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Kingdom of the Netherlands



EU Support to Strengthen the Fight against Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans

EU4FAST

Context

Irregular migration to the EU, which includes the risk of vulnerable migrants becoming victims of trafficking in human beings (THB), has particularly increased since the end of 2021. In 2022, over 300.000 irregular entries were recorded at the external borders of the European Union (EU), representing an increase of 64% compared to the same period the previous year. Nearly half of these arrivals were recorded on the Western Balkan route, making it one of the main routes for smuggling of migrants into the EU. This surge in irregular migration has generated illicit financial flows (IFFs), which pose significant threats to economic stability, governance, and public trust in the Western Balkans by weakening institutions and fueling corruption. Systematically addressing IFFs is therefore essential for disrupting the financial backbone of organized crime networks involved in smuggling and trafficking and other crimes they are committing.

Facing this massive inflow, both EU and Western Balkan judicial authorities and law enforcement need more capacities and expertise to effectively and efficiently combat organized crime and prevent migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans. This is particularly evident in complex and long-running cross-border investigations and prosecutions.

Project name	EU Support to Strengthen the Fight against Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans (EU4FAST)
Partner Countries	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia
Volume	European Commission (DG ENEST): EUR 45.4 million German Government (BMZ): EUR 5.5 million Italian Ministry of Interior: EUR 2.3 million Kingdom of the Netherlands: EUR 428,000
Duration	67 months; June 2023 – December 2028
Implementing Partners	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Austrian Ministry of Interior, German Federal Police (Bundespolizei), Center for International Legal Cooperation (CILC), CIVIPOL, Croatian Ministry of Interior, Italian Ministry of Interior, Slovenian Ministry of Interior

*This designation is without prejudice to position in status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Financial and technical resources to support lengthy and complex investigations, prosecution and trials are not sufficiently available and there is a lack of necessary equipment, capabilities and compatible IT infrastructure to efficiently tackle poly-criminal organized crime groups (OCGs) engaged in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.

Implemented by:



Objective

The project aims to reinforce the security and rule of law in the Western Balkans by strengthening the capacities of the national and regional authorities for preventing and combatting organised crime. A tailored approach in line with the specific needs of the partners will be directed towards all relevant institutions and stakeholders to enhance capacities on an institutional and individual level to ensure efficient identification and protection to (potential) victims of trafficking in human beings as well as to refer them to relevant state and non-state support services. In parallel, the project strengthens the region's ability to detect and disrupt illicit financial flows (IFFs) linked to these crimes, recognizing that dismantling the financial infrastructure and the business models of organised criminal groups is key to a lasting impact.

The relevant law enforcement and border authorities will be assisted in preventing and countering the trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling in line with EU standards and human rights, through the provision of adequate and efficient enhancement of their technical capabilities. This includes preventive activities in assessing risks, analysing intelligence, transparency and accountability, strengthening financial investigative capacities to trace and recover criminal proceeds and better integrate anti-money laundering efforts within the broader fight against human trafficking and migrant smuggling and organised crime in general. Procurement and development of innovative digital solutions compatible within the contemporary crime prevention and investigation will enable the authorities to efficiently combat organized crime groups. This support will be linked with a comprehensive enhancement of the overall capacity building for all relevant stakeholders. Regional networks and cross border partnerships setting up and implementation of bilateral and regional investigations and Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) organised crime will complement these efforts. A wide outreach awareness raising campaign toolbox for conducting target group-specific sensitization campaigns against THB ensures a victim centred approach coordinated also with all relevant stakeholders.

The law enforcement and judicial authorities will be strengthened in inter-institutional and intra-regional cooperation resulting with increased numbers of investigations and organized crime cases accepted for trial, as well as in deepen the partnerships with EU

Member States and EU Justice and Home Affairs Agencies, including active participation in EU Justice and Home Affairs agencies and EMPACT, the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats.

Approach

The project is implemented by experts and embedded country teams (ECTs) consisting of resident police, prosecutors, legal advisers, technical advisers, project assistants and administrative officers. The project follows the 4 – P approach: **Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Partnership**.

The conditions for effective investigation and prosecution of criminals and networks are improved by strengthening the related capacities of Western Balkan law enforcement and judicial authorities in line with EU standards (**Prosecution**). Through strengthening integrated border management systems, increasing the resilience of at-risk groups and improving their knowledge base on smuggling and THB-related risks, criminal networks will be deterred and their search for potential victims disrupted (**Prevention**). Complementing these efforts, combating IFF adopts a holistic approach to combat illicit financial flows in the Western Balkans through the areas of prevention, financial investigations, asset recovery and asset management. It strengthens the frameworks of Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism Frameworks, enhances financial transparency, and improves supervision of financial institutions, supporting broader efforts under the 4-P strategy by addressing the systematic challenges and the required national reforms. By strengthening state and non-state institutions in the identification and referral of victims of trafficking as well as the systems for the provisions of shelter and services, the action contributes to a comprehensive **Protection** system.

Strengthening linkages between law enforcement and the protection systems will contribute to the effective prosecution of criminals and their networks. Facilitating effective **Partnerships** plays a key role across the project, as it seeks to strengthen national, regional, and EU – Western Balkans collaboration structures. Addressing all key elements to improve the conditions for preventing and combatting migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans will contribute to strengthening the rule of law in the region. This will in turn support the 6 Western Balkans partners on advancing on their path towards enlargement.

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