

Expert level meeting of the EU Internet Forum on combatting trafficking in human beings on 1 June 2023

The EU Anti-trafficking Coordinator (EU ATC) convened at expert level the EU Internet Forum on 1 June 2023 to address the online dimension of trafficking in human beings, in particular **prevention and awareness raising as well as detection and the challenges of investigations**. The meeting gathered experts of the European Commission, EU Member States, the EU Agencies and representatives of the internet industry. The purpose of this expert level meeting was to take stock of the work of Member States, EU Agencies and online companies in combating trafficking in human beings online. The outcome of this first meeting on trafficking will feed into further discussions in various fora of the EU Internet Forum, as well as of the meeting of the Focus Group of Specialised Prosecutors and in the next meeting of the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and Coordinators. **The objective is to reinforce already existing actions, to increase cooperation with the private sector and to result in concrete actions, commitments and mutual support to tackle trafficking in human beings online.**

In the introduction EU ATC **recalled that human trafficking is a new work strand of the EU Internet Forum**, which is fully in line with the 2021 EU Strategy. In the last years, trafficking in human beings gradually moved online. Almost, each and every human trafficking offence has an online element, be it the recruitment, advertisement, exploitation or control over the victims, organisation of transportation or money laundering for example. This developments significantly amplifies the crime by allowing traffickers to get access to endless number of potential victims and to reach out millions of users. It opened an entirely new dimension of the scale of the crime and created major but not insurmountable challenges for law enforcement. What is illegal and prohibited offline it is also prohibited online. To achieve this, we would need (1) the **right political and legal framework**, (2) **digital capabilities of law enforcement and prosecution** and (3) the **active engagement of the companies** since many elements of human trafficking is taking place on social media and other internet platforms. This first expert meeting is the opportunity to exchange experiences, identify challenges and discuss how all stakeholders can work together to better prevent the crime, identify and protect victims and bring traffickers to justice.

Representatives of **DG HOME** and **DG CONNECT** presented how the applicable political and legal framework, notably the Anti-trafficking Directive (2011/36/EU), the EU Strategy combatting trafficking in human beings 2021-25 and the Digital Services Act (DSA) apply to the online dimension of trafficking in human beings, in particular DSA will strengthen the fight against trafficking in human beings, as it applies to illegal activities online involving a threat to the life or safety of a person or persons, including trafficking in human beings, as set out in Recital (56). DSA will have a positive impact on combatting trafficking in human beings, regulating the responsibilities of online platforms and other online intermediaries abused by perpetrators for human trafficking and other illegal activities.

In the session on the challenges of **detection and investigations** of content related to trafficking in human beings, the representatives of Europol and Eurojust provided a situational picture about the *modi operandi* of the traffickers recruiting, advertising, exploiting and controlling the victims. They both underlined the necessity of active cooperation of the internet companies with law enforcement agencies since most human trafficking activity takes place on the surface web (lesser extent on the dark web) on social media, adult websites and on encrypted messaging apps. Prosecutors and courts must increase their capabilities to be able to identify, extract and assess electronic evidence. Close law enforcement and judicial cooperation is fundamental to bring perpetrators to justice in transnational cases affecting several jurisdictions. The representatives of the German Federal Crime Agency and the French Ministry of Interior presented the German and French experience with the

online elements of trafficking in human beings. They concluded that trafficking in human beings is a dynamic crime also in the online environment, which requires technological capabilities and an innovative approach from law enforcement to be able to combat it effectively. Governments must conduct intensive awareness raising to curb the demand online and educate potential victims about the threats of traffickers posed in the online environment. Cooperation with the private sector is absolutely necessary. The representative of a company reaffirmed the commitment of the company to fight illegal activities, in particular child sexual exploitation and child trafficking. The company is ready to engage into work with the Forum on this matter.

In the session on **prevention and awareness raising** the Romania National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons and the Swedish Gender Equality Agency presented their campaigns on the two major forms of exploitation: sexual and labour exploitation. The representative of DG HOME informed the participants about **the upcoming EU awareness raising campaign in connection with the EU Anti-Trafficking Day on 18 October 2023**.