

**STRENGTHENING THE PROTECTION AGAINST ABUSE
AND EXPLOITATION OF VULNERABLE PERSONS,
IN PARTICULAR WOMEN AND CHILDREN, FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE:**

THE SITUATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

*Online event organised by the Special Representative on Migration and Refugees of the
Council of Europe and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*

21 September 2022

Summary

The event was organized jointly by the **Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration and Refugees of the Council of Europe (SRSG), UNHCR's National Office in Slovakia and the UNHCR Representation to the European Institutions in Strasbourg**. It gathered representatives of the Slovak authorities holding responsibility in strategic sectors related to asylum, children's protection and preventing & combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Ministries of Interior, of Foreign and European Affairs, of Labour, of Education, Public Defender's Office, Slovak National Centre for Human Rights), as well as participants from international organisations such as CoE, UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF.

The **SRSG Ms. Leyla Kayacik** introduced the event, detailing the main findings of the Report of the [fact-finding mission to the Slovak Republic](#), published on 13th July 2022, following the visit carried out from 2 to 4 May 2022.

During the introductory session, **Mr. Vendelin Leitner, State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior**, followed by **Ms. Sona Danova, Director of Human Rights Department of Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs** presented the initiatives put in place by the Slovak government to respond to the unprecedented flow of persons coming from Ukraine. **Ms. Danijela Popovic-Efendic, Head of Office, UNHCR National Office in Slovakia**, explained UNHCR's activities on the ground, facilitated by the opening of an office in Bratislava. She also underlined the generosity of the Slovak government and the local community, for having opened up their homes to the most vulnerable.

The first panel focused on the protection of the rights of women and children migrants and refugees. **Ms Lucia Vlasakova of the Department of Equality between Men and Women and Equal Opportunities, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Slovakia**, presented the national system in place for the legal protection of children and women and provided an overview of the best practices as well as challenges encountered. Key in the effort to protect Ukrainian women is the "National plan for the protection of women and children against violence and sexual exploitation", that is divided into three phases: prevention, protection, and effective prosecution. The Slovak Government is displaying particular

sensitivity to integration and has developed specific policies to facilitate access to education, employment, housing, health, justice. **Ms Natasa Just Hrnarova, from the Department of Strategy for Social Protection of Children and Families, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Slovakia,** presented the tools put in place that are specifically addressed to children. She underlined that schooling and effective access to education remain the priority, given that children under temporary protection may choose to follow online education in Ukrainian instead of enrolling in local schools. Many children, however, do not attend school and therefore risk not being identified in the event that they are victims of abuse or mistreatment.

Martina Bosak, Member of the Gender Equality Commission of the Council of Europe, presented the new [Recommendation CM\(2022\)17](#) on protecting the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls and other [relevant CoE standards](#). They represent useful tools for state and non-state actors to offer pre- and post-arrival protection and develop further tailor-made guidelines on specific situations.

The next intervention focused on the protection of children from sexual abuse. **Ms Ana Guerreiro, from the Secretariat of Council of Europe's Lanzarote Committee on the Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children,** presented the Council of Europe's standards and the [checklist](#) on the protection of children affected by the refugee crisis from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. She underlined the need for a comprehensive action, and for the training of specialised professionals.

Standards of the CoE on [Alternative Care and Protection for unaccompanied and separated children](#) were presented by **Ms Lilja Gretarsdottir, Head of Cooperation Programmes of the Council of Europe.** She underlined the need to promote family-based care as a preferred accommodation option for unaccompanied and separated children. She also stressed the importance of desinstitutionalising their accommodation.

Aikaterini Lazana, Lawyer from the Registry of the European Court of Human Rights, offered a detailed overview of the Court's case-law on topics such as detection of vulnerabilities, trafficking in human beings, reception conditions, and the rights of unaccompanied minors and age assessment procedures.

The second panel concerned trafficking in human beings and the assistance to victims. **Ms. Sona Grauzlova, Director of Information Center for the Fight Against Human Trafficking and Crime Prevention, Ministry of Interior, Slovakia,** presented their strategy, a comprehensive system, the first phase of which is data collection. Given the high number of people crossing the borders, it is important to monitor and detect vulnerabilities at an early stage. Increasing awareness among refugees is also paramount.

Sergii Lavrukhin from UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe presented the wider issues related to the protection of refugee children from Ukraine. He outlined in particular UNHCR views on jurisdiction, guardianship arrangements established in Ukraine, obligations of the country of asylum as well as the sharing of the personal data and returns.

Ms Parvine Ghadami, from the Secretariat of Council of Europe's Convention on Action against trafficking in human beings (GRETA) presented relevant CoE standards, GRETA's recommendations as

well as the [Guidance Note](#) on the entitlement of victims of trafficking, and persons at risk of being trafficked, to international protection. **Sandra Berty of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe** presented the UNHCR's approach to protecting women and girls in this context, highlighting key risks and challenges, and presenting regional good practices. Lastly, **Ms. Zuzana Cacova from IOM Slovakia** shared information on IOM's field response, mainly regarding activities, trainings and counselling to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. She underlined that, although victims' cases may not have been formally identified, it does not mean that trafficking or exploitation is not taking place, especially labour exploitation (unfair pay and long hours are known to happen).

Ms Leyla Kayacik, concluded the event by expressing the willingness to continue the dialogue with the Slovak authorities. She underlined the relevance of the principle of the best interest of the child, as far as unaccompanied and separated children are concerned, as well as access to education. She also offered the Council of Europe's specific support for the full implementation of the standards regarding the protection of women and girls, who are the most affected and vulnerable in the current refugee crisis.