

Panel 4 – The road ahead: Towards an inclusive and comprehensive protection

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to greet you on behalf of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia and on my own behalf as the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration. It is an exceptional honour for me today to be a part of the 22nd Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons dedicated to strengthening of our efforts for victim's protection.

One of the basic lessons I learned when I started working in this field, was that the THB victims are not some invisible and nameless persons, somewhere far away from us. It was difficult for me to realise that they are not invisible, but we are not able to see them. Now is completely clear for me that our moral and legal responsibility is bigger than their invisibility. This obligation is personal to each and every one of us as individuals, even more, it is a collective obligation and task of each country.

The Republic of North Macedonia is dominant **country of transit of THB** because one of the main channels for smuggling of migrants passes through my country. North Macedonia is a **country of final destination** as well, where the victims and potential victims, mostly young women from neighbouring countries, are exploited for sexual and labour purposes in catering facilities that are located in the western part of the country. Sometimes the THB gains domestic characteristics and the citizens of our country become victims of sexual exploitation and forced child marriages in their own country.

For example, last year in the Republic of North Macedonia, **48 THB victims were identified, of which 6 were children**, mostly foreigners (40), and 8 domestic victims.

So I have to stress that most dominant types of exploitation, in the Republic of North Macedonia, definitely is the sexual and labour exploitation. Forced marriages with minors are also on the rise. But to be honest, the increasing of the number of child THB victims is of our particular concern.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, THB is based on a simple philosophy firstly, to detect everyone who can be and should be part of the mission called the fight against trafficking in human beings, and secondly, to include all of them as relevant partners for achieving the common goal. So in 2001 Government established a body, NC, which is a mosaic of state bodies, the non-governmental sector and the international organizations. Each and every of these institutions are an important link in the chain and cover different areas in the fight against trafficking in human beings.

In simple words its mission is to create the strategy of the country that will guarantee an effective fight against trafficking in human beings. The National Commission during this period of more than 20 years, adopted 5 Strategies and 5 Action Plans, constantly changing the rules of game to provide an adequate response to the new challenges in THB. So the National Commission for more than 2 decades created the common framework for joint action of all partners within, starting with adopting the policies and strategies, through building the normative framework and finishing with operational action in practice of various institutions in the country. The main and most difficult task during this years for the National Commission was to rise social awareness for all stakeholders, such as teachers, journalists,

police, doctors and judges to convince them that each and every one of them have their own role in this fight.

Let's look several very obvious results of effective partnerships initiated by the National Commission of the Republic of North Macedonia, during the last years.

1. Between the MOI and the Public Prosecution

The result is the establishment of the **National Unit for Combating Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking** (Task Force) in 2018

2. Between the MOI and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The result is the formation of **5 mobile teams** for identification of vulnerable categories of persons, including THB victims, in different municipalities across the country where there are significant risks of trafficking in human beings.

3. Between the MOI and the Office of the Ombudsman

The result is the new Office of the **National Rapporteur** within the Office of the Ombudsman, which is evaluated by the relevant stakeholders with the highest marks,

4. Between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the NGO sector

The result is a specialized **Centre for THB Victims**, which is under the competence of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and is managed in partnership with Citizens' Association. Services.

5. Between NC and the local self-government

The result is the formation of **5 local commissions** in the local self-government councils, where all bodies and organizations represented at a local level in the fight THB and protection of victims.

NC also gave recommendation on joint cooperation between neighbouring countries and beyond, in order to exchange experience and use the lessons learned from foreign actors in countries in the region.

Therefore, in the past year, the National Commission initiated and signed **agreements on cooperation with NCs** in this area with Bulgaria, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia and Slovenia, and negotiations have begun with Greece.

(I will tell you in confidence, that we stole a model of the Task Force from NC of Serbia, model of the local commissions from Bulgaria, model for compensations of damages to victims from a law of Kosovo. So we still try to discover some good idea, some effective practises from the NC of the region, or wider....to stole)

What are the other strategic directions through which the National Commission creates a new partnership and implements the will, not only of the country but of the whole society to fight trafficking in human beings and to help the THB victims?

1. Firstly, the national legislation must be harmonized with the EU standards. In 2018 the Republic of North Macedonia incorporated the **Principle of Non-punishment of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings** in the Criminal Code. During the last year, the Commission, in cooperation with the competent institutions, drafted the **Law on Payment of Monetary Compensation to Victims of Criminal Offences**. In this regard, we are focused on monitoring its effective implementation, drafting bylaws and conducting trainings to strengthen the capacity of judges, public prosecutors and victims' legal representatives to effectively ensure the right for compensation.

2. Secondly, to obtain the minimum action that our country can do is to establish a legal mechanism and provide to victims access to appropriate and effective remedies, such as compensation, regardless of their immigration status, information, legal advice and services available in a language they can understand.
3. And third, in the next period we are focused on creating a functional Operational Team for coordination and management of cases of trafficking in human beings and formal identification of the victim.
4. And last but not least, one of the next steps will be to create a new partnership and new form of cooperation with business community, to prevent the increasing of labour exploitation, as a risk of THB.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are witnessing quick, negative phenomena through which the world is passing. I would like to mention the pandemic caused by Covid 19, the easy availability but also the vulnerability of children on the Internet, and now the war in Ukraine which, as expected, caused a new wave of refugees. Criminals adapt very quickly to the new circumstances, taking advantage of people's vulnerability. That means that each and every one of us, every country must be fully prepared, for the new attempts. The excuse like, we are far away from Ukraine is not real, at all. For example, North Macedonia is not a country of interest to the refugees, at least at the moment, but you never know how migration flows will change. We have not forgotten what happened at our border when during the migrant crisis 2015-2016, a human tsunami of 1 million people passed through my country (take in consideration that we have 1 million and 8 hundred citizens). Also, no one expected such tectonic security disruptions in the 21st century caused by Russia's military aggression on Ukraine, and millions of displaced people who could become

easy prey for the traffickers. In these situations we can best understand the need for inter-institutional cooperation and cooperation between institutions with international organizations and citizens' associations in the country, and more broadly between the countries themselves.

In the future, we as National Commission remain fully committed to the fight against trafficking in human beings, building new forms for a more intensive joint approach of all stakeholders (actors) in this fight, but also building new partnerships, to implement new joint activities, since this struggle is like a perpetual motion, constantly evolving and constantly changing.

I am personally convinced that the concept of inclusiveness and completeness sends two messages, firstly everyone must find their place in the system of fight against trafficking in human beings and play their own role in the best possible way, and secondly, there should not be any part of this fight uncovered by an appropriate response and appropriate measure in order to help and protect the victim.