

The 2017 National Report on the implementation of the 2017 National Programme for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Victim Protection lays down the trends seen in 2017, and reports from the NCCTHB's Administration, reports from member institutions of the NCCTHB, and from the local committees (LCCTHB).

Overview

Bulgaria is still the main country of origin for victims of trafficking in human beings (THB) given the global migratory situation, and is also becoming a country of transit. Registered victims, formally or informally, are also mainly Bulgarian citizens, and according to the statistics of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, the majority of victims are girls and women- nearly 90% of the registered cases by 2017.

Both internationally and at a European level, and in Bulgaria, the majority of trafficked cases are for the purpose of sexual exploitation, but at the same time there is a reported increase in the trafficking of Bulgarian citizens for the purpose of organised begging and labour exploitation alongside other less recognisable forms of trafficking. It is often pointed out that the reasons for greater awareness of sexual exploitation compared to other forms of exploitation is the increased data available for victims of sexual exploitation, while those of labour exploitation are often not viewed as victims of a crime and/or do not seek assistance and protection of their rights. At a European level, there is also the challenge for institutions to distinguish between trafficking in persons for labour exploitation and violations of labour rights. 2017 also saw single cases of unidentified third country national victims from Africa (Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone) and the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria). In the last few years there has also been work with victims from Romania and citizens with an „unidentified identity“ (from the so-called Soviet Republics).

Bulgaria, alongside others, is among the leading countries in the European Union active in the field of developing a comprehensive institutional framework for crime prevention and protection of victims. Additionally, the crime of trafficking is criminalised in the country's Criminal Code, and is supplemented by the 2003 Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act, alongside two regulations- one of which determined the composition of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB) and its administration. On 20 June 2016, a decision of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria endorsed the 2010 creation of the National Mechanism for Referral and Support of Trafficked Persons in Bulgaria (NMR), with the NCCTHB as Mechanism Coordinator. The NMR clearly describes the individual role of institutions and organisations in their referral and support of victims, and it clearly identifies the importance of formal and informal identification, the special rights of victims, and the various support opportunities. Creating

the NMR between 2008-2010 was also accompanied by Bulgaria's participation, through the NCCTHB, in the first international project to create the so-called Transnational Mechanism for Referral and Support of Trafficked Persons, under a program headed by the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), which as both an international and interinstitutional organisation is solidifying a partnership with the National Commission throughout 2017.

Since the establishment of the Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act, and by the end of this reporting year, Bulgaria has the largest number of specialised services for victims of TB compared to previous years, namely those services financed or co-financed by the State budget. These services are 8 in total and apply only for the target group of victims of THB, are financed by the NCCTHB and managed by non-governmental organisations, and include shelters for temporary accommodation and support centers, shelters for temporary accommodation and subsequent reintegration, and shelters for temporary accommodation and with functions of a crisis center for children. These shelters are again targeted at victims, formally and/or informally identified, as well as to persons for whom there is investigative evidence of their risk of being trafficked (especially in the case of minors). At the beginning of 2017, and following a series of consultative meetings, a meeting of the NCCTHB also saw the approval of the National Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2017-2021), adopted by a decision of the Council of Minister in July 2017. This strategic document also represents the country's long-term policy to counteract the crime of trafficking, and the support of victims is realised on an operational level through annual national programmes such as participation in activities offered by all institutions, represented in the NCCTHB, its administration, and the LCCTHB to municipalities and non-governmental organisations and international organisations.

By the end of 2017, there were 10 LCCTHB's for Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Varna, Veliko Turnovo, Montana, Pazardjik, Pleven, Plovdiv, Russe, and Sliven. Prevention activities, as well as increasing the capacity of local and regional experts are a priority for committee secretaries, including work on traffic signal coordination according to the NMR. The Secretary and the expert staff of the NCCTHB provide methodological assistance to the local committees, according to an approved local program at a meeting of the committees concerned. The main activities of the committees are financed by the budget of the NCCTHB, and implementation of the work of the local committees at a local level is key to improving partnerships with other municipalities, NGOs, and other State institutions at the regional level and within the public sector. Also in 2017, the work of the Permanent Expert Working Group of the NCCTHB (PWG), composed of leading experts on trafficking in human beings

from the different institutions and the non-governmental organisations and international organisations registered with the PWG, focused on consulting and discussing the need for changes in the legislative framework on trafficking in human beings, particularly the Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act and the explicit definition of the so-called „period of recovery and reflection“. A legal analysis was also conducted by an external specialist and a working group on this issue, with the aim of finding the most appropriate proposal for the Anti-trafficking Act.

Within the project „Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation for identification and long-term support for children and adults victims of trafficking in human beings“, which is one of the three components of the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Program for the Prevention of Trafficking in Human Beings and the Identification, Support for Return and Reintegration of Victims, created and coordinated by the NCCTHB, is a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional team for work relating to the traffic of persons. The work of the team includes the practical implementation of the NMR as well as the opportunity to discuss and search for solutions to complex cases of human trafficking, including those on which there are mixed opinions about whether a person is a true victim of the crime of trafficking.

The National Program for Prevention and Counteraction of Trafficking of People and Protection of Victims for 2017 was approved by the NCCTHB at its first 2017 meeting (18 January 2017). The National Program includes activities divided into seven sections: institutional and organisational measures; prevention; capacity building of specialists; statistical data collection and analysis; work relating to the support and protection of victims; international cooperation; legislative work changes, and more on the effective implementation of policies. The program is being developed annually by the members and administration of the NCCTHB. The secretaries of the LCCTHB offer activities to be included in the programme of the respective municipalities and local committees, following the national programme and priorities, and guidance provided by the NCCTHB. Following a conciliation procedure, the national programme is approved by a decision of the Council of Ministers. National programmes and reports over the years can be seen on the NCCTHB website (www.antitrafficking.government.bg/en/).

The 2017 National Anti-trafficking Program includes 40 activities that are being implemented by the administration and members of the NCCTHB. Separately to these activities, it is also important to have in mind those implemented at the regional level and by the local committees, especially relating to work on prevention which requires an approach based on local specifics and trends. For the purpose of more targeted prevention and support for crime detection, the specialised mapping, including mapping of regions, through the organisation and analysis of focus groups in vulnerable

communities in 2016, continued to be carried out jointly with external specialists in the region and in 2017. The analysis of this pilot activity naturally leads to greater clarity about trends in the crime of human trafficking, victims' profiles and those of the perpetrators, a better understanding of their environment as well as shedding light on the complex dynamics of their relationship, bearing in mind that many cases victims can cross the threshold and become perpetrators. Moreover, the increasingly important role of the internet and new technologies, both in crime and its prevention and tracking of parallel and traffic-related crimes, is becoming apparent. Personal relationships and the creation of emotional dependence and association to engage in the crime between a victim and a trafficker remain the leading in both maintaining obedience as well as future manipulation.