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High-Level Conference: Empowering Change: Technology and Artificial Intelligence in the Fight against Human Trafficking

Rabat, Malta, 11 June 2025 (9:30 – 5 minutes)

Opening statement

Distinguished Parliamentary Secretary, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the Maltese Government for including the fight against trafficking in human beings amongst the priorities of Malta's Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, as part of the broader goal of combating violence and upholding human dignity, and for keeping the fight against human trafficking high on the political agenda.

In 2024 Malta adopted its first National Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings - the expression of political will to fulfil international obligations in the area of combating human trafficking and address new challenges, such as the increase in trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation and the use of information and communication technologies to commit trafficking offences. The development of the Strategy was supported by a project implemented by the Council of Europe, in co-operation with the European Commission.

We are marking a significant milestone today - the 20th anniversary of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. This groundbreaking treaty established a comprehensive, human rights-based framework for combating trafficking while putting victims at the centre of our response. Two decades later, we can see the Convention's real-world impact: countries have better targeted policies to tackle human trafficking. It's proven that when we combine comprehensive legal frameworks with a commitment to human rights and victim protection, we can create lasting change and impact.

GRETA, the Convention's independent expert body, monitors and stays ahead of trafficker's tactics. It has undertaken important work, including the preparation of a study on online and technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings. The study explored the increasing use of information and communication technologies to identify, groom, exploit and control victims, the operational and legal challenges in detecting, investigating and prosecuting online and ICT-facilitated human trafficking offences, and the strategies to overcome them. It provided evidence-based recommendations on how to enhance the detection, investigation and prosecution of technology-facilitated trafficking, international cooperation and collaboration with businesses, as well as actions to prevent victimisation and re-victimisation.

At the same time, digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence create new opportunities to prevent human trafficking, reach out to victims, and prosecute offenders. This requires urgent, coordinated and strategic action. To this end, the conference brings together experts, policymakers, civil society and business representatives to discuss current challenges, share innovative and good practices, and develop actionable solutions to how technology and AI can be used effectively and ethically by the anti-trafficking community.

Last year the Council of Europe adopted the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. This is the first ever international treaty aiming to ensure that AI systems are developed and used in ways that respect human rights, democratic institutions and the rule of law. The Framework Convention requires AI systems to comply with the fundamental principles of human dignity and individual autonomy, equality and non-discrimination as well as the principles of protection of privacy and personal data protection.

This conference presents a crucial opportunity. I encourage you all to engage actively, share your experiences, highlight promising practices and help identify innovative strategies for prevention and protection.

Make no mistake: We don't get to choose whether to fight human trafficking - it's our moral imperative. Today is not only about dialogue, it is also about building partnerships, sharing tools, and committing to action. Traffickers adapt and innovate. We must be faster and smarter in our response. Only with relentless commitment and a coordinated united action can we bring this grave human rights violation to an end.

I wish you all a productive, insightful, and inspiring conference.