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COMMITTEE OF THE PARTIES COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONVENTION ON ACTION AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

33rd meeting of the Committee of the Parties

Strasbourg, 15 December 2023

MEETING REPORT

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Agenda item 1: Opening of the meeting

1. The Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (hereinafter referred to respectively as "the Committee" and "the Convention") held its 33rd meeting on 15 December 2023 in Strasbourg. The meeting was held in a hybrid format, with some members participating online via Zoom.
2. The Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Maria Spassova, opened the meeting.

Agenda item 2: Adoption of the draft agenda

3. The Chair invited the Committee to adopt the draft agenda of the meeting. The agenda, as adopted by the Committee, is set out in Appendix I. The list of participants is set out in Appendix II.

Agenda item 3: State of signatures and ratifications of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

4. The Chair noted that no new signatures and/or ratifications had been submitted since the last meeting of the Committee. She underlined that the invitation addressed by the Committee of Ministers to Tunisia to accede to the Convention would expire on 7 February 2024 and the Tunisian authorities had not yet indicated if they intended to request for a second extension of the invitation. Further, the Chair noted that high-ranking Moroccan officials had continued to express their interest in joining the Convention, but the Moroccan authorities had not yet submitted a request to the Committee of Ministers to invite Morocco to accede to the Convention.

Agenda item 4: Exchange of views with the President of GRETA

5. The Chair invited Ms Helga Gayer, President of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), to take the floor for the periodic exchange of views with the Committee.
6. The President of GRETA informed the Committee of GRETA's activities in the period since the last meeting of the Committee in June 2023. She indicated that GRETA had held two plenary meetings and had adopted seven final reports under the third evaluation round of the Convention (concerning Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Andorra, Hungary, Italy and Lithuania). Ms Gayer highlighted the main findings from GRETA's reports on Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden, which were the subject of draft recommendations by the Committee at the current meeting. These reports highlighted improvements to the legislation, policy and practice, but at the same time showed that there were some persistent gaps, in particular related to preventing and combating human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.
7. Furthermore, GRETA's President noted that GRETA had launched the fourth evaluation round of the Convention in July 2023. This new evaluation round has a thematic focus on vulnerabilities to human trafficking and measures taken by States Parties to prevent them, detect and support vulnerable victims, and punish the offenders. This includes a focus on the use of information and communication technology (ICT), which brings structural changes to the way offenders operate and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. Ms Gayer indicated that GRETA had carried out the first two visits under the fourth evaluation round, to Austria and Cyprus, in early December 2023.
8. GRETA's President indicated that the first visit to Israel, scheduled to take place in December, had been postponed due to the Israel-Hamas war. The third visit to Ukraine had also been postponed, but GRETA hoped that it could carry it out at the beginning of 2024. The full text of Ms Gayer's statement is set out in Appendix III.
9. The Chair thanked Ms Gayer for the informative account of GRETA's activities and opened the floor to members of the Committee for questions or comments.

10. Ms Dina Dominitz (National Anti-Trafficking Co-ordinator at the Ministry of Justice of Israel) took the floor online and expressed regret that GRETA's first visit to Israel had had to be postponed. She denounced the attack by the terrorist group Hamas on 7 October 2023 during which over 240 people were kidnapped and taken hostage to Gaza, and stated that the violations of international law committed by Hamas included the trafficking across borders of women, men, children and elderly persons. She reiterated the commitment of the Israeli authorities to combating human trafficking, and to continuing their protection, prosecution and protection efforts. The full text of Ms Dominitz's statement is set out in Appendix IV.

11. The Chair of the Committee expressed her heartfelt condolences to all victims killed by Hamas and her sincere wish for the quicker return of all hostages to their families.

Agenda item 5: Examination of GRETA's reports on the implementation of the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden (third evaluation round) and adoption of recommendations in respect of these Parties

12. The Chair of the Committee recalled that GRETA had adopted and published three final reports, concerning Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden, under the third evaluation round of implementation of the Convention. The three draft recommendations based on these GRETA reports had been made available to the Committee on 17 November 2023 and members of the Committee had been invited to send any proposals for amendments by 8 December 2023. The Secretariat had not received any proposals for amendments to the draft recommendations in advance of the meeting. The Chair noted that the draft recommendations followed the model of recommendations under the third evaluation round, setting a two-year deadline for informing the Committee of the Parties of the measures taken.

Third evaluation round

5.1. Iceland

13. The Chair invited the Committee to consider the draft recommendation concerning Iceland.

14. Ambassador Ragnhildur Arnljótsdóttir (Permanent Representative of Iceland to the Council of Europe) thanked GRETA for the constructive report and constructive recommendations. She stressed that it was crucial to integrate GRETA's conclusions into the new national action plan against human trafficking. Further, she referred to the recent organisation of a conference in Reykjavik on ICT-facilitated human trafficking, in the context of the Icelandic presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

15. The Committee adopted the recommendation in respect of Iceland and decided to request the Government of Iceland to inform it of measures taken to comply with this recommendation by 15 December 2025.

5.2. Netherlands

16. The Chair invited the Committee to consider the draft recommendation concerning the Netherlands.

17. Ambassador Tanja Gonggrijp (Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the Council of Europe) thanked GRETA for the third evaluation round report and the constructive dialogue during the evaluation process. She noted that the report recognised the progress made since the previous evaluation and provided valuable suggestions on how to strengthen certain areas. She informed the Committee that a new National Action Plan on combating human trafficking had been launched on 18 October 2023 and the Government was expected to report annually to Parliament on its implementation. Among the measures contained in the plan, reference was made to new legislation aimed at broadening the criminal liability for serious abuse of workers, the increase of staff in the criminal investigation department of the Netherlands Labour Authority, and a proposal to regulate the temporary work agency sector. Further, the exploration of the possibilities for

disconnecting the identification of victims from the criminal proceedings would be considered in 2024. The full text of Ambassador Gonggrijp's statement is set out in Appendix V.

18. The Committee adopted the recommendation in respect of the Netherlands and decided to request the Government of the Netherlands to inform it of measures taken to comply with this recommendation by 15 December 2025.

5.3. Sweden

19. The Chair invited the Committee to consider the draft recommendation concerning Sweden.

20. Ms Charlotte Eklund Rimsten (Deputy Director, Division for Criminal Law of the Ministry of Justice of Sweden) expressed the Swedish authorities' appreciation of the GRETA's report, as well as their willingness to implement the recommendations. She referred to efforts made by Sweden to scale up the fight against human trafficking, including the increase in the funding of law enforcement agencies to deal with organised crime. Further, the vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees to human trafficking was being addressed through various measures and the Swedish Migration Agency had increased its efforts to identify victims of trafficking in the asylum process. She also referred to two events that had taken place in Stockholm in 2023: a conference organised during the Swedish presidency of the Council of the European Union on addressing demand for sexual services provided by victims of trafficking, and the European Forum on trafficking for labour exploitation, organised together with the Council of the Baltic Sea States. The full text of Ms Eklund Rimsten's statement is set out in Appendix VI.

21. The Committee adopted the recommendation in respect of Sweden and decided to request the Swedish Government to inform it of measures taken to comply with this recommendation by 15 December 2025.

Agenda item 6: Government reports submitted in reply to Committee of the Parties recommendations

Second evaluation round

6.1. Belarus

22. The Chair of the Committee noted that a report concerning the steps taken to implement previous Committee of the Parties' recommendations had been submitted by Belarus on 27 November 2023, in the context of the second evaluation round of the Convention. The Chair recalled that, in accordance with Rule 3.1 of the revised Rules of Procedure of the Committee of the Parties and following the decision of the Committee of the Parties taken at its 32nd meeting to apply this rule to Belarus, the latter's participation in the meeting had been restricted (no attendance). The application of the revised rules of procedure was confirmed by the Directorate of Legal Advice and Public International Law (DLAPIL) prior to this meeting and the Belarusian authorities were informed by the Secretariat of the restriction to participate in the meeting.

23. The Chair invited the President of GRETA to comment on the report submitted by Belarus. Ms Gayer noted that the report provided information about steps taken to implement several of the urgent actions highlighted in the Committee of the Parties' recommendation. According to the government submission, new legislation had been adopted on external labour migration and the licensing of employment agencies providing employment abroad. Information stands had reportedly been placed at border crossings to raise awareness about the risk of human trafficking. Other measures described in the report included, *inter alia*, a government regulation on child-friendly rooms, as well as training of law enforcement officials, judges and other officials on trafficking. According to statistical data for 2022-23, there was one conviction for trafficking. However, the government submission provided no information on measures to facilitate and guarantee access to compensation for victims of trafficking nor on steps taken to ensure compliance with the non-punishment principle. The Belarusian authorities' report referred to a new law on the "Foundations of civil society", but

Ms Gayer stressed that this law had been widely criticised for creating a hierarchy of civil society organisations, giving priority to organisations promoting the state ideology.

24. The Executive Secretary of the Convention indicated that a letter would be sent to the Belarusian authorities requesting them for additional information concerning the recommendations which had not been addressed in their report.

Agenda item 7: Follow-up information provided in reply to Committee of the Parties' recommendations

25. The Chair noted that, since the previous meeting of the Committee, the governments of Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Romania had submitted reports with additional information in reply to the Committee of the Parties recommendations. She invited the representatives of the countries concerned to take the floor and briefly present the information submitted.

7.1. Albania

26. Ms Disola Ici (Ministry of the Interior of Albania) presented briefly the additional information sent to the Committee of the Parties. She referred to the increase in the budget dedicated to the assistance of victims of trafficking, the implementation of the national action plan and awareness-raising activities.

7.2. Bulgaria

27. The Executive Secretary informed the Committee of the Parties that in July 2023 the President of GRETA had sent a letter to the Bulgarian authorities raising concerns over the interruption of state funding for the shelters providing specialised assistance to victims of trafficking. The Bulgarian authorities' response had been received on 11 September 2023.

28. Mr Paulo Goranov (Junior Expert at the Secretariat of the Bulgarian National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings) indicated that there would be a 190% increase in the 2024 budget of the National Commission, as well as a 30% increase in staff salaries. He also underlined that from 2024 onwards, all specialised services for victims of trafficking would be funded directly through the budget of the National Commission. Mr Goranov's statement is reproduced in full in Appendix VII.

7.3. Georgia

29. The Executive Secretary indicated that the additional information provided by Georgia related to the compensation of victims of trafficking and the re-classification of trafficking cases. She noted that Georgian legislation did not provide for the possibility of claiming compensation as part of the criminal proceedings and therefore victims of trafficking had to file a compensation claim in civil proceedings. As regards the second issue, the authorities report referred to an internal General Prosecutor's Office instruction which prohibits the re-classification of human trafficking cases during the prosecution.

7.4. Republic of Moldova

30. Ms Tatiana Pârveu (Ambassador at Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova) indicated that the additional information provided by the authorities referred to the use of the first Barnahus-type centre for child victims and witnesses of human trafficking, legal and practical steps to facilitate access to state compensation for victims of trafficking, and plans to strengthen the legal framework and expand the mandate of labour inspectors. She also underlined that in September 2023 the Moldovan authorities had adopted a new Programme for the prevention and combating of trafficking in human beings for 2024-2028. Ms Pârveu's statement is reproduced in full in Appendix VIII.

7.5. Montenegro

31. Ms Ivana Masanovic (Deputy Permanent Representative of Montenegro to the Council of Europe) indicated that the additional information provided by the authorities referred to recent amendments to the Criminal Code related to the criminalisation of human trafficking and related offences, as well as the introduction of a specific provision on the non-punishment of victims of trafficking. Further, the authorities had provided data for 2023 which indicated an increase in the number of identified victims of trafficking and the cases of trafficking which had been investigated and prosecuted. Ms Masanovic's statement is reproduced in full in Appendix IX.

7.6. Romania

32. The Executive Secretary indicated that the additional information provided by the Romanian authorities referred to efforts made to facilitate access to compensation for victims of trafficking, notably through the adoption of the 2021-2025 National Strategy for Asset Recovery. Information was also provided on the new National Referral Mechanism for victims of trafficking and training of labour inspectors on human trafficking. The Romanian authorities' report indicated that no Romanian NGOs working with victims of trafficking had applied for state grants in 2023.

Agenda item 8: Fourth evaluation round of the Convention: discussion on a procedure for supervising the implementation of Committee of the Parties' recommendations

33. The Chair invited the Executive Secretary to introduce this agenda item. The Executive Secretary noted that after three rounds of the evaluation of the Convention, there were recurrent shortcomings in the implementation of the Convention, leading to repeated recommendations. She recalled the proposal of the previous Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Meuwly, to strengthen the role of the Committee of the Parties in supervising the implementation of its recommendations by States Parties. The Executive Secretary suggested that for the fourth evaluation round of the Convention, the Committee could put in place a procedure for following up on a selected number of issues for each State Party.

34. The Chair opened the floor for questions and comments.

35. Ambassador Ragnhildur Arnjóltsdóttir (Permanent Representative of Iceland to the Council of Europe) asked the Secretariat to inform the relevant Permanent Representation to the Council of Europe of the date of the planned publication of a GRETA report, in addition to the contact person in the capital. The Executive Secretary confirmed that this information will be ensured.

36. Ambassador Joan Forner Rovira (Permanent Representative of Andorra to the Council of Europe) noted that, based on the experience of the third evaluation of Andorra, the GRETA monitoring process should be adapted for countries without trafficking cases, focusing on specific areas and resulting in a limited number of recommendations which should be concrete and easier to implement.

37. The President of GRETA stressed that all States Parties to the Convention should be treated equally. She noted that GRETA had been following this approach during all evaluation rounds and that the consistent evaluation of all aspects of combating human trafficking had led to positive changes at national level.

38. The Executive Secretary of the Convention recalled the three levels of action suggested by GRETA in its reports ("urge", "consider" and "invite") which correspond to different levels of urgency of the recommendations for bringing the State Party's legislation and/or practice into compliance with the Convention. She noted that this allowed GRETA to adapt its recommendations to the national context.

39. The Chair concluded by proposing the continuation of the discussion of this agenda item at the next meeting of the Committee when a draft proposal for a procedure for supervising the implementation of Committee of the Parties' recommendations could be presented.

Agenda item 9: Information on activities aimed at strengthening the implementation of GRETA's conclusions and the Committee of the Parties' recommendations

40. The Executive Secretary referred to the work conducted by the Anti-trafficking Division aiming at strengthening the implementation of GRETA's reports and the Committee of the Parties recommendations. She informed the Committee that seven round-table meetings had been organised in 2023 (in Bulgaria, Romania, Denmark, Montenegro, Georgia, Malta and the United Kingdom) to discuss progress in the implementation of the recommendations made by GRETA and the Committee of the Parties under the third evaluation round. Further, in September 2023, a round-table was organised in Sarajevo in cooperation with the OSCE on the role of the private sector and financial institutions in combating trafficking in human beings. The Executive Secretary also referred to the work carried out as part of the anti-trafficking co-operation projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malta, North Macedonia and Serbia. Finally, she indicated that that the revised and updated HELP online course on trafficking in human beings should be made public at the beginning of 2024.

Agenda item 10: Information on the anti-trafficking activities of other Council of Europe bodies and international organisations of interest to the Committee of the Parties

41. The Chair invited members, participants and observers to provide relevant information.

42. Ms Bryony Rudkin (Chair of the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities) stressed the role played by the local and regional authorities in combating trafficking in human beings. She referred to the Congress' reports on the reception and integration of refugees and of unaccompanied refugee children, as well as the report on the reception and protection of Ukrainian women and children refugees in Europe's towns and regions. Ms Rudkin noted that following an exchange of views between the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress and the President of GRETA in June 2023, the secretariats of the two bodies had held several meetings and an analysis of GRETA's reports concerning the role of local and regional authorities in combating trafficking was in the process of preparation. In the light of this analysis, which was scheduled for presentation at the Current Affairs Committee's meeting on 20 February 2024, the Committee was expected to decide on possible future work. Ms Rudkin's statement is reproduced in full in Appendix X.

43. The Executive Secretary of the Convention updated the Committee on the progress of the revision of the EU Directive on combating trafficking in human beings (2011/36/EU). She also referred to the recent Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) Principals meetings, held on 8 November 2023, during which a Call to Action to prevent and end child trafficking was endorsed by ICAT members.

Agenda item 11: Dates of future meetings

44. The Committee decided to hold its next meeting in June 2024.

Agenda item 12: Other business**Agenda item 13: Adoption of the list of decisions taken**

45. The Committee approved the decisions taken at the meeting, namely the adoption of recommendations concerning Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Appendix I

Agenda

1. Opening of the meeting
2. Adoption of the draft agenda
3. State of signatures and ratifications of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
4. Exchange of views with the President of GRETA
5. Examination of GRETA's reports on the implementation of the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden (third evaluation round) and adoption of recommendations in respect of these Parties

Third evaluation round

- 5.1. Iceland
- 5.2. Netherlands
- 5.3. Sweden
6. Government reports submitted in reply to Committee of the Parties recommendations

Second evaluation round

- 6.1. Belarus
7. Follow-up information provided in reply to Committee of the Parties' recommendations
8. Fourth evaluation round of the Convention: discussion on a procedure for supervising the implementation of Committee of the Parties' recommendations
9. Information on activities aimed at strengthening the implementation of GRETA's conclusions and the Committee of the Parties' recommendations
10. Information on the anti-trafficking activities of other Council of Europe bodies and international organisations of interest to the Committee of the Parties
11. Dates of future meetings
12. Other business
13. Adoption of the list of decisions taken

Appendix II List of participants

Members of the Committee of the Parties Membres du Comité des Parties

ALBANIA / ALBANIE

Ms Disola Ici (*online / en ligne*)
Ministry of Interior

Ms Katerina Gjorgo (*online / en ligne*)
Ministry of Interior

ANDORRA / ANDORRE

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Ambassadeur Extraordinaire et Plénipotentiaire
Représentant Permanent
auprès du Conseil de l'Europe

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Chef de la Section des Relations Internationales et
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Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Equal opportunities provision department
Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

AUSTRIA / AUTRICHE

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Deputy Permanent Representative
to the Council of Europe

Mr Wolfgang Spadinger
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Ministry of Internal Affairs

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Fundamental Rights
Criminal Policy Service
Organised Crime Unit
Trafficking and smuggling in human beings

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Ms Maria Spassova (*Chair / Présidente*)
Ambassador
Permanent Representative
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 Protection Act
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 Policy Officer
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 Detective Superintendent
 Garda National Protective Services Bureau

ISRAEL / ISRAËL

Ms Dina Dominitz (*online / en ligne*)
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ITALY / ITALIE

Mr Roberto Martini
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Mr Raffaele Festa
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Directorate for Digital Development and Social Services
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Ms Ilona Shkliaruk (*online / en ligne*)
Chief Specialist of the Expert Group on Combating
Trafficking in Human Beings
Domestic Violence and Gender Equality
Directorate for Digital Development and Social Services
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Mr Faraan Sayed
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**Participants of the Committee of the Parties
Participants du Comité des Parties**

**COUNCIL OF EUROPE BODIES /
ORGANES DU CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE**

**CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL
AUTHORITIES / CONGRES DES POUVOIRS
LOCAUX ET RÉGIONAUX**

Ms Bryony Rudkin (*online*)
Chair of the Current Affairs Committee

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms Dunja Mijatović
(*apologised/excusée*)

Observers of the Committee of the Parties Observateurs du Comité des Parties

Others / Autres

GROUP OF EXPERTS ON ACTION AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS / GROUPE D'EXPERTS SUR LA LUTTE CONTRE LA TRAITE DES ETRES HUMAINS (GRETA)

Ms Helga Gayer
President of GRETA

Secretariat / Secrétariat

Directorate General of Democracy and Human, Dignity / Direction générale de la démocratie et de la dignité humaine

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Appendix III

Statement by Ms Helga GAYER, President of GRETA

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to participate in the 33rd meeting of the Committee of the Parties and to update you on GRETA's activities.

Since our last exchange, GRETA has held **two plenary meetings**, in June and November. At the June meeting, GRETA adopted three final reports concerning Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden, which were subsequently made public and are the subject of the draft recommendations that you will discuss today. Four more final reports were adopted by GRETA at its recent meeting in November (on Andorra, Hungary, Italy and Lithuania), and were sent to the national authorities for final comments prior to their publication.

Allow me to highlight GRETA's main findings from the three recently published reports under the third evaluation round of the Convention.

In the report on **Iceland**, GRETA welcomed the amendment of the legal provision criminalising human trafficking, the adoption of the third National Action Plan for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, and the setting up of a police advisory group on human trafficking. However, GRETA urged Iceland to take further steps to improve the identification of victims of trafficking by setting up a formalised National Referral Mechanism which defines the procedures and roles of all frontline actors who may come into contact with victims of trafficking.

Noting that there has been only one prosecution and no convictions for human trafficking in Iceland since 2010, GRETA urged the authorities to ensure that cases of human trafficking are investigated proactively and prosecuted effectively, leading to effective, proportionate and dissuasive sentences. GRETA was concerned by the limited progress made by Iceland in combating trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation, and called on the authorities to ensure that law enforcement officials, labour inspectors, NGOs and other relevant actors increase their outreach work aimed at identifying victims of human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.

In the report on **the Netherlands**, GRETA welcomed the increased funding provided to anti-trafficking action, including to the police and to labour inspectors, and the fact that the majority of Dutch municipalities have adopted policies to combat trafficking, in addition to the national programme "Together against Human Trafficking". Other positive aspects are the provision of free legal aid to all victims of trafficking, irrespective of their immigration status or level of income, and the decisions by criminal courts to award compensation to victims.

However, GRETA expressed concern about the decreasing number of investigations, prosecutions and convictions for human trafficking, in particular for labour exploitation. GRETA urged the Dutch authorities to intensify their efforts to prevent and combat this form of trafficking, including through steps to regulate recruitment and temporary work agencies. Furthermore, GRETA called on the Dutch authorities to develop a National Referral Mechanism for child victims of trafficking, and to continue addressing the risk of unaccompanied migrant children going missing from institutional care.

GRETA's report on **Sweden** welcomed the steps to further develop the legislative and institutional framework for combating THB, the additional budget allocated to the National Support Programme, and the increased number of victims of trafficking who have received state compensation.

While welcoming the increased number of prosecutors specialised in human trafficking and the existence of anti-trafficking units in the police, GRETA was concerned that two of those units had been reorganised or disbanded. GRETA noted the low number of prosecutions and convictions in trafficking cases, and in particular the near absence of convictions for trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. GRETA urged the Swedish authorities to ensure that trafficking offences are investigated and prosecuted effectively, including by conducting proactive investigations, ensuring that cases of trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation are not qualified as 'human exploitation', and allocating sufficient human and financial resources to the police and prosecution services.

In July of this year, GRETA launched the [fourth evaluation round](#) of the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention, with a thematic focus on **vulnerabilities** to human trafficking and measures taken by States Parties to prevent them, detect and support vulnerable victims, and punish the offenders. This includes a focus on the use of **information and communication technology** (ICT), which brings structural changes to the way offenders operate and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. In the days preceding this meeting, GRETA carried out the first two monitoring visits under the fourth evaluation round, to Cyprus and Austria. I would like to thank the authorities of these two countries for preparing the programmes of our visits within a relatively short time and enabling GRETA to collect additional information for the preparation of the reports.

By the end of this year, GRETA will carry out 12 evaluation visits. Unfortunately, the visit to Israel, which was planned for December, had to be postponed due to the war. The visit to Ukraine has also been postponed, but GRETA hopes that it can go there at the beginning of 2024.

In March next year, GRETA will hold its 50th plenary meeting, and has decided to use this symbolic occasion in order to organise an event, on 22 March, which looks back at the 15 years of GRETA's work and highlights the successes and remaining challenges in the implementation of the Convention. GRETA is currently preparing a document which takes stock of the third evaluation round of the Convention, focusing on victims' access to justice and effective remedies.

I would like to refer to the recent judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the [case of Krachunova v. Bulgaria](#), delivered on 28 November 2023, in which the Court found that Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights lays down a positive obligation to enable victims of human trafficking to claim compensation from their traffickers in respect of lost earnings. The Court stressed that the possibility for victims to seek compensation in respect of earnings withheld by the traffickers could redress the full extent of the harm suffered by them. It would also give them the financial means to rebuild their lives and would go some way towards ensuring the traffickers are not able to enjoy the fruits of their offences, thus reducing the incentives to commit trafficking. In this respect, GRETA has stressed that to deny victims of sexual exploitation compensation from their traffickers for loss of earnings - because prostitution is considered illegal, immoral or undesirable – would run contrary to the object and purpose of the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention.

The Committee of Ministers' **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)21** to member States on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation, adopted in September last year, was promoted at an event organised in Warsaw, as well as at round-table meetings in Bulgaria, Denmark, Georgia, Malta, Romania and UK. The implementation of this recommendation has to be examined by the Committee of Ministers no later than five years after its adoption, taking into account prior national assessments, in co-operation with other relevant Council of Europe bodies, such as GRETA, and with the participation of relevant stakeholders. The preparation of a checklist to facilitate the national assessments is underway.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

Appendix IV

Statement by Ms Dina Dominitz, National Anti-Trafficking Co-ordinator, Ministry of Justice, Israel



Ministry of Justice

National Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit

Dina Dominitz, National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, Ministry of Justice, ISRAEL 33rd
meeting of the parties to the convention on action against trafficking in human beings

Dear Chair, madam president, dear colleagues, and friends,

I am honored to join you today for the 33rd meeting of the committee of the parties to the convention on action against trafficking in human beings.

It is due to grave circumstances that I couldn't join you in person this year as usual, and due to these same heartbreaking circumstances, we also had to postpone GRETA's visit to Israel in the first evaluation round, that was supposed to take place last week .

Trafficking in human beings is a severe crime that deals with the violation of the core of humanity, the treatment of people as mere objects. Israel has been very active in this field and is a global leader in promoting efforts to counter all horrible forms of this crime, through international cooperation, including joining this COE convention and playing a part in its implementation. We see global partnership and cooperation as a key factor in combatting human trafficking.

Traffickers often target the most vulnerable persons in society, preying on their vulnerability and exploiting them. Traffickers target women, children, persons with disabilities, migrants, and those suffering from economic distress, to exploit them for sex, labor, and other purposes, cruelly stripping them of their autonomy. Therefore, urgent measures must be taken to prevent trafficking, and to swiftly act to rescue victims,

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Ministry of Justice

National Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit

referring them to appropriate protection and aid, whilst holding the perpetrators fully accountable .

Israel's global commitment to anti-trafficking efforts reflects our determination to stand by the vulnerable and refuse to accept attempts to harm and exploit them.

We cannot discuss trafficking today, without marking 70 days, since Israel was the target of a barbaric attack by the terrorist organization Hamas on 7th October, in the course of which, more than 1.200 people were cruelly murdered, including children, babies and entire families, men and women were subject to horrific abuse, including sexual violence, mutilation and rape .

During the same attack, over 240 people were kidnapped and taken hostage to Gaza, including 33 children, 10 of whom under the age of 5 and babies only few months old! Those civilians were deliberately and viciously targeted, attacked at their homes where they were defenseless, when they were taken. Over 130 victims are still held hostage by the Hamas in Gaza and there are serious concerns, particularly for the young women, as hostages who have been returned report widespread gender-based violence and enslavement.

These inhumane acts by HAMAS and the violations of international law, including the trafficking across borders of women, men, children, and elderly persons – Israelis and foreigners alike, their objectification, which lies at the root of THB crimes – using them as mere bargaining chips, committing severe and cruel systematic sexual and gender crimes against them. Their lives are a commodity that can be traded between terror organizations, with no regard to their welfare and dignity as human beings, and this must be denounced utterly.

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Ministry of Justice

National Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit

This runs counter to all international laws, and beyond the other violations and war crimes enacted by the Hamas terrorist organization, these actions also constitute Trafficking in Human Beings crimes and violations of all international obligations in this regard, particularly towards the defenseless children and women involved .

We ask all Member States to demand from the respective ICRC offices as well as from international leaders of the ICRC, that the ICRC be permitted to visit these hostages, supply medicine and medical treatment and we expect from the Red Cross, as well as, to condemn these terrible violations and act to ensure the safety of the hostages and their immediate release.

Our commitment to combatting trafficking in persons, particularly of children and women, remains steadfast throughout and despite these awful and heartbreaking events. We continue our protection, prosecution, and protection efforts, to ensure no victim is left behind, particularly noting the vulnerability of thousands of displaced civilians in Israel. It is part of our steadfast commitment to protect the vulnerable and stand against cruel use of the innocent. We urge you to do the same and to act today to condemn these heinous attacks, to release the victims of these crimes against humanity, and position yourselves on the right side of this equation.

I thank you for your solidarity and invite you to join me in ending with a prayer for more peaceful and better days soon.

Thank you!

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Appendix V

Statement by Ambassador Tanja Gonggrijp, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the Council of Europe

The Netherlands would like to thank the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) for its third evaluation on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings in the Netherlands. The process to come to this report has been intensive and the Netherlands would like to thank the delegation of GRETA that visited the Netherlands (composed of Ms Petya Nestorova, Ms Antoaneta Vassileva, Mr Peter Van Hauwermeiren, and Mr Roemer Lemaître) for its very constructive cooperation during this process.

The Netherlands has tried to be as open as possible during the process and towards the delegation. The ministry of Justice, as a coordinating ministry with regards to this matter, has brought the delegation into contact with as many colleagues as possible to be able to have a proper overview of the situation.

The Netherlands is pleased with the content and the recommendations contained in the final report. The report recognises the progress that has been made in many different areas since the publication of GRETA's second report on the Netherlands of October 2018. Those have also been highlighted in the document provided for this meeting (*and mentioned by Chair of today*). The recommendations offer valuable information to strengthen specific aspects of our approach.

This information will be used while implementing our new National Action Plan, which has been launched on the 18th of October, the EU anti-trafficking day, and it consists of 5 lines of action:

1. Create broader awareness
2. Increase the willingness to report
3. Better identification of victims and protection of victims
4. Improve the cooperation at a regional and sub-regional level
5. Improve the information sharing and data processing

The action lines will be carried out in the next three years by a total of 32 concrete actions with action holders and intended effects. We will report annually on the progress of the actions to our parliament. The action plan will also be available in English.

With regards to the recommendations mentioned by GRETA we would like to mention the following:

1. To strengthen efforts to investigate and prosecute cases of labour exploitation

The Netherlands is modernising the legislation that applies to labour exploitation. An element of the legislative proposal that will be put forward to parliament in 2024, will introduce the criminalization of serious disadvantage. The new legislation aims to broaden the criminal liability with regard to serious abuse of workers. To enforce this new legislation the number of detectives of the Labour Exploitation Division of the criminal investigations department of the Netherlands Labour Authority will be increased.

2. To intensify efforts to prevent and combat labour exploitation taking into account the Guidance Note of GRETA

In addition to the aforementioned legislation on labour exploitation the government recently put forward a proposal to regulate the temporary work agency sector.

Furthermore the Netherlands agrees with GRETA that cases of THB for labour exploitation should be treated as labour exploitation and will continue to do so.

The criminal investigations department of the Netherlands Labour Authority set up a division in 2023 solely for criminal investigations into human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. The capacity of this division has been expanded in the course of 2023 and will be further expanded in 2024. This division will be responsible for the entire investigation process and to this end all detectives will receive special training. With a dedicated division the criminal investigations department can be more effective in combating human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation and intensify the cooperation with the labour inspectors of the Netherlands Labour Authority, NGO's and other partners in the field of human trafficking. The the Netherlands Labour Authority has been publishing a report on labour exploitation and serious disadvantage since November 2021.

3. To make further efforts to ensure all victims of trafficking are identified as such and can benefit from the assistance and protection measures contained in the Convention.

One of the actions which has been identified within the Actionplan is a an exploration of the possibilities to decouple the identification of victims of human trafficking from the criminal proceedings against possible perpetrators.

This exploration will take place in 2024, in close cooperation with all parties involved in the current procedure. In addition, we will take into account the GRETA recommendations and feedback from NGOs for possible future policy changes regarding this aspect of the current procedure.

Some of the other recommendations mentioned under nr 3 might also be taken into account during this process. Other recommendations will be looked into separately.

4. Take care for the identification and assistance to child victims of trafficking.

In the new Actionplan, it was chosen not to set out the actions along the different forms of exploitation (sexual exploitation, labor exploitation and criminal exploitation) or age groups. Rather, by lines of action, the aim is to achieve a comprehensive approach to the aforementioned problems and that mutual learning from each other takes place. Integral also means that this plan is aimed at **all ages**. In order to do provide insight into what actions should result in addressing an form of exploitation, the actions indicate which form(s) of exploitation they target.

Examples of specific targeting of minors within the Actionplan include raising awareness. It is known that (underage) youth can be extremely vulnerable to human trafficking, which is why, in creating broad awareness specifically targets young people. For example, by 2024, a focused communication strategy will be created that is target group oriented (including (underage) youth) and with a clear goal and action perspective for the target group including the reporting of human trafficking and where information about human trafficking can be found. In the communication strategy addresses the role of social media in human trafficking.

A recent European Parliament proposal also made recommendations to develop specific policies for child victims of trafficking. We will consider these points, as well as GRETA's comments.

Concluding we can state that we will actively look into the recommendations given by GRETA and report on them as requested.

Appendix VI

Statement by Ms Charlotte Eklund Rimsten, Deputy Director, Ministry of Justice of Sweden, Division for Criminal Law

First of all, let me extend Sweden's appreciation for all the work done by the Expert Group and the Secretariat which we value highly.

The Swedish Government is constantly reviewing our legislation and other anti-trafficking measures to improve the fight against trafficking in human beings.

We are very thankful for the thorough report from GRETA concerning this third evaluation round. It provides us with very useful recommendations, that we will work hard to meet.

During this evaluation round, the work against trafficking in human beings has continued in several areas.

Right now, the Government is scaling up the general fight against organised crime by a historic increase of the funding of law enforcement agencies.

The international work against trafficking in human beings is a high priority issue for Sweden. We need to make sure that this serious crime gets the needed attention in order to ensure efficient prevention and counter measures.

The illegal Russian aggression against Ukraine has once again reminded us of the fact that traffickers often abuse these situations to profit from the vulnerability of people in need. As you are aware we, unfortunately, see an increase of vulnerabilities to exploitation and trafficking in human beings in Europe due to this war. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Sweden has emphasized the importance of prioritising work against various forms of human trafficking both in Ukraine and in countries that receive refugees from Ukraine.

The current situation has reminded us about our joint obligation to address the demand that fosters trafficking for different forms of exploitation. To highlight the importance to address the demand, Sweden held a Presidency conference in Stockholm 29-30 March on "Prevention models against the demand that fosters trafficking for sexual purposes" with a focus on Ukraine.

On 7-8 December 2023 a European Forum against Human Trafficking for Forced Labour and Labour Exploitation was organised in Stockholm by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The forum addressed the pressing challenges Europe currently faces in the realm of human trafficking, particularly against the backdrop of the recent humanitarian crisis stemming from the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine. The forum assessed how the European states currently perceive and tackle human trafficking for forced labour purposes and labour exploitation. Measures that have been proven effective as well as needed efforts to enhance successful prosecution were highlighted. In recent years, the Swedish Migration Agency has increased its efforts to identify victims of trafficking in human beings in the asylum process and in reception centres. This includes a wide range of measures, for example developing internal procedures to be followed by case officers when cases of trafficking is suspected, as well as information guidelines on trafficking in human beings for appointed legal guardians of unaccompanied children. Information about Swedish legislation on trafficking in human beings and available support efforts for victims of human trafficking is also included in the social introduction which is offered to asylum seekers. The work on these issues will now continue. In addition to this, the work following the government's mission on increased detection of violence, which includes trafficking, continues during the period 2022 to 2024.

The Swedish Government has commissioned the Swedish Work Environment Authority to coordinate joint authority controls of nine agencies that combat fraud, violations of statutes and work-related crime.

Based on the task and conditions of the different authorities, the mission includes to set up and conduct broad work against work related crimes at regional centres and to conduct combined inspections at workplaces.

This year, we are pleased to report that all the seven regional centres envisioned to facilitate this work have been established and are operating.

It can furthermore be noted that there is a ten-year national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women in Sweden, covering the period 2017–2026, The strategy which includes issues of prostitution and human trafficking, is the guiding framework for national work and coordination in this field. Within the strategy, national action plans are adopted for shorter time spans to implement the strategy with concrete actions and measures.

The current Government entered office on 18 October 2022 and has since initiated the drafting of a new action plan for the period 2024–2026. The process was launched through six dedicated round tables with civil society organisations, academia and public authorities for feedback and inputs in spring and autumn of 2023.

In August, the Government furthermore decided to appoint an Inquiry on a Strengthened Long-term Governance of the Work against Gender-based Violence and Honour-based Violence and Oppression. The Inquiry is to report in February of 2025.

Two days ago, on 13 December, the Government also received the final report of an Inquiry which has investigated the possibility to incorporate an EXIT-programme for adults subjected to prostitution and victims of human trafficking for sexual purposes, and another programme for children subjected to sexual exploitation and human trafficking for sexual purposes. The recommendations are now under consideration in the Government Offices.

We are looking forward to continued excellent cooperation and dialogue with the Expert Group during the third evaluation round.

Thank you for your attention.

Appendix VII

Statement by Mr Paulo Goranov, Junior Expert at the Administration of the Bulgarian National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

Dear Madame Chair,
Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to take part in the 33rd meeting of the Committee of the Parties of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings on behalf of the Secretariat of the Bulgarian National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB).

Counteraction of human trafficking and victims' protection is a key priority at national level.

The current government is taking the appropriate steps to ensure the implementation of the measures needed to strengthen the anti-trafficking response.

In connection with the second stage of the 2024 budget process, which is currently underway, the NCCTHB has included in the budget estimates a 190% increase in the budget component providing for the cost of maintenance of the specialized services, awareness raising activities, capacity building events and other activities related to the implementation of the annual national programs. A 30% increase in staff remuneration is included in the budget estimates in relation to the current budget procedure. Following the need expressed by the Chairperson of the NCCTBH for an increase in the Commission's budget, a positive response was received from the Ministry of Finance. In 2022, the staff remuneration budget has been increased by 30%, resulting in an increase of more than 100% in the administrative capacity of the NCCTBH in 2023. The administration currently has eight posts, six of which are part of the specialised administration and the remaining two are part of the general administration.

The seven specialised services are still functioning under the NCCTHB providing accommodation and protection specifically for adult victims of trafficking in human beings which can be accommodated with their children. It includes 3 shelters for temporary accommodation, 1 shelter for subsequent reintegration and 3 consultative services – centres for protection and support in the regions of Sofia, Varna and Burgas. All the services have accommodation capacity of 26 beds. The specialised services in Varna and Burgas are funded directly through the budget of NCCTHB. For the services in Sofia until the end of 2023 is ensured external funding within a project, implemented by the administration of NCCTHB under the Internal Security Fund. Since 2024, all the specialised services for victims of human trafficking shall be funded directly through the budget of NCCTHB. Victims of trafficking can also benefit from social services under the Social Assistance Act for victims of gender-based violence, human trafficking and other needs.

Bulgaria has also made first steps for the needed legislative changes. Currently, the Council for Criminological Studies under the Ministry of Justice has a working group of scientists, criminologists, judges, prosecutors, experts from the Ministry of the Interior and statisticians, which has to come up with a report on trends and prevention of human trafficking. At a regular meeting of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, it was decided to establish a working group under the Council on Legislation of the Ministry of Justice, whose main task is to draft laws and regulations, participate in the study of the results of the implementation of laws and prepare proposals for amending and systematizing legislation, and participate in the drafting of regulations adopting measures at the national level necessary for the implementation and enforcement of Acts of the European Union to be tasked with drafting proposals for legislative changes on the basis of this received and summarised version of the written opinion received.

In conclusion, I would like to thank GRETA and the Secretariat of the Council of Europe Convention for the support received by the Secretariat of the NCCTHB and especially in terms of the protection of victims. GRETA's 3rd evaluation report and the Committee of the Parties' recommendation act as a reference point and guidance for future endeavours at national level.

Thank you.

Appendix VIII

Statement by Ms Tatiana Pârvu, Ambassador at Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova

Dear Mrs Chairperson,
Dear members of the Committee of the Parties,
Esteemed audience,

Let me thank you for the invitation to participate at meeting today, it is a great honour to address you on such an important subject for my country.

As you may well have noticed, the Government presented in October this year its replies to the supplementary questions of the Executive Secretary of the Convention regarding the report of the Republic of Moldova on the measures taken to address nine issues for immediate action identified in GRETA's third evaluation report.

The additional information refers to:

- the use of the first Barnahus-type Centre (North – Balti) for child victims and witnesses of crime and the statistics on the number of child victims of human trafficking referred to the Centre. In 2022, 78 children benefited from the support of the Centre. The plan is to open another regional Centre of Integrated support in Cahul town, South region of the country, during 2024.
- the practical steps taken to facilitate and guarantee access to state compensation for victims of trafficking and developments of legislative framework for state compensation.
- the plans for strengthening the legal framework and expanding the mandate of labour inspectors. This subject is at the centre of discussions at national level and not only related to the commitments under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Convention).
- steps taken to overcome the obstacles in the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases, such as lack of victim's co-operation with the authorities, turnover of police officers, prosecutors and judges dealing with human trafficking cases and the cross-border nature of most human trafficking cases.

The national institutions are aware that there is room for improvement and more actions should and could be done. Therefore, these issues will be addressed at the future meetings of the interinstitutional *Group of experts for the implementation of the Convention*, but also in the process of implementation of the **new Programme** in the field of prevention and combating THB for the years **2024-2028**, approved by the Government Decision No.715/2023 on 26 September 2023.

A few words about the 4th evaluation round of the implementation of the Convention. Following the meeting of the Specialised Commission of the National Council for Human Rights which took place on 14 November 2023, **the Questionnaire** for the fourth evaluation round of implementation of the Convention by the Republic of Moldova was sent to the national institutions.

A step-by-step calendar is envisaged for the submission of the reply.

That includes:

collecting the contribution of national institutions,
organisation of public consultations with participation of national authorities, civil society representatives and other stakeholders,
coordination with the Specialised Commission of the National Council for Human Rights under the aegis of the State Chancellery.

We are looking forward to GRETA's visit next year 2024.

Finally let me thank the CoE for the assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova through the Action Plan for 2021-2024 as well as for the voluntary contributions of member states to the Plan.

I would like to thank the Secretariat and especially the Executive Secretary Petya Nestorova for the good cooperation we have had for so many years.

Thank you!

Appendix IX

Statement by Ms Ivana Masanovic Deputy Permanent Representative of Montenegro to the Council of Europe

Thank you Chair!

Allow me to reiterate the full commitment of Montenegrin authorities to address all recommendations and willingness to continue necessary activities in order to fully implement the Convention and improve the standards in this area.

Beside information that Montenegrin authorities provided in October this year, allow me to briefly introduce some additional information.

First of all it is my pleasure to inform you that Government of Montenegro proposed The Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code and it was adopted by Parliament of Montenegro on December 11, 2023.

In this regards when it comes to criminal offence of THB, we harmonized terminology concerning the concept of child in the criminal offence and kidnapping is added as one of the ways of committing this criminal offence.

Another more serious form of this criminal offence was added, which will exist if serious physical injury to a child has occurred due to the offence and an imprisonment sentence of at least five years is prescribed. Appreciating the importance of the principle of non-punishment of victims, we strengthened criminal offence in such a way that, in the form of a special paragraph, we introduced a provision on non-punishment of the victim.

Also let me inform you that we established a new criminal offence of Sale of Children and ensure that it is incorporated in accordance with UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Protocols.

By the end of October, there were a total of 15 cases pending before courts, one of which was finally concluded and two cases were resolved in the first instance and proceedings are ongoing before the Appellate Court of Montenegro.

The competent prosecutor's offices filed 5 indictments, while the Police Administration filed 14 criminal charges for human trafficking (under Article 444 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro).

In the period January -October 2023, the team for the formal identification of victims of human trafficking, after the formal identification procedure, granted the status of victims of human trafficking to a total of 12 persons.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare undertook activities to adapt the facility located within the "Ljubović" complex, and it will serve to receive minors who are identified as victims of human trafficking.

When it comes to Lawyer training programmes, the first training will take place on 18-19 January 2024, with support of COE Programme office in Podgorica.

In May of this year, the Ministry of Justice of Montenegro announced a public call for the appointment of a court interpreter for the Romani language. One applicant applied for that call and, unfortunately, did not meet the requirements. Bearing this in mind, Ministry of Justice continues to work closely with representatives of the Roma community to encourage more candidates to apply in future calls.

Finally, allow me to once again reiterate the full commitment of the Montenegrin authorities to address all recommendations and timely send all information to Committee and GRETA Secretariat.

I thank you.

Appendix X

Statement by Ms Bryony Rudkin (United Kingdom, SOC), Chair of the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Dear members of the Committee,

As Chair of the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and local Councillor in the United Kingdom, it is my pleasure to provide you with a short update today, on ongoing work of the Congress in the field of combatting human trafficking.

Indeed, local and regional authorities are key players in combatting human trafficking. Our local administrations are often the first points of contact for persons facing difficulties and in particular for refugees and migrants arriving in our communities.

Let me illustrate with an example from my home country, the United Kingdom, how cities and regions are impacted by trafficking, but also how they can play a role in combatting it, in co-operation with other levels of government.

Aware of the key role that cities and regions play in the fight against trafficking, the Congress has developed several reports aimed at helping cities and regions address this issue.

In 2017 and 2018, the Congress presented reports **on the reception and integration of refugees** and on **unaccompanied refugee children**. Both highlighted the increased danger of women and children becoming victims of abuse, even when they reach "safe" countries.

Most recently, following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the Congress adopted a report on the reception and protection of women and children refugees in Europe's towns and regions.

The report looks into how local and regional authorities can best address the vulnerabilities and needs of women and children, including their increased vulnerability to human trafficking.

These reports have addressed trafficking in the wider context of a thematic report, often starting from the phenomenon of migration.

However, in the current context, with so many vulnerable persons on the move and at risk of falling into the hands of traffickers, we need to step up our efforts and take concerted action at all levels of government.

Authorities at all levels are increasingly aware of this need for action, which is also reflected in the Reykjavik Declaration adopted by heads of State and Government under the Icelandic Presidency of the Council of Europe in May this year.

Only this week, for example, the French government presented its new plan for combating trafficking in human beings, based on increasing evidence of trafficking victims reaching France, many of them women falling victim to sexual exploitation.

To better understand the role of local and regional governments in this context and prepare relevant recommendations for local and regional governments in particular, the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress therefore decided to hold an exchange with the Chair of GRETA, Ms Helga Gayer, at the committee meeting last June.

It became very clear from this exchange that this subject merited further exploration. As a result, the secretariats of the Current Affairs Committee and GRETA are currently cooperating to analyse GRETA's national and general reports, including by putting the spotlight on problems that may be of concern for local and regional authorities.

The aim is to identify how and where cities and regions are already taking action to combat trafficking and where they can play a role in bridging existing gaps in this fight.

We, as Congress members representing the local and regional authorities all over Europe, would also like to better understand what types or phases of trafficking we can best intervene in.

This ongoing analysis will be presented to the Current Affairs Committee at our online meeting on 20 February next, following which the Committee will decide how to follow up on this work. We could, for example, envisage a Congress report on the role of local and regional authorities in the fight against trafficking, including guidelines for cities and regions.

I want to warmly thank GRETA and the Secretariat of the anti-trafficking division for this excellent cooperation, which will be most valuable for the Congress as it will provide us with a starting point for more concrete future work of Committee I am chairing.

In the meantime, I would be most interested to hear of good practices in your members states on the fight against trafficking at local and regional level, so that I can share them with my peers – mayors, city councillors and regional parliamentarians across Europe.

Your experience and examples are invaluable for us, as practitioners in the field. They can strengthen our action on the ground and make our local policies against trafficking more effective, but we can also act as leavers to obtain further action against trafficking, building on your expertise, through the privileged relations we as local and regional authorities have with our governments.

After all, as local politicians, we have committed to improving our local communities and the lives of our citizens. Combatting human trafficking is an integral part of the road towards delivering this promise.

This is all from me for today, but I hope to be able to come back to your committee in the coming months to present the outcomes of this cooperation.

Thank you.