

Event marking the 15th anniversary of the Council of Europe Group of Experts  
of Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)

*22 March 2024*

**Draft statement by Ambassador Maria Spassova,  
Chair of the Committee of the Parties,  
Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to the Council of Europe**

Deputy Secretary General,  
President of GRETA,  
Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure and an honour for me to address you today on behalf of the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Today's event marks the 15th anniversary of monitoring of the Convention by GRETA. This provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved and where we need to do more to ensure that the monitoring of the Convention's provisions leads to the desired results.

The first elections of GRETA members by the Committee of the Parties to the Convention took place in December 2008. Back then, there were 18 State Parties to the Convention - compared to 48 today - whose representatives elected the first 13 members of GRETA. Six of these founding members are present here today, and it must be a moment of pride for you to see the results of your initial endeavours.

Ever since its first meeting in February 2009, GRETA has pursued its mission with dedication and resolve to ensure that the provisions of the Convention do not remain a dead letter, but are effectively implemented. Over the 15 years of its existence, GRETA has benefited from a wide range of expertise. Regardless of the different professional backgrounds of its members, GRETA has always been led by the deep conviction that the protection and promotion of the rights of victims of human trafficking lies at the heart of action to combat this scourge.

I would like to underscore three essential aspects of GRETA's work over the 15 years of its existence.

First, it is an outstanding illustration of the work carried out by Council of Europe monitoring bodies. Right from the beginning, GRETA took the view that in addition to sending a questionnaire, it is crucial to carry out onsite visits to evaluating the implementation of the

Convention. These country visits provide an opportunity to understand the situation on the ground and contribute to the promotion of dialogue with the Parties. The reports drawn up by GRETA are thus substantiated by tangible findings reflecting information received from a wide range of sources, including victims and survivors of human trafficking. GRETA's working methods have gained it a reputation for being an authoritative source of information, analysis and guidance for public officials, independent human rights bodies and civil society representatives.

In the second place, GRETA has invested a great deal into developing the ongoing dialogue with State Parties. Prior to the adoption of a final report, GRETA asks each Party to the Convention to provide comments on the draft report and replies to additional requests for information. On the basis of GRETA's reports, the Committee of the Parties adopts recommendations addressed to each Party. GRETA is proactive in following up the implementation of these recommendations and organises round-table meetings to discuss any implementation difficulties and offer additional support. The reports provided by states in reply to the recommendations are analysed and, if necessary, additional information is requested. The input of civil society is part and parcel of this process. Continuous dialogue is therefore a crucial element of the monitoring of the Convention.

Third, to ensure effective monitoring, a consistency of approach, the development of coherent standards, and the capacity to react quickly to new challenges, are profoundly important. This requires a combination of highly qualified members, with wide-ranging expertise, and the support of an experienced and dedicated secretariat. The continuity that has been provided by GRETA's Secretariat, and in particular the Executive Secretary of the Convention, has been instrumental for building a sound methodology and maintaining a strong team spirit. The Council of Europe should ensure that GRETA is provided with adequate human resources to carry out its work and function in a comprehensive manner.

The Committee of the Parties must also continue to ensure that the selection process for GRETA members leads to highly qualified and independent members. By doing this, we will pave the way to yet more success for GRETA and our ultimate goal – to put an end to human trafficking. The next elections of GRETA members will be held in November or early December this year. In this context, I recall the recommendations issued by Amnesty International back in 2007 to ensure the election of independent experts of the highest calibre to monitor implementation of the Anti-Trafficking Convention. One of these recommendations is to put in place open, inclusive and transparent national selection procedures which promote the selection of experienced candidates from a range of backgrounds relevant to the work of GRETA. The recommendations also stress that the election should be based on merit and avoid political 'trade-offs'.

While the task of GRETA is to evaluate the implementation of the Convention by the Parties, the task of the Committee of the Parties is to ensure the full and timely implementation of GRETA's conclusions. As the political pillar of the monitoring mechanism of the Convention, the Committee of the Parties must encourage the implementation of GRETA's conclusions, not to dilute or minimise them.

As the Deputy Secretary General pointed out, there are many positive examples of countries acting upon GRETA's recommendations, by amending legislation, adopting new action plans and taking practical steps to support victims in the exercise of their rights. However, it is also clear from GRETA's reports that there are also important gaps which must be addressed as a priority.

As Chair of the Committee of the Parties, I commend GRETA's relentless efforts to pinpoint implementation difficulties and propose actions to address them. States Parties must continue to treat GRETA's reports with utmost seriousness and undertake the follow-up action requested by GRETA and the Committee of the Parties. This requires political will to implement the recommendations and uphold the commitment to prevent and combat trafficking in human beings, following the human-rights based approach of the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention.

In this context, it would be important to strengthen the role of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and national parliaments. The appointment of independent national rapporteurs on trafficking in human beings and/or the involvement of national human rights institutions is also essential for strengthening the implementation of the Convention.

Local and regional authorities have also a key role to play in the fight against trafficking in human beings. I am pleased to note that GRETA has developed co-operation with the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and has started identifying common threads and good practices.

In conclusion, I would like to express the wish that GRETA should continue to wield its influence and enable us to accomplish more progress in Europe and beyond in combating trafficking in human beings, with the long-term goal of its eradication.

I thank you for your attention.