

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A REVIEW OF LEGAL AND SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

*Ph.D. Candidate Stela KARAJ*

*Lawyer & Assistant Lecturer in Human Rights and Labour & Insurance Law,  
"Department of Legal Sciences", European University of Tirana,*

*Prof. Dr. Kristaq XHARO*

*Lecturer at the European University of Tirana for International Relation,  
Security and Strategy Issues  
"Department of Applied Social Sciences", European University of Tirana,*

## Abstract

*Human trafficking is one of the most complex and threatening challenges to human and regional security in the Western Balkans. This issue is closely connected to socio-economic factors, institutional weaknesses, and corruption, impacting not only individuals but also the stability of the region. This study examines the legal and political frameworks in Western Balkan countries, regional cooperation efforts, and the challenges of protecting and rehabilitating victims. The findings indicate that while significant progress has been made in aligning legislation with international standards, weak law enforcement and a lack of resources limit the impact of these efforts. Criminal networks involved in trafficking are often linked to other threats, such as organized crime and terrorism, further undermining regional security. Recommendations include strengthening the legal framework, promoting regional and international cooperation, and improving mechanisms for victim protection and reintegration. Additionally, sustainable policies and dedicated funding are needed to address the root causes and enhance institutional capacities. This study highlights the need for an integrated and comprehensive approach to addressing this complex issue and ensuring the protection of the rights and dignity of victims.*

**Keywords:** *Human trafficking, Western Balkans, Regional security, Legal frameworks, Victim protection, Criminal networks*

## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the most severe human rights violations and a persistent threat to global security. This phenomenon affects millions of individuals every year,

primarily women and children, who are exploited for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse. Trafficking of women and children is particularly concerning, as victims are often vulnerable and face a lack of legal and social support<sup>1</sup>. In the Western Balkans, human trafficking remains a serious issue, influenced by factors such as poverty, political transition, and weak security borders. The Western Balkans includes countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. With its history of conflicts and socio-economic transitions, this region has become a key point for human trafficking, serving as a source, transit, and destination for victims. While the countries in the region have made efforts to strengthen their legal framework and the institutions dealing with this issue, challenges continue to be numerous and complex<sup>2</sup>.

The Western Balkans has been shaped by a history of conflicts and painful transitions, including the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the political transformations following the collapse of communist regimes. These events created conditions conducive to trafficking, such as weakened state structures, widespread corruption, and poverty. Additionally, the region's strategic geographic location makes it a key hub for international trafficking networks<sup>3</sup>.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how the countries of the Western Balkans address the issue of human trafficking, with a particular focus on the trafficking of women and children. This article seeks to explore: the national and international legal frameworks in the fight against trafficking; the challenges related to law enforcement and victim protection; and the role of human security as an alternative approach to tackling this phenomenon.

Another point to address is analyzing the national and international legal frameworks in the fight against human trafficking in the Western Balkans, identifying the main challenges in law enforcement, victim protection, and the prosecution of traffickers. Also it's important to examine the impact of the concept of human security in addressing this phenomenon, emphasizing its role in strengthening efforts to protect victims and prevent trafficking. Using the Western Balkans as a case study, the paper explores the region's unique challenges and offers concrete recommendations for improving regional cooperation, harmonizing laws, and developing more effective strategies. Scholars such as Shelley, Kaldor, Gallagher and Holmes, Surtees, Subotić, Friman, and Reich have significantly advanced the understanding of human trafficking. Their collective work provides a comprehensive framework that addresses the complex,

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, S., A. Fehrenbacher, and D. Eisenman. "Psychological Coercion in Human Trafficking." *Qualitative Health Research* 25, no. 9 (2014): 1171-1181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732314557087>.

<sup>2</sup> Ivanova, E. 2013. "Comparative View of the Problem with Human Trafficking in the Balkan Countries." *Balkan Social Science Review* 1: 85-100. <https://eprints.ugd.edu.mk/6737/1/Comparative%20View%20of%20the%20Problem%20with%20Human%20Trafficking%20in%20the%20Balkan%20Countries.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ađır, B. S. 2009. "Rethinking Security in the Balkans: The Concept of Weak State and Its Implications for Regional Security." *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 2009 (2): 1-13.

multi-dimensional nature of human trafficking, offering valuable insights into the key factors driving the issue and the necessary approaches to combat it. This paper seeks to contribute to academic and political discourse, aiding the development of better policies to address trafficking in this region and beyond. Another goal of the paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the connection between law and security in the fight against trafficking, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for improvement. In doing so, the article contributes to scholarly and political debates on the importance of an integrated approach in combating trafficking.

## 2. Research Questions and Methodology

This paper aims to address the key research question: "How do legal harmonization and the human security approach influence the effectiveness of measures against human trafficking in the Western Balkans?" To tackle this question, the article employs a combined qualitative and quantitative approach. First, it analyzes existing literature, including international reports, academic studies, and national and international laws. Second, data from international organizations such as UNODC, OSCE, and national reports from Western Balkan countries are used to provide an updated perspective on the current situation. Additionally, the paper uses case studies from specific countries in the region to offer a more detailed analysis of the challenges and achievements. Through this methodology, the aim is to draw concrete recommendations for strengthening anti-trafficking efforts and improving human security in the region. This paper seeks to lay the groundwork for a thorough analysis of the challenges and opportunities in the fight against human trafficking in the Western Balkans. By exploring the connection between law and human security, the paper aims to contribute to the development of more effective approaches to addressing one of the most pressing human rights and global security issues.

## 3. Theoretical and Legal Framework

Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives on Trafficking and Security. Human trafficking is defined in the Palermo Protocol as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation"<sup>4</sup>. This definition highlights the complex dimensions of the phenomenon, encompassing the criminal actions, methods employed,

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations. 2000. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime." <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

and the purpose of trafficking. From a theoretical perspective, human trafficking is often addressed through two main approaches: human rights theories and security theories. The human rights approach views trafficking as a severe violation of the dignity and freedom of individuals, advocating for a response focused on victim protection and the punishment of traffickers<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, the security theory sees trafficking as a threat to national and regional stability, often linking it to organized crime networks and international terrorism<sup>6</sup>.

According to the concept of human security, trafficking represents a direct threat to individuals and communities, undermining the economic, social, and personal security of victims. This approach emphasizes the need for a comprehensive response that includes legal measures, victim protection, and the prevention of socio-economic factors that contribute to trafficking<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. International and Regional Legal Framework

The international legal framework for combating human trafficking is primarily based on the Palermo Protocol, an annex to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The Protocol includes obligations for member states to criminalize trafficking, protect victims, and promote international cooperation<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, the European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, adopted by the Council of Europe, sets higher standards for victim protection and provides oversight mechanisms for their implementation<sup>9</sup>.

At the regional level, the Western Balkans has taken steps to align national legislation with these international instruments. For example, Albania has adopted specific laws to combat trafficking and established a National Agency for the Coordination of Efforts against Human Trafficking<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, countries such as Serbia and North Macedonia have incorporated provisions in their national laws to penalize trafficking and provide support for victims<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Gallagher, A. T. 2010. *The International Law of Human Trafficking*. Cambridge: "Cambridge University Press".

<sup>6</sup> Shelley, L. 2014. *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge: "Cambridge University Press".

<sup>7</sup> UNDP. 1994. *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. n.d. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children." United Nations. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe. 2015. *Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*. Warsaw, Poland: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/168008371d>

<sup>10</sup> Government of Albania. 2020. *National Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2020–2023*. Tirana: Ministry of Interior.

<sup>11</sup> OSCE. 2018. *Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans: Achievements, Challenges, and the Way Forward*. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org/>

However, despite progress in the legal framework, the implementation of these measures remains limited. Issues such as corruption, lack of resources and institutional capacities, and insufficient international cooperation continue to hinder efforts to address trafficking in the region<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Review of Relevant Literature

The existing literature on human trafficking and its impact on regional and global security encompasses a broad range of studies and analyses that help to understand the complexity of this phenomenon. In the book “The International Law of Human Trafficking”, Gallagher (2010) emphasizes the importance of human rights-based approaches, arguing that current policies often fail to meet the protection and rehabilitation needs of victims. Through a comprehensive analysis of international instruments, the author highlights the challenges related to harmonizing laws and prosecuting traffickers<sup>13</sup>. Shelley (2014), in the study “Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective”, focuses on the links between trafficking and organized crime, noting that criminal networks often exploit the institutional and socio-economic weaknesses in the Western Balkans. The author argues that these networks not only exploit victims but also contribute to regional destabilization, posing a significant threat to both human and national security<sup>14</sup>. Subotić (2013) explores how state narratives in the Balkans, shaped by historical trauma and national identity, influence political decisions and human rights policies. The author work emphasizes that these narratives often hinder the institutionalization of post-conflict reforms, making it more difficult to address human trafficking effectively. Subotić’s insights provide a crucial understanding of the challenges faced in combating trafficking in the region, offering a framework to analyze the intersection of national identity, historical context, and policy implementation<sup>15</sup>.

In *Human Trafficking, Human Security, and the Balkans*, Friman and Reich (2007) examine the relationship between human trafficking and human security in the Balkans. The book analyzes how historical, socio-economic, and political factors contribute to trafficking, impacting individuals and regional stability. It also proposes frameworks for improving victim protection, strengthening law enforcement, and addressing structural vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for a cooperative, multi-dimensional approach<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Gallagher, A. T., and P. Holmes. 2008. “Developing an Effective Criminal Justice Response to Human Trafficking: Lessons from the Front Line.” *International Criminal Justice Review* 18 (3): 318–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567708320746>

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher, A. T. 2010. *The International Law of Human Trafficking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley, L. 2014. *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Subotić, J. 2013. “Stories States Tell: Identity, Narrative, and Human Rights in the Balkans.” *Slavic Review* 72 (2): 306–326. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.72.2.0306>.

<sup>16</sup> Friman, H. R., and S. Reich, eds. 2007. *Human Trafficking, Human Security, and the Balkans*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

A review of international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol<sup>17</sup> and the European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings<sup>18</sup> reveals that these documents form a crucial foundation for global and regional efforts to combat trafficking. The Palermo Protocol provides standardized definitions and obligations for member states to criminalize trafficking and protect victims. Similarly, the European Convention sets higher standards for victim protection and establishes oversight mechanisms for their implementation. In the context of human security, Kaldor (2007) argues that trafficking represents a multidimensional threat that affects not only individuals but also the stability of communities and states<sup>19</sup>. This concept emphasizes the importance of integrating human security approaches into anti-trafficking policies and practices. The UNDP (1994), through its Human Development Report, frames human security as an approach that goes beyond traditional perspectives, focusing on individuals as the central element of security policies.

Specific studies on the Western Balkans, such as those by the OSCE (2018), highlight that while countries in the region have made significant progress in establishing legal frameworks, they still face challenges in their implementation. The OSCE report indicates that the lack of regional cooperation and institutional capacity issues hinder an effective approach to combating trafficking. Furthermore, Gallagher and Holmes (2008) emphasize the need for a balanced response that includes the criminal prosecution of traffickers and the support of victims. A critical aspect of the literature is the role of civil society organizations and international cooperation<sup>20</sup>. Surtees (2008) argues that anti-trafficking efforts cannot succeed without the broad involvement of non-state actors, including civil society organizations and the private sector<sup>21</sup>. Experience in the Western Balkans shows that cooperation between international and local actors is essential for addressing challenges in victim protection and trafficker prosecution.

Thus, the existing literature provides a rich foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities in the fight against human trafficking. While legal frameworks have improved, challenges in implementation and victim protection persist. To overcome these, a comprehensive approach involving legal harmonization, stronger institutions, and increased regional and international cooperation is necessary. The theoretical and legal framework of human trafficking is essential for understanding

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations. 2000. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol)." United Nations. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Council of Europe. 2005. Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197). Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/Convention>.

<sup>19</sup> Kaldor, M. 2011. "Human Security." *Society and Economy* 33 (3): 441–448. <https://doi.org/10.1556/SocEc.33.2011.3.1>.

<sup>20</sup> Gallagher, A. T., and P. Holmes. 2008. "Developing an Effective Criminal Justice Response to Human Trafficking: Lessons from the Front Line." *International Criminal Justice Review* 18 (3): 318–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567708320746>.

<sup>21</sup> Surtees, R. 2008. "Traffickers and Trafficking in Southern and Eastern Europe: Considering the Other Side of Human Trafficking." *European Journal of Criminology* 5 (1): 39–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084224>.

its complexities and informing better policies. Definitions and perspectives clarify trafficking dynamics, while legal instruments guide action. Despite progress, studies indicate a gap between policies and practices in the Western Balkans. Addressing this requires stronger law enforcement, enhanced cooperation, and more support for victims. This analysis aims to deepen the understanding of these challenges and opportunities.

## **6. An Analysis of Human Trafficking Issues in the Western Balkans**

*Contributing Factors to Trafficking.* The Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, represents a region particularly vulnerable to human trafficking due to its historical transitions, economic challenges, and strategic location. These factors, combined with weak borders and limited regional cooperation, have created favorable conditions for criminal networks<sup>22</sup>.

*Political and Economic Transitions.* Following the collapse of communist regimes and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the region experienced political destabilization and violent conflicts, which weakened state structures. These conditions created law enforcement vacuums that criminal networks exploited to further their activities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the instability of institutions and high levels of unemployment in certain regions, as noted by the World Bank, make women and children particularly vulnerable to trafficking<sup>23</sup>.

In Kosovo and North Macedonia, poverty and a lack of economic opportunities remain major contributing factors to trafficking. A study by Terre des Hommes (2019) shows that approximately 40% of trafficking victims identified in Kosovo and 35% in North Macedonia are under the age of 18, reflecting the heightened vulnerability of young people to this phenomenon<sup>24</sup>.

*Migration and Weak Borders.* The Western Balkans serves as a key corridor for irregular migration toward European Union countries. Weak borders and corruption at border crossing points, particularly between Serbia and Montenegro, create ideal conditions for criminal networks trafficking victims for forced labor and sexual exploitation. UNODC (2021) reports that a significant portion of identified victims in the region have been trafficked across national borders, highlighting the need for stronger cross-border cooperation<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Lindstrom, N. 2004. "Regional Sex Trafficking in the Balkans: Transnational Networks in an Enlarged Europe." *Problems of Postcommunism* 51: 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2004.11052168>.

<sup>23</sup> World Bank. 2021. *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report*. <https://www.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> TDH Kosovo. n.d. "Improving Provision of Services and Awareness to Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP) in the Balkans - Albania." Terre des Hommes Kosovo. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://tdh-kosovo.org/en/improving-provision-services-and-awareness-combat-trafficking-persons-tip-balkans-albania>.

<sup>25</sup> UNODC. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns (2021)*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Accessed [date]. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>.

*Cultural and Social Factors.* Roma communities and other marginalized groups are particularly affected by trafficking. In North Macedonia and Serbia, Roma children represent a disproportionate percentage of identified victims, often trafficked for begging or forced labor. These groups face ongoing discrimination and have limited access to education and social services, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Access to education for Roma children is limited, with low enrolment rates in both primary and preschool education. In Serbia, fewer than 4% of Roma children attend preschool, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 2% of children aged three to five are enrolled. Employment rates for Roma vary, ranging from 11% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 22% in North Macedonia, with other Western Balkan countries falling in between<sup>26</sup>.

## 7. Government commitments

Governments in the Western Balkans have made significant efforts to improve their legal and institutional frameworks in line with international standards, as part of their commitment to European Union integration.

*Legal Framework and National Policies.* Albania has implemented national anti-trafficking strategies that focus on prevention, victim protection, and the prosecution of traffickers. Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite its complex administrative structure, has made progress in aligning laws across its entities, although significant institutional challenges persist. In Serbia, anti-trafficking laws have notably improved since 2015, with enhanced provisions for victim support. However, a recent report reveals that a large number of trafficking cases do not lead to severe convictions, primarily due to corruption and limited judicial capacity<sup>27</sup>.

*Institutions and Enforcement Mechanisms.* Governments in the region have established dedicated institutions to combat trafficking, but effective law enforcement remains challenging. In Kosovo, the Kosovo Police reports that lack of resources and training limits its ability to pursue traffickers and assist victims. In Montenegro, despite progress in case identification, inter-institutional cooperation remains insufficient<sup>28</sup>.

*Victim Protection Programs.* Victim services are limited across the region. Albania has established several shelters and rehabilitation programs for victims<sup>29</sup>. In Bosnia

<sup>26</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. n.d. "The Vulnerability of Roma Children to Commercial Sexual Exploitation." *Risk Bulletins*. Accessed [date]. <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-006/03-the-vulnerability-of-roma-children-to-commercial-sexual-exploitation.html>.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of State. 2024. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2023*. U.S. Department of State. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

<sup>28</sup> OSCE. 2018. *Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans: Achievements, Challenges, and the Way Forward*. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> Terre des Hommes Albania. 2023. *National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons*. Terre des Hommes Albania. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.tdh-albania.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/NATIONAL%20ACTION%20PLAN%20%28eng%29%20web.pdf>.



and Herzegovina, most victims rely on non-governmental organizations, which often face funding shortages<sup>30</sup>.

**Role of International and Regional Organizations.** International and regional organizations play a crucial role in strengthening anti-trafficking efforts by providing technical, financial, and expertise support to the Western Balkans countries.

*International Organizations.* In 2022, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provided support to the six jurisdictions within the Western Balkans' regional platform by organizing a series of capacity-building events aimed at advancing the implementation of the Regional Anti-Corruption and Illicit Finance Roadmap. This initiative included eight regional events, one of which was a high-level anti-corruption conference, as well as the creation of 11 knowledge products in local languages. Additionally, UNODC contributed to the development of strategies for asset recovery. A total of 384 officials, including 179 women, were trained through national capacity-building efforts designed to strengthen the prevention of corruption and support the roadmap's priorities<sup>31</sup>.

*Role of the OSCE.* The OSCE has been actively involved in organizing a variety of regional programs aimed at raising awareness and strengthening the capacity of national authorities. Through these initiatives, OSCE training has helped significantly increase the identification of trafficking victims, with a notable rise in the number of victims identified over the last five years. Non-governmental organizations, including Terre des Hommes and the "Vatra" Psycho-Social Center, have played a pivotal role in supporting trafficking victims and raising awareness in the community. In both Kosovo and North Macedonia, these organizations provide essential rehabilitation services to victims, helping to address gaps in support that are left by state authorities<sup>32</sup>.

The analysis of the situation in the Western Balkans reveals that socio-economic factors, geographical location, and institutional weaknesses contribute to the spread of trafficking. Government efforts to improve legal frameworks and victim protection mechanisms are visible, but implementation remains a major challenge. International and regional organizations, along with civil society, have played a crucial role in raising awareness and assisting victims, but more collaboration and resources are needed to address this issue effectively. An inclusive approach, involving legal harmonization, institutional strengthening, and enhanced international cooperation, is essential to eliminate human trafficking in the region.

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<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of State. 2023. 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina. U.S. Department of State. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. n.d. Western Balkans Regional Platform on Anti-Corruption and Illicit Finance. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/ft-uncac/platforms/western-balkans.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. n.d. Annual Report 2023: Trafficking in Persons and Related Initiatives. OSCE. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/annual-report>.

## 8. Challenges and limitations

Human trafficking remains a major challenge in the Western Balkans, a region in political and socio-economic transition, seeking European integration. Despite progress in legal frameworks and policies, issues like legal harmonization, weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate victim protection continue to hinder effective action<sup>33</sup>.

*Legal Harmonization Issues.* A major challenge in addressing human trafficking in the Western Balkans is the lack of alignment with international legal standards. While frameworks like the Palermo Protocol and the European Convention offer clear guidelines on prevention, prosecution, and victim protection, many regional laws remain inadequate. Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex administrative structure, with responsibilities split between state and entities, hinders a coordinated approach. Kosovo's limited international recognition also restricts cooperation and the application of global standards, as noted by UNICEF<sup>34</sup>. Additionally, differing interpretations of trafficking and victim rights, such as labor exploitation and child begging, create legal loopholes that criminal networks can exploit, as highlighted by Shelley.

*Weak Law Enforcement and Corruption.* Even when laws are in place, their enforcement remains a significant challenge. Widespread corruption and insufficient institutional resources severely hinder efforts to combat trafficking. In the Western Balkans, a large number of trafficking cases fail to result in convictions, highlighting systemic issues within law enforcement. Corruption within the justice system and law enforcement agencies creates an environment where traffickers can operate with relative impunity. For example, in Serbia and Montenegro, there have been allegations that high-ranking officials have collaborated with criminal networks, further undermining public trust in state institutions. This impunity encourages traffickers to continue their activities without fear of legal consequences. Additionally, a lack of financial resources and professional training presents further obstacles to effective enforcement. In countries like Kosovo and Albania, law enforcement agencies often struggle to access the necessary technology and resources to track trafficking networks. Moreover, prosecutors and judges frequently lack the expertise required to handle the complexities of trafficking cases<sup>35</sup>.

*Deficiencies in Victim Protection.* Despite efforts to establish victim protection systems, many countries in the Western Balkans still face significant challenges in this regard. In the Western Balkans, the severity of the ongoing crisis exacerbates existing

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<sup>33</sup> Dordevic, Sasa, and Vanja Petrovic. 2024. *Forced to Work: Labour Exploitation in the Western Balkans. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. Accessed [date]. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Sasa-Dordevic-Vanja-Petrovic-Forced-to-work-Labour-exploitation-in-the-Western-Balkans-GI-TOC-August-2024.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF. 2020. *Children in the Western Balkans: Addressing Gaps in Protection and Rights*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/eca>.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of State. 2023. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2023: Western Balkans*. U.S. Department of State. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report>.

inequalities, making vulnerable populations even more susceptible to economic and social risks. According to data from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo\*, children account for the majority of both presumed and formally identified trafficking victims, comprising approximately 66% of cases in 2020. These children are trafficked not only within their own countries but also across the region and into the European Union or neighboring nations. Those from marginalized communities, children living on the streets, and unaccompanied or separated minors are particularly vulnerable, making them prime targets for traffickers and exploiters<sup>36</sup>.

*Lack of Shelters and Support Services.* Many countries face challenges related to limited infrastructure for sheltering and supporting victims. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of shelters available is inadequate to manage the flow of victims. In Albania, although several rehabilitation centers are in place, their ability to provide long-term services is often constrained by limited resources, as highlighted in a report by the Different & Equal organization<sup>37</sup>.

*Discrimination and Marginalization of Victims.* Trafficking victims often experience stigma and discrimination, making it challenging for them to seek assistance. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, Roma victims, in particular, face institutional discrimination and struggle to access essential services, as research on victimization in the region has shown. Female victims, in turn, are frequently blamed for their situations, which further complicates their social reintegration. A significant issue is the insufficient identification of victims. According to OSCE findings, many trafficking victims in the region remain unrecognized by authorities. This is due to various factors, including fear of traffickers, lack of awareness of their rights, and uncertainty about their legal status, leaving many victims unseen and vulnerable<sup>38</sup>.

The challenges and gaps in the fight against human trafficking in the Western Balkans are numerous and complex. Issues with legal harmonization, weak law enforcement, corruption, and deficiencies in victim protection continue to impede efforts to address this phenomenon. To improve the situation, it is essential to take steps to strengthen legal harmonization with international standards, invest in resources and training for law enforcement, and establish sustainable systems for victim protection and reintegration. An inclusive approach, involving international and regional cooperation, is crucial to effectively address the challenges and protect the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable individuals.

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<sup>36</sup> Council of Europe. n.d. *Agenda for the Regional Conference on Child Trafficking*. Council of Europe. Accessed December 30, 2024. <https://rm.coe.int/agenda-en-regional-conf-on-child-trafficking/1680a7315c>.

<sup>37</sup> Different and Equal. 2019. *Study Report on the Need of Drafting a Special Law for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Albania*. Accessed [date]. <https://differentandequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Study-report-on-the-need-of-drafting-a-special-law-for-the-protection-of-victims-of-trafficking-in-albania.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> OSCE. 2021. *Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans: The Role of Institutions and Victim Support*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. [https://www.osce.org/files/f/ documents/6/f/509345\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/ documents/6/f/509345_0.pdf).

## 9. Human Security Perspective as Part of International Security

Human trafficking represents a multidimensional challenge that impacts both human and regional security. In the Western Balkans, this phenomenon has profound socio-economic and political consequences, affecting not only the individual victims but also the stability of states and regional relations. As a geographical nexus for international trafficking, the countries of the Western Balkans face complex influences tied to other global threats, including organized crime and terrorism. This study examines the impact of trafficking on human and regional security, its interconnection with other threats, and the similarities and differences among countries in the region<sup>39</sup>.

*Impact on Human and Regional Security.* Human security is a concept that focuses on individuals, aiming to protect their freedoms and well-being. In this regard, human trafficking presents a direct threat to human security, as it devastates the lives of victims and disrupts social structures. Trafficking erodes various dimensions of human security, such as economic, social, and personal security. For instance, victims are often compelled to work under harsh conditions, without legal protection, and face significant health risks<sup>40</sup>. The detrimental impacts of trafficking extend beyond the individual, disrupting social structures and contributing to broader regional insecurities. Addressing this challenge necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of trafficking with broader security concerns and the implementation of effective, cooperative strategies at both national and regional levels.

*Regional Security.* At the regional level, trafficking undermines state institutions and creates security vacuums that criminal networks exploit. In the Western Balkans, institutional weaknesses and corruption create an environment conducive to traffickers, who often operate without facing prosecution. Between 2018 and 2023, the U.S. Department of State's annual Trafficking in Persons report recorded 767 victims of labor exploitation, including forced begging, across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The number of victims ranged from 83 to 173 annually, averaging 128 per year, with the highest count in 2021. After a steady rise in cases from 2018 to 2021, there was a significant decline in 2022, followed by a sharp increase in 2023. Albania reported the highest number of potential labor exploitation victims during this period. A study on human trafficking conducted by the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) revealed that forced begging was the most prevalent form of exploitation in the Western Balkans between 2018 and 2022, representing 27% of all trafficking victims, second only to sexual exploitation,

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<sup>39</sup> Begovic, D. 2019. "Informal Economies and Human Trafficking in the Western Balkans." *Journal of Balkan Studies* 12, no. 3: 245-262.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Tammemi, A., Nadeem, A., Kutkut, L., Ali, M., Angawi, K., Abdallah, M., Abutaima, R., Shoumar, R., Albakri, R., and Sallam, M. 2023. "Are We Seeing the Unseen of Human Trafficking? A Retrospective Analysis of the CTDC K-Anonymized Global Victim of Trafficking Data Pool in the Period 2010–2020." *PLOS ONE* 18 (e0284762). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284762>.

which accounted for 49%. Other forms of labor exploitation made up 16.5% of the total victims in the MARRI study, bringing the overall proportion of labor exploitation to 43.5%. These findings align closely with data from the U.S. Department of State, which reported that labor exploitation represented 46% of all trafficking cases in the region<sup>41</sup>.

## 10. Interconnection with Other Threats: Organized Crime and Terrorism

Human trafficking is often intertwined with other threats, including organized crime and terrorism. This connection highlights the complex and transnational nature of the phenomenon.

*Organized Crime.* Criminal networks in the Western Balkans use human trafficking as a sustainable source of profit. Transnational organized crime groups in the Western Balkans cause significant financial damage, not only within their home countries but also to the EU and international partners. A 2020 World Bank report notes that weak institutions, poor rule of law, and organized crime are key barriers to economic progress in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Unlike traditional criminal groups, Balkan organizations operate through ethnic and personal networks, making them more flexible and adaptive, especially in cyber-enabled fraud. These groups are primarily involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking, with cybercrime increasingly becoming a major concern. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that crime-related activities significantly impact the region's GDP, with over half of those convicted for organized crime linked to drugs<sup>42</sup>.

In some cases, trafficking is exploited by terrorist groups as a means of financing or as a tool for recruiting and exploiting individuals. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, there is evidence of connections between radical groups and trafficking networks, as observed in reports on security challenges in the region. These links make it even more difficult to address trafficking and terrorist threats in a coordinated and comprehensive way.

## 11. Similarities and Differences Between Countries

Human trafficking presents a shared challenge across all countries in the Western Balkans, yet each nation experiences and addresses this issue in unique ways, shaped

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<sup>41</sup> Đorđević, S., and V. Petrović. 2024. "Forced to Work: Labour Exploitation in the Western Balkans." *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Sasa-Dordevic-Vanja-Petrovic-Forced-to-work-Labour-exploitation-in-the-Western-Balkans-GI-TOC-August-2024.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> European Parliament. 2021. "The Impact of Organized Crime on the EU's Internal Security: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Responses." *European Parliamentary Research Service*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698838/EPRS\\_ATA\(2021\)698838\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698838/EPRS_ATA(2021)698838_EN.pdf).

by both common regional factors and specific national circumstances. The similarities and differences between these countries highlight the complexities of addressing trafficking in such a diverse region.

*Similarities.* All Western Balkan countries face common challenges, including institutional weaknesses, corruption, and porous borders. These challenges are compounded by the fact that many of the countries in the region serve as both source and transit points for trafficking, with some also being destinations for victims. For example, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo have a long-standing history of irregular migration, which provides traffickers with opportunities to exploit vulnerable populations. These countries serve as key locations on trafficking routes, with victims often being moved through them to other parts of Europe or the world<sup>43</sup>. Additionally, certain groups within the population, such as women, children, and Roma communities, are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. These groups are disproportionately affected by discrimination, poverty, and lack of access to education and social services, making them prime targets for traffickers across the entire region.

*Differences.* Despite these common challenges, the ways in which human trafficking manifests and is addressed vary significantly across the countries of the Western Balkans. One key area of difference is the institutional capacity and focus on combating trafficking. Albania, for example, has made considerable progress in aligning its national legislation with international standards, such as the Palermo Protocol, and has established specialized mechanisms for victim protection and support<sup>44</sup>. These efforts have positioned Albania as a leader in the region in terms of addressing human trafficking, although challenges in implementation remain. On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces significant institutional challenges due to its complex political and administrative structure, which hinders effective cooperation between different governmental entities and levels of governance. This fragmentation has made it difficult for the country to implement cohesive and coordinated anti-trafficking measures<sup>45</sup>.

Similarly, Kosovo's lack of international recognition presents another layer of difficulty, particularly in terms of building international cooperation and receiving support from foreign partners. This has created limitations in its ability to combat trafficking effectively, as it often faces obstacles in accessing the resources and partnerships needed to address the issue comprehensively<sup>46</sup>. In contrast, Serbia and

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<sup>43</sup> Gallagher, A. T., and P. Holmes. 2008. "Developing an Effective Criminal Justice Response to Human Trafficking: Lessons from the Front Line." *International Criminal Justice Review* 18 (3): 318-343.

<sup>44</sup> Government of Albania. 2020. *National Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2020–2023*. Tirana: Ministry of Interior.

<sup>45</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 2018. *Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans: Achievements, Challenges, and the Way Forward*. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org/>.

<sup>46</sup> Kelmendi, B. 2015. "Preventing Human Trafficking in the Western Balkans: A Particular Review in Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (2): 61. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n2s2p61>.

North Macedonia have made some strides in establishing regional partnerships and collaborating with neighboring countries to tackle trafficking, yet they still face significant challenges in terms of law enforcement, victim protection, and resource allocation<sup>47</sup>. These differences highlight the varying degrees of political will, institutional strength, and international support across the region, which in turn affect the ability of each country to address trafficking effectively.

Human trafficking in the Western Balkans is a multifaceted and pervasive issue that poses a serious threat to both human rights and regional stability. It is closely linked to organized crime and terrorism, creating a complex web of challenges that undermine the security and cohesion of the region. The Balkans' geographic location as a critical transit point for trafficking routes exacerbates the problem, facilitating the movement of victims across borders. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 120,000 women and children are trafficked annually within the European Union (EU), with many passing through the Balkans. Countries in the region, including Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia-Montenegro, are strategically positioned between less affluent eastern nations and the wealthier EU countries, functioning as both sources of trafficking, transit points, and destinations. The IOM's latest data indicates that roughly 90% of women involved in prostitution within the EU are foreign nationals, with 10-15% of them being minors<sup>48</sup>.

To effectively address this issue, it is essential to strengthen local institutions while aligning national legal frameworks with international standards, such as the Palermo Protocol and the European Convention on Human Trafficking. Regional and international cooperation must be prioritized to dismantle transnational trafficking networks and ensure comprehensive victim protection. While the challenges are substantial, a coordinated, multi-pronged approach involving law enforcement, victim rehabilitation, awareness campaigns, and adequate resource allocation can significantly reduce the impact of trafficking. By focusing on these critical areas, it is possible to foster a safer environment, enhance cross-border cooperation, and provide a sustainable pathway to justice and recovery for the most vulnerable victims of this grave crime.

## **12. Recommendations for Enhancing the Response to Human Trafficking**

Addressing the phenomenon of human trafficking in the Western Balkans requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. To improve current efforts, it is essential to strengthen the legal framework, enhance regional cooperation, and improve the

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<sup>47</sup> UNODC. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*. New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/>.

<sup>48</sup> Vujin, Jasna. "Human Trafficking in the Balkans: An Inside Report." *Human Trafficking: Global and Local Perspectives 4* (n.d.): 267–316. St. Thomas University School of Law. Retrieved December 30, 2024, from <https://www.stu.edu/Portals/law/docs/human-rights/ihr/r/volumes/4/267-316-JasnaVujin-HumanTraffickingintheBalkansAninsideReportHumanTraffickingGlobalandLocalPerspectives.pdf>.

protection and rehabilitation of victims. These recommendations aim to tackle the key challenges identified in previous analyses and promote more effective solutions to this complex issue. Strengthening legal instruments and enforcement mechanisms, increasing cross-border collaboration among regional stakeholders, and ensuring better victim support services are fundamental steps in improving the overall response. Moreover, creating sustainable rehabilitation programs for victims, alongside a commitment to tackling corruption and enhancing institutional capacities, will play a crucial role in addressing the root causes and long-term effects of human trafficking in the region.

### **1. Improving the Legal Framework and Strengthening Enforcement**

*Harmonizing Legislation with International Standards.* The countries of the Western Balkans must ensure that their national legislation is fully aligned with international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol and the European Convention on Action Against Human Trafficking<sup>49</sup>. This includes broadening legal definitions of trafficking, organized crime, and child exploitation. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibits trafficking, and regional cooperation is essential, as outlined in the Tampere Conclusions and Lisbon Treaty. The EU has strengthened anti-trafficking efforts through Framework Decisions and initiatives like STOP, DAPHNE, and AENEAS. The report calls for consolidated EU legislation with consistent definitions and prioritizing the best interests of child victims. It also recommends regular reviews of anti-trafficking laws, incorporating feedback from NGOs and agencies, which is currently lacking in the reporting process<sup>50</sup>.

### **2. Training of Justice and Law Enforcement Professionals**

Judicial authorities and law enforcement officers must undergo continuous professional training to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of human trafficking. For example, workshops facilitated by the OSCE have resulted in an increase in victim identification due to the enhanced capabilities of law enforcement officials. A sustainable training program should encompass victim identification, investigation of trafficking networks, and the prosecution of offenders in compliance with legal procedures.

### **3. Promotion of Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms**

Corruption remains a significant impediment to the effective enforcement of anti-trafficking laws. Governments should establish independent oversight bodies to

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<sup>49</sup> United Nations. *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*. 2000. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

<sup>50</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Child Trafficking in the EU: Challenges, Good Practices, and the Way Forward*. 2009. Available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/529-Pub\\_Child\\_Trafficking\\_09\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/529-Pub_Child_Trafficking_09_en.pdf).



monitor the enforcement of trafficking laws and hold accountable any public officials implicated in unlawful activities. For instance, the establishment of an independent Ombudsman for Anti-Trafficking efforts could serve as a mechanism for overseeing, investigating, and reporting abuses of authority<sup>51</sup>.

#### **4. Proposals for Enhancing Regional Cooperation**

The countries of the Western Balkans should establish a shared platform for information exchange and operational collaboration. This platform could include a joint database for victim identification and trafficker tracking, which can be supported by organizations such as the OSCE and UNODC<sup>52</sup>.

- a. *Memorandum of Understanding and Bilateral Agreements.* To enhance the effectiveness of cross-border efforts, countries should sign and implement memoranda of understanding that address human trafficking. These agreements should focus on joint investigations, cross-border operations, and the sharing of technical resources<sup>53</sup>.
- b. *Organization of Regional Trainings.* Joint training initiatives for police and criminal justice systems can help develop skills and foster relationships between different institutions. For instance, specialized training on tracking criminal networks and managing sensitive cases could strengthen the operational capabilities of the region<sup>54</sup>.
- c. *Support for Cooperation with the EU and NATO.* Given that many countries in the region are in the process of EU integration or are NATO members, regional efforts should be linked to these institutions to ensure technical and financial support. EU IPA programs could be utilized to fund projects that promote regional cooperation and address human trafficking<sup>55</sup>.

#### **5. Protection and Rehabilitation of Victims**

Enhancement of Victim Protection Infrastructure. Many countries in the Western Balkans lack sufficient shelters for victims of human trafficking. Governments should

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<sup>51</sup> UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). *Corruption and Human Trafficking*. 2008. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2008/BP020CorruptionandHumanTrafficking.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Strengthening the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling in the Western Balkans*. n.d. Available at: <https://albania.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11401/files/documents/17.%2520Strengthening%2520the%2520Fight%2520against%2520Trafficking%2520in%2520Persons%2520and%2520Migrant%2520Smuggling%2520in%2520the%2520Western%2520Balkans.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Council of Europe. *Memorandum of Understanding on Cross-Border Cooperation to Combat Human Trafficking*. n.d. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16804e437b>.

<sup>54</sup> OSCE. *Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans: Achievements, Challenges, and the Way Forward*. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2018. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/>.

<sup>55</sup> European Commission. *Overview of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA)*. n.d. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en).

invest in the creation of new shelters and improve existing ones. These centers should provide comprehensive services, including medical, psychological, and legal support<sup>56</sup>.

- a. *Social and Economic Reintegration of Victims.* One of the greatest challenges for trafficking victims is their reintegration into society. Programs focused on professional training and creating employment opportunities can help victims recover and prevent their re-trafficking<sup>57</sup>. For instance, collaboration with the private sector for training and employment opportunities can play a crucial role in this regard.
- b. *Public Awareness Campaigns:* Public awareness campaigns are crucial for increasing understanding of human trafficking and informing the public about the rights of victims. These initiatives should engage various sectors, including schools, local communities, and civil society organizations. In Albania, for instance, such campaigns have contributed to a notable increase in the number of trafficking cases reported<sup>58</sup>.

In this context, the OSCE Presence in Albania supported a study titled "Typology of Child Trafficking in Albania" by Aidan McQuade, Juliana Rexha, and Anila Trim, which examined 45 cases of suspected child trafficking. The study identified 39 potential trafficking victims, with 41 out of 45 cases showing no international connections. This suggests that trafficking was primarily occurring within Albania, pointing to an urgent need for legal reforms addressing both domestic and cross-border trafficking. The report identified key deficiencies, including a lack of transparency in trafficking identification, inadequate follow-up on investigations, and insufficient protective measures for victims. These findings underscore the necessity of strengthening Albania's child protection system, improving inter-agency coordination, case monitoring, and training for stakeholders such as law enforcement and child protection professionals. Additionally, enhancing data collection and providing specialized care for victims, including services for addiction recovery, are critical to ensuring long-term recovery and prevention<sup>59</sup>.

- c. *Mechanisms for Protecting Vulnerable Victims.* Vulnerable groups, such as women and Roma children, should be a special focus of victim protection policies. This includes creating programs dedicated to education and social support for these groups, helping them escape cycles of marginalization and poverty<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*. 2020. Available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP\\_2020\\_15jan\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Shelley, Louise. *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Ramaj, Klea. 2021. "The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges." *Journal of Human Trafficking* 9 (3): 408–29. doi:10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823.

<sup>59</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). *Typology of Child Trafficking in Albania*. 2020. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/457546.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> UNICEF. *Rights of Roma Children and Women in Europe: A Report*. 2012. Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/1071/file/report\\_rights\\_of\\_Roma\\_children\\_women\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/1071/file/report_rights_of_Roma_children_women_full_report.pdf).

d. *Strengthening Public Awareness and Community Engagement.* Public awareness campaigns play a vital role in preventing trafficking and encouraging victims to come forward. Governments, NGOs, and international organizations should collaborate on widespread awareness-raising campaigns that educate the public on the dangers of human trafficking, the tactics used by traffickers, and the rights and resources available to victims. These campaigns should target high-risk areas, including schools, rural communities, and urban centers, and be tailored to specific audiences. By fostering greater community engagement and encouraging citizens to take an active role in preventing trafficking, these campaigns can help create an environment where exploitation is less likely to occur<sup>61</sup>.

The recommendations outlined provide a detailed plan for improving the response to human trafficking in the Western Balkans. Strengthening the legal framework and its enforcement, enhancing regional cooperation, and bolstering victim protection and rehabilitation are essential steps in addressing this complex challenge. Only through an integrated and coordinated approach can the protection of victims be ensured and the spread of this phenomenon in the region be halted.

## Conclusions

Human trafficking remains a complex and multifaceted challenge for the countries of the Western Balkans. Analyses reveal that the phenomenon is influenced by socio-economic factors, institutional weaknesses, and the region's strategic position as an international transit hub. The legal frameworks of the region's countries have made significant progress, particularly through alignment with international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol and the European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

However, full harmonization and effective implementation of these laws remain a challenge due to corruption and limited institutional resources. Organized crime and terrorism are interlinked threats to trafficking, creating additional challenges for both human and regional security. The lack of coordinated cross-border cooperation exacerbates this situation, while efforts to protect and rehabilitate victims are often insufficient due to limited infrastructure and resources. Victims, particularly those from more vulnerable groups like women and Roma communities, face significant discrimination and difficulties in reintegrating into society.

The recommendations above focus on improving the legal framework, strengthening implementation, promoting regional and international cooperation, and enhancing

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<sup>61</sup> Friman, H. R., and S. Reich, eds. *Human Trafficking, Human Security, and the Balkans*. Pittsburgh: "University of Pittsburgh Press", 2008.

victim protection and rehabilitation. To address trafficking in the Western Balkans, key next steps should include:

1. *Conducting comprehensive studies* on the factors contributing to trafficking, with data analysis to identify vulnerable groups and high-risk areas. Comparative studies on law enforcement practices should highlight gaps and best practices.
2. *Promoting regional cooperation* with international institutions, creating platforms for information sharing and cross-border operations to combat criminal networks and protect victims.
3. *Investing in shelters and rehabilitation centers* offering support, professional training, and economic integration programs for victims, alongside public awareness campaigns to prevent trafficking.
4. *Securing sustainable funding* for policies and strategies, with support from the EU and international organizations to enhance institutional capacities.

Combating human trafficking in the Western Balkans requires a collective, comprehensive response that addresses root causes, targets criminal networks, and protects vulnerable individuals. Future efforts should aim for an integrated system that respects human rights and dignity.