



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

**Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator
for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings**

**26th Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons
The Rise of Forced Criminality: Addressing a Security Blind Spot**

20-21 April 2026

Hofburg, Vienna, Austria and via Zoom

THE ALLIANCE

The Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference is a high-level annual gathering of key stakeholders from across the OSCE region that aims to raise the political profile of the fight against trafficking in human beings (THB) and discuss emerging topics and trends in this area. With participation from national authorities, as well as international and civil society organizations, the Alliance helps to align and amplify the efforts of all stakeholders toward the common goal of combating human trafficking. Since its establishment in 2004 as a framework for advocacy and co-operation, the Alliance has supported OSCE participating States in developing a robust, harmonized approach to combating THB that seeks to protect human rights, security, the rule of law, and good governance throughout the region.

THE FOCUS

The 26th OSCE High-Level Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference, titled *The Rise of Forced Criminality: Addressing a Security Blind Spot*, offers a critical opportunity to discuss the fastest growing and least understood dimension of human trafficking - trafficking for exploitation in criminal activities, commonly referred to as forced criminality. Although this issue was discussed 10 years ago at the 16th Alliance Conference¹, it has since expanded significantly in scale and sophistication across the OSCE region, including amid heightened crises and conflicts, while remaining insufficiently addressed in policy and practice.

This year's conference will bring renewed attention to trafficking in human beings for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities by providing a comprehensive overview of its scope, examining emerging trends, including the role of digital technologies and financial footprints, as well as the increasingly complex *modus operandi* employed by criminal networks to target their victims. The Conference will also analyse the response mechanisms, promising practices, policy, and practical tools to combat this form of trafficking.

By underscoring the urgency of closing this critical security and protection gap, the Conference will call on OSCE participating States to develop and commit to robust strategies that deliver targeted prevention, strong identification and protection measures, and effective criminal justice outcomes. The Conference will further encourage innovation, the exchange of promising practices, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. By fostering partnerships among governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector, the Conference aims to strengthen a collective and co-ordinated response to effectively tackle forced criminality across the OSCE region.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

OSCE participating States first explicitly raised trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation with the adoption of the 2013 Addendum to the OSCE Action Plan on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, which was subsequently reinforced through Ministerial Council Decisions No. 6/17 (2017) and No. 6/18 (2018) condemning this form of trafficking and expressing concerns specifically related to child trafficking (Ministerial Council Decisions No. 6/18). In 2016, the participants at the OSCE's 16th Alliance against Trafficking in Persons conference also issued a clear call for action with specific recommendations to tackle human trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation, including, *inter alia*, proactive victim identification, especially among migrants and unaccompanied minors, stronger cross-border co-operation, specialized training for law enforcement and judiciary, improved data collection, and legal reforms that explicitly recognize forced criminality as a form of

¹ [Highlights of the 16th Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#)

trafficking. A decade later, not only does this form of exploitation continue to persist, but it has expanded rapidly in scale, geographic scope, and complexity, becoming the fastest-growing trafficking trend. State detection figures reflect this trajectory, rising from just one per cent of all identified victims in 2016 to six per cent in 2018 and eight per cent in 2022.² According to data provided in 2025 by 55 OSCE participating States to the survey on efforts to implement OSCE commitments and recommended actions to combat trafficking in human beings, there has been a sharp increase in cases of forced criminality under investigation – from 10 cases in 2016 to 192 in 2024 across the region.

Trafficking in human beings increasingly intersects with other forms of organized crime, including cyber and financial crimes. Expanding in strength, reach, and sophistication, criminal networks have diversified their operations to exploit thousands of victims across a wide spectrum of criminal activities. Their methods are highly strategic, deliberately targeting vulnerabilities shaped by gender, age, and socio-economic marginalization. Women, men, and children are exploited in distinct ways, while individuals from minority or socially excluded communities are disproportionately affected, as they are least protected by existing systems.

A new dimension of vulnerability has also emerged: the deliberate targeting of individuals with specific technical skills and digital competencies to be coerced into scamming operations. This cyber-enabled financial crime, where digital technologies intersect with illicit financial activity has rapidly become one of the most significant transnational threats facing the OSCE region and beyond. Evidence gathered by international organizations and civil society³ indicates that at least 19 OSCE participating States and 5 Partners for Co-operation are affected, with their citizens trafficked into these criminal operations.

Beyond large-scale financial fraud and online scam schemes, victims are also forced into drug cultivation and distribution, theft, burglary, shoplifting, smuggling of migrants, benefit fraud, violent crimes, and other organized criminal activities. According to the UNODC 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, approximately 22 per cent of all victims identified in Western and Southern Europe are trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation, including drug-related offences.

Traffickers exploit victims not only for profit but also as a buffer to shield themselves from prosecution, making this a complex and rapidly expanding form of exploitation that demands coordinated, victim-centred responses. Effective identification of victims of forced criminality requires more than simply recognising subtle indicators of coercion - it is first and foremost about understanding how victimhood is constructed in practice. Many victims cannot safely disclose their experiences or accept assistance due to fear, trauma, or direct control by criminals. Their guarded or resistant behaviour is frequently misinterpreted as criminal intent rather than a manifestation of exploitation. This creates a systemic risk in which those most in need of protection are instead overlooked or punished, while the true perpetrators operate with impunity behind the scenes, continuing their criminal activities and actively recruiting new victims. Strengthening identification frameworks therefore requires approaches that acknowledge these barriers, challenge narrow expectations of what an “*ideal*” victim looks like, and ensure that individuals coerced into criminal acts are recognised as victims and safeguarded rather than criminalised.

These challenges are compounded by persistent gaps in understanding and inconsistent application of core anti-trafficking principles, including the irrelevance of consent, psychological coercion, and the pivotal non-punishment principle. Despite international commitments, implementation remains weak due to limited awareness among law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges, as well as the absence of quantitative data on the use and success of relevant defences. In some jurisdictions, legal frameworks

² [GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf](#), p. 95

³ [INTERPOL releases new information on globalization of scam centres](#);

exclude certain offences from protection, further restricting access to the non-punishment principle. Persistent gaps remain in the effective application of the non-punishment principle, in both preventing the wrongful prosecution of victims and in ensuring the full and effective expungement or vacatur of criminal records, an essential measure, as only complete erasure enables victims to recover, reintegrate, and contribute to safer, more resilient societies.

At the same time, increasingly restrictive migration and security policies risk entangling trafficking cases with immigration control, with significant consequences for both human security and public safety. When trafficking cases are primarily approached through a migration-control angle, victim protection is typically undermined, a culture of disbelief takes hold, and migrants' vulnerability to exploitation increases. This also weakens the ability of States to disrupt organized crime and enhance community safety, while precious resources are spent to punish the victims rather than the real criminals who enjoy impunity.

To effectively confront this fastest-growing form of human trafficking and address its broader security implications, OSCE participating States must fully uphold their commitments to ensure early and accurate victim identification and provide robust protection and assistance. Equally important is the need to strengthen criminal justice responses by correctly and consistently applying the non-punishment principle and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable. Targeted prevention measures are also essential to reduce vulnerabilities, disrupt criminal exploitation, and reinforce safe, inclusive, and law-abiding societies across the OSCE region.

THE OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the Alliance Conference is to examine the systemic gaps that have enabled the rapid expansion of trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation and to develop concrete, actionable measures to ensure full implementation of OSCE anti-trafficking commitments. Central to this is deepening understanding of this complex crime, strengthening the early identification and protection of trafficked persons, advancing the consistent application of the non-punishment principle when they come in contact with the law, and securing effective prosecutions of perpetrators.

The Conference programme is designed to facilitate a meaningful exchange on emerging trends in forced criminality and share good practices both in law and practice across the OSCE region. It aims to galvanize collective action by building a shared understanding of the evolving nature of this crime, promoting a whole-of-society approach, and showcasing promising practices, tools, and methodologies.

THE AUDIENCE AND FORMAT

The Conferences of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons are attended by representatives of the 57 OSCE participating States and 11 Partners for Co-operation, major international organizations and NGOs that are partners in the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons, as well as civil society, lived experience experts, media, the private sector, academia, and relevant professional networks of national anti-trafficking practitioners. Due to budgetary constraints and reduced venue capacity, in-person participation in the 26th Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons will be restricted, by invitation only. All other stakeholders will be invited to follow the discussions online via a dedicated Zoom link. Active participation during the discussion sessions and via X - @osce_cthb, #CTHB26 – is also highly encouraged. Ahead of the Alliance, participants can use the hashtag #askOSCE on X to ask questions to the speakers. More information will soon be available at <https://cthb.osce.org/event/alliance26>