



Concept Note

Vienna Conference on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS IN TRANSITION:

NEW CHALLENGES – NEW RESPONSES

15 October 2026

Location: Vienna School of International Studies

Trafficking in Human Beings is a serious crime that not only harms individuals and devastates lives, but also represents a global challenge with significant cross-border dimensions. Given the evolving nature and emerging forms of this crime, there is a pressing need for innovative, sustainable, and comprehensive approaches. Effectively combating Trafficking in Human Beings requires coordinated action at both the national and international levels, as well as the continuous development and implementation of modern strategies.

Combating Trafficking in Human Beings is a key priority of Austrian foreign policy. To ensure effective national coordination, the Task Force on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings was established in 2004. Chaired by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, it brings together representatives of all relevant ministries, regional authorities, and civil society organisations to coordinate efforts and strengthen cooperation in the fight against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Vienna has increasingly become a centre of expertise in the field of combating Trafficking in Human Beings, benefiting from close cooperation with international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Since 2007, the Task Force, in cooperation with a range of partners, including the Principality of Liechtenstein, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the OSCE, has organised the annual Vienna Conference on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. Bringing together national and international experts, the conference has become a well-established platform for dialogue and an important strategic instrument in the fight against Trafficking in Human Beings. Its primary objectives are to facilitate the exchange of experiences, promote good practices, and raise awareness of the evolving challenges associated with preventing and combating Trafficking in Human Beings. A series of thematic workshops enables participants to explore key issues in greater depth and to develop practical approaches for addressing them.

This year's conference, under the heading **“Trafficking in Human Beings in Transition: New Challenges – New Responses”**, takes place 15 October 2026 at the Vienna School of International Studies and will be streamed online.

Ongoing digitalisation and the growing use of artificial intelligence present both new challenges and new opportunities in the fight against Trafficking in Human Beings. Increasingly, Trafficking in Human Beings is shifting into the digital sphere: whereas recruitment and exploitation once often relied on direct personal contact between perpetrators and victims, social media and online platforms are now frequently used to initiate contact and facilitate exploitation. Through sophisticated and manipulative online methods, vulnerable individuals around the world can be deliberately targeted and recruited for exploitation. At the same time, those at risk are becoming increasingly younger.

These developments pose significant challenges for law enforcement authorities, policymakers, and victim support organisations. As Trafficking in Human Beings becomes ever more intertwined with the digital environment, innovative responses and adapted measures are required. The objective is to harness the potential of modern technologies, including artificial intelligence, to prevent and combat Trafficking in Human Beings more effectively, while at the same time mitigating the risks arising from their misuse by criminal networks.

Digital tools and applications based on artificial intelligence can strengthen cross-border cooperation between law enforcement authorities, facilitate the identification of perpetrators, and support efforts to bring them to justice. At the same time, preventive awareness-raising measures, information campaigns, and counselling services on the risks associated with Trafficking in Human Beings are of crucial importance. Enhancing awareness of the dangers and vulnerabilities associated with digital environments is equally essential. The perspectives and experiences of persons affected by Trafficking in Human Beings must also remain at the centre of all efforts to prevent and combat this crime.

To ensure that trafficked persons are identified and receive timely assistance, clear responsibilities and effective referral procedures are essential. Early identification and prompt referral are key to providing trafficked persons with appropriate protection and support. The EU Directive on combating trafficking in human beings, revised in 2024, provides important momentum for addressing these challenges. Its objectives and requirements, including the establishment of a National Referral Mechanism (NRM), are currently being implemented at the national level and provide a strong foundation for the work of the Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings. These and other key issues related to Trafficking in Human Beings will be examined in greater depth and discussed in four thematic workshops.

Workshops

Workshop 1:

The phenomenon of Trafficking in Human Beings – new criminal offenses, digitalisation and financing

Online recruitment via social media and encrypted communication, as well as digital money transfers
(German and English)

Organised by the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria

Experts: Gerald Tatzgern (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria), Horst Schiller (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria), N.N. META Group (online), Karim Adam (Federal Ministry of Finance – Financial Crime)

Trafficking in Human Beings is regarded as one of the most heinous crimes, committed millions of times a year worldwide and one that can only be combated globally and within an international context. Perpetrators resort to online recruitment methods via social media and messaging platforms in the recruitment of both minor and adult victims of trafficking in human beings. They are exploited sexually, for their labour or through committing criminal offences. This could suggest that it is particularly easy to employ such methods via the internet, especially for these forms of exploitation. Similarly, the proceeds from trafficking in human beings are laundered via intermediaries or coerced third parties and transferred digitally to the perpetrators or criminal organisations. The workshop will discuss possible perceptions of these methods and how people might respond to them by engaging with civil society, particularly Generation Z.

Workshop 2:

Criminal Exploitation of Children: Hidden dimensions of Trafficking (English)

Organised by ECPAT Austria and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights (LBI)

Experts: Sosa Henkoma (Expert by Experience) as well as experts from the fields of law enforcement, public prosecution and victim support/social work

The recruitment of minors for the purpose of exploiting them for criminal activities (drug-related crime, cyber-attacks, online fraud or serious violent crimes) is a growing international phenomenon and is becoming increasingly significant as digitalisation advances, a development which has been confirmed by international organisations (Europol, UNODC). Recruitment usually takes place via online platforms and social media. Reports from individual countries show that increasingly manipulative methods are being used to target ever younger groups.

The workshop will examine the challenges involved in identifying and dealing appropriately with the children concerned, with a particular focus on the application of the 'non-punishment' principle for trafficking victims forced into crime, and will discuss these issues with experts from the police, judiciary and child victim support organisations, as well as with an 'expert by experience' from the UK who himself became a victim of criminal exploitation when he was a child.

Workshop 3:

Beyond borders: Practical paths to transnational victim protection *(English)*

Organised by LEFÖ-IBF und IOM Austria

Moderation: Katie Klaffenböck (IOM Austria)

Experts: Tamara Schmidt (LEFÖ-IBF), Petra Jeney (EU-Anti-Trafficking Hub), Sophia Wirsching (Managing director, KOK – German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings), Nils Winkler (IOM Austria)

Trafficking in Human Beings is frequently a transnational phenomenon. In Austria, the majority of trafficked persons originate from outside the country, either from other EU Member States or from third countries. While some victims have viable prospects for remaining in Austria, others choose to return voluntarily or are subject to return procedures. Conversely, trafficked persons may also be transferred to Austria, for instance when Austria is deemed responsible for their asylum procedure or when individuals previously exploited elsewhere return to Austria.

The cross-border transfer of trafficked persons presents significant challenges for victim protection and for ensuring effective access to their rights. To address these challenges, the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive foresees the establishment of a national focal point in each Member State to ensure effective cross-border referral mechanisms. Although Austria has recently established a national referral mechanism, it does not yet include a dedicated focal point for transnational referrals.

This workshop will analyse practical case examples of transnational referrals in order to identify key challenges in ensuring that trafficked persons receive appropriate support services. It will also examine the structural requirements necessary to facilitate the effective transfer of protection services between countries. The findings of the workshop will contribute to the ongoing process of establishing an Austrian national focal point for transnational referrals.

Workshop 4:

Labour Exploitation: A Growing Problem? Recent Cases of Human Trafficking, Emerging Forms of Exploitation, and New Approaches to Addressing Them *(German)*

Organised by MEN VIA

Experts: Representatives of the EU Anti-Trafficking Hub, an Italian NGO focusing on seasonal farm work, and representatives of the Sezonieri Campaign

Labour exploitation in the context of human trafficking is widely considered to be increasing, as reflected in international reports, expert assessments, and domestic media coverage. In this workshop, MEN VIA will present recent case examples involving affected men and discuss selected media reports highlighting different forms of labour exploitation. The EU study on trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation, published in 2026, concludes that Member States should implement a range of measures to address this phenomenon more effectively. The study emphasizes that human trafficking for labour exploitation is embedded within a broader continuum of exploitative labour practices. It therefore recommends the development of national strategies,

enhanced expertise, coordinated cooperation among relevant stakeholders, and victim support services that take into account the full spectrum of labour exploitation. Against this background, this workshop examines the contribution of newly developed National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) to the identification of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation and, consequently, to ensuring that victims can access and exercise their rights.