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

**Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings (Fourth
Report)**

{SWD(2022) 429 final}

1. INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in human beings is a serious crime and a grave violation of fundamental rights. Combatting it is a priority for the European Union¹. Article 20 of Directive 2011/36/EU² foresees a two-yearly report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings. Despite progress made over the past years, the threat remains high. Recent major crises, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have further exacerbated people's vulnerability to being exploited.

According to the EU Serious Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2021³ (EU SOCTA 2021), trafficking in human beings is a core activity of serious and organised crime in the EU and is set to remain a threat for the foreseeable future. Measures have been taken at the EU level and by Member States in order to prevent the crime, reduce demand that fosters trafficking in human beings; break the business model of traffickers; protect and support the victims; as well as address the international dimension.

This report takes into consideration:

- The contributions submitted by all Member States through the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and Equivalent Mechanisms (NREM);
- The contributions from members of the EU Civil Society Platform against trafficking in human beings;
- The contributions from nine EU Agencies⁴;
- Reports and other documents from EU Agencies, EU institutions and International Organisations.

More specifically, the report i) identifies key patterns and challenges in addressing trafficking in human beings, ii) outlines the main anti-trafficking actions from 2019 to 2022 and iii) provides an analysis of statistics for the period of 2019-2020, which is included in a Staff Working Document⁵. The data included in the report and in the Staff Working Document was gathered by EUROSTAT from all the Member States via the national statistical authorities.

¹ Communication on the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025, [COM\(2021\) 171 final](#); Council conclusions of 26 May 2021 setting the 2022-2025 EU priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime through the European multi-disciplinary platform against criminal threats (EMPACT).

² 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, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA, OJ L 101, 15.4.2011

³ Europol, 2021 EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, available at: [link](#).

⁴ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA), EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA).

⁵ SWD(2022) 429.

2. CHALLENGES AND TRENDS IN COMBATTING TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS IN THE EU

2.1. Recent challenges related to trafficking in human beings

The third report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings⁶, already highlighted the **implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for trafficking in human beings**. According to Europol, the economic effects of the pandemic will drive increased demand for labour exploitation. Civil society organisations underlined that certain categories of people, such as undocumented migrants, seasonal workers, persons in precarious working and living conditions and persons in prostitution had been disproportionately affected by measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic, including travelling restrictions. Subsequently, these groups are more vulnerable to the risk of falling victims of traffickers.

The pandemic had also a significant impact on trafficking for sexual exploitation, notably as the physical contacts between traffickers, victims and clients decreased and more operations moved online⁷. Similarly, several Member States reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had accelerated the move from street prostitution to private homes, short-term rentals and hotels⁸, as well as to the online environment⁹. This made it more difficult for law enforcement authorities and other relevant stakeholders to detect and reach out to possible victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The Covid-19 restrictions and several lockdowns contributed to further isolating victims, sometimes together with their traffickers. This was particularly the case for victims who could not return to their country of origin. Member States and civil society organisations observed challenges in the identification and referrals of victims to assistance, support and protection services (e.g. healthcare, counselling, administrative services, legal assistance), as well as victims' access to justice. Moreover, stakeholders highlighted increased difficulties in cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation, longer criminal proceedings due to remote hearings, as well as a decrease in the number of labour inspections during the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has considerably accelerated the shift of criminal activities into the **digital space**, in particular for trafficking for sexual exploitation, but also for other forms. Traffickers use technology and the internet (both the surface web and the dark web) for every phase of the offence, including the recruitment of the victims (which often takes place via social media platforms), communication between the traffickers, victims and clients, the advertising of services, organising the transportation of the victims, as well as proceeding with payments. Children have notably become more vulnerable to online recruitment and grooming. The use of technology to commit trafficking offences created significant challenges for law enforcement and judicial authorities as it allows criminals to reach out to more potential victims as well as clients, to move victims from one location to another more easily and to carry out their operations remotely. Traffickers

⁶ REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Third report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings (2020) as required under Article 20 of Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, COM/2020/661 final, and its accompanying Staff Working Document, SWD(2020) 226 final.

⁷ European Migrant Smuggling Centre, [5th Annual Activity Report](#) (2021).

⁸ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France and Hungary.

⁹ Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

also benefit from increased anonymity, notably through encrypted communications solutions¹⁰.

The reporting period was also marked by **Russia's military aggression against Ukraine**, which started on 24 February 2022 and led to a mass inflow of people fleeing the war into the EU, of which 90% were women and children. The risks of trafficking in human beings were considered very high from the beginning. Criminal organisations were active at the border between Ukraine and the EU already before the war. In 2019-2020, Ukraine was among the top-ten non-EU citizenships of victims identified in the EU, mainly for sexual and labour exploitation. The war has further increased opportunities for traffickers to exploit the vulnerable situation of people fleeing the aggression, mainly women and children, for their financial gain. There are particular risks of growing demand for the services exploited from victims of trafficking, both offline, for instance in the context of malicious offers for private accommodation, transport and assistance, and online, including on social media, for example online advertising for sexual services with Ukrainian women.

2.2. Trends in trafficking in human beings

2.2.1. Victims (sex, age, citizenship)

During the reporting period of 2019-2020, **14 311 victims of trafficking** were registered in the EU. This number is slightly higher than the number recorded in the EU during the previous 2-year period (14 145). In 2021, the estimated number of victims was 7 109.¹¹ The decrease in the number of registered victims between 2019 (7 777) and 2020 (6 534) is probably linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created challenges in the identification of victims of trafficking. It should be noted that **the actual number of victims is likely to be significantly higher** than reported data suggests, as the statistics only capture victims that become known to one of the registering entities, and many victims remain undetected.

Trafficking in human beings remains a crime with a significant gender dimension. **Women and girls represented 63%** of all registered victims in the EU. However, the share of male victims (33%)¹² increased as compared to 2017-2018 (23%)¹³.

53% of the victims were EU citizens and 43% had a non-EU citizenship¹⁴. The top-five EU countries as regards citizenship of trafficking victims by numbers were Romania, France, Italy, Bulgaria and Poland. The top-five non-EU countries as regards citizenship of trafficking victims in the EU were Nigeria, China, Moldova, Pakistan and Morocco. 37% of all registered victims were citizens of the country in which they were

¹⁰ European Migrant Smuggling Centre, [6th Annual Activity Report](#) (2022).

¹¹ EUROSTAT launched the data collection for 2021, which could not be fully completed as some Member States could not provide the full data set on time. Therefore, EUROSTAT made estimations for the missing Member States based upon the values of previous years. For the number of victims DE and SE could not provide data.

¹² Throughout the report, percentages for the same indicators and reporting year do not always add up to 100%, due to the fact that Member States registered some victims under the categories of “unknown” or “other”. The Staff Working Document on the statistical analysis provides more detailed information.

¹³ For 4% of recorded victims of trafficking in human beings, the reported sex was ‘unknown’.

¹⁴ For 2% of registered victims, the citizenship was “unknown” and for 2% the citizenship was “other”. This data was estimated by Eurostat based on data collected from the Member States via the national statistical offices.

registered (internal trafficking). All or nearly all of the victims registered by Estonia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia were their own citizens

2.2.2. Trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation

Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation continued to be the **most prevalent form of exploitation** in the EU during 2019-2020 (**51%**). The vast majority of the victims are female (87%), of which 73% women and 27% girls.

High-risk sectors for sexual exploitation remain the same as for previous years, i.e. prostitution, escort agencies and services, the pornography industry, massage services, bars and nightclubs. Member States observed a rise in violence against women and girls during the pandemic. Europol highlighted that exploitative sexual services are advertised on escort and dating website, as well as on social media platforms. “Sex tours”, during which victims travel to different cities to meet clients in rental apartments and hotel rooms, are increasingly reported. As mentioned above, Member States also confirmed that technology is widely used as a means to recruit, advertise and sexually exploit the victims. Moreover, Europol reported that traffickers lure victims to enter voluntary business agreements, as part of which they accept to engage in prostitution and hand over a share of their earnings in exchange for protection and support with administrative issues. Persons in this type of arrangement do not necessarily perceive themselves as victims, which makes it easier for traffickers to exploit them.

Member States¹⁵ frequently reported Nigeria as one of the main countries of origin of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. In addition, several Member States¹⁶, as well as Europol, indicated an increase in South-American women and transgender people, being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

2.2.3. Trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation

Trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation is the second most prevalent form of trafficking in human beings in the EU (**28%**). It **increased significantly** as compared to 2017-2018 (15%). Men represent the majority of the victims trafficked for labour exploitation (66%), while 34% are female victims. Trafficking for labour exploitation is the predominant form of exploitation in seven Member States¹⁷. Europol underlined that, while trafficking for labour exploitation is more frequently reported than before in the EU, many cases remain undetected.

Criminal networks involved in trafficking for labour exploitation mainly operate in cash-intensive businesses where a large number of workers paid at a low wage, as well as seasonal workers are employed. These high-risk sectors include agriculture, construction, forestry, food processing, assembly lines, hospitality, retail, carwashes, beauty and cleaning services, transportation, housekeeping and domestic assistance. Traffickers increasingly recruit victims of trafficking for labour exploitation online, by setting up or cooperating with recruitment agencies and subcontractors in order to provide a legal facade to their operations.

While men are predominately the victims of labour exploitation (66%), several Member States reported that women were increasingly victims of trafficking for labour exploitation (34%), especially in domestic work or cleaning services. They often remain

¹⁵ Including Belgium, France, Ireland, Spain and Sweden.

¹⁶ Estonia, France, Netherlands and Spain.

¹⁷ Belgium, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Slovakia.

invisible, as their exploitation usually takes place in the private sphere and many of them come from non-EU countries.

Nearly the same share of EU (45%) and non-EU (50%)¹⁸ victims of trafficking for labour exploitation were registered in the EU in 2019-2020. However, Member States highlighted the particular vulnerability of migrants to this form of exploitation. They are often recruited in their country of origin by traffickers of the same nationality and lured into the EU by the perspective of higher wages.

Member States¹⁹ reported that non-EU victims often enter the EU with a visa, although traffickers sometimes use fraudulent documents (e.g. identity fraud, false employment contracts and legal work permits obtained through the use of shell companies and abusing legal pathways). Some Member States²⁰ mentioned that victims from non-EU countries, in particular from Asia (e.g. Vietnam), often have to work, for instance in nail salons or cannabis farms, to reimburse their debts incurred by the costs of travelling.

No data was reported by the Member States on legal persons, which were subject to investigations, prosecutions or convictions for trafficking offences in 2019-2020.

2.2.4. Trafficking in human beings for other forms of exploitation

During the reporting period, forms of trafficking in human beings, other than sexual and labour exploitation, accounted for **11%** of all cases²¹. Such forms of exploitation include forced criminal activities, forced begging, illegal removal of organs and “other” forms, which are not included in the definition of Article 2(3) of Directive 2011/36/EU, such as illegal adoption, forced and sham marriages, illegal surrogacy and benefit fraud²².

While **forced criminality and forced begging** only accounted for 3% of all registered victims in the EU for 2019-2020, several Member States²³ reported an increase in these forms of exploitation. Forced criminality is often associated with theft, petty crime, pickpocketing, shoplifting and selling drugs. Forced begging was the second main form of exploitation in Estonia (20%) and forced criminality was the second most prevalent form of exploitation in Greece (42%).

Member States reported that women, children and irregular migrants are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for these purposes. Victims often have a disadvantaged background, are homeless or suffer from alcohol or other addictions. Some Member States²⁴ underlined that victims of trafficking for forced begging are mostly from Roma communities and persons with disabilities. Data on the number of victims of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of forced begging in 2019-2020 indicates that 47% were children²⁵.

¹⁸ The citizenship of 5% of registered victims of trafficking for labour exploitation was reported as ‘other’.

¹⁹ Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Lithuania and Malta.

²⁰ Belgium, Ireland, Spain

²¹ In 2017-2018, other forms of exploitation represented 18% of cases of trafficking in human beings in the EU.

²² For the remaining 10% of recorded victims of trafficking in human beings, the reported form of exploitation was ‘unknown’.

²³ Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Romania and Spain

²⁴ Austria and Bulgaria.

²⁵ 31% were adults and 22% were unknown.

Several Member States²⁶ reported on cases of trafficking for **forced and sham marriages**, which mainly affect vulnerable migrant women as well as ethnic minorities, such as Roma. Member States highlighted that victims of this form of exploitation are often also trafficked for sexual exploitation, labour exploitation or forced begging. According to Eurojust, women coming from Roma communities in Member States are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked and exploited for sham marriages for the purpose of allowing the free entry and movement of third-country nationals in the EU²⁷. In addition, European Institute for Gender Equality reported that women and girls victims of forced marriage are often hidden within private households and in the sector of prostitution, which makes their detection and identification more difficult.

Europol, Eurojust and some Member States²⁸ reported cases of trafficking for the purposes of **illegal surrogacy and forced pregnancy**, where women are recruited to give away their new-borns upon the promise of compensation or to participate in illegal surrogacy programmes.

Trafficking for the purpose of **removal of organs**²⁹ and **benefit fraud**³⁰ was also reported by some Member States. These two forms of exploitation represented less than 1% of registered cases in the EU in 2019-2020.

2.2.5. Child trafficking

Almost one in four victims of trafficking in human beings was a child (**23%**) in 2019-2020. The majority of child victims were female (75%). EU citizens were disproportionately represented among registered child victims (85%), among which 75% were recorded in their own country of citizenship. 10% of child victims were non-EU citizens³¹. Half of registered child victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation (50%), while 17% were trafficked for labour exploitation and 4% for forced begging³².

Dating and escort websites often advertise child victims as adults. Children are also advertised on dedicated websites where adults are specifically looking for sexual encounters with children. Children are also often abused in clandestine settings, such as pop-up brothels and sometimes in public venues (hotels, restaurants, as well as sex, night and strip clubs).

Several Member States³³ highlighted the use of the “lover boy” method by traffickers to lure children and young adult women into sexual exploitation. During the reporting period, Europol and Eurojust notably supported Romania, France and Spain in two different operations targeting criminal networks, which recruited victims through the “lover boy” method. “Lover boys” are human traffickers who usually operate by trying to make young girls or boys fall in love with them, or by manipulating young people through other means in order to exploit them, for instance in the sex industry. Nowadays,

²⁶ Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Greece and Lithuania

²⁷ Eurojust, *Report on national legislation and Eurojust casework on sham marriages* (2020), [sham-marriage-oct-2020-redacted.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁸ Bulgaria, Cyprus and Greece.

²⁹ Greece, Netherlands and Poland.

³⁰ Cyprus, Lithuania and Slovakia.

³¹ For 3% of recorded child victims of trafficking in human beings, the reported citizenship was ‘unknown’ and for 2% was ‘other not specified’.

³² 8% were registered for other forms of exploitation. For 20% of registered child victims, the form of exploitation was unknown.

³³ Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Luxemburg, Romania and Spain.

lover-boys resort more quickly and frequently to threatening their victims, using blackmail and violence.³⁴

Europol and several Member States³⁵ reported that EU family clans continue to traffic their own children, as well as other children who are in the same communities as them, mainly for begging, pickpocketing and shop lifting or as domestic servants. Criminal networks active in the EU also use children, often from non-EU countries, to commit various types of crimes, such as pickpocketing, shoplifting or selling of items³⁶. Children are also trafficked through illegal adoption schemes³⁷.

2.2.6. Trafficking in human beings in the context of migration

Trafficking remained a challenge in the context of migration³⁸, especially in some Member States, which reported that the majority of victims have a migrant background. Irregular migration created profit opportunities for trafficking networks and exposed migrants to various forms of trafficking not just in countries of destination, but also in transit points and migration camps. There is a clear link with smuggling of migrants, with victims recruited in the country of origin, sometimes with the promise of a respectable job in the EU, and trafficked in countries of destination for forced labour or sexual exploitation in order to repay the transport arrangements that led them to the EU³⁹. In this case, the traffickers are often of the same nationality, or ethnic group, as the victims⁴⁰. There have been cases of voluntary recruitment by other victims⁴¹, but also of inadvertent recruitment based on information relayed to countries of origin regarding the opportunities of getting a job or a residence permit in countries of destination⁴². There are also numerous cases of trafficking of migrants who had arrived in the EU through legal routes and were later exploited⁴³.

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

3.1. A comprehensive approach to addressing trafficking in human beings

In April 2021, the Commission adopted the **EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025**⁴⁴, which takes a comprehensive approach from the prevention of the crime and protection of victims through to the prosecution and conviction of traffickers. As reported in the next sections, many of the legal, policy and operational initiatives announced in the four areas of the EU Strategy have significantly advanced or have already been implemented⁴⁵.

³⁴ ‘[‘Loverboys’ | Human trafficking and people smuggling | Government.nl](#)

³⁵ Greece, Hungary and Romania.

³⁶ Europol, 2021 EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, available at: [link](#).

³⁷ Europol and Slovakia.

³⁸ Ireland, Greece, FRONTEX and civil society organisations.

³⁹ France and Spain.

⁴⁰ Italy and Sweden.

⁴¹ France.

⁴² Portugal.

⁴³ France, Malta.

⁴⁴ COM/2021/171 final.

⁴⁵ Reducing demand that fosters trafficking for all forms of exploitation; breaking the business model of traffickers; protecting, supporting and empowering the victims, with a specific focus on women and children; and the international dimension

One of the priority actions of the EU Strategy, is the **evaluation of Directive 2011/36/EU**⁴⁶. The evaluation found that the Directive constituted a robust framework to prevent and combat trafficking in human beings, as well as protecting the victims, and had created a common ground at EU level to address the crime. However, it also identified a number of issues, which present obstacles to reducing the scale of the crime, ensuring an effective law enforcement and judicial response against traffickers, as well as to the early identification of, and assistance and support to the victims. In order to address these shortcomings, the Commission proposed on 13 December 2022 a Directive amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims⁴⁷. Moreover, in line with the outcome of the evaluation, the key non legislative actions of the EU Strategy continue to be highly relevant in order to improve the implementation of the Directive in the Member States.

The EU Strategy underlines the need to improve data recording and data collection on trafficking in human beings to ensure reliable and comparable information for tailor made policies. In 2021, the Commission moved from a biannual to an annual data collection, which will be available together with data for previous reporting years, on EUROSTAT website⁴⁸. The Commission proposes to amend Directive 2011/36/EU in order to make it mandatory for Member States to **collect data on trafficking in human beings and report those statistics to the Commission on an annual basis**. This will allow a more up-to-date overview and monitoring of the scale of the phenomenon in the EU.

Funding for combatting trafficking in human beings was provided through the Thematic Facility Work Programmes for 2021-2022 under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)⁴⁹ and the Internal Security Fund (ISF)⁵⁰ (for a total budget of EUR 13 million for Union action and specific action under direct and shared management).

The current **EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator**⁵¹ (EU ATC) was appointed on 1 July 2021. Since then, the EU ATC has met with different stakeholders in the Members States and in non-EU countries and reinforced the cooperation with international organisations in the context of the implementation of the Anti-trafficking Directive and EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings. Six meetings of the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and Equivalent Mechanisms took place, as well as four meetings of the EU Civil Society Platform against trafficking in human beings. The EU ATC developed and coordinated the implementation of a **Common Anti-trafficking Plan**⁵² to address the risks of trafficking in human beings and support potential victims among those fleeing the war in Ukraine, in close cooperation with the National Rapporteurs and Coordinators, the EU Agencies, civil society organisations, Ukraine and Moldova.

⁴⁶ SWD(2022) 427.

⁴⁷ Proposal of the Commission for the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combatting trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (COM(2022) 732)

⁴⁸ The data will be published in Eurostat website ([Database - Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat)) under Population and social conditions/Crime and criminal justice.

⁴⁹ [AMIF - Thematic Facility Work Programme 2021-2022_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵⁰ [ISF - Thematic Facility Work Programme 2021-2022_en.PDF \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁵¹ [EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁵² [A new Anti-Trafficking Plan to protect people fleeing the war in Ukraine \(europa.eu\)](#).

Trafficking in human beings is also addressed through a comprehensive approach at national level. During the reporting period, Member States adopted legal and policy instruments to fight against trafficking in human beings and supporting the implementation of Directive 2011/36/EU. These included **new or renewed national strategies and action plans**⁵³, sets of **guidelines, protocols and procedures**⁵⁴ aimed at supporting the relevant stakeholders in detecting, identifying and protecting victims, as well as measures to **coordinate the efforts in the fight against human trafficking**⁵⁵.

3.2. Preventing trafficking in human beings and reducing the demand that fosters the crime

The EU Strategy highlighted that, despite prevention initiatives, the demand for using exploited victims' services has not been reduced. The 2019-2020 statistics for the criminal offence of the **use of the services of trafficking victims**, show that 11 Member States reported a total of 159 suspects, 46 prosecutions and 51 convictions. These numbers are significantly lower than during the previous reporting period⁵⁶, which might be linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the criminal justice system.

Assessing the possibility of modifying the provisions of Directive 2011/36/EU on **criminalising the use of exploited services from victims of trafficking** was one of the key actions of the EU Strategy. Member States have different approaches to discouraging and reducing the demand and not all of them have made use of **Article 18(4) of the Directive 2011/36/EU**, which requires them to **consider taking measures to criminalise the knowing use of services exacted from victims**. During the reporting period, Hungary adopted new legislation, which criminalises the knowing use of exploited services and increased the level of penalties for the users when the victim is a child. The Netherlands criminalised the use of sexual services when the user knew or had a serious ground to suspect that the person was a victim of trafficking. Penalties are higher if the victim is a child. In 2021, Germany, which had already criminalised the knowing use of exploited sexual services, adopted a stricter approach by establishing criminal liability for the use of exploited sexual services under recklessness. Cyprus amended its legislation in 2019 to increase the penalties for the offence of the use of any exploited services of victims and removing the requirement that the user must have a "reasonable suspicion" in cases of sexual exploitation. Moreover, discussions on the criminalisation of the knowing use of exploited services and demand for sexual services are taking place in some Member States, such as Slovakia and Spain. Three Member States⁵⁷ have also carried out or are currently conducting an evaluation of relevant legislation criminalising the use of exploited services.

In order to strengthen the criminal justice response to discouraging demand, the Commission proposes a modification of Directive 2011/36/EU, which aims at **making the criminalisation of the knowing use of services exacted from victims of trafficking in human beings mandatory**.

⁵³ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Portugal.

⁵⁴ Germany, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia.

⁵⁵ Germany.

⁵⁶ During the 2017-2018 reporting period, 11 Member States reported a total of 170 suspects, 162 prosecutions and 133 convictions in relation to the criminal offence of the use of the services of trafficking victims.

⁵⁷ Ireland, France and Luxembourg.

In line with the EU Strategy, the Commission adopted several measures aimed at addressing the **responsibility of companies and businesses** to reducing demand for, and detecting potential cases of trafficking in human beings **in their activities and supply chains**. In July 2021, the Commission and the European External Action Service published a Guidance to assist EU businesses in taking appropriate measures to address the risk of forced labour in their operations and supply chains⁵⁸. Moreover, the Commission's proposal for a **Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence** sets out a horizontal framework to foster the contribution of businesses operating in the single market to the respect of human rights through their own operations and through their value chains, by identifying, preventing, mitigating and accounting for their adverse human rights impact, including trafficking in human beings. On 14 September 2022, the Commission presented a **proposal for a Regulation prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market**⁵⁹. These proposals - once adopted - will strengthen the Union's efforts to assign stricter accountability of legal persons for human trafficking offences. At the national level, Member States have taken or are considering to take measures to oblige companies above a certain size to carry out due diligence throughout their supply chain to detect and prevent potential labour exploitation. In Germany, the Act on Corporate Due Diligence in Supply Chains will enter into force on 1 January 2023. Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands and Romania are working towards adopting similar legislation. Belgium also prepared a tool box with guidance for companies to identify human rights violations and labour exploitation.

Additionally, the Commission proposed actions⁶⁰ to strengthen the effectiveness of the **Employers' Sanctions Directive**⁶¹, which prohibits the employment of irregularly staying third-country nationals, including victims of trafficking in human beings. The communication set out that the Commission would promote the exchange of good practices for identifying victims of exploitation and trafficking, including on joint inspections with dedicated units. The Commission participates in the meetings of the European Platform tackling undeclared work within the European Labour Authority, which mobilises labour inspectorates in the Member States in order to raise awareness about undeclared work and labour exploitation and share practices in detecting possible victims of trafficking in human beings. Moreover, the European Labour Authority takes part in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) operational actions addressing trafficking for labour exploitation.

The EU Strategy provides that **awareness raising campaigns** on the risks of trafficking are important means to detect and prevent the crime. Member States⁶² carried out awareness raising campaigns on trafficking in human beings through social media, videos, leaflets, posters, media, as well as in schools, among others. Some Member States⁶³ have put in place campaigns targeting clients on social media, dating website and advertising platforms for sexual services in order to raise their awareness of the risks of trafficking in human beings and encourage them to have a more responsible behaviour.

⁵⁸ [New EU guidance helps companies to combat forced labour \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-room/detail/16/07/2021).

⁵⁹ COM(2022) 453 final.

⁶⁰ COM(2021) 592 final.

⁶¹ Directive 2009/52/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 providing for minimum standards on sanctions and measures against employers of illegally staying third-country nationals, OJ L 168, 30.6.2009, p. 24–32

⁶² Such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta, Portugal and Spain.

⁶³ Belgium and Netherlands.

Other Member States⁶⁴ carried out awareness raising campaigns on labour rights and safe work opportunities, as well as on the risks of trafficking for labour exploitation.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Member States continued to deliver **training** to a wide range of stakeholders in order to enable them to detect and identify cases of trafficking, including law enforcement and judicial authorities, frontline staff, border guards, asylum and immigration officers, health professionals, social workers, social and labour inspectors, consular staff, municipalities staff, as well as flight personal.

3.3. Breaking the criminal business model of traffickers

Law enforcement cooperation has significantly intensified during the period 2019-2022⁶⁵, both at the EU and international levels. This is also reflected by the increase of 29% in the total number of individuals suspected of trafficking in human beings, as compared to the previous reporting period⁶⁶. EU citizens accounted for 62% of all suspects registered in the EU in 2019-2020.

Many Member States⁶⁷ reported taking part in the **EMPACT operational actions** to tackle trafficking in human beings, including in cooperation with non-EU countries⁶⁸. Europol supported numerous large-scale actions across the EU on sexual exploitation, child trafficking, labour exploitation (including focused actions in the agricultural sector), as well as forced begging and forced criminality. Europol continued to run the Joint Liaison Task Force Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings established in 2019, focusing on developing intelligence-led coordinated actions against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. In addition, Member States⁶⁹ carried out bilateral cooperation with other EU Member States, non-EU countries⁷⁰ as well as EU Agencies⁷¹ and Interpol, including for investigations cases, the posting of liaison officers, training and capacity building, exchange of practices, among others.

For the period 2019-2020, **6 539 prosecutions** and **3 019 convictions** were recorded within the EU. This represents a slight increase as compared to the previous reporting period⁷². Nevertheless, the number of prosecutions as compared to the number of suspects decreased from 52% in 2017-2018 to 43% in 2019-2020. The number of convicted persons as compared to the number of prosecutions increased from 39% to 46% during 2019-2020⁷³. In 2021 the estimated number of prosecutions is 4 452⁷⁴ and the estimated number of convictions is 2 507⁷⁵. Nevertheless, despite the overall increase, the absolute number of prosecutions and convictions remains low, especially as compared to the number of registered victims and of suspects.

⁶⁴ Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

⁶⁵ Europol supported 60 operational meetings in 2021, as compared to 32 operational meetings in 2020. Europol supported 37 operational meetings only in the first half of 2022.

⁶⁶ 15 214 suspects were registered in the period 2019-2020, as compared to 11 788 in 2017-2018.

⁶⁷ For instance, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Spain, Finland, France, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia.

⁶⁸ China, Nigeria, Vietnam, as well as the Balkan region and North Africa.

⁶⁹ Such as Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal.

⁷⁰ For example, Bosnia-Herzegovina, China, Jordan, Moldova, Montenegro, Nigeria, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, United Kingdom, etc.

⁷¹ Europol, Frontex and, CEPOL.

⁷² In 2017-2018, 6 163 persons were prosecuted.

⁷³ In 2017-2018, 2 426 persons were convicted.

⁷⁴ The value of Portugal was estimated.

⁷⁵ The value of Germany and Portugal were estimated.

Between 2019 and 2021, 486 investigations and prosecutions were referred to Eurojust for assistance⁷⁶. Eurojust supported 156 Joint Investigations in the same period⁷⁷. The number of investigations and prosecutions coordinated by Eurojust has decreased, from 183 in 2019, to 163 in 2020 and to 140 in 2021, which may highlight difficulties or a lack of awareness of Member States in referring cases to the EU Agency. Several Member States⁷⁸ reported on participating in Joint Investigation Teams coordinated by Eurojust, both with EU and non-EU Member States.

On 14 June 2022, the EU ATC, together with Eurojust, organised the first meeting of the **Focus Group of specialised prosecutors** against trafficking in human beings, which is one of the key actions of the EU Strategy⁷⁹. The meeting brought together prosecutors and judges from the EU Member States in order to build expertise and intensify judicial cooperation against trafficking in human beings, including in the context of the war in Ukraine.

As underlined in the EU Strategy, **systematic training** of law enforcement and justice practitioners, is important to effectively tackle trafficking in human beings. CEPOL continued to provide training covering the main aspects of the fight against trafficking in human beings, such as prevention, the gender-specific and child-sensitive approach, financial and online investigations, cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation, as well as the early identification, assistance, support and protection of victims.

As mentioned previously, traffickers increasingly moved **online** for every phase of trafficking. As one of the key actions of the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, the Commission extended the activities of the **EU Internet Forum** to discuss with the internet and technology companies and encompass measures to prevent, detect and remove content related to human trafficking. The Commission further proposes to include in the definition of trafficking in human beings offences committed or facilitated by means of information or communication technologies.

Moreover, the **Digital Services Act**⁸⁰ will be a relevant tool in detecting, monitoring and removing online content related to trafficking in human beings, as it introduces a due diligence obligation for providers of intermediary services, such as online platforms, with the aim to reduce illegal and harmful content online, including trafficking in human beings.

The digitalisation of the traffickers' business model brought opportunities to law enforcement authorities to detect the victims and arrest traffickers, notably through the tracing and gathering of digital evidence, which can contribute to building a case and complement the victim's testimony⁸¹. Several EMPACT coordinated online joint actions,

⁷⁶ 273 trafficking in human beings cases were referred to Eurojust during the previous reporting period (2017-2018).

⁷⁷ 107 Joint Investigation Teams were supported by Eurojust in 2017-2018.

⁷⁸ Such as Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Spain and Romania.

⁷⁹ [Focus group of prosecutors specialised in human trafficking meets for the first time | Eurojust | European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁸⁰ Regulation 2022/2065/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p.1) See also [EUR-Lex - 32022R2065 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁸¹ Europol, *The challenges of countering human trafficking in the digital era* (2020), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/challenges-of-countering-human-trafficking-in-digital-era>

supported by the EU Agencies, including Europol, targeted criminal networks using websites and social media platforms to recruit victims for sexual exploitation, including online platforms related to vulnerable Ukrainian refugees⁸².

Member States⁸³ adopted various strategies to detect cases of trafficking in human beings facilitated by the use of technology. These include monitoring the internet (both the surface web and the dark web) combined with real-time open source intelligence analysis, creating cyber-unit specialised in countering trafficking in human beings and deploying “cyber-patrols” with specialised officers tasked with carrying out investigations on the Internet, subject to relevant legal requirements. Web-scraping tools specifically developed for extracting information from websites are used by some law enforcement agencies, particularly to identify risk and vulnerability on Adult Services Websites⁸⁴. Several Member States have implemented systems for Internet users to report content and websites that they suspect are linked to illegal activities, including sexual and labour exploitation. Austria mentioned that law enforcement authorities use digital evidence to trace the working hours and conditions, logistics of transport, daily income, threats and constant control and abuse of women who are victims of trafficking.

Member States⁸⁵ carried out labour inspections in order to detect possible cases of trafficking for labour exploitation, including within the framework of EMPACT “Trafficking in Human Beings”. Some Member States⁸⁶ also adopted specific measures aimed at improving labour inspections in the area of trafficking in human beings, such as legislative acts expanding the inspection and investigative powers of financial authorities, setting-up of cooperation agreements between law enforcement and labour authorities, as well as creating a specific unit of labour inspectors competent for cases of trafficking in human beings.

Moreover, Member States took measures aimed at increasing and improving the use of **financial investigations** in trafficking in human beings cases, including training for law enforcement and judicial authorities, development of public-private partnerships between Financial Intelligence Units, National Labour Authorities and banks, strengthening of the capacity of law enforcement authorities to conduct money laundering investigations in relation to trafficking in human beings cases; and development of handbooks on financial investigations and asset recovery⁸⁷. Member States also reported on seizing and confiscating assets and proceeds in the context of criminal proceedings on trafficking in human beings. The Commission’s **proposal for a new Directive on asset recovery and confiscation**⁸⁸ contributes to the fight against trafficking in human beings by providing a new set of rules that reinforces asset recovery from tracing and identification, through freezing and management, to confiscation and final disposal of proceeds and instrumentalities of criminal offences, including from trafficking of human beings.

The Commission proposes to amend Directive 2011/36/EU in order to further harmonise the EU legal framework with a view to facilitate cross-border cooperation in trafficking

⁸² See for example: [20 countries spin a web for human traffickers during a hackathon | Europol \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europol.europa.eu/news-room/2022/02/20-countries-spin-a-web-for-human-traffickers-during-a-hackathon).

⁸³ Such as Spain, France, Croatia and Netherlands.

⁸⁴ Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, *Online and technology-facilitate trafficking in human beings* (2022), <https://rm.coe.int/online-and-technology-facilitated-trafficking-in-human-beings-summary-/1680a5e10c>

⁸⁵ Such as Croatia, France, Ireland and Netherlands.

⁸⁶ Germany, Hungary and Lithuania.

⁸⁷ Cyprus, Netherlands and Spain.

⁸⁸ [COM/2022/ 245 final](#).

cases and address emerging threats. In addition to the ones, which were mentioned above, these modifications consist in **adding forced marriage and illegal adoption among the forms of exploitation that Member States should criminalise and reinforcing the sanction regime against legal persons in relation to trafficking offences committed for their benefit.**

In 2022, the Commission launched a call for proposals under the ISF on actions against trafficking in human beings⁸⁹, with a total budget of EUR 3 million, which aims at breaking the criminal business model of human traffickers. The fight against trafficking in human beings is fully integrated in the EMPACT grants that support multidisciplinary actions against ten crime priorities identified by the Council in the context of the EMPACT Cycle⁹⁰.

3.4. Early identification, assistance and protection of the victims

In 2022, the Commission launched a call for proposals under the AMIF on the assistance, support and integration of third country national victims of trafficking in human beings⁹¹, with a total budget of EUR 4 million. The call supports concrete transnational measures aiming to enhance the integration of the victims in the host country, taking into account their specific needs and circumstances, as well as victims among vulnerable groups.

EU agencies reported on their respective roles and actions for the early identification and protection of victims⁹². EUAA developed a vulnerability toolkit to provide a comprehensive approach to the issue of trafficking in human beings together with the other vulnerabilities focusing also on victims with special needs. FRONTEX developed VEGA Children handbooks to improve the identification of children on the move at risk at air, land and sea borders. FRONTEX Handbook on Risk Profiles on Trafficking in Human Beings is also a practical and operationally relevant tool that aims to respond to the needs of Border Guards and national authorities in the area of anti-trafficking. FRA prepared a manual for trainers on guardianship for unaccompanied children, including child victims of trafficking, and carries out monitoring at the border to help staff in identifying victims of trafficking in human beings.

Member States took measures aimed at increasing and intensifying the **early identification** of victims of trafficking in human beings and their **referral to assistance** and support services. Such measures include detection and assessment tools used in reception centres, guidelines for the referral of non-EU victims of trafficking arriving at airports, as well as developing projects, guidelines, protocols, handbooks and indicators to detect the signs of trafficking in human beings⁹³. Member States also reported on training of front-line caseworkers, police officers and border guards on the early identification of potential victims of trafficking in human beings⁹⁴. Multidisciplinary training dedicated to the identification and protection of children at risk of becoming victims of trafficking was also organised by some Member States⁹⁵, in cooperation with

⁸⁹ [Funding & tenders \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.europa.eu/funding/tenders)

⁹⁰ Council Conclusions setting the EU's priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime for EMPACT 2022-2025, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8665-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

⁹¹ [Funding & tenders \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.europa.eu/funding/tenders)

⁹² [Joint report of the JHA agencies' network on the identification and protection of victims of human trafficking \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.europa.eu/funding/tenders)

⁹³ For example Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Italy, Finland, Hungary and Spain.

⁹⁴ For example, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Romania.

⁹⁵ For example, France.

civil society organisations and involving child protection services, staff from the administrative, judicial and socio-educational sector, among others.

Member States took initiatives in order to improve informal or formal **national referral mechanisms**. For instance, Portugal started to implement the National Referral Mechanism, which consists in a protocol defining procedures for the identification and referral of (potential) child victims. France is developing a National Referral Mechanism, which will take the form of a document including indicators to identify victims and define the roles and attributions of relevant stakeholders. Ireland approved the creation of a revised National Referral Mechanism, which will allow selected civil society organisations to refer victims, among other measures. The Commission proposes in the amendment to Directive 2011/36/EU to make it mandatory for Member States to establish national referral mechanisms aimed at the early identification of, assistance to, and support for victims, in cooperation with relevant support organisations, and to appoint a national focal point for the referral of victims.

In line with the EU Strategy, the Commission encouraged Member States to establish **specialised shelters for victims of trafficking** through EU funding. All Member States indicated measures and actions to ensure that all victims identified are provided with **assistance, support and protection**, taking into account gender and child-specific needs. These measures and actions include housing and specialised shelters for adult victims as well as children and provisions of medical, psychological and legal assistance. Civil Society Organisations also offered a diverse range of counselling services for potential victims of trafficking, as well as provided protection, shelter, medical, psychological and psychiatric support, legal, social, education and professional care.

Several Member States⁹⁶ reported on specific amounts of compensation awarded to victims of trafficking in human beings, ranging from EUR 1 000 to EUR 29 295 in one year. Victims continue to face obstacles in accessing justice and compensation, notably due to the fact that they may not be aware of their rights, lack information regarding the civil or criminal proceedings or do not legally reside in the Member States. Member States and civil society organisations produced information material for victims of crime, including trafficking in human beings, about their rights and relevant procedures. They also adopted amendments to existing legislation; put in place training of law enforcement authorities and specialised services on victims' hearing; set up rooms dedicated to the hearing of victims of trafficking; and developed new procedures to assess the specific individual circumstances of the victims claiming compensation⁹⁷.

The specific prevention, protection and support measures envisaged in the Commission's proposal for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence⁹⁸ complement the measures laid down in Directive 2011/36/EU.

3.5. International dimension

The EU Strategy addresses trafficking in human beings as a transnational crime. Nearly half of the victims registered in 2019-2020 were non-EU citizens. As announced in the EU Strategy, the Commission adopted an EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (2021-2025)⁹⁹, which aims at providing protection and assistance to smuggled vulnerable

⁹⁶ Belgium, Latvia and Slovakia.

⁹⁷ Czechia, France, Germany, Lithuania and Netherlands.

⁹⁸ [COM/2022/105 final](#).

⁹⁹ [COM\(2021\) 591 final](#).

migrants, with a particular attention to children and women, and contributes to fighting the smuggling networks and disrupting their business of moving victims for exploitation to the EU.

In 2022, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has put the focus on addressing the threats of trafficking in human beings for those fleeing the war. The EU has acted promptly. As mentioned above, on 11 May 2022, the Solidarity Platform endorsed a **Common Anti-trafficking Plan**¹⁰⁰, developed and implemented under the lead of the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, in close cooperation with the NREM, the EU Agencies and the European External Action Service. The Plan sets out concrete actions at the EU level and recommendations for the Member States to prevent the crime, increase law enforcement and judicial cooperation and protect potential victims. It also recognises the positive role of EU missions on the ground, including EUAM Ukraine that assists the Ukrainian authorities in border management and contributes to the facilitation of the flow of refugees from Ukraine to the EU. The Council also activated the Temporary Protection Directive¹⁰¹, which has decreased the vulnerability of persons fleeing the war to trafficking in human beings and complemented the actions and recommendations set out in the Common Anti-Trafficking Plan.

All the actions of the Plan have either been completed or are ongoing. The Commission notably launched a dedicated webpage addressing people fleeing Ukraine, including a section containing practical advice to refugees on how to avoid falling into the hands of traffickers¹⁰². A list of dedicated emergency anti-trafficking helplines to help potential victims was compiled and published online¹⁰³. Actions under the EMPACT Operational Action Plan (OAP) to tackle trafficking in human beings in relation to Ukraine took place¹⁰⁴. The EU ATC chaired a meeting with the internet platform and technology companies within the EU Internet Forum in order to encourage online platforms and social media to raise awareness on the risks of, prevent and detect trafficking in human beings. The European Platform tackling Undeclared Work created a specific subgroup on tackling undeclared work among displaced persons and refugees from Ukraine.

Member States and civil society organisations, as well as EU Delegations and EU missions in Ukraine and Moldova, put in place awareness raising and prevention measures to reduce the vulnerabilities of people fleeing Russia's aggression against Ukraine and address the specific risks of trafficking in human beings. The immediate response at the EU and national level certainly contributed to the very limited number of confirmed cases of trafficking in human beings.

During the reporting period, the Commission, together with the European External Action Service, engaged with other **main countries of origin and transit of victims and traffickers** (Nigeria, China, Moldova, Pakistan, Morocco, Western Balkans, Turkey etc.) through involvement in operational actions, policy dialogues and targeted funding. This included the involvement of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro North Macedonia and Serbia in EMPACT operational actions on trafficking in human beings.

¹⁰⁰ [A new Anti-Trafficking Plan to protect people fleeing the war in Ukraine \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹⁰¹ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof

¹⁰² [Information for people fleeing the war in Ukraine | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹⁰³ [National hotline numbers for reporting a crime or seeking assistance \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹⁰⁴ [Human traffickers luring Ukrainian refugees on the web targeted in EU-wide hackathon | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#).

In July 2022, the EU launched the Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management in Moldova¹⁰⁵ with trafficking in human beings being one of its top thematic priorities. Trafficking in human beings is also systematically addressed by the Commission and the European External Action Service in dedicated human rights and security dialogues as well as through a range of foreign policy instruments and operational cooperation with partner countries.

In the neighbourhood, the EU **funded actions with anti-trafficking impact** for EUR 15 million under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa in 2019-2022 and will contract further EUR 84 million under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) 2021-2022 in order to address the growing involvement of organised crime groups in the irregular migration picture, which leads to increasing threat of trafficking in human beings along migration routes especially in the neighbourhood. The EU funded actions with anti-trafficking impact through its international partnership budget, with EUR 27.8 million in national projects (and additional 13 million to be contracted), as well as EUR 575.5 million in regional or multi-country projects (and additional EUR 38 million to be contracted). Further financial contributions are currently under discussion. Through the Internal Security Fund Police, the Commission supported projects with partner countries along migratory routes towards the EU to prevent and combat migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings with EUR 11.6 million, including cooperation with Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Nigeria, The Gambia, the Horn of Africa, Turkey and the Western Balkans.

The EU stepped up cooperation with international and regional organisations active in the area¹⁰⁶, including in the context of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). It also continued its engagement with the Council of Europe and its Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA). The EU has actively participated in the Working Groups and Conferences of Parties of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC). It is also taking part in the Review Mechanism of UNTOC.

Member States have contributed to addressing the international dimension including through the provision of awareness raising campaigns, training, operational cooperation, technical assistance and targeted funding¹⁰⁷ whilst cooperating with international organisations. The EU Agencies have undertaken capacity building, operational cooperation, and technical assistance in partner countries.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Between 2019 and 2022, the EU faced unprecedented challenges in fighting trafficking in human beings. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on victims of trafficking in human beings and with regard to the changing modus operandi of criminals, which increasingly and rapidly shifted to a digital business model of trafficking in human beings for all forms of exploitation. While the risks of trafficking in human beings were taken very seriously from the beginning of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, the

¹⁰⁵ [Informal Home Affairs Council: EU launches the Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management in Moldova \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-articles/detail/14444)

¹⁰⁶ Such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

¹⁰⁷ Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.

threat remains high. The economic situation of refugees from Ukraine might deteriorate, which will increase the criminal opportunities of traffickers taking advantage of vulnerable people. This requires to continue monitoring the situation.

The data reported by the Member States show that trafficking in human beings has not decreased. While the slight rise in the number of identified victims may be linked to better identification, many victims remain undetected. Trafficking for labour exploitation has significantly increased during the reporting period. This form of exploitation is underreported, which means that the actual number of victims is likely to be significantly higher. Despite progress in cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation, the numbers of prosecutions and convictions of traffickers remain low. The number of prosecutions for trafficking offences as compared to the number of suspects dropped by 9% during the reporting period compared to 2017-2018, which may also be due to the challenges faced by the judicial authorities during the pandemic, including delays in criminal proceedings.

Nevertheless, many measures have been taken at the EU level and by the Member States in order to address these challenges, notably in the context of the implementation of the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025 and the Common Anti-Trafficking Plan. These measures contribute to the comprehensive approach to combatting trafficking in human beings and need to continue. Moreover, the Commission's proposal to amend Directive 2011/36/EU further aims at strengthening the legal response to trafficking in human beings and harmonising the EU legal anti-trafficking framework.