental principles of human rights protection⁴. Typically, the violation does not encompass just one right but several in parallel, such as the right to life, prohibition of forced labor, prohibition of discrimination, or the basic right to freedom and personal

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¹ L. Palus, *Handel ludźmi jako realne zagrożenie bezpieczeństwa w dobie kryzysu globalnego spowodowanego pandemią COVID-19*, [w:], *Prawo karne i kryminologia wobec kryzysów XXI w.*, Diana Dajnowicz-Piesiecka, Emilia Jurgielewicz-Delegacz, Emil W. Pływaczewski(red.), Wolters Kluwer, s. 540.

² *Ibidem*, s. 540.

³ C. Rijken, *Trafficking in Persons: Prosecution from a European Perspective*, The Hague 2003, s. 50.

⁴ Z. Lasocik, *Human Trafficking – Social and Legal Aspects*, *Studia Socjologiczne* 2007/4, s. 34–45.

security⁵. Moreover, victims often face the problem of secondary victimization during legal proceedings due to insufficient protection.

A fundamental problem affecting not only Poland but many other European countries is the lack of a single, comprehensive law regulating all protection mechanisms for these entities that are guaranteed by national, European, and international law. It is undeniable that “imposing” on victims the obligation to search for appropriate entitlements not only creates a rather incoherent protection system but, above all, significantly hinders the use of these guarantees, especially since they are dispersed across numerous national legal acts.

It should also be emphasized that accessing the legal guarantees of protection is conditioned upon proper identification as a human trafficking victim, which is determined by law enforcement agencies. In the absence of grounds to demonstrate connections with the crime of human trafficking, the legislator obviously has provided protections for crime victims in a general sense, but this catalog is significantly narrower than in the case of the crime in question. A typical example of such a situation is forced labor, one of the most common forms of human trafficking in Poland. The surprisingly low number of initiated criminal proceedings does not result from the fact that exploitation in the labor sphere does not occur, but from the lack of a definition of forced labor, and thus difficulties in proving the connection with human trafficking⁶. This situation not only results in lower criminal responsibility for perpetrators, who are usually convicted of gross violations of labor rights (for which penalties are extremely low) but above all significantly complicates victims’ ability to assert their rights. It should also be taken into account that the so-called “reflection period” available to victims of human trafficking is also associated with a certain kind of threat. Of course, the legislator’s intention to guarantee victims time to consider whether they want to cooperate with law enforcement agencies should not be subject to criticism, however, it should be kept in mind that in practice, the 3-month period provided for in legal regulations may prove to be insufficient⁷. Taking into account the fact that victims often face trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, or negative experiences with law enforcement agencies in their country of origin, and furthermore, fear of criminal liability resulting from lack of awareness of their rights, many victims do not decide to cooperate, which in turn may result in deportation to their country of origin, especially since foreign victims are often initially treated as illegal migrants. It should be taken into account that such a situation brings negative consequences on two levels. Not only does it limit victims’ opportunities to benefit from the protection measures available to them, but it also significantly impedes proceedings due to limited evidence, and consequently - perpetrators in many cases remain unpunished.

⁵ Z. Lasocik, *Handel ludźmi jako przestępstwo i naruszenie praw człowieka — wyzwania dla kryminologii*, *Archiwum Kryminologii*, t XXVIII, s. 236.

⁶ Z. Lasocik, *Dlaczego w Polsce jest niewiele spraw karnych dotyczących pracy przymusowej?*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, s. 25.

⁷ B. Namysłowska-Gabrysiak, *Handel ludźmi w celu wykorzystania seksualnego. Zagadnienia karnoprawne i kryminologiczne*, Wydawnictwo C.H.Beck, s. 190.

Another problem is related to the availability of social assistance. Similarly to the previous case, support has been guaranteed by the legislator, however, the regulations are presented in a very general scope and do not take into account the specific needs of individual victims. Taking into consideration the types of exploitation and the manner of victim exploitation, the needs will differ significantly from each other. For example, in the case of persons who were subjected to sexual exploitation, medical needs (particularly gynecological) and psychological support will have priority character, because this group of victims is particularly exposed to experiencing social stigmatization⁸. In turn, in the case of forced labor, physical rehabilitation or specialized treatment is often extremely important, while in the case of persons who were forced to beg, addiction therapy is often necessary. Unfortunately, national law regulations treat victims in this context as a homogeneous group, therefore this is an area that undoubtedly needs change to ensure proper assistance to victims.

The pursuit of financial claims for damages suffered also poses a challenge. Of course, legal regulations provide for the institution of redress and compensation, however, it should be noted that access to free legal assistance is severely limited. There is also no doubt that the financial situation of victims in most cases prevents them from using professional legal assistance, especially since additional costs related to using interpreter services must be considered.

The above examples describe only some of the challenges that victims of human trafficking must face. On one hand, Poland has made significant progress in recent years in providing victims with better protection, however, the dispersion of guarantees across multiple legal acts definitely weakens the actions taken. A change involving the creation of a comprehensive legal act would be a fundamental step toward providing victims with the support they truly deserve.

⁸ A.Dziergawka, *Secondary victimisation of victims of sexual offences – regulatory and practical aspects*, Prawo w Działaniu 57/2024 - sprawy karne, s. 167.

4. Online sex work-related risk factors: a qualitative snapshot from Georgia

*Ushangi Bakhtadze**

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*Jorn van Rij****

INTRODUCTION

Georgia presents a unique context for examining the intersection of online sex work, trafficking risks, and institutional marginalisation due to its geographical location and rapidly evolving political and digital landscape. While online platforms have enabled greater autonomy and discretion for sex workers (Cunningham et al., 2017), they have also introduced new vulnerabilities, such as surveillance, online harassment, and the difficulty of distinguishing consensual work from coercion (GRETA, 2022). Recent legal developments restricting gender recognition and expression have exacerbated exclusion for LGBTQ communities, particularly trans sex workers (ILGA-Europe, 2024). Although prostitution itself is not criminalised in Georgia, the prohibition of advertising and facilitation pushes sex work into unregulated spaces, fostering mistrust in institutions and heightening exposure to exploitation. Migrant sex workers, especially those without legal status or community support, face increased risks of trafficking and violence (Pekkarinen & Jokinen, 2023), while economic hardship continues to make online sex work one of the few viable survival strategies available. This study builds on these concerns to explore how legal ambiguity, digital vulnerability, and social isolation collectively contribute to exploitation and abuse.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews to explore risks and vulnerabilities among online sex workers in Georgia. Sampling combined purposive and snowball methods: respondents were identified via Georgian sex work platforms and NGO contacts. In total, eleven sex workers were interviewed, including six trans women and five cis women, with a mix of Georgian nationals and migrants from Kazakhstan and Albania. Interviews were

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conducted either in person or online via Google Meet, depending on participant preference; most were recorded with informed consent. Transcripts were analysed thematically to identify working conditions, signs of exploitation, and trafficking-related indicators. Ethical considerations included full anonymity, voluntary participation, and compensation equivalent to typical earnings. While the study offers valuable insights, limitations include a non-representative sample and potential exclusion of the most hidden or vulnerable individuals.

FINDINGS

Economic and social motivations

Most respondents began sex work before the age of 20, with experience ranging from 1.5 to 20 years. The primary motivator across the board was financial hardship, compounded by a lack of family support, discrimination—particularly against trans women—and limited employment opportunities. Several individuals also mentioned entering sex work to explore their identity, intimacy, or out of curiosity. Peer networks played a critical role in providing initial access to the field, with friends offering practical advice and referrals. While sex work offered a pathway to economic survival, low social capital and unequal access to relevant information created conditions that increased vulnerability, particularly for those considering work abroad.

Digital work environment

The majority of respondents now operate online, using encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal. Digital platforms enabled some degree of independence, allowing workers to advertise services, manage clients, and exercise control over interactions. Trans women were more likely to offer a wider variety of services, compared to cis women. Some respondents admitted to posting misleading ads to attract clients.

Many have shifted away from street-based sex work, some continue to work offline out of preference. Rising inflation and economic strain since the COVID-19 pandemic have depressed client demand and lowered rates, tightening the financial pressures that initially led many into the sector. Legislative changes and growing anti-LGBTQ sentiment have further compromised safety, especially for trans women.

Managing work and safety

Georgian sex workers demonstrated relatively high levels of autonomy: they set personal rules, selected clients, determined work hours, and managed their earnings. Most also used aliases and separate phones to compartmentalize their identities. In contrast, one of the foreign sex workers displayed clear signs of ex-

ploitation; she had no control over her schedule, finances, or housing, suggesting coercion or trafficking.

Safety practices varied across settings. Hotels were seen as safest due to built-in surveillance and registration, while private homes and especially client homes or cars were perceived as more dangerous. Key safety factors included environmental familiarity, the ability to respond physically to threats, and the presence of external support. Trans women tended to rely on physical self-defence, while cis women emphasized verbal de-escalation or escape.

Client filtering was widely practiced. Many enforced rules regarding hygiene, sobriety, and acceptable behaviour. Retaliation against abusive clients—such as demanding payment—was not uncommon, although these actions sometimes introduced new risks like doxxing or threats. Despite digital work environments reducing exposure to violence, abuse remained a consistent reality.

Experiences of abuse

Almost all respondents reported experiences of intimidation, violence, or theft, with street-based workers facing higher rates of physical assault. Emotional abuse was also common: some clients cultivated emotional intimacy to manipulate or exploit, while others issued threats of exposure to family members or the public. A few respondents had received death threats or threats against their children. In most of these cases, no formal complaints were filed due to fear of retaliation or lack of trust in authorities. Foreign sex workers appeared particularly vulnerable, with one visibly injured respondent reporting no control over her work or earnings.

Institutional distrust

Trust in formal institutions was low. Trans respondents described deteriorating treatment by police following recent legislative shifts. Many sex workers shared experiences of public shaming, homophobia, and police indifference. Several reported being asked to act as informants—spying on clients or planting drugs in exchange for protection or payment.

Religious institutions were also viewed with suspicion. Some respondents stated that both clergy and police had historically used sex worker services to extract information about each other's networks. While most evaluated NGOs positively in general terms, there was notable hesitation in directly approaching them, with some citing distrust in leadership.

Social isolation

Social networks among sex workers were weak and fragmented. Trust between cis and trans women was low, and few respondents reported reaching out to others in times of crisis. Client-sharing platforms and group chats were underuti-

lised or seen as unreliable. Some workers felt emotionally closer to clients than to peers or friends, underscoring the depth of their social isolation.

Perceptions of trafficking

Understanding of trafficking was limited and often confused with other forms of abuse or exploitation. Most Georgian sex workers believed they were unlikely to be trafficked, viewing it as a foreigner-specific risk. Yet, several described first-hand or observed experiences—such as restrictions on movement, earnings, or communication—that fit trafficking definitions. A particularly concerning case involved a foreign worker monitored by a third party, showing multiple red flags. Respondents also gave conflicting accounts about working abroad, with some viewing it as profitable and others warning of exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Sex workers in Georgia, particularly trans and migrant women, face heightened risks of exploitation, violence, and coercion due to financial hardship, social marginalisation, and weak institutional protections. While digital platforms offer some autonomy, they also expose workers to new threats such as surveillance, blackmail, and data misuse. Mistrust in law enforcement and limited support networks further isolate individuals and reduce access to help. A lack of awareness about trafficking leaves many unable to identify or report high-risk situations, compounding their vulnerability.

5. Identifying Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in the Context of Child Criminal Exploitation in Northern Ireland

*Gilian Kane**

*Andrew Chisholm***

This paper presents findings from research conducted between October 2024 and March 2025, investigating barriers to the identification of modern slavery and human trafficking in the context of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland (NI). Recognising such harm is crucial to ensure that children can access the relevant protections within international human rights, and anti-trafficking law. Yet, UK Home Office statistics (2023) show that since 2015, there have only been 45 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in NI, of potential child victims of modern slavery who have been exploited within the UK. Further, there has never been a UK male child referred to the NRM in NI. These figures stand in stark contrast to the rest of the UK where over 10,000 UK male children have been identified. The low numbers are surprising given the legacy of the past and continued presence of paramilitarism in NI. Against this backdrop, we use legal analysis, data analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews to explore: (1) similarities and differences between how modern slavery and human trafficking (in the context of CCE) are identified in NI and the rest of the UK; (2) how the law (international and domestic) on modern slavery and human trafficking applies in the NI context, with a focus on what such obligations require in terms of identification, and; (3) first responder perception, knowledge, and recognition of CCE. In so doing, the study identifies barriers to identification, and proposes recommendations to improve the response in law, policy, and practice, with a view to a more effective operationalisation of children's rights.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

In this project, we investigated barriers to the recognition and identification of modern slavery and human trafficking for children in Northern Ireland. In 2023, publicly available statistics¹ from the UK Data Service (UKDS) show that since

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¹ UK National Referral Mechanism. Northern Ireland NRM Data Analysis Briefing. 2023 Annual Review. IOM. <https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11381/files/documents/2024-04/iom_uk_ni-nrm-annual-review-2023.pdf> accessed 26 June 2025.

1st January 2015 there have only been 45 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)² in Northern Ireland for cases where an individual was reported as a potential child victim of modern slavery who was exploited within the UK.³ Only three such cases were referred in 2023.

Furthermore, in 2023, there were no children referred to the NRM reporting criminal exploitation, often referred to as child criminal exploitation (CCE), in Northern Ireland. This is in stark contrast to such potential cases in the rest of the UK where 2,825 children in England, 227 in Wales and 66 in Scotland were referred as potential victims of CCE in 2023. Indeed, since records began in 2015, there have only been three child referrals (all male) to the NRM reporting criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland, compared with 11,902 identified across the rest of the UK (England, Scotland and Wales). Moreover, there has never been a UK male child referred to the NRM at all in Northern Ireland,⁴ despite 10,762 UK male children identified specifically for CCE throughout the rest of the UK.

While there has never been a UK male child referred in Northern Ireland, UK male children specifically reporting criminal exploitation make up 24% of all child referrals across the rest of the UK since 2015.

The extraordinarily low number of potential victims of CCE and wider forms of modern slavery in Northern Ireland is particularly surprising given the legacy of the past and continued presence of paramilitarism⁵ in Northern Ireland. Paramilitaries and organised crime groups can exploit children and young people in Northern Ireland, a problem that has received attention from state and non-state actors.⁶ Yet, framings of such conduct as modern slavery or human trafficking remain almost entirely absent in Northern Ireland despite criminal exploitation being recognised within the framework of human trafficking more

² More information on the National Referral Mechanism and the decision making process is outlined in Annex 1 – List of Definitions

³ Publicly available Home Office statistics on NRM referrals are available through the UK Data Service (UKDS). Home Office statistics disaggregate an NRM referral as being exploited ‘within the UK’, ‘within the UK and overseas’ or ‘overseas’ only.

⁴ UK National Referral Mechanism. (n 1).

⁵ Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland. 2015. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469548/Paramilitary_Groups_in_Northern_Ireland_-_20_Oct_2015.pdf> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁶ Colm Walsh. *Child Criminal Exploitation*, 2022. <<https://www.endingtheharm.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Criminal-harms-report-final.pdf>> accessed 26 June 2025.

widely in the UK for over a decade,⁷ with particular focus on exploitation in county-lines in recent years.⁸

AIMS

This research project was a scoping study to enhance understanding of why, given the increased focus on addressing harms experienced by children in the context of criminal exploitation and paramilitarism,⁹ the identification of modern slavery and human trafficking is largely absent in these contexts.

OBJECTIVES

In this study, we pursued the following objectives:

1. Identify risks facing children in Northern Ireland in relation to criminal exploitation and explain why the risks and harm experienced by children in Northern Ireland in relation to criminal exploitation is not framed as modern slavery/human trafficking or reflected in the level of referrals to the NRM.

⁷ Serious Organised Crime Agency, Intelligence Assessment, UKGTC: A Baseline Assessment on the Nature and Scale of Human Trafficking in 2011, 2012, https://documentation.lastrapointinternational.org/Isidocs/SOCA_UKHTC_Baseline_Assessment_2011.pdf accessed 26 June 2025.

⁸ ‘County Lines’ as defined by the UK Serious Violence Strategy “is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.” Policy paper: Serious Violence Strategy. GOV UK. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁹ Recent increased focus on addressing the harms experienced by children in the context of criminal exploitation and paramilitarism includes: Colm Walsh, *From contextual to criminal harm: Young people's perceptions and experiences of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland* (Department of Justice, Northern Ireland 2023). Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published report on the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime in Northern Ireland, citing child criminal exploitation. The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland. UK Parliament. <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmniaf/43/report.html>> accessed 26 June 2025. Several 2024 news articles including: Mike McBride: ‘Young people ‘being groomed’ into paramilitary violence’ *BBC* (London 11 April 2023) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65238930>> accessed 26 June 2025. Suzanne McGonagle, ‘Children as young as seven involved in south Belfast rioting ‘incredibly disturbing’ *The Irish News* (Belfast, 17 July 2024) <<https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/children-as-young-as-seven-involved-in-south-belfast-rioting-incredibly-disturbing-27CBTROAOZETTC5QTQLO2DVC44/>> accessed 26 June 2025. Connor Lynch, ‘Why is Northern Ireland lagging so far behind the rest of the UK in dealing with Child Criminal Exploitation?’ *BelfastLive* (Belfast, 6 April, 2024) <<https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/news-opinion/northern-ireland-lagging-far-behind-28947727>> accessed 26 June 2025.

2. Consider if the current law impacts on the identification of CCE in Northern Ireland; analyse if the law (international and domestic) could be more effectively implemented to assist in identifying MSHT among children in Northern Ireland.
3. Examine early intervention and identification mechanisms in place for children in Northern Ireland and enhance understanding of how first responder organisations perceive, recognise and identify child victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland, specifically in the context of CCE and paramilitarism.
4. Utilise research findings to inform law, policy and practice, around addressing CCE as a form of modern slavery and human trafficking to improve identification and support of children affected by CCE.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The overarching methodological approach of the research was a sociolegal one. We adopt the definition of Wheeler and Thomas: '[t]he word "socio" in socio-legal studies means to us an interface with a context within which the law exists, be that a sociological, historical, economic, geographical or other context' (2000:271). Contextually, this study assessed the law – especially positive obligations to identify trafficking in international, regional and domestic law – in a unique geographical and cultural context. Northern Ireland is a transitional society, one in which the legacy of ethno-national conflict¹⁰ impacts upon a range of socio-political issues, particularly when it comes to identity and belonging. Part of this legacy relates to the continued existence of paramilitary organisations and associated organised crime. It is within this context that our research will be centred. The research is rooted in a conceptual understanding of human trafficking that can encompass internal trafficking for the purposes of criminal exploitation. This understanding is now recognised in the international¹¹ context, as well as the broader UK context.

Research methods were both qualitative and quantitative and included: (a) doctrinal legal analysis, exploring the content, scope and interpretation of key international and domestic norms; (b) 14 semi-structured interviews, between December 2024 and March 2025, with 15 key informants¹² based in NI (n=11) and Great Britain (GB) (n=4). Interview participants are anonymized and referenced as NI-01 to NI-15; (c) a survey carried out between December 2024 and March

¹⁰ C.P. McManus, 'Dealing with the Legacy of Ethnic Conflict: Confronting 'Othering' through Transformative Adult Education—A Northern Ireland Case Study' (2016) 16 *Ethnopolitics* 411.

¹¹ Human Rights Council, Implementation of the non-punishment principle, Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Siobhán Mulhally, A/HRC/47/34.

¹² 15 key informants from organisations, statutory bodies or law enforcement agencies. The interviews took place between December 2024 and February 2025.

2025, and completed by 43 key stakeholders based in NI comprising representatives from statutory bodies (35%, n= 15)¹³; law enforcement agencies (33%, n=14); and the community and voluntary sector (33%, n=14).¹⁴ Interviews and surveys were complemented by a desk-based review of relevant literature (academic and grey), legal and policy documents and existing data sets, namely the NRM statistics disaggregated from the UK Data Service (UKDS).¹⁵ Using both purposive and snowball sampling methods, interviewees were selected based on the nature of their work in relation to both MSHT and CCE. Participants included those responsible for policymaking and law enforcement, practitioners working directly with at-risk children and well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in both NI and GB. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Interview data was coded thematically and through the use of NVivo data analysis software.

The findings will be presented in brief during our presentation, and the full research report will be launched in June 2025.

¹³ This included HSCNI, Education Authority, Department of Health, Probation Board of NI, Safeguarding Board of NI

¹⁴ This included those working in dedicated anti-trafficking organisations, as well as youth work organisations. The text of the survey is included in Annex II.

¹⁵ The study was approved by Ulster University's Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Filter Committee in October 2024.

6. The Applicability of Novel Crime Prevention Techniques in Hungary – A Case Study

*István Szijártó**

The presentation explores the applicability, effectiveness, and reception of an innovative crime prevention technique in Hungary, focusing on a mobile crime prevention tool developed by the Reshape Foundation. The so called 'Escapetruck' utilises a specially designed mobile escape room to raise awareness about the realities of human trafficking, particularly sexual exploitation mostly targeting teenagers of 14-18 ages. Through a hybrid methodology that blends interactive education with quantitative evaluation, the project demonstrates how experiential learning can be instrumental in raising awareness and preventing victimisation.

The Escapetruck consists of a modified shipping container mounted on a semi truck and a trailer. The container functions as a mobile escape room. This design allows the novel crime prevention programme to reach a wide geographical area and engage participants who might otherwise be inaccessible to conventional crime prevention initiatives. The escape room presents a scenario set in a brothel, visually and narratively reconstructing the coercive and exploitative environment typical of sexual exploitation. Participants engage in problem-solving exercises embedded in a coherent storyline, whereby they learn about the gradual process of victim grooming, psychological manipulation, and entrapment.

In 2024, the Escapetruck was operated over ten days across six Hungarian cities—Győr, Budapest, Kaposvár, Dombóvár, Komló, and Pécs. Approximately 1,000 individuals participated in the programme, with 292 completing a structured post-experience questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to quantitatively assess participants' comprehension of key elements of the trafficking scenario. The demographic breakdown includes 182 high school students, 49 university students, 35 practitioners, 11 elementary school students, and 15 non-specified respondents. The presentation showcases and analyses the results of the questionnaire.

The first question evaluates whether participants are familiar with the concept of human trafficking. An overwhelming 97.8% respond affirmatively, demonstrating a high level of initial awareness.

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The second question assesses whether participants believe human trafficking occurs within Hungary. Again, 97.8% answer in the affirmative, revealing a widespread understanding that trafficking is not merely an international or remote phenomenon, but a localised and present danger. This result underscores the importance of framing trafficking as a domestic issue within awareness campaigns.

The third question was used to identify the demographic breakdown of the respondents. Question four addresses specific vulnerabilities of the victim in the scenario. Participants are invited to select multiple applicable characteristics. A high percentage (77.5% to 89%) correctly identified the lack of family or social support and neglect. This indicates that participants remembered very well that there are important social dimensions of trafficking, aligning with both criminological literature and victimology principles.

In question five, participants are asked to identify the character of Bence within the narrative. An impressive 90.5% correctly identified him as the perpetrator, indicating clear recognition of the trafficker's role and the absence of ambiguity regarding his intentions.

Question six examines how the victim comes into contact with Bence. The majority (95%) correctly identified the social media platform as the medium of initial contact, thereby acknowledging the digital recruitment dimension of trafficking—a phenomenon that reflects modern trafficking trends and technological facilitation.

Question seven asks why the victim trusts Bence, allowing multiple correct answers. 88.5% cited emotional resonance—Bence acts like someone who shares the victim's personality and experiences. Additionally, 45% selected social invisibility – the victim had not previously received attention – which complements the first explanation and shows an understanding of emotional grooming tactics. These answers point to a nuanced grasp of how traffickers exploit psychological vulnerabilities to gain trust.

In question eight, participants are required to explain how Bence ultimately traps the victim. The correct answer is through deceit. 83.5% correctly indicated that Bence used the tactic of going on a vacation for the entrapment of the victim. Question nine concerns the means by which the victim is forced into prostitution. The answer options reflect multiple pathways: seizure of documents, relocation, and direct force. The responses suggest that participants remembered correctly that the travel documents of the victim were seized, and she was brought to a brothel.

In question ten, participants assessed the conditions under which the victim was treated in the brothel. 64% correctly identified physical violence and coercion

as tactics used by traffickers to control victims. This is a much lower score than those which were reached in previous questions. This may be explained by the fact that this information is only told in the final premise of the escape room where participants are already greatly focused on escape rather than on the story itself.

Question eleven investigates how the victim escapes. Only 45% identified the correct answer—asking for help from a client. This relatively low score may be explained by the ending of the escape room whereby the victim lets the participants know that they can only escape with the code 112, that is the emergency hotline in the EU. Since this is one of the most significant points in the game, many may remember incorrectly that this is how the victim escaped instead of asking for help from a client.

Question twelve deals with the consequences of exploitation. Participants selected from multiple answers, including physical harm and psychological trauma. Correct answers span PTSD, damage to internal organs, and the need for surgeries. The percentages—ranging from 31% to 77.5%—demonstrate that while many understand the long-term consequences of trafficking, a significant minority underestimated its severity.

Question thirteen assesses the participant's perception of the physical setting used in the escape room. Only 57.5% correctly identified the setting as a brothel. This relatively low recognition rate may suggest that the realism of the setting could be further enhanced or that participants require more contextual framing before entering the scenario.

Overall, the results of the questionnaire reveal a generally high level of awareness regarding the dynamics of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Participants demonstrate accurate knowledge of grooming methods, risk factors, and coercion tactics. However, some areas—such as knowledge of emergency exit strategies and full comprehension of long-term victim impacts—require reinforcement in the story or another storytelling method.

This study demonstrates that the Escapetruck represents a novel, effective, and viable model for crime prevention education. Its success lies in its ability to communicate complex legal and criminological concepts through immersive experience under an exceptionally short time of 18 minutes. In conclusion, the case study validates the utility of experiential, mobile, and emotionally engaging tools in crime prevention strategy. The initiative exemplifies how participatory learning can translate abstract legal concepts—such as coercion, consent, and criminal exploitation—into accessible and emotionally resonant lessons for diverse audiences. Future implementations should consider the results of the questionnaire when modifying the game mechanics of the Escapetruck to further increase the efficiency of learning.

7. Identification and referral system for the victims of human trafficking in Hungary

*Péter Hudák**

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND

The aim of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings is to build on existing international instruments to combat trafficking in human beings and the body of law established within the European Union, to further strengthen the protection provided by those instruments and to promote the development of rules by creating a comprehensive international legal framework focusing on the human rights of victims of trafficking (Preamble and Article 39).

Hungary has been in compliance with the requirements of the Convention since 2012. With the adoption of the new Criminal Code (Act C of 2012), including the recodification of the definition of trafficking in human beings (Article 192), and the adoption of Government Decree 354/2012 (XII. 13.) on the identification of victims of trafficking in human beings (hereinafter: THB Decree), the transposition of Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council was completed by the end of 2012, which is based on the Convention in its essential elements and carries forward its acquis.

Of particular relevance to the topic is the THB Decree, which defines the identification and the referral of potential victims of trafficking in human beings who are Hungarian citizens or have the right of free movement and residence.

The THB Decree contains rules on the procedure for the identification of a person who has become a victim of trafficking (relevant concepts such as the identification interview, the scope of the identification bodies, the scope of the voluntary collaborating bodies, the shelters, the safe accommodations or the indirect victims).

It defines the role of each body in the procedure and its responsibilities in cases where potential victim of trafficking in human beings comes to its attention. It also contains provisions on sheltered accommodation and the conditions of accommodation therein, as well as on the provision of statistical data and on Hungarian nationals identified abroad.

The THB Decree also includes an annex on the identification form (data sheet) and the procedures to be followed for the identification and the referral of Hungarian victims of trafficking in human beings and of adults with the right of free

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movement and residence in Hungary.

After the entry into force of the THB Decree, the identification and referral of victims was exclusively paper-based, as was the communication between the identification bodies. However, this was not considered to be an effective solution, latency remained high and the number of identified victims of trafficking reaching the bodies and organisations providing support to them (e.g. victim support services, OKIT) remained low.

CREATION AND PURPOSE OF THE EKAT SYSTEM

From 1 October 2016 to 30 September 2017, in the project within the Internal Security Fund (ISF) No. 5.4.1/2.-2016-00001. “Establishment of a web-based system to assist the referral mechanism of victims of trafficking in human beings and to monitor trends in trafficking in human beings” the Ministry of Justice (and its predecessor) established the Identification and Support of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings IT system (hereinafter: the EKAT System).

The EKAT System serves a dual purpose:

- to ensure that the necessary information and data for providing assistance and support to victims is provided to the victim support service (or other agencies involved in the victim’s care: OKIT, health service, guardianship),
- facilitates a better understanding of the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings on the basis of the data recorded, thus allowing for better planning of interventions.

In the past, the identification, the reporting and the data provision required by law was either not carried out at all or exclusively on paper, with very low efficiency. Due to the written consent of the victims, paper-based recording has been maintained after the introduction of the system, but the transmission, systematisation and statistical analysis of the data is carried out exclusively in the system.

The aim of the Ministry of Justice was therefore to create an IT environment that would facilitate the identification, referral, care and support of the potential victims of trafficking in human beings. The creation of a web-based system allowed for the collection of statistical data, the transfer of data between relevant governmental bodies and the referral of victims to be carried out in a more efficient and coordinated manner, in line with the legal framework. The IT system was primarily designed for the transmission, systematisation and statistical analysis of data in order to provide a more efficient identification (and support) of victims and a broader range of tools to combat trafficking in human beings.

The EKAT System was live by November 2017, after testing, training and a comprehensive vulnerability assessment. In addition to the identification bodies, some representatives of the voluntarily collaborating bodies were also involved as collaborative partners in the implementation of the project and their feedback was incorporated into the design and development of the system.

The use of the system is mandatory for the identification bodies. From the start, more than 3,600 organisations, more than 5,700 staff members have registered in the EKAT System and more than 1,200 identification forms have been recorded.

Since it launched, the system has been modified several times in order to comply with legal requirements and the needs of users and operators.

STRUCTURE OF THE EKAT SYSTEM

The EKAT System is a unique, custom software solution for collecting, organising, extracting and processing data on trafficking in human beings, based on the needs of the professional sector.

The system is a three-tier application with a web-based user interface. It requires a compatible browser to use and no other additional systems are required. A test software environment has been installed alongside the live environment. The system is divided into three main units.

On the public interface, the application operator can place static, public information.

The form management module of the system is used to record of data sheets, display and transmit the individual questions filled in on paper during the identification process (e.g. victim data, signs of victimisation, data related to exploitation). The form management module is user-friendly, easy to use, practically guides the user through the recording process and also warns of incorrect or incomplete recording. In case of an error, the form and data sheet cannot be recorded/not possible to record.

The statistics module allows to anonymously aggregate and evaluate the recorded data. The three sub-units operate in harmony as a unified system using a unified database.

In the EKAT System, multiple user groups and authorisation levels have been created for the access of certain program functions (e.g.: recording new data, closing data, merging data). During the registration (which can be done online

since May 2023), users are assigned authorisations according to their role in the identification and their tasks.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE EKAT SYSTEM (“EKAT 2.0”)

In order to make the EKAT System work as efficiently as possible, the Ministry of Justice implemented a project in 2022 within the Internal Security Found (ISF) No. 5.2.2/23-2022-00001. “Implementation of tasks aimed at preparing the further development of the EKAT System”. Outcome products of the project: preparation of 1 technical specification and 1 system design, taking into account professional needs, compliance with legislation, integration of the follow-up module. These two documents will contribute to the preparation and the planning of the volume of the major development of the EKAT System.

On the basis of these documents, the Ministry of Justice submitted a call for proposals in September 2024 for the “Information and communication technology development in the field of criminal data exchange” (Internal Security Found – ISF Plus No. 1.1.2-24.). The main element of the tender is the further development and technological rewriting and quality assurance of the EKAT System. In addition to the technological rewriting required due to the obsolescence of the software and the changes in legislation, the development includes the interfacing of the EKAT System with the specialised systems for victim support, legal assistance and other systems (e.g. police IT system) in order to make the EKAT System more efficient and to avoid users having to record the same data more than once. The development of the follow-up module will be implemented in the course of the Call for Proposals in order to allow for a more comprehensive follow-up of victims in the future, and to allow for the subsequent identification of the services used by the victim of trafficking, be it financial assistance/state compensation, shelter or free legal aid. Research into the possibility of establishing system-system links is also part of the project.

In the course of the project, a consular module will also be developed, whereby in order to identify victims of human trafficking, to effectively trace victims and to provide assistance to consulates, an interface will be created within the EKAT System, through which it will be possible to report directly if a potential victim of human trafficking of Hungarian nationality is detected in the foreign country.

In addition to these, the Ministry of Justice, through the European Network on Victims’ Rights („ENVR”), asked each Member State in 2024 to indicate, briefly, whether they had any IT systems in place to support victims. The responses were sent to us by the Ministry of Justice staff in each Member State. The replies were analysed and on this basis the Netherlands and Romania were selected for the expert visits.

International discussions, consultations and studies to be conducted will allow the system to further develop and establish data connections with certain foreign systems in order to reach victims as widely as possible.

Based on the experience gained, it is necessary to develop a new educational system, to train users according to the educational plan and to provide regular further training, as there are about 10,000 organisations that should provide data to the EKAT System, whereas currently only about one third of them are registered in the system and only a smaller number of registered organisations provide data.

To encourage identification bodies to use the system as widely as possible, it is important that the interface itself is designed in a modern and user-friendly way. With such a large user base, the maintenance of user data is a problem, which is currently done centrally at the operator level. For maintenance, it is essential that organisations give timely report of changes in their staff or organisation. The development of an incentive solution to facilitate the notification and report of changes is also part of the proposal.

The project for the further development of the EKAT System is expected to start in 2025 and end in 2027, following a positive evaluation.

8. The Poland-Belarus Border Crisis and Trafficking in Human Beings - A Criminal Law Perspective

*Jan Stajanko**
*Michał Wawrzyńczyk***

ASSESSING THE SITUATION AT THE POLAND-BELARUS BORDER

The focus of this contribution is the crisis on EU-Belarus borders, which started in the summer of 2021. In August of 21', Lithuania passed the laws allowing for pushbacks¹ - Poland had done the same in October of 21'.² Since then, the practice of pushbacks became a custom, being implemented pretty much as often as possible. On the Polish border, just in the first 9 days of May 2025, over 800 attempts to illegally cross the border were reported³. In 2025, according to POSG, there were almost 6,500 attempts.⁴ In 2024, there were nearly 30,000 attempts to illegally cross the border, with 346 organizers and helpers being arrested,⁵ with migrants coming in from 52 different states. Similarly, in 2023, there were nearly

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¹Paul Adams and Reality Check, 'Poland border crisis: What happens to migrants who are turned away?' *BBC* (London, 21 November 2021) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/59348337>> accessed 26 June 2025.

² 'Migrants face expulsion at Polish border under new law' *BBC* (London 15 October 2021) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58921310>> accessed 26 June 2025; Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 13 marca 2020 r. w sprawie czasowego zawieszenia lub ograniczenia ruchu granicznego na określonych przejściach granicznych (Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 435 z późn. zm.)

³ Michał Bura, 'Granica polsko - białoruska' *Straż Graniczna* (09 May 2025) <<https://www.podlaski.strazgraniczna.pl/pod/aktualnosci/65932,Granica-polsko-bialoruska.html>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁴ Katarzyna Zdanowicz, 'Granica polsko - białoruska.' *Straż Graniczna* (27 April 2025) <<https://www.podlaski.strazgraniczna.pl/pod/aktualnosci/65765,Granica-polsko-bialoruska.html>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁵ Katarzyna Zdanowicz, 'Nielegalna migracja w Podlaskim Oddziale Straży Granicznej – podsumowanie' *Straż Graniczna* (21 January 2025) <https://www.podlaski.strazgraniczna.pl/pod/aktualnosci/64039%2CNielegalna-migracja-w-Podlaskim-Oddziale-Strazy-Granicznej-podsumowanie.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com> accessed 26 June 2025.

26,000 attempts to cross the border,⁶ with migrants coming in from 52 different states.⁷

Following the data on the flow of migrants is not easy, as there are no comprehensive reports on migrant crossings. Some argue that Polish statistics are very incomplete as compared to the German ones, especially when it comes to crossing of the Polish-German border.⁸ It is unknown what happens to most of the people that enter EU through Polish-Belarusian border. However, it is clear that they are subject to multiple „mule offers” by various parties – not only criminals, but also NGO’s and activists – offering them a transit services to seek asylum inside or outside Poland.

It is also not particularly clear as to what the reality is for the migrants while in Belarus. Focusing on media reports and migrants’ testimonies, they are allegedly pushed by both states like a ball;⁹ it is said that Belarusian officials beat and detain those who return and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again, meanwhile preventing them in most cases from either traveling elsewhere in Belarus or returning to their home countries.¹⁰ However, in 2021, Amnesty International reported that Belarusian authorities have already started forcibly returning them to their countries of origin, including returning them unlawfully without an evaluation of their protection needs, including an interviewed group of 66 individuals who had been returned, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to their country after failed attempts to reach the EU.¹¹

In contrast, the European Parliament report states that, in order to attract people, Belarus simplified its visa procedures and convinced migrants to travel to Belarus with the aim of entering the EU easily. After arriving in Minsk, migrants realised that to enter into the EU they would have to cross forests, streams and

⁶ Katarzyna Zdanowicz, 'Przełom roku na polsko-białoruskiej granicy' *Straż Graniczna* (2 January 2024) <<https://www.podlaski.strazgraniczna.pl/pod/aktualnosci/58410,Przełom-roku-na-polsko-bialoruskiej-granicy.html>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁷ Paweł Śnieć, 'Miniona doba bez prób nielegalnego przekroczenia' *Straż Graniczna* (9 January 2024) <<https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12829,Miniona-doba-bez-prob-nielegalnego-przekroczenia.html>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁸ Małgorzata Tomczak, 'Ile osób naprawdę pokonuje granicę polsko-białoruską? Dane niemieckich służb ujawniają skalę' *OKO Press* (Warsaw, 17 August 2023) <<https://oko.press/ile-osob-pokonuje-granice-polsko-bialoruska-dane-niemieckie>> accessed 26 June 2025.

⁹ Paul Adams and Reality Check (n 1)

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Die Here or Go to Poland" Belarus' and Poland's Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/11/eca_migrant1121_web_0.pdf> accessed 26 June 2025, 32, - no sources for these claims.

¹¹ 'Belarus/EU: New evidence of brutal violence from Belarusian forces against asylum seekers and migrants facing pushbacks from the EU' *Amnesty International* (20 December 2021). <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/belarus-eu-new-evidence-of-brutal-violence-from-belarusian-forces-against-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-facing-pushbacks-from-the-eu/>> accessed 26 June 2025.

swamps. In addition, they were not allowed to return to Belarus, even if they were not allowed to cross the Polish, Latvian or Lithuanian borders. Instead, the Belarusian border guards forced them to try repeatedly to cross the border. The result was that at the end of October 2021 around 23 000 irregular attempts to enter Polish territory had been registered.¹²

Similarly, it is claimed by some scholars that refugees may not return from Belarus, and that they are beaten by Belarussian guards.¹³ Amnesty international also reports that many migrants were captivated by an idea of „attractive travel package” to Belarus, which were widely promoted as easy and quick way of getting to EU through Minsk. They were told that they merely need to walk through a couple of kilometres to Polish (EU) border, cross it and wait for someone to transit them into other EU states.

However, the reality turned out to be far from the promises of the tour operators. After entering the “zone,” often with difficulty and after paying Belarusian border guards, people had to make their way to the Polish border fences, avoiding capture by Belarusian border guards, who often forcibly transported people to “assembly points,” where they violently forced them to attempt to cross the Polish border in groups. After the inevitable pushback from Polish border guards or capture by Belarusian border guards, people were forcibly detained in “assembly points” for days or weeks along with dozens or even hundreds of other people, without food, water or shelter, and then brutally and forced to repeatedly cross the borders of Poland, beaten, chased by police dogs and forced to cross frozen rivers.¹⁴

THE CRIMINAL LAW PERSPECTIVE — COMPARING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS

Determining the situation on the grounds is important for the legal assessment of smuggler’s conduct. From the criminal law perspective, the following question arises: Does mere transporting of migrants in the circumstances described above already amount to human trafficking or mere smuggling of migrants?

¹² European Parliament, Instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum, <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739204/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)739204_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739204/EPRS_BRI(2022)739204_EN.pdf)> accessed 26 June 2025, 2.

¹³ Janusz Balicki, ‘Migration Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border (2021–2022) From a Humanitarian and Human Rights Perspective’ (2022) 2 *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*, 75, 82. T. Molga and P. Michalski, ‘Dzieci z Michałowa głodują na granicy. To już pewne. Rozmawialiśmy z członkami tej grupy’ *Wirtualna Polska* (12 October 2021) <<https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/dzieci-z-michalowa-dzis-w-nocy-gloduja-na-granicy-to-juz-pewne-rozmawialismy-z-czlonkami-tejgrupy-6693096370772640a>> accessed 26 June 2025- based on press claims.

¹⁴ ‘Polska: Okrucieństwo Zamiast Współczucia Na Granicy Z Białorusią’ Amnesty International Polska, (11. April 2022) <<https://www.amnesty.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Raport-Amnesty-Intrnational-POLSKA-OKRUCIENSTWO-ZAMIAST-WSPOLCZUCIA-NA-GRANICY-Z-BIALORUSIA.pdf>> accessed 26 June 2025.

The question is not merely of academic nature. Human trafficking needs to be criminalized under the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which was later expanded by the 2005 CoE Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS 197) and the Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings. As pointed out by the Joint UN Commentary on the EU Directive,¹⁵ the definition consists of three parts: a) the act (what is done) - recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons; b) the means (how it is done) - threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim; c) the purpose (why it is done) - for the purpose of exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs.

In contrast, human smuggling is covered by the 2000 UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which was later expanded by the Directive 2002/90/EC defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence and the Framework Decision 2002/946/JHA on the strengthening of the penal framework to prevent the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence.

The 2000 Protocol stipulates in Art. 3 that: “Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”

Categorizing a conduct as human trafficking and not as mere human smuggling has important legal and practical consequences. Human trafficking may be considered a graver criminal offence than human smuggling, which reflects in sharper criminal sanctions for human traffickers. What is more, the UN Protocol on Human Smuggling and the Directive 2011/36/EU provide for a series of measures to assist and support victims of trafficking.¹⁶ For example, the UN Protocol on Human Smuggling calls in Art. 6 for implementing of measures such as the provision of appropriate housing, employment, educational and training opportunities. In contrast, migrants as customers of human smugglers are not always considered as victims and therefore enjoy comparatively lower set of-

¹⁵ Human Trafficking, Joint UN Commentary on the EU Directive – A Human Rights-Based Approach, OHCHR, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women, & ILO (2011), <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2011/UN_Commentary_EU_Trafficking_Directive_2011.pdf> accessed 26 June 2025.

¹⁶ *ibid* 41.

protections.¹⁷ Additionally, from the perspective of EU criminal law, trafficking in human beings is considered as a “Eurocrime” under Art. 83(1) TFEU, while migrant smuggling is not.¹⁸

IN SEARCH OF THE DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND HUMAN SMUGGLING

Despite these differences, distinguishing human trafficking from human trafficking has proven controversial at least in particular cases, with some scholars arguing that the division between both crimes is, in principle, not convincing.¹⁹

When it comes to consent and agency of the migrant, it is incredibly tough to systemize and qualify the events at the Polish-Belarusian border. Some of the events point out to the decreased-to-zero agency on behalf of the migrants, but others – even when reported by the same organization (AI) point out to a much higher level of agency, which would indicate human smuggling rather than trafficking. This is, perhaps, not surprising, as some migrants might be aware about the dire situation at the border and decide to take the associated risks, where others lack such awareness.

Similarly, the control over migrants at the final destination, at the Polish-Belarusian border, is not particularly clear. Where migrants are violently forced by the border guards to attempt to cross the Polish border in groups, while at the same time preventing them from either traveling elsewhere in Belarus or returning to their home countries, this indicates a level of control over migrants not typical for migrant smuggling. However, it is not clear of this level of control should be compared to what a typical victim of human trafficking experiences.

The alleged actions of the Belarussian guards also open the question of the role of third persons in the transfer of migrants. With allegations of soldiers helping migrants to cross the Polish-Belarusian border and experts of migration weaponization as a form of hybrid threat,²⁰ there is plausible grounds to believe Belarus is using migrants as a simple commodity – a mere asset to be (ab)used – in order to achieve its geopolitical goals. However, a geopolitical benefit of a state is less tangible than profit generated from the continuing exploitation of

¹⁷ Anne T. Gallagher, ‘Migrant smuggling’ in Neil Boister and Robert J. Currie (eds), *Routledge handbook of transnational criminal law* (Routledge 2014) 196-197.

¹⁸ Marianne L. Wade, ‘Cross-Border Crimes’, in Kai Ambos and Peter Rackow (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to European Criminal Law* (Cambridge University Press 2023) 182–205.

¹⁹ Anne T. Gallagher, ‘Human rights and human trafficking: quagmire or firm ground? A response to James Hathaway’ (2009) 50 *Virginia Journal of International Law*, 789, 792.

²⁰ Çlirim Toci, ‘The Belarus Crisis: the Weaponisation of Migration’ *Beyond the Horizon* (9 November 2021) <<https://behorizon.org/the-belarus-crisis-the-weaponisation-of-migration/>> accessed 26 June 2025.

the victim from the eventual exploiter of a person.

Last but not least, it is also not particularly clear which legally protected goods (values) are particularly threatened by such actions. Without a shred of doubt, such actions threaten the Polish state and its immigration regime to a much greater extent than typical human smuggling operations. However, this would indicate that, from the criminal law perspective, we deal with a particularly serious form of a human smuggling offence.

DISCUSSION

Legal assessment of the migrant situation at the Polish-Belarus border is not only difficult because of the blurred line between criminalized migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Even when it comes to evaluating the facts on the ground, including the level of involvement of Belarus in the smuggling operations and the control over the migrants at the crossing, questions remain.

Nonetheless, it is clear that, where a foreign state facilitates smuggling of migrants for geopolitical benefits, this is a particularly serious form of a human smuggling offence. There is good reason to believe that this ought to be reflected in national criminal codes and not merely left to the discretion of judges. A need for harmonization at the EU level, perhaps by amending the Framework Decision 2002/946/JHA, should also be evaluated.

Finally, we showed that, at least under particular circumstances, exploitation of migrants at border crossings as tools to induce hybrid threats might amount to human trafficking. It could also prove beneficial to raise awareness on this issue between practitioners involved in prosecution of migrant smugglers and traffickers this possibility.

9. Supporting Victims of Trafficking for Labour Exploitation: Identification of Early Signs and Risk Indicators for Adults and Children

*Eftymis Antonopoulos**

Labourrelated human trafficking continues to flourish in Europe's shadow economy, concealed behind seemingly legitimate employment relationships and complex supply chains. Although the internationally accepted Palermo Protocol and Article 5 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights outlaw trafficking, and Directive 2024/1712 expands protection by classifying organised begging as a form of forced labour, detection and assistance remain inconsistent. The presentation therefore sets out to fuse normative clarity with operational guidance: it unpacks the legal–conceptual bedrock of trafficking for labour exploitation and then translates that framework into practical, victimcentred strategies that nonspecialist professionals can deploy at first contact.

At the core lies the tripartite definition of trafficking—an act such as recruitment or harbouring, carried out through means of coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation. Forced labour, both for adults and children, is further distilled into four coercive dimensions: unfree recruitment, duress in work and living conditions, impossibility of exit, and a persistent menace of penalty. ILO Conventions 29 and 105, together with Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour, illuminate how these dimensions manifest: recruitment fees morph into debt bondage; passports are confiscated; threats of denunciation to immigration authorities curb escape, and excessive overtime or dangerous tasks are imposed with impunity.

Such abuse clusters in lowwage, labourintensive sectors—agriculture, construction, domestic and hospitality services, garment production, food processing, warehousing and logistics—where regulatory oversight is thin and subcontracting blurs accountability. Victims frequently enter these jobs under false promises, only to discover restrictions on movement, arbitrary deductions, or substandard accommodation. Adults describe withheld wages and intimidation; children, who lack the legal capacity to consent, are doubly vulnerable, often coerced through parental debt or threats to their families.

The presentation emphasises earlywarning indicators that surface in three overlapping spheres. Behaviourally, victims may appear coached, allow others to speak for them, avoid eye contact with officials, or never leave work premises unattended. Physically, they may bear untreated injuries consistent with control measures or present with malnutrition. Situationally, practitioners might encounter overcrowded living quarters, retention of identity documents, or unexplained deductions on pay slips. Because trafficking touchpoints extend far beyond spe-

cialised police units, the presenter targets a wide audience—healthcare providers, social workers, labour inspectors, transport staff, teachers, embassy personnel and even the general public—urging them to weave knowledge of these indicators into routine interactions.

Yet recognising exploitation is only the first hurdle; mishandled engagement can inflict secondary victimisation that erodes trust and undermines legal proceedings. The presentation therefore advances a traumainformed, victimcentred ethos. Practitioners are advised to prioritise safety by removing victims from traffickers’ reach and to conduct needsandrisk assessments that account for physical security, digital privacy and threats to relatives abroad. Communication should be empathetic and nonjudgmental: instead of “Why didn’t you leave?” one might ask, “Can you describe what was happening while you were there?” Professional interpreters should replace friends or bystanders; repeated recounting of trauma should be avoided; and genderappropriate interviewers should be provided where necessary.

Immediate assistance must span secure accommodation, comprehensive medical care, and specialised legal counsel versed in trafficking statutes. Psychological support is indispensable—many victims exhibit posttraumatic stress, anxiety or depression stemming from prolonged coercion. For children, continuity in schooling and safe family reintegration are paramount; adults meanwhile benefit from vocational training that restores economic independence. Empowerment comes through transparent informationsharing and genuine choice: victims should understand procedural steps, available rights, and the consequences of each option so they can steer their own recovery.

A robust national referral mechanism is the structural hinge that links these services. The presentation calls for multiagency coordination—law enforcement, social services, NGOs, healthcare, labour authorities—so that shifting victim needs are met seamlessly from rescue through reintegration. Frontline workers are also urged to collect corroborative evidence early, documenting nonverbal exchanges between victims and suspects, securing identity documents or digital data, and preserving financial records; such proactivity strengthens prosecutions and deters traffickers.

In closing, the presentation paints trafficking for labour exploitation as a crime sustained by invisibility, coercion and systemic vulnerability, but not beyond remedy. By mainstreaming indicator training, embedding traumainformed protocols, criminalising the knowing use of trafficked labour, investing in longterm aftercare, and enriching crosssector data collection, European states can cultivate an environment where victims regain dignity, perpetrators face justice, and exploitative labour markets shrink. The message is clear: supporting victims begins with awareness, empathy and decisive, coordinated action.

10. Can prevention be standardised? Research on public awareness and prevention campaigns on human trafficking and the Bulgarian model

*Ernesta Rousseva**

Human trafficking is a persistent global challenge, deeply rooted in historical injustices and shaped by contemporary forms of exploitation. While investigation, prosecution, and protection measures remain essential, prevention is increasingly recognised as a key component of effective counter-trafficking efforts. At the same time, it remains underexplored, especially in terms of strategic design, impact measurement, and potential for standardisation. The research on “Public awareness and prevention campaigns on human trafficking” investigates whether and how prevention efforts can be standardised, particularly within the frameworks established by international, EU, and national strategies. It assesses the extent to which selected awareness campaigns align with policy objectives and whether measurable indicators and evaluation mechanisms are being employed to assess their effectiveness.

The legal and strategic framework for anti-trafficking prevention is well established. Internationally, the Palermo Protocol, the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CATHB), and the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive provide robust foundations. These are reinforced by strategic documents such as the UN Global Plan of Action, the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025), and national strategies. In each, prevention is identified as a key pillar.

This study addresses the question: Can prevention in the field of human trafficking be standardised across global and regional levels while remaining effective in local contexts? It maps and compares selected public awareness and prevention campaigns from international, EU, and national domains, evaluating their correspondence with policy documents and the relevant strategic objectives, and considers whether standardisation could help translate policy into practical action.

The methodology included a comparative case study of publicly available campaign materials, strategic plans, and international guidelines. Campaigns were categorised into primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention based on their target audience, methods, and goals. These elements were cross-referenced against 38 recommendations derived from the three main strategic documents listed above.

The analysis applies a conceptual framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary

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ry prevention to categorise prevention campaigns and explore how well they address risk factors, target vulnerable populations, and support victims of trafficking. It aims to give an overview of various approaches towards the general prevention of trafficking in human beings, to examine targeted prevention activities, and the initiatives to prevent re-trafficking and re-victimisation.

Primary prevention focuses on general sensitisation on the existence of human trafficking, addressing risk factors and vulnerabilities, and promoting protective factors before individuals become victims of trafficking. This may include awareness raising and information campaigns, promoting education and social empowerment, and advocating for policies that uphold human rights and dignity.

Secondary prevention focuses on early detection and intervention to mitigate the impact of human trafficking and prevent its progression. This may include targeted interventions, screening, and outreach aimed at individuals already at risk or in situations conducive to trafficking. Additionally, providing specifically designed information among marginalised groups, treating concrete topics and specific risk factors, conducting targeted outreach information sessions, ensuring access to consultative services, healthcare, legal assistance, and alternative livelihood opportunities to empower vulnerable populations.

Tertiary prevention focuses on reducing the negative impact and preventing re-victimisation and re-trafficking. This may include efforts for improvement of early detection and identification, providing immediate response to the basic needs of victims of human trafficking, immediate access to remedies, comprehensive assistance and support, specialised rehabilitation and reintegration services for victims of human trafficking, building victims' competencies and qualification, vocational trainings, mentorship, public-private partnership in the reintegration process, etc.

Vulnerability to trafficking is influenced by personal, social, and systemic factors: gender, age, migration status, displacement due to conflict or natural disasters, lack of social support networks, substance abuse, mental health issues or physical disabilities, involvement in criminal activities, poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities, discrimination, social exclusion, weak rule of law, corruption, political instability, armed conflict, human rights abuses, inadequate protection mechanisms, etc. Certain populations are especially at risk: women and girls, children, ethnic minorities and socially marginalised communities, migrants and refugees, persons with disabilities, sex workers, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc. Effective prevention must therefore be multifaceted and context-sensitive.

The research examined several prevention initiatives categorised as primary prevention, including global campaigns like the UN Blue Heart Campaign (UNO-

DC, 2009 – global, in 44 MS), EU-wide efforts such as “Blind Betting - Don’t Gamble With Your Future” (GDCOC & NCCTHB, 2021 – EU, in 26 MS) and national campaigns like Animus Association’s Campaign for prevention of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation (developed in three phases; 2015 – 2017), and “Can You See Me? II” (A21 Campaign – Bulgaria in cooperation with NCCTHB, 2023 – national). It included as well “Targeted raising awareness and information sessions in regions with a prevalence of Roma population on the topics of safe migration and prevention of THB for the purpose of labour exploitation in Bulgaria” (IOM – Bulgaria, 2021 – 2023 – national), “Blind Betting – Don’t Play with Their Fate!” (GDCOC and NCCTHB, 2021 – EU, 26 MS, focusing on demand), and the National anti-trafficking hotline – job ads vetting service as a tool for targeted prevention (A21 Campaign, ongoing – national) as examples of secondary prevention. Tertiary prevention measures included long-term reintegration of victims of human trafficking accommodated in specialised services for victims of human trafficking in Bulgaria (ongoing – national), and the National mechanism for referral and support of victims of human trafficking (NRM).

Findings revealed that while many campaigns align with strategic goals, gaps remain. Out of nine initiatives mapped against 38 strategic priorities, several addressed multiple goals, especially in secondary prevention. In the area of primary prevention, four campaigns were analysed against seven relevant recommendations and priorities identified in strategic documents. All four campaigns demonstrated full alignment with four of these recommendations. One campaign, being a global UN initiative, could only be mapped to three priorities within a single international framework, as it falls outside the scope of direct correlation with EU or national-level strategies. For secondary prevention, three campaigns were assessed against a total of twenty identified recommendations and priorities. However, full alignment was observed with only two of these, indicating a partial or fragmented integration of targeted prevention efforts with strategic guidance. In the case of tertiary prevention, two initiatives were examined, corresponding to eleven recommendations. Notably, one of these initiatives, the National Referral Mechanism, fully aligned with all eleven priorities, representing the strongest example of strategic coherence and comprehensive implementation among the cases reviewed. However, eight priorities remained unaddressed, highlighting a need for more comprehensive planning and coverage.

Although this is not a country-focused study, the current Bulgarian model for combating trafficking in human beings serves as a strong example, demonstrating several notable strengths. First, the country benefits from a well-established institutional and legal framework that is fully aligned with EU and international standards. The National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB), which serves as the national anti-trafficking coordinator, is positioned at a high level under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of

Bulgaria.

Coordinated, multi-stakeholder action is ensured through effective collaboration between relevant state institutions, international partners, and non-governmental organisations, facilitated by the Permanent Expert Working Group. To support complex cases of trafficking, a dedicated multi-agency and multi-disciplinary team plays a key role in implementing the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), also coordinated by the NCCTHB, for the identification, support, and protection of victims of trafficking.

Seven services, specialised specifically for adult victims of trafficking in human beings, are functioning under the NCCTHB, operated by NGOs. These comprise three shelters for temporary accommodation, one shelter for long-term reintegration, and three consultative centres providing support and guidance. At the regional level, ten Local Commissions for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (LCCTHBs) operate under municipal leadership and the methodological guidance of the NCCTHB, ensuring decentralised response and outreach.

In recent years, Bulgaria has increasingly focused on targeted prevention interventions aimed at empowering the most vulnerable groups and equipping them with tools to mitigate the risks of trafficking. Examples of such initiatives include youth-oriented Academies for Volunteers on human trafficking, peer-to-peer education programmes, and digital literacy efforts. Other notable practices are the promotion of the job ad vetting service available through the National Anti-Trafficking Hotline, operated by A21 Bulgaria, and capacity-building sessions for Roma labour, health, and educational mediators providing practical, country-specific information for Bulgarian cross-border, mobile, and migrant workers. These efforts serve as strong illustrations of effective secondary and tertiary prevention in practice.

In conclusion, existing prevention efforts at the international, EU, and national levels are diverse, practical, and continuously evolving. The overarching legal and strategic frameworks are well-established, while communication strategies have become increasingly multifaceted and credible. However, flexibility remains essential to effectively address local contexts and the specific vulnerabilities of at-risk groups.

Standardisation can support consistency and comparability across efforts, but it must be carefully balanced with the need for adaptability. Importantly, the field still lacks a clear and widely accepted definition of prevention as it relates to trafficking in human beings, as well as robust tools for evaluating the impact of prevention efforts.

This analysis highlights the need for ongoing dialogue, research, and innovation in the area of trafficking prevention. Ultimately, the goal is to build resilient,

well-informed communities where exploitation is not only addressed but prevented altogether.

11. Hearing of the Minor Witness/Victim and the Escape Van Project

Anghel Vadim^{*22}

The presentation titled ‘Hearing of the Minor Witness/Victim (under special conditions) and the Escape Van Project’ was delivered by Grigore Moga and Alexandru Moga, representing the Police Academy of the Republic of Moldova. This comprehensive presentation was aimed at sharing Moldova’s evolving approach in tackling human trafficking and protecting the rights of minor victims and witnesses within the judicial system. The core focus was on the legal procedures developed for child-friendly hearings and on awareness campaigns such as the Escape Van Project that support preventive efforts through education and outreach.

Drawing from the Central Database of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the presentation revealed alarming trends from 2019 to 2024 in human trafficking cases across the Republic of Moldova. A significant number of criminal offenses were registered under Article 165 (Human Trafficking) and Article 206 (Child Trafficking) of the Criminal Code. Victims were identified at the national level, including numerous children who were trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse. A deeper insight was provided into the types of exploitation faced by these child victims, emphasizing the urgent need for enhanced protective measures and justice mechanisms.

The presentation underlined Moldova’s commitment to aligning with international standards by referencing key global legal instruments. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as the foundational document guaranteeing special protection for children. It emphasizes the responsibilities of governments to shield children from all forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse. Article 19 particularly calls on authorities to ensure protective measures that prioritize the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of minors. These standards serve as the basis for national reforms introduced in Moldova.

Domestically, the Republic of Moldova implemented the special hearing procedure through Law No. 66 of April 5, 2012, which introduced Article 110¹ into the Criminal Procedure Code. Initially, this legal provision mandated that children under 14 involved in criminal cases related to sexual violence, child trafficking, or domestic abuse must be heard in special conditions. Following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2022, this age limit was extended to

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minors under the age of 18, enhancing procedural protections and ensuring the country's compliance with broader international human rights obligations.

Special hearing procedures are conducted in rooms specifically arranged to ensure a safe, non-intimidating, and child-friendly environment. These rooms are equipped with audio-video recording systems. An investigating judge oversees the hearing, which is conducted via a trained interviewer—typically a specialist in law or psychology. The suspect or defendant is strictly prohibited from attending. Other actors, such as prosecutors, clerks, and psychologists, participate from a separate observation room. This method ensures that the child is not re-traumatized and that their testimony is gathered in a supportive and psychologically sound setting. The procedure also limits the duration of interviews to avoid fatigue: one hour without interruption (and a maximum of two hours per day) for children under 14, and two hours without interruption (up to four hours per day) for older minors.

One of the most innovative components of Moldova's anti-trafficking strategy is the ESCAPE VAN Project. Launched between April 27 and May 18, 2023, the project brought human trafficking awareness directly to communities through a mobile information and training center. Approximately 2,500 individuals from 18 regions benefited from practical information about identifying and preventing trafficking. The project was coordinated by Open Gate International NGO, in partnership with the Technical University of Moldova, the "Stefan cel Mare" Academy, and the General Police Inspectorate, with valuable support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Moldova.

The first beneficiaries of the project were students of the Police Academy, followed by the training of 450 police officers who are now better equipped to handle trafficking cases and interact sensitively with vulnerable victims. On April 9, 2025, the technical equipment of the Escape Van was officially transferred to the NGO Inițiativă Pozitivă, further ensuring its continued use and outreach. The program is projected to reach at least 20 localities, with an estimated 7,000 people gaining access to anti-trafficking education and resources. This expansion demonstrates Moldova's commitment to strengthening community engagement and institutional capacity in addressing trafficking and protecting minors.