

Early Warning Notification

War in Ukraine – refugees arriving to the EU from Ukraine at risk of exploitation as part of THB

The Hague, March 2022
 Ref. No.: 2022-340
 Europol Operations Directorate
 Operational and Analysis Centre
 European Migrant Smuggling Centre

The military invasion initiated by Russia against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has caused a humanitarian crisis and prompted large numbers of refugees to flee from Ukraine to the EU. According to the UN refugee agency, close to three million people have left Ukraine¹ as of 16 March 2022. Despite this crisis, opportunistic criminal networks may use this situation to further gain profits and strengthen their criminal activities:

- Most of the people fleeing Ukraine are **women, children and vulnerable persons**, who are the ideal potential victims for criminal networks engaging in trafficking in human beings. With more than one million children reported to have left Ukraine amidst the war, **unaccompanied minors** arriving in the EU are particularly at risk.
- Women and children including unaccompanied minors are most at risk for **sexual and labour exploitation** as well as **forced criminality and begging**, or other criminal activities.
- The **areas of most concern** are the border areas, the reception and accommodation centres as well as public transport hubs such as train and bus stations.
- Countries receiving refugees from Ukraine **need to remain alert** for indications or attempts to recruit potential victims of trafficking in human beings.

What is happening?

The high number of refugees arriving from Ukraine have put a significant strain on receiving countries (either transit or final destination countries) to fully control, monitor and record those arriving from the war area. The situation in Ukraine has also attracted a large number of volunteers in EU MS eager to contribute to the humanitarian effort and offering their help. Authorities therefore encounter an additional set of challenges in vetting and monitoring the large number of volunteers in the border regions and in destination countries, offering support such as transportation or accommodation to those arriving from Ukraine.

Criminal networks may also **exploit this crisis** and recruit¹ victims among refugees from Ukraine, for sexual, labour, or other types of exploitation. EU MS, agencies and several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have highlighted the potential victimisation of women and children arriving from Ukraine in the past weeks, referring to suspicious individuals spotted in reception areas, in transit or destination hubs in the EU. ²

¹ Information contributed by MS to Europol.

² IOM, March 2022, IOM Warns Of Increased Risk Of Trafficking in Persons for People Fleeing Ukraine, accessible at <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-warns-increased-risk-trafficking-persons-people-fleeing-ukraine>.

Early Warning Notification

Trafficking in human beings – a thriving criminal business already set up in the EU

The number of potential victims arriving from Ukraine is likely to attract **both individual, opportunistic abusers** posing as volunteers as well as criminal networks specialising in the trafficking in human beings (THB).

THB has long been a **lucrative business venture for criminal networks** relying on a vast and dynamic infrastructure, **already established and spread throughout the EU**. Eastern Europe has been a key region of origin for victims of THB trafficked and exploited all over the EU. It is also a region of origin for members of many criminal networks involved in THB in the EU.³ The criminal networks orchestrating activities related to THB often have roots in the countries bordering Ukraine, which may further enable them to exploit new opportunities and the large pool of potential victims. While traffickers and victims of THB often share the same nationality⁴, it is likely that also other EU-based criminals will increasingly target Ukrainian victims for exploitation. THB, in particular sexual and labour exploitation, is still a key threat in all EU MS.

Those fleeing the war in Ukraine are likely to be targeted at **different stages of their journey** to destinations in the EU. On the short term, the highest risks concern the potential targeting of victims by criminals under the pretence of promising transportation, free accommodation, employment or other forms of immediate support.

The **use of social media groups** (set up by volunteers) where individual requests and offers for support are posted are ideal sources of information for criminal groups. These social media platforms often contain detailed information about the refugees (location, phone numbers, pictures) and their children. Criminals may use these platforms to identify and contact potential victims. Another risk is that criminals are present themselves in **reception and accommodation centres** as volunteers.

Mainly women and children but also elderly and other vulnerable categories such as mentally and physically disabled individuals are amongst potential victims. Among them, unaccompanied minors, including those orphaned during the war, as well as minors travelling with guardians (other than parents) for which thorough verification cannot be performed, are also at risk of victimisation. Women may fall prey of **sexual exploitation**, illegal surrogacy programs, forced begging or criminality. Children may be targeted for sexual exploitation, for illegal adoption schemes, or may be forced by criminals into **begging and criminality**. Elderly and other vulnerable categories are also at risk of falling into the hands of exploiters, forced to beg or used in **benefit fraud schemes**.

All involved authorities need to remain alert in order to promptly identify criminal attempts to exploit the crisis and the vulnerable situation of people arriving from Ukraine.

Europol is continuously monitoring the situation, using the agency's expertise and capabilities – including staff deployed and participating in fact-finding missions in the region. Europol continues to deliver operational support and stands as a platform for cooperation and information sharing among law enforcement in relevant EU MS and non-EU partners.

³ Europol information

⁴ Europol information