

Together to fight trafficking and exploitation of children

*By Florian Raunig**

Next time your car stops at a red light and little faces show up near your window, or you walk past a small begging hand on a sidewalk, take a minute to think: one in three of those children you see is at risk of trafficking. The 2013 National Study, conducted by UNICEF, Save the Children and the Albanian NGO ARSIS, identified over 2,500 children living in street situations in Albania, and assessed that more than 800 of them are in danger of being trafficked within and outside Albania and be exploited for sex, labour, begging and petty crimes.

The OSCE Presence in Albania is therefore continuing to put strong emphasis on programmatic measures and actions to support efforts that address child trafficking and exploitation, as the most heinous violations of human rights - rights we celebrate each year on 10 December. Obviously, this is not only an Albanian phenomenon. It affects thousands of children worldwide. The latest United Nations global report on human trafficking shows that one in three known victims of human trafficking is a child - a five per cent increase compared to a few years ago.

Over the past decade, Albania has taken a number of commitments to prevent and combat child trafficking, but the country continues to face serious problems with child trafficking and labour exploitation. Good laws have been drafted, but that is insufficient even in case of full implementation. We need to focus on preventive measures as well. Interviews with trafficked children show that almost all of them experienced deprivation of their rights and abuse prior to being trafficked. They would not have fallen victim to traffickers if education and social services professionals and law enforcement officials had identified much earlier the danger signs and responded in a timely and appropriate manner.

Trafficking is linked with social and economic issues and affects the most vulnerable members of the society. For example, 70 per cent of the children in street situations belong to the Roma and Egyptian communities. Therefore, it should not be viewed just as a criminal act, but as a social, political and human rights issue, which requires a multi-disciplinary approach.

Responses must be oriented towards an effective child protection mechanism, which is able to respond to the needs of vulnerable and socially excluded children and ensures their development. There are almost 200 child protection units in Albania. They should be the forefront of ensuring that child victims of abuse and exploitation receive proper care and protection. Unfortunately, only a few of them are fully operational.

The state has a duty to prevent child abuse and to meet their needs for special protection and assistance in an integrated, multi-dimensional approach. Since May 2014, the government has undertaken an ambitious action plan to identify and protect children in street situations. Realising that this requires long-term effort and durable solutions, the OSCE Presence in Albania is working closely with the government and civil society to ensure that policies and concrete actions guarantee the best interest of the child.

The use of forced child labour is another serious human rights violation. In Albania, children work in the agricultural, textile, garment, footwear and mining sectors. They are often

exposed to dangerous chemicals and heavy machinery. According to INSTAT's 2012 child labour survey, 57,000 children in Albania – eight percent of five to seventeen year-olds – are economically active. This means there are 57,000 children in Albania whose childhood has been interrupted too soon, and who may suffer long physical and mental consequences.

It is crucial that the existing laws are enforced against all forms of exploitation associated with trafficking. It is also important to increase the role and potential contribution to the prevention of exploitation of child labour of other actors in civil society, such as businesses, trade unions and non-governmental organizations.

While guaranteeing protection of human rights is primarily a governmental responsibility, businesses have an obligation to ensure that no one is forced to sacrifice their life, rights or future to produce a desired product. The OSCE Presence has adopted a two-fold approach to address the phenomenon of exploitation of child labour. We have provided support to labour inspectors to empower them to detect cases of forced labour, including child labour. We are also working with the government and the business associations to introduce a Code of Conduct on the prohibition of child labour.

The devastating experience of children who have been trafficked or exploited makes it a moral imperative that we stand up against those who view children as commodities to be exploited. Only a co-ordinated and collaborative approach can ensure that children receive the support they need to be protected from trafficking and to start building their lives. We are responsible for their future!

**Ambassador, Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania*