

## **TRAFFICKING OF HUMAN BEINGS IS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE**

*An op-ed by Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Vincenzo Del Monaco,  
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Trafficking in Human Beings is not a faded, historical memory: it is a social issue in today's Albania, and it bears the seeds of a potential threat to security.

RS, a 20-year-old woman from Tirana, gave birth in prison, following an arrest for theft. RS first reached authorities' attention as a serial thief at 16. However, her story is not simply one of juvenile crime. RS's parents abandoned her at a young age. When she was a teenager living with her grandparents, she was sexually exploited. After authorities identified the case of trafficking, she was moved to a shelter, but eventually returned to her grandparents', where the sexual exploitation continued. She currently remains in prison for theft.

RS's story is just one of the many complex human trafficking cases in Albania, covered by a recent study conducted by my office, the OSCE Presence in Albania. Human trafficking – the process of entrapping people through the use of force, violence, deception, or coercion and exploiting them for financial or personal gain – can occur at all times and anywhere. Over the last five years, Albanian authorities reported more than 450 cases of presumed and formally identified victims of trafficking, the majority of whom are children. The UNODC estimates about 50,000 trafficking victims globally in 2018, the latest reliable, available data. Yet, trafficking of human beings (THB) is notoriously underreported and the number of victims is likely far greater.

This global phenomenon is fueled by social and economic inequality, poverty, unemployment, violence and conflict, and facilitated by technology. It deserves high attention by the international community and national authorities in Albania.

### **Who are trafficked persons today?**

Anyone can become a victim of trafficking, though persons living in unsafe and insecure circumstances are more prone to become targets, and more likely to be dependent on and therefore continuously exploited by their traffickers. Vast research on THB tells us that often these individuals' dreams for better lives may end in debt, poor working conditions, or in trafficking, exploitation and violence. They become victims twice when they are hired by organized crime organizations.

The problem is even more intricate in the case of children, especially those forced to beg, or commit petty crimes by their parents. In the Presence's research, 45 cases of trafficked children or potential child victims of trafficking were documented, such as EXH, a 15-year-old with mental disorders, who has been begging, selling drugs, stealing, and occasionally working to support his disabled father since he was 11. After he escaped state care, a child protection worker has continuously monitored his case.

What cases like EXH's show is that THB is not simply addressed by a victim's removal from exploitation, but requires long-term economic and social solutions for families and children, including employment, housing, and education. This begins with strong and well-resourced social support systems that prevent trafficking and exploitation from happening and nourish a protective environment for the most vulnerable.

The Presence in Albania remains committed to helping coordinate a victim-centered, multi-stakeholder to eradicate all forms of THB, grounded in the OSCE's comprehensive approach to address this heinous crime. Our commitment is driven by the knowledge that trafficking poses a threat to national and regional security because of the criminal activity involved. Global research stresses that traffickers are often involved in corruption, drug trafficking, migrants' smuggling, money laundering, and other forms of organized crime, with THB profits flowing into formal and criminal economies at the cost of rule of law, democratic values, economic security, investment and sustainable development.

In line with its mandate and the Albanian Government's priorities, the Presence provides expertise to improve policies, upgrade skills, and strengthen coordination mechanisms across social, enforcement, and judicial institutions and organizations. We contributed to the adoption of a National Action Plan to protect children from economic exploitation and local-level plans for identifying and assisting children in these situations. Adopted guidance for safeguarding child victims' interests in criminal proceedings; enhanced data collection mechanisms; and multi-agency coordination meetings are further helping to identify and manage cases.

My recent meetings with institutions, police, shelters and NGOs solidified the need for co-operation at all levels. "Different and Equal", "Vatra" and "Caritas", which bring laudable experience on the ground in preventing trafficking and assisting victims, stressed the importance of sustainable social assistance programmes for victims' reintegration, without which they may be driven back to the initial stage of exploitation, such as in the case of "RS".

### **What can be done?**

Against this backdrop, the prosecution of THB is a priority to render justice to victims, and help identify perpetrators by tracing their assets.

Victims should not be treated as perpetrators for crimes committed due to their trafficking situation. Their proper identification as victims would lead to the protection of their human rights and contribute to successful prosecution of traffickers.

Confiscated funds could be used to help trafficking victims, to support shelters and NGOs in victim rehabilitation, who can initiate a new life.

In the case of children, proactive involvement of social workers and law-enforcement to reduce the occurrence of abuse would mitigate children's risk to be trafficked. We will continue to support Albanian institutions, also at local level, to strengthen the child protection system.

As traffickers develop new recruitment methods, on and offline, and sophisticated means to control their victims, specialized training for law-enforcement and justice officials is paramount. The Presence is developing training for police and magistrates that addresses new forms of trafficking and encourages a human rights, child-oriented and gender sensitive approach to combatting it. And with the OSCE Office of the Special Representative and

Coordinator for Combatting THB, we will deliver a unique simulation-based online training for the first time in the region.

Finally, the role of a dedicated national anti-trafficking coordinator remains crucial, with a clear mandate and adequate resources to lead coordination of the various dimensions of anti-trafficking efforts.