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Trafficking in human beings – the international dimension

European Migration
Network Inform

July 2025

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Statistics were sourced from Eurostat, national authorities and other (national) databases.

Circulated

July 2025

European Migration Network (EMN), 'Trafficking in human beings – the international dimension', [July 2025], [URL].

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1. KEY POINTS TO NOTE

- **Trafficking in human beings is a complex and dynamic crime that involves different forms of exploitation and constitutes a human rights violation under international law and the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights.**¹ It concerns the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.
- **Statistics show, over the past decade, an increasing trend in the number of victims of trafficking being identified in the EU being nationals from non-EU countries.** Indeed, the international dimension of trafficking in human beings has gained more prominence at EU level in recent years. It was, for example, made a specific priority under the 2021 EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025. Since 2022, non-EU victims are the majority of registered trafficking victims in the EU.
- **The EU has played an important role in supporting EU Member States' efforts to address trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals,** through the provision of funding as well as supporting operational actions and coordination and the exchange of information, including through EU Agencies and initiatives such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT). **The EU has also directly managed and/or funded development cooperation programmes in third countries,** using a comprehensive approach in line with the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.
- **EMN Member and Observer Countries² have prioritised a wide range of thematic areas when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.** Main policy areas addressed include crime prevention, victim protection, law enforcement cooperation and prosecution of perpetrators. The challenges of identification of third-country national victims of trafficking in human beings was highlighted as a key priority in this context. Most countries prioritised specific third countries, geographic regions and/or third-country nationalities.
- In most countries, **the international dimension of trafficking in human beings is addressed as part of national anti-trafficking policies/action plans, and/or other government policies or strategies.** None have in place a dedicated policy to exclusively address this issue. In several countries, the international dimension of trafficking is not specifically addressed at policy level, but rather embedded in broader national policies or part of specific measures in third countries. **In almost all EMN Member and Observer Countries, national policies addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings are linked to other policy areas, especially asylum and migration policies as well as fighting organised crime.**
- **Most EMN Member Countries have funded or implemented measures addressing trafficking in human beings in third countries of origin and transit of (potential) victims.** Cooperation with third countries mostly happens at operational level, on an ad-hoc basis. Targeted regions include the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Thematically, measures reported span almost equally across the pillars of the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025. Measures target a wide range of actors including victims (the main target group), frontline actors, local communities and national authorities of third countries, and were **often implemented in cooperation with international organisations** (primarily IOM). National funds from EMN Member Countries were the most used source to finance the reported measures, sometimes in combination with EU or NGO funding.
- **Most EMN Member and Observer Countries have also implemented different measures specifically addressing trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals in their territories.** The majority of the measures reported are related to identifying, protecting, assisting, supporting and empowering third-country national victims. **Most of the measures target third-country nationals in general** (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, migrants in transit, seasonal workers, etc.) **rather than specific nationalities.**
- **Challenges in addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings were reported across the priorities identified in the EU Strategy.** In third countries, key challenges linked to the prevention of trafficking in human beings related to cultural differences, cross-border cooperation and awareness raising amongst vulnerable groups. On law enforcement and judicial response, most challenges were linked to differences in legislation or difficulties in cooperation and communication with competent authorities. On identification and protection of victims, limited training of protection staff, dysfunctional referral mechanisms, or low levels of trust of victims in authorities were singled out as key challenges. In Europe, EMN Member and Observer Countries, in addition to several of the above challenges, reported the growing role of the online dimension of trafficking in human beings.
- **Countries identified a wide range of good practices across all pillars of the EU Strategy.** Internationally, several EMN Member and Observer Countries singled out awareness-raising campaigns and cooperation with third countries and CSOs as good practices to prevent trafficking in human beings. Countries also praised the deployment of police liaison officers in third countries and support from EU Agencies to support judicial and law enforcement response. Key

¹ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>, accessed 2 June 2025.

² Note for the reader: key points provide a summary of the main information contained in the study. For ease of reading, key points do not contain footnotes. Please note that EMN Member and Observer Countries referred to in the key points are thoroughly listed in the relevant sections.

good practices in identifying and supporting victims in third countries included cooperation with NGOs and stakeholder capacity building activities. In EMN Member and Observer Countries, good practices included, among others, mentoring and training of law enforcement authorities, the establishment of specialised law enforcement units or victim assistance, support and referral systems and the organisation of capacity building activities for key stakeholders.

- **EMN Member and Observer Countries identified several challenges or specific aspects in need of strengthening when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.** To better

support the identification and protection of victims, countries stressed the need to enhance financial investigations connected to trafficking in human beings, to further concentrate on the digital space and to invest more resources to address trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. Others noted the need to reinforce cooperation with certain third countries or develop capacities of relevant authorities. Several countries are currently reviewing their policies, with some assessing the possibility to reinforce international cooperation and others considering new measures to enhance the integration of third-country national victims and/or to strengthen the identification of certain groups of victims.

2. INTRODUCTION

This study³ provides an overview of EU-funded measures and EMN Member and Observer Countries' efforts to address trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals towards their countries: a) in third countries of origin and transit of victims (and potential victims); and b) in their respective countries, where these efforts have an international component. It specifically looked at policies and measures put in place to address this international dimension of trafficking in human beings, in connection with each of the priorities identified by the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025 i.e. prevention and demand reduction; law enforcement and

judicial response; identification, protection and support to victims; and international partnerships. The study delved into the challenges and good practices identified by EMN Member and Observer Countries in addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings and provides some examples of outcomes and outputs of existing efforts in this context. Finally, it identified existing needs in addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings and provides some examples of ongoing discussions and plans on future policies and measures to address these needs.

3. EU CONTEXT

Trafficking in human beings is a complex and dynamic crime that involves different forms of exploitation and constitutes a human rights violation under international law and the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights (Article 5(3)).⁴ Trafficking in human beings is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Many victims of trafficking that are trafficked within the European Union are EU nationals and a significant number of them are trafficked within their own Member State. However, statistics show, over the past decade, an increasing trend in the number of victims being identified in the EU, being nationals from non-EU countries (64% of all those identified in the EU). At the same time, many victims remain undetected.

The international dimension of trafficking in human beings has gained more prominence at EU level in recent years, leading to the recognition of this aspect as a specific priority under the **EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025** adopted on 14 April 2021.⁵

At EU level, the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (EU ATC) contributes to a coordinated and coherent comprehensive approach to address trafficking in human beings.

The European Commission has made a link between the **EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings** and the renewed **EU action plan against migrant smuggling**, which aims to disrupt the business of transnational smuggling and trafficking networks.⁶ The **Pact on Migration and Asylum**, adopted in May 2024, also introduced strong safeguards for vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking in human beings.⁷

The EU has played an important role in supporting EU Member States' efforts to address trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals through the provision of funding as well as supporting operational actions and

³ Methodological note: This study is a synthesis of national reports prepared by 24 EMN NCPs using an agreed template complemented by information provided by the European Commission on national EU-funded measures that were already mapped through a previous internal data collection exercise. It also relies on information provided by the European Commission on EMPACT and other EU-funded initiatives that was gathered directly from its Services, as well as two interviews undertaken with officials of EMN Member Countries and EU agencies involved in EMPACT.

⁴ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>, accessed on 30 October 2024.

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021- 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0171>, accessed 5 June 2025

⁶ A renewed Action Plan against migrant smuggling, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/irregular-migration-and-return/migrant-smuggling_en, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁷ The Council adopts the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, press release, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/14/the-council-adopts-the-eu-s-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/> accessed 5 June 2025.

coordination and the exchange of information, including through EU Agencies. In this context, the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) has served as a platform to facilitate the operational cooperation between the public authorities and law enforcement of EU Member States, the Commission and the EU Agencies and where relevant, third countries. The EU has also directly managed and/or funded development cooperation programmes in third countries addressing different aspects of trafficking in human beings based on a comprehensive approach in line with the EU Strategy on combating trafficking in human beings and its four pillars. The EU funded programmes have particularly focused on enhancing relevant capacities of national law enforcement

and judiciary authorities but are also increasingly looking at the digital and illicit financial dimensions of trafficking. EU programming countering Trafficking in Human Beings often also target the smuggling of migrants, two inter-linked phenomena.

During the reporting period, the external dimension was further strengthened: anti-trafficking policies were included in actions on fighting migrant smuggling, in the enlargement process with accession countries and in human rights, security and migration dialogues with third countries, as well as through a range of foreign policy instruments and operational cooperation with partner countries.



4. NATIONAL POLICIES AND MEASURES

EMN Member and Observer Countries have prioritised a wide range of thematic areas when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings. Priorities were either formally established in policy documents or determined by the type of measures implemented and/or funded by EMN Member and Observer Countries.

Some of the main thematic areas where EMN Member and Observer Countries focused their efforts to address the international dimension of trafficking in human beings included the prevention of this crime through for example, awareness raising or the reduction of demand for trafficking, followed by the provision of support, assistance and protection to victims of trafficking in human beings. In some cases, particular attention was given to the protection of vulnerable groups like women or children. A number of countries also gave priority to enhancing the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators, including through the combat of trafficking in human beings as a form of transnational organised crime and international law enforcement cooperation. The identification of third-country national victims of trafficking in human beings was also highlighted as a key priority in this context.

Most countries prioritised specific third countries, geographic regions and/or third-country nationalities when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings. Efforts were mostly directed towards countries in Southeastern and Eastern Europe (with special attention given to Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion and war of aggression on the country) as well as countries in West and East Africa.

At policy level, EMN Member and Observer Countries have adopted different approaches to address the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.

In most cases, the international dimension of trafficking in human beings is addressed as part of national anti-trafficking policies/action plans, and/or other government policies or strategies, which contain one or more objectives referring to the international dimension of trafficking in human beings. None of the countries have in place a dedicated policy to exclusively address this issue.

In a number of countries, this aspect of trafficking is not specifically addressed at policy level, but rather embedded in broader national policies that do not differentiate

between nationalities, or through the implementation of specific measures in third countries or initiatives that specifically target third-country nationals.

There are clear interconnections between national policies addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings and other policy areas in almost all EMN Member and Observer Countries.

Since many third-country national victims are initially identified during asylum application processes or among irregularly staying migrants, several EMN Member Countries have integrated their anti-trafficking policies with asylum and migration policies. Interconnections were also identified with migrant smuggling, irregular migration and border management policies. In a few cases, there were also links between policies addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings and fundamental rights policies, including gender equality policies and policies aiming to combat gender-based violence, and with more general policies combating organised crime and labour exploitation.

Most EMN Member Countries have funded or implemented measures addressing trafficking in human beings towards EMN Member and Observer Countries, in third countries of origin and transit of (potential) victims.

Measures are implemented across the world, primarily in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Thematically, those reported span almost equally across the pillars of the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025, aiming for example to reinforce the capacity of third-country law enforcement and judicial authorities and enhance the exchange of information among competent authorities; provide information and raise awareness of the risks of trafficking in human beings; reduce the vulnerabilities and enhance the resilience of potential victims; reinforce existing protection structures; or improve the identification of victims and provide them with direct support.

Measures target a wide range of actors going from victims (the main target group), frontline actors and community members, to national authorities, law enforcement and judicial authorities in third countries and were implemented in cooperation with a variety of partners (e.g. NGOs, international organisations, national authorities, authorities from EMN Member and Observer Countries). National

funds from EMN Member Countries were the most common source of funding used to finance the reported measures, in some cases, in combination with EU funding or funding from NGOs.

Most EMN Member and Observer Countries have also implemented different measures specifically addressing trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals in their territories.

Most of the measures reported are related to identifying, protecting, assisting, supporting and empowering third-country national victims (e.g. through the delivery of capacity building to relevant actors, reinforcement of existing protection structures, the provision of direct assistance and enhanced coordination). A lower number of measures relate to prevention, awareness raising and reduction of the demand that fosters trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals (e.g. through awareness raising campaign or enhancing the resilience of at-risk groups) and/or to law enforcement and judicial cooperation to break the criminal model of traffickers (e.g. capacity building to law enforcement authorities and reinforced cooperation).

The main beneficiaries of these measures are third-country national (potential) victims of trafficking in human beings and in some cases also law enforcement and border authorities and CSOs working with trafficking victims or in the prevention of trafficking of human beings. Most of

the measures target third-country nationals in general (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, migrants in transit, seasonal workers, etc.) rather than specific nationalities, although following Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, a number of EMN Member Countries started implementing specific measures to address the risk of trafficking among this group. Most of the national measures specifically targeting third-country nationals in EMN Member and Observer Countries are implemented by international organisations (primarily IOM) and/or NGOs and CSOs and were funded through a combination of national and EU funds.

EMN Member and Observer Countries have engaged in different forms of cooperation with third countries and international organisations to combat trafficking in human beings.

Cooperation with third countries mostly happens at operational level, on an ad-hoc basis (e.g. through the posting of liaison officers or exchange of information with third countries). Only in a few cases was this cooperation formalised through bilateral agreements, protocols or Memorandum of Understanding. The form of cooperation with international organisations greatly varies across countries with some engaging in more structured cooperation and others primarily cooperating with international organisations on an ad-hoc basis through the implementation/funding of projects or participation in joint initiatives.



5. CHALLENGES AND GOOD PRACTICES

Challenges in addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings were identified across the priorities in the EU Strategy.

Key challenges reported by EMN Member and Observer Countries in connection to the prevention of trafficking in human beings in third countries related mainly to cultural differences, difficulties in cross-border cooperation and difficulties in identifying vulnerable groups to raise awareness on the risks of trafficking. Difficulties in raising awareness among potential victims or in at-risk sectors were also one of the main challenges to prevent trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals in EMN Member and Observer Countries.

Most challenges related to law enforcement and judicial response in third countries were linked to differences in legislation or difficulties in cooperation and communication with competent authorities. In EMN Member and Observer Countries, most challenges in this context were connected to legal restrictions on the use of personal data, lack of skills of relevant personnel, lack of resources and an increased use of online platforms by criminal groups.

When it comes to the identification and protection of victims, some of the challenges identified in third countries included a lack of knowledge of staff providing assistance, dysfunctional referral mechanisms, or low levels of trust of victims in authorities. This last aspect was also a challenge in EMN Member and Observer Countries, together with challenges caused by the rise in the online dimension of trafficking in human beings.

Finally, EMN Member and Observer Countries reported that cooperation with specific third countries or regions was

in some cases hindered by the political situation in these countries.

Countries also identified a wide range of good practices across all pillars of the EU Strategy when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.

The organisation of awareness raising campaigns – both in EMN Member and Observer Countries and in third countries – was identified as a good practice to make potential victims understand the risk and prevent trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals. The good cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and the implementation of projects in cooperation with CSOs were also reported as good practices for preventing trafficking in human beings towards the EU in third countries.

Concerning law enforcement and judicial response to trafficking in human beings in third countries, good practices related to the good cooperation with partner countries and the presence of police liaison officers in third countries, as well as the support that EU Agencies provided in this regard. In EMN Member and Observer Countries the mentoring and training of law enforcement authorities and the establishment of specialised law enforcement units were identified as the main good practices.

Key good practices in identifying and supporting victims in third countries included the cooperation with NGOs and enhancing the capacity of relevant stakeholders in third countries. In EMN Member and Observer Countries good practices were primarily linked to the functioning of victim assistance, support and referral systems as well as to the

provision of training and capacity building to key stakeholders.

Most EMN Member and Observer Countries identified good practices in their cooperation with third countries of origin and transit of (potential) victims, including for example

the active involvement of third countries in anti-trafficking efforts, the organisation of meetings and study visits with third countries and cooperation through regional and multi-lateral platforms. Key good practices in cooperating with international organisations included cooperation for the provision of training and awareness raising.



6. OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES ACHIEVED IN ADDRESSING THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

EMN Member and Observer Countries provided multiple examples of outputs and outcomes resulting from the efforts to address the international dimension of trafficking in human beings, which however greatly differed across countries and thematic areas, depending on the type of measures implemented.

Awareness-raising, training, international cooperation – including on joint investigations – were some of the main areas highlighted as having concrete outcomes, alongside increased support for (potential) third-country victims. Some countries noted, however, that the lack of good quality data and other challenges to monitoring and evaluation made it difficult to identify the results of existing efforts.



7. EXISTING NEEDS, INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AND FUTURE NATIONAL POLICIES AND MEASURES

EMN Member and Observer Countries identified a number of needs or specific aspects that could be reinforced when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.

To better support the identification and protection of victims there was a need to enhance financial investigations connected to trafficking in human beings, to further concentrate on the digital space and to invest increased efforts in trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. Other needs related to existing institutional and cooperation structures, like the need to reinforce cooperation with some third countries, or the need for more capacity building for competent authorities and better coordination.

Several countries are currently having discussions on how future policies could address such needs or

have plans to develop new policies and measures covering these aspects.

At the end of 2023, several countries were reviewing (or establishing) their national anti-trafficking strategies, including, in some cases, to reinforce international cooperation. Some countries are also discussing concluding, renewing or reinforcing cooperation agreements with third countries of origin and transit of victims. In other countries there are plans to adopt measures to enhance the integration of third-country national victims and/or to strengthen the identification of certain groups of victims (e.g. victims of labour exploitation, trafficking victims among applicants for international protection).



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The Czech Republic www.emncz.eu/

Estonia www.emn.ee/

Finland emn.fi/en/

France www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Europe-et-International/Le-reseau-europeen-des-migrations-REM3/Le-reseau-europeen-des-migrations-REM2

Germany www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/EMN/emn-node.html

Greece <https://migration.gov.gr/emn/>

Hungary www.emnhungary.hu/en

Ireland www.emn.ie/

Italy www.emnitalyncp.it/

Latvia www.emn.lv

Lithuania www.emn.lt/

Luxembourg emnluxembourg.uni.lu/

Malta emn.gov.mt/

The Netherlands www.emnnetherlands.nl/

Poland www.gov.pl/web/european-migration-network

Portugal rem.sef.pt/en/

Romania www.mai.gov.ro/

Spain www.emnspain.gob.es/en/home

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Slovenia emnslovenia.si

Sweden www.emnsweden.se/

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Ukraine dmsu.gov.ua/en-home.html

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Armenia migration.am/?lang=en

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<https://mvr.gov.mk/>

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