



Home Office

# **Report of a fact-finding mission** **Albania: Human trafficking**

**Conducted between 5 and 12 October 2022**

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# Introduction

## Background

This report contains the (approved) notes of interviews with sources during a Home Office fact-finding mission (FFM) to Albania.

The FFM was conducted between 5 and 12 October 2022 by 3 officials from the Country Policy and Information Team (CPIT), with support from the British Embassy in Tirana. The FFM team was based in Tirana and visited Kukes.

The report does **not** provide advice on handling particular types of protection. For this, see the [Albania Country Policy and Information Notes](#).

## Purpose of the mission

The purpose of the mission was to gather accurate and up-to-date information from a range of sources about human trafficking of men and women, and the situation for single women/mothers.

See the [Terms of Reference](#) (ToR) for topics that were identified as relevant areas to explore.

## Research standards

The FFM was undertaken with reference to the [EU \[European Union\] common guidelines on \(Joint\) Fact Finding Missions: a practical tool to assist member states in organizing \(joint\) Fact Finding Missions](#), November 2010 (EU Guidelines 2010), and the Home Office's internal guidelines for conducting FFMs.

## Identification of sources

The FFM team sought to interview a wide range of informed sources (interlocutors), including members of non-government organisations, western embassy officials, government officials, and academics. Sources were identified primarily by desk-based research and in consultation with the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The sources contacted and interviewed are those that the FFM team were able to identify as relevant to the mission's ToR. But, as with any FFM, factors including time constraints and availability of sources mean that the list of sources consulted and information provided are not exhaustive.

That a particular source was interviewed and the notes of the interview have been included should not be taken as endorsement of that source or the information provided. Rather, all sources and information provided need to be critically assessed and considered against other publicly available material.

See [List of sources](#).

## Arranging and conducting interviews

The FFM team met with 26 discrete sources, consisting of 52 people in 25 face-to-face interviews, and one source (consisting of 2 people) interviewed over Microsoft Teams. All interviews / correspondence with sources were conducted in English or Albanian (with an interpreter).

At the start of each interview the FFM team explained the purpose of the mission, including that the notes of the interview may be published in a report on the GOV.UK website and the sources would be able to review the notes before publication.

See [FFM introductory note](#).

### **Notes of interviews/meetings**

The FFM team made notes of all meetings, which were then sent by email to the sources for review and approval. This email explained that, if a source did not respond within a specific deadline, CPIT would assume that the source was content with the notes as sent to them.

Of the 26 sources, 23 approved the notes, with a number making amendments to the original drafts, and one did not respond. Two sources did not consent to the notes being published, therefore they have not been identified in the [List of sources](#).

All sources are described / referred according to their preference.

See [Interview notes](#).

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# Terms of Reference

Prior to the FFM, the following topics were identified as relevant areas to explore:

- Statistics for 2021 and 2022 on
  - numbers of victims of (potential) trafficking (VOT) by gender, age and nature of trafficking (sexual, labour or criminal exploitation)
  - number of former VOT returned to Albania who have been supported and assisted by state/non-state agencies
  - number of former VOT who have been re-trafficked/experienced reprisals and/or harm from societal actors by age, gender and nature of trafficking (sexual, labour or criminal exploitation)
  - number of criminal investigations, prosecutions and convictions of traffickers by age, gender and nature of trafficking (sexual, labour or criminal exploitation)
  - number of (former) VOT by age and gender who have stayed and been provided support at shelters
  - number of (former) VOT by age and gender who have been provided ongoing support following departure from shelters
- Specific evidence of re-trafficking / reprisals and/or harm conducted by societal actors broken down by age, gender and nature of trafficking. Factors that may elevate / reduce risk of such harm
- Specific evidence of state response to (former) VOT, in particular male VOT. Factors that may influence positive / negatively state response
  - Has the state response improved, stayed the same or deteriorated over the last 5 years? Explain and evidence the changes
- Specific evidence of state and non-state support and assistance for VOT on return to Albania:
  - Organisations involved in provided support and assistance to VOT, state and non-state
  - Funding, size, capacity, and location of shelters and other support facilities
  - assistance provided in shelters/support facilities
  - financial assistance
  - availability and accessibility of healthcare generally, including mental ill-health
  - availability of assistance with long-term integration, including accommodation education and employment
  - has support and assistance for VOT improved/stayed the same/deteriorated in the last 5 years? Explain and evidence any changes

- Specific evidence of societal attitudes / treatment, including by family members, of VOT generally, but specifically lone women (with / without children) and lone men
  - Ability of lone women (including with children) to live independently, factors that may affect this such as location, socio-economic status, education and training, financial circumstances, family and friends support
  - Ability of lone men (including with children) to live independently including access to support, accommodation, education, healthcare and work. Factors that may affect this such as location, socio-economic status, education and training, financial circumstances, family and friends support
  - Has societal attitudes/treatment towards VOT improved/stayed the same/deteriorated in the last 5 years? Explain and evidence changes
- Ability of VOT to relocate within Albania to avoid family and / or traffickers, factors that may affect this

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# List of sources

Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN)  
BIRN Albania  
Caritas  
Center for Legal Civic Initiatives  
Different and Equal  
General Directorate of Registration and Compliance, Ministry of Interior  
General Directorate of State Police – Anti-trafficking Office  
General Prosecutors Office  
Key Adviser  
Kukes Municipality officials  
Mary Ward Loreto  
Ministry of Health and Social Protection  
Mobile units  
National Agency for Employment and Ability  
NISMA ARSIS  
Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)  
SHKEJ  
State Agency for Child Rights and Protection  
Terres des Hommes  
Tirana Municipality  
Tjeter Vizion  
UNICEF Albania  
Vatra Psycho-Social Center

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# FFM introductory note

Officials from the United Kingdom (UK) Home Office are undertaking a Fact Finding Mission (FFM) to Albania to obtain information about human trafficking (of both men and women) and the situation for single women/mothers and would like to interview you about this subject.

The FFM team consists of three officials from the Home Office, the government department responsible immigration and asylum. More information about the Home Office can be found on our website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office>

The information you provide the FFM team may be cited in a report which may be placed on the Home Office website and made available to the public. It will be used to assist UK immigration officials and judges involved in the asylum and human rights decision making process.

However, the FFM team will only publish information you provide with your consent. If you prefer that the information is not made publicly available, this will be respected.

The FFM team will give you an opportunity to review the notes of the interview to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the conversation and ask if you are willing to be identified as the source of the information. If you do not wish to be identified by name, then the FFM team will ask if you are willing to be identified in more general terms, for example as a representative of your named organisation, or as 'an official of an international humanitarian organisation'.

The FFM team would find it helpful if you could provide some background to your organisation (where appropriate) and your role in the organisation. This will help them to understand the context of the information you provide.

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# Interview notes

## UNICEF, 5 October 2022

**Date:** 5 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 3 UNICEF officials

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 representative from British Embassy

UNICEF National coordinator in Human Trafficking (HT) programme.

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### Interview

Q. With a focus on male and female victims of trafficking (VOT), do you hold any statistics for VOT, if so how many, broken down by gender, and types of trafficking?

A. There are 2 types, one shows the details from the internal programme and data is provided by the Ministry of Interior (MoI). We can share a link for the national statistics office where there is data for last 3 years [see [Ministry of Interior statistics provided by UNICEF](#)].

Qualitative and quantitative data is available: for example, see [First Wave Survey Study on Youth Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Human Trafficking, in Four Regions in Albania](#), [Survey on youth knowledge, attitudes & practices regarding human trafficking in 4 regions of Albania | UNICEF Albania](#), [Trafficked by Someone I Know | UNICEF Albania](#), and [Economic reintegration of trafficking survivors in Albania](#).

Q. What is the capacity of shelters and who can access them?

A. The programme we engage in is with 3 out of 4 shelters, providing reintegration services. There is a coalition of trafficking shelters, a state-run one and 3 NGO-run. We collaborate with the NGOs, they are a consortium of programmes, we have supported and provided services for VOT for the past 3 years. We provide a range of services including wellbeing, housing, health care and education. We have quite a few people who require assistance from the programme and 40% reach a level of reintegration as a result of our assistance. One of the shelters is in Tirana, and provides services for children, adolescents, men and women. One is in Elbasan providing for under-18s, and one is in Vlore for women, and women with children. The state-run shelter provides for all cohorts.

Q: You mentioned support and vocational services, please expand.

A. Once a person has left the shelter, support is still available.

They have a cycle of support for 3 years, though this can be extended beyond 3 years, with professional support as well. This can continue with payments provided for accommodation, basic living needs, food and clothes. This is especially available to single mothers and for those in rural areas, as well as support beyond those leaving shelters.

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Social care support for VOT includes cash benefits. Legislation exists, but there are resource and capacity constraints and for people on the ground the support is not happening. This is one of the gaps we are trying to fill.

So VOT can access state benefits but system issues mean that the implementation is not working in all places. This requires continued investment and strength.

Q. Are there specific areas where this doesn't work?

A: The government has provided support, but they also report that 10 municipalities are not providing services to vulnerable groups, even though legislation applies. The UNDP's mapping of services is helpful to identify the gaps:

<https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/infographics-mapping-social-care-services-albania>

Q. For those who can access state benefits, are they at a sufficient level to cover accommodation and basic living costs?

A. There is an example of economic aid in the report 'Economic reintegration of trafficking survivors in Albania'<sup>1</sup>, which comments on the benefits that VOT are entitled to in legislation. VOT need a certificate (to prove their status), which they can easily access with help from shelters. However, this is only \$90 USD a month and does not even cover basic living costs.

Q. Is this the only support they are entitled to?

A. There is housing support in some municipalities, but it has stagnated and in some cases support is not being implemented. It is a great law on paper, but it is not being implemented at all levels.

Q. Are ethnic Roma and Egyptian able to access services?

A. Roma/Egyptian have difficulty accessing services due to difficulties in civil registration. There are a good number of Roma/Egyptian being assisted by NGOs, providing emergency services and 72-hour shelter, health care if needed. We encounter Roma quite a lot and they are supported by shelters. They do work with Roma but the shelters have limited accommodation.

Q. Can they (Roma/Egyptian) access state benefits?

A. It is very difficult to access state benefits and other social services, including education and healthcare, unless there are targeted interventions based on individual assessments. They are the most vulnerable and less targeted.

For a general reference there is a 2018 survey by the EU with figures on the status of Roma compared to the general population. Special needs were identified for this group and their situation has not changed in 20 years.

We asked the general population their perception of Roma being at risk of trafficking and this risk was recognised. In the Roma survey they self-identified themselves at risk of trafficking. Next week we will share the report [see [Survey on youth knowledge, attitudes & practices regarding human trafficking in 4 regions of Albania | UNICEF Albania](#)].

Q. Are single women living in Albania able to live independently?

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<sup>1</sup> Davy D, UNICEF, '[Economic reintegration of trafficking survivors in Albania](#)' (page 11), July 2022

A. This is not a particular area we at UNICEF know.

We completed an extended desk review looking at human trafficking (HT) that can be shared with you. The researcher looked at vulnerability factors and one of the risks of a child falling into human trafficking was divorce of parents. A child of a lone parent falls into the vulnerable category and can be at risk of HT. Children of single women are at risk as they have lost the protective factor of families.

With underage girls aged 15 to 17 years, the response is difficult, knowing the fragile child protection system and lack of robust support that should be provided to this group that need reintegration services.

Q. Are women with children more vulnerable?

A. The report (on economic reintegration<sup>2</sup>) found that weak child care systems hinders reintegration. In the absence of family support, childcare is a critical concern as women cannot go to work and this impacts on economic integration.

Q. What are societal attitudes towards VOT?

A. We can share the survey and surprisingly 90% said survivors should receive services, although the response by men was slightly different [see [Survey on youth knowledge, attitudes & practices regarding human trafficking in 4 regions of Albania | UNICEF Albania](#)]. Serious research into social norms is lacking. Stigma is there but there is no qualitative data available. There is nothing to conclude what are considered social norms or information on family attitudes.

Q. What are societal attitudes towards single women either with or without children?

A. Our report confirms that stigma exists at all levels. Even service providers expressed stigma when providing services to victims. This was confirmed by both survivors and the service providers.

Q. Is there evidence of re-trafficking?

A. We have been asking the government for data on this but the answer is, we don't know, no data is available. But all programmes work towards the prevention of re-trafficking. It happens and it is perceived that potential victims of trafficking (PVOT) can easily fall back into trafficking. We have a small percentage of people known to have been re-trafficked. We don't have data on this, apart from what the shelters have confirmed from the other interviews.

Q. What is the typical profile of a trafficker?

A. Many times female VOT go on to be the trafficker themselves.

Q. In terms of people being vulnerable to being re-trafficked, is there any kind of information about women or men who may have been returned to Albania and then been located by their trafficker, because they owe money?

A. Maybe that information is reported or the shelters will be able to provide. Most traffickers have close link to their victims. Sometimes they are very close, maybe even family members.

Q. Do you know if police are trained to identify male VOT?

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<sup>2</sup> Davy D, UNICEF, '[Economic reintegration of trafficking survivors in Albania](#)', July 2022

A. We are not aware of specific training. Maybe one of the other implementing partners complete specific training. Not a lot of cases are identified or referred by the police. They are mostly identified by other means.

Q. Are both women and male VOT protected in law and policy?

A. Yes regardless of gender, it extends to all.

Q. You said that referrals are not made by the police, so how are VOT identified?

A. There are 8 mobile units, 4 are run by the HT programme. Having mobile units is in the National Action Plan (NAP) for HT, but they have no financial means to roll out across Albania. The initiative is highly regarded by shelters that assist PVOT. People are recruited at the community level and are properly trained. The initiative is led by a national coordinator. Support is provided in terms of prevention, which includes prevention-related activities in schools and community centres, highlighting the risks, how to refer a case and so on.

People are not aware of mobile units. The mobile units work with shelters and give us an indication of bottlenecks in the system.

You are interviewing the government, so you will hear about building blocks and the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which is high on the government's priority list. Mobile units are part of that continuum of care such as identification, referral and reintegration.

Q. Is there any other information on support when returning to Albania?

A. The official from UNICEF referred to the report [Survey on youth knowledge, attitudes & practices regarding human trafficking in 4 regions of Albania](#), which aimed to understand and explore the level of youth knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding human trafficking in the regions of Dibër, Kukës, Shkodër and Tirana, as well as among Roma. In regard to areas of concern, 34% of survey participants stated there was insufficient support for VOT and 72% said there was a lack of law enforcement.

Q. Are services in cities?

A. Yes, they are concentrated in big cities. Almost nothing in rural areas, including for child care. See <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/infographics-mapping-social-care-services-albania>

Q. Could a person returning to Albania internally relocate?

A. Is there safety? I don't know. Cyber-attacks released everyone's personal data.

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Ministry of Interior statistics provided by UNICEF

Number of victims of human trafficking, by gender, age and form of exploitation

**Victims of trafficking and potential victims of trafficking**

	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Victims of trafficking</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
Albanian	1	7	4	3
Females	1	7	4	1
Males				2

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Foreign	1		1	2
Females	1		1	2
Males				
<b>Potential victims of trafficking</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>154</b>
Albanian	93	90	81	
Females	58	69	55	95
Male	35	21	24	58
Foreign		6	2	
Females		4	2	1
Male		2		
<b>Total victims of trafficking and potential victims of trafficking</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>159</b>
Reason				
Sexual exploitation	36	65	48	59
Forced labour and begging	27	26	27	66
Street situation	22	7	2	7
Forced marriage	3	1	2	1
Illegal border crossing	1		1 promise for school	
Low criminal acts		4	6	15
Other	6			11

### Child - victims of trafficking and potential victims of trafficking

	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Child victims of trafficking</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Albanian	1	1	1	2
Females	1	1	1	
Males				2
Age group:				
0-6 years				
6 - 18 years	1	1	1	2
Foreign				
Female				
Males				
Age group:				
0-6 years				
6 - 18 years				
<b>Child potential victims of trafficking</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>110</b>
Albanian	67			
Female	35	44	34	52
Males	31	21	23	58
Age group:				
0-6 years	4	2	5	3

	2018	2019	2020	2021
6 - 18 years	63	64	52	108
Foreign		1		
Female		1		
Males				
Age group:				
0-6 years				
6 - 18 years		1		
<b>Total child victims of trafficking and potential victims of trafficking</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>112</b>
Reason				
Sexual exploitation	17	32	24	23
Forced labour and begging	24	23	25	61
Street situation	20	4	1	7
Forced marriage	1		1 promise for school	
Illegal border crossing	1			
Low criminal acts	1	3	6	14
Other	3	5	1	7

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## Different and Equal, 5 October 2022

**Date:** 5 October 2022

**Meeting with: Different and Equal shelters (D&E):** a non-profit organization dedicated to providing high quality reintegration services for victims of trafficking, exploitation and abuse, and to improving the legal, institutional and social context to prevent and counter these violations of human rights.<sup>3</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 4 officials from D&E, 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 representative from the British Embassy

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### Interview

Q. Do you know if official data on victims of trafficking (VOT) is broken down by gender, age, nature of trafficking?

A. The National Coordinators Office (NCO) for VOT has a database for all cases of trafficking. We have a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and the agreement for the establishment of the NRM stipulates coordination of governmental and non-governmental actors for identification, referral and protection of victims of trafficking

The agreement shows how to regulate the database and how to share statistics with the NRM. Information is submitted to the Ministry of Interior (Moi) and they generate statistics, but they are not so detailed. There are some details to be found in national

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<sup>3</sup> Different and Equal Shelter, [Projects 2022 – Different and Equal](#), no date

reports, with the number of cases identified and those assisted, by gender, age and type of exploitation. Every 6 months, Different and Equal provide a report on information on the cases identified. Usually the NCO produce 6 monthly or annual reports. All reports are online, though not sure of the situation now following cyber-attacks.

Q. Does the government collate data on convictions and prosecutions of traffickers?

A. Yes, information is collated from the police, Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and court decisions. The report by General Prosecutor's Office has a section on trafficking and the MoJ also produce statistics in a statistical book for every criminal offence.

Q. What is the capacity of the shelters in Albania and how many are there?

A. There is one government-run shelter, a national reception centre with up to 100 beds, which is never full. There are 3 NGO-run shelters, in Tirana, Elbasan and Vlorë – with 15 to 25 beds each. We cooperate with each other when receiving referrals and see what the best options for cases are, or if a shelter is over-capacity. The capacity for shelters is good up to now.

Q. What support is provided to VOT?

A. Shelters are only one part of the support. It is a 3-phase programme, the VOT are in the programme from 2 years up to 5 years. They are first accommodated, provided with a full package of service depending on needs and if there are children. Some are pregnant, or have children with them.

We have a multi-disciplinary team consisting of a case manager, psychologist, doctor, teacher, lawyer, who all assess the case, make comprehensive needs assessments. Each VOT is assigned a case manager and they attend to the case from start to end until the VOT is reintegrated. After the needs assessment, the beneficiary, together with their case managers, design and follow their individual reintegration plan and the services provided are: medical assistance and psychological support to assess and reduce trauma. We provide education, vocational training and professional courses. There have also been cases where minors are placed in school following exploitation and trafficking. After the person has left the shelter we provide support for employment, counselling, opportunities in the labour market and we liaise with different businesses and different companies.

The first stage starts with 3 to 6 months in the shelter, sometimes longer depending on security issues, or where minors cannot return home as their parents are involved in the exploitation, or they can't return to their home cities/towns due to stigma and discrimination. Even when the VOT improve their relations with parents, and they are supportive, we still provide services, for example, supporting parents if they need to find a job or assist siblings. Or support them to open a small business.

Some women are pregnant or with children and we provide the same services. In later stages, when they are employed and do not have family support, we provide after school care for the children of VOT.

Q. You say a VOT will stay for 3 to 6 months, depending on their situation. How long on average would you provide support?

A. Those with mental health (MH) issues can be different. For example, in 2 cases when the VOT had MH problems, we tried to collaborate with social services and



provide appropriate accommodation, but this was hard so they stayed with us for between 3 and 5 years. Long term solutions for VOT with MH problems is hard.

Q. If difficult cases are in the shelter for a long time, do you still provide support and can they rely on you?

A. Yes, we then pass the cases onto the second phase, or transition. This is semi-independent living, where they go from shelter to a rented apartment, and we help pay rent on the apartment for one year (the cases are from all over Albania not only in Tirana). In this period D&E try to collaborate with municipalities to include the beneficiaries in the social housing programmes that they have. We help and support the VOT with the preparation of all the documents needed to profit from this programme. It can be difficult as different municipalities have different programmes and the cases are from all over Albania. We support them wherever they choose to live and to be reintegrated.

Not all VOT need shelter or agree to be supported in the shelter, some are supported by their families directly. We support directly with psychological, educational and legal help, we support the whole family for a safe and healthy environment for the child. In some cases, adults might be supported in a rented apartment directly when they enter the programme, or at home with their family. An important issue in regard to security is stigma faced by VOT. Post shelter support is one of the most important issues with regard to transitioning to independent life, and providing professional support, mentoring and peer mentoring support (survivors of trafficking mentoring new cases). This has been very important for both the mentor and the mentee VOT, as this is empowering and creates a safety net when establishing a new life in a new area and this guides their life after the shelter. We have a programme for survivors for their participation on awareness raising and we cooperated with the University of Bedfordshire for research. These are empowering projects.

There are no specific shelters for males. They are supported mostly outside the shelters, with housing and reintegration.

Q. Can VOT re-access services if they leave the programme?

A. Yes, we have seen that reintegration is not linear and we understand the ability factor and the need for asking for support again. We keep in touch for up to at least 5 years to see how they are doing and if they need more support. We see sometimes that if a trafficker is released from prison, for security reasons we need to support the VOT again. Or we have cases that are for one year supported in the programme and after one year they decide to denounce their trafficker, so we reevaluate the situation.

So in some cases we are open to accept them back.

Q. Services such as employment, housing and benefits, are VOT able to access these after leaving the shelter?

A. It is not easy to access directly. This is why we continue to help as we see that they have to fill in many forms or provide many documents for the service they want. They struggle to get economic aid, to profit from the housing programme, or rent leases, and we support them to provide these documents, this can be expensive, and sometimes support is needed from our lawyers. For accessing vocational training or employment, this is not easy in some areas of Albania, even Tirana. If a

person is displaced to Tirana they will need support to officially register in the civil state and to profit from the municipality programmes and other services at a local level.

Another issue is stigma, not everyone knows they are a VOT or are reluctant to declare that they are. We believe they need someone to help. Even to apply for a simple service. We have helped VOT to apply for economic support from the municipality. The economic help is small in value and sometimes a VOT is reluctant to apply for that service as there is stigma and discrimination. The main institutions are part of the referral mechanism, and they are aware that VOT must be treated in a way so as not to discriminate. The lack of knowledge of employers means VOT encounter stigma and discrimination. They don't always have the knowledge to protect them. VOT need someone to help or facilitate applications for different services at the local level, but they are reluctant to declare themselves as VOT.

Q. Are you saying that VOT can access support at the local level, but often don't as they may encounter discrimination?

A. Yes, mostly for the cases who are living outside of Tirana. To profit from the economic aid, VOT need a document from us declaring their status as VOT. In most of the cases they do not want to expose this status as they live in small cities and the people know each other very well. They say they don't want to go back to their municipality as they and their family are known, and they don't want to expose themselves with the status of VOT.

Q. Do they have to identify as VOT to get financial support?

A. Yes, they must identify as VOT to access financial support as well as to obtain a health card. In this regard, we agreed to cooperate with one health clinic where all health cards can be taken just by one doctor, so we try to limit the spread of information.

Q. With regard the level of financial support, is it sufficient to meet basic needs?

A. No, until this year 25 euro or 3,000 lek (ALL) per month. It has now changed this summer and is now around 80 euro or 9,000 lek (ALL) per month. Our programme assists cases to help VOT live independently, we support with housing and help them to have a stable job. But the benefits are not paid if the person is employed.

In fact, when VOT who are in our programme leave the shelter they are employed unless they choose not to be. We make sure they are employed so they have some income. So we can offer support for daily expenses during the first month, but later this support will be covered by the VOT themselves. We don't have a minimum cost of living standard, although we have a minimum wage. The problem is that the state doesn't have the capacity. It is difficult to calculate the value of what a VOT needs to be supported by the state.

Q. The Roma and Egyptian community, can they access shelters and the same support services?

A. Yes, both. They are equally provided with services.

Q. NGO or government services?

A. Both. They can access shelter services regardless of status – Roma, Egyptian, foreigner, domestic.

Q. With regard family and societal attitudes, can you advise whether single female VOT can live independently in Albania, once they have had the relevant level of support?

A. It is more difficult, we try to support them, and some cases finally live independently but it is a long process. There are financial difficulties, especially for those with children. And they have stigma and discrimination towards them and the child. VOT children are not considered in their own right. In collaboration with municipalities, we have established after school care alternatives but this programme is only available in 4 municipalities, others have to struggle, even with keeping their job.

Sometimes, even when the family is supportive, neighbours behave towards VOT with stigma and discrimination.

Q. What is at the root of this stigma? Why are there different attitudes?

A. Generally it is gender discrimination. Females experience gender imbalance in the family, with cases where they have been victims of violence prior to trafficking. People do not have the right information about human rights and victims and they blame victims. Families face shame as they do not see the woman as being exploited, they see her as exercising prostitution and putting shame on the family. In families where the daughter went abroad or to Tirana, or victims of sexual violence in general, they experience discrimination.

We had a case of a girl who was trafficked abroad as a minor. She came back to Albania and the family, who was very supportive, accepted her. We supported her with all the services they needed and she also wanted to open a small business, a hairdressers shop. But when she opened her salon no one came. She was depressed and the father proposed they sell cosmetic products, but the residents still didn't come, so the family moved.

Even where families are supportive they are afraid of societal opinion. I have an example of one woman who was pregnant and who wanted to visit her family. She was told to come late at night and leave in the early morning to avoid being seen by neighbours.

Q. If families regard the VOT as having been exploited, are they more likely to be accepted?

A. Yes. We do a lot of mediation with families. The parents want to come to Tirana and meet their daughter, but not at their own place. So it happens, but it is difficult to accept due to victim blaming. The family think she should be strong and not do things like this. Some are more open to understand the situation. So we do see cooperation with some families.

Q. What about male victims, are police trained to identify male VOT?

A. Yes, although there are less cases identified by the police. Most are identified and referred by child protection workers and our mobile units. We have one established Mobile Unit in Tirana and one in Shkodra and a considerable number of males were identified by these mobile units.

Q. Do men experience the same levels of stigma?

A. If they are adults they face some stigma, less so with minors. Few men ask for help on their own. Only a few go to ask the police for help. Of all the cases of men, only 2 have asked for help. Others were asking for help on something else and by giving help we recognised that this was actually a situation of trafficking. So men feel they have to be strong and not ask for support and we see they are more resistant to receive counselling. We support the employment of males by collaborating with the Regional Employment Office and different business companies.

Q. Is there any evidence of re-trafficking?

A. Yes, we have sometimes seen cases. Especially when minors are more at high risk, especially when they leave the programme after a short time, or those that don't continue with the programme. Some interrupt the programme and still they come later and try and re-enter the programme. There are some cases of 'false' romantic relationships formed and women are trafficked through these 'false' relationships. Even when they enter into the programme, they still have ambivalent feelings – love and hate – so they feel like they want to go back to that relationship, but we see in the long term that, in some cases, they decide to denounce their traffickers.

Q. Are these cases where a VOT is trafficked by their original trafficker or a new situation of exploitation?

A. There was a case in 2021 where the woman denounced the traffickers. She was trafficked both inside and out of Albania by both her original trafficker and a different one.

I would like to say that if justice does not work properly, even protection is at risk. Especially for children at risk of committing petty crimes, we work a lot with them. They are young children so they can be manipulated easily, so if the trafficker is not arrested then re-trafficking is a risk.

Q. Those who have left the service, what might increase their risk of being re-trafficked?

A. If their stay in the shelter was short, the risk is higher. To recover from trauma needs a long time. The risk is very high. And cases with mental health issues, they are at high risk. Sometimes we have cases where we could not find a solution in the system so we supported them for a long time, so it's not easy.

Q. Are most trafficked within Albania?

A. Most are exploited in Albania, but some in Kosovo and Germany. They are not returning. And some to the UK. It is a risk factor for all due to lack of funding to keep programmes running. Since 2016 the government started supporting some salaries for staff and food for beneficiaries. But most of programme expenses are through other funding, donors and businesses, so the risk is high to have continuation especially for long term support.

Q. What mental health (MH) support is available?

A. Every shelter has psychological counselling based on needs and for serious MH problems we cooperate with psychiatric hospitals and they have qualitative programmes. Psychological support continues in each phase of the reintegration programme, from shelter into reintegration until they leave the programme. We provide art therapy and occupational therapy, which affect positively VOT by being a

stress relief activity, relaxation, building creativity, self-worth and self-esteem, and continue to be an important activity for the psychological support. There are some cases with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a few cases with personality disorder who need to go further with psychological doctor.

Q. Do most access the MH support?

A. For our psychological support we mediate with the hospital.

The problem is the lack of specialised centres. For victims of crime and also prisoners, we have a lack of support and capacity.

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## OSCE, 5 October 2022

**Date:** 5 October 2022

**Meeting with:** An official from the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives UK Home Office, 1 representative from British Embassy

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The OSCE is the largest regional security organisation in Europe, working for stability, peace and security through political dialogue.

The OSCE Presence in Albania supports the country's institutions and civil society by promoting a comprehensive, human rights based approach to combating trafficking in human beings<sup>4</sup>.

### Interview

The official from the OSCE provided an overview of the organisations role in Albania:

We have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Albania, which includes the issue of human trafficking. The MOU with the Albanian government covers several areas including election monitoring, the rule of law and human rights issues. OSCE has a broad mandate in Albania. They support organisations in areas covered by the mandate. OSCE's role is not project-based but provides technical assistance to the Albanian government and civil society.

The OSCE does not work directly with victims of trafficking (VOT) or shelters but has a role in supporting the government. OSCE is less active in prevention / protection. Their role is more policy related, including capacity building and improving the protection framework. The current focus is on child trafficking, including the legal framework and training various stakeholders. In 2015, the government acknowledged the problem of street children. OSCE support the government to understand child VOT and to create a legal basis to address child trafficking. In line with the legal framework, the State Agency for Child Protection has an action plan on child VOT and forced labour.

The OSCE has supported the Ministry of Interior (Mol) to draft a new National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which aims to address some aspects of reintegration

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<sup>4</sup> OSCE, [Presence in Albania | Combating human trafficking | OSCE](#)

when it comes to the shelters' roles. We have also worked with the police, prosecutors' office and the courts.

Q. Does the Albanian Government record statistics on the number of identified VOT, broken down by gender, age and nature of trafficking?

A. The OSCE relies on the Mol's statistics that are collected from the NRM and Ministry of Justice (MoJ). They are not easy to analyse. The OSCE provided the Mol with a database but it is not used and unlikely to be, following the recent cyber-attacks.

The OSCE collects data on child VOT with the State Protection Authority for Children and the MoJ, but I cannot provide exact statistics.

Our goal is to help the municipalities' child protection workers to identify cases of child VOT.

Q. Is there any data on the number of prosecutions and convictions?

A. Data on prosecutions is available from the General Prosecution Office (GPO). The MoJ has information on cases sent to trial, but this is not segregated by gender or age, only defined as adults or children.

Q. Is there any data on Roma and Egyptian minorities?

A. There is data on minority children, including those returned from the EU following irregular migration. The OSCE have recently observed a different trend – forced begging no longer just affects children from minority groups, but all Albanian children.

Q. How many VOT are supported in the shelters?

A. We rely on the government data provided to them by the shelters.

Q. What support do the shelters provide to VOT?

A. Shelters provide long-term support and specialised work. We have witnessed how they provide anti-trafficking orientated support. However, government support is very low. The government has policies in place but they are not always implemented. There is a burden on VOT to fill out the necessary paperwork to obtain support, however it is not worth it for the assistance they receive. Shelters fill this gap.

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection are involved in the NRM. They need specialised support, for example for drug abuse. Members of the NRM have been asking for dedicated mental health support, however there are no dedicated services, not even in the shelters. The NRM refers cases to state providers of mental health services however I doubt it is sufficient or is tailored to VOT. There are no standard operating procedures (SOPs) around the provision of mental health support.

Q. Is there any evidence of re-trafficking?

A. The purpose of the OSCE database [designed for government use] was to provide such statistics [the database is not used]. The low rates of prosecution of traffickers leads to persistent exploitation. There is clearly not a trauma focused approach to the protection of victims of trafficking and prosecution of traffickers.

There is no practical implementation of such an approach. The police are not able to do gender sensitive interviews or child focused interviews.

Q. So is there an increased risk of re-trafficking?

A. I prefer to rely on reports than assumption. This is one of the issues highlighted in our report. Suspected cases of re-trafficking have been referred and not followed up.

Q. How are VOT identified?

A. There is no practical implementation in identifying women VOT and a lack of interest in child or gender sensitivity. A female officer may be assigned to the case but not always.

Q. Are the police trained to identify VOT?

A. There is a lot of training for the police to identify VOT, but the quality of the training is an issue. We are working with police to institutionalise the training and conduct early, needs-based training planning. There are no longer dedicated officers for VOT.

There is no proper calendar of training. The police have received training but there is a lack of awareness of the NRM.

Q. How are VOT protected in law?

A. There is a gap in legislation as internal trafficking of children is not addressed. In the School of Magistrates manual child trafficking is addressed under other family-based offences, for example, abuse and so forth.

Disabled adults, children and women can access the legal protection framework. There are provisions for VOT in law.

Q. If a VOT went to the police would they receive protection?

A. There is a big gap. For example, recently 7 non-Albanian sex workers were arrested in Albania. Full information on the girls were reported in the media, including their identities. The media identified them as prostitutes.

Q. Are police trained to identify male VOT?

A. Despite any training the police receive referrals to the NRM must be improved, so effectiveness of their training is a big issue. Women are only proactively identified by the police after they been arrested for prostitution. Most cases that the police have were referred by mobile units.

Q. What reintegration support do male VOT receive?

A. Men are able to access the same levels of service and can receive education and vocational training – the issue is about the quality of this in general. However, few adult males seek protection from the police. Most men are trafficked for labour exploitation. OSCE is working with the state labour department around the identification of victims.

There are a handful of cases of men exploited in labour being referred to the police by shelters, rather than self-referring.

Q. What are societal attitudes towards VOT?

A. Speaking as a citizen of Albania – there is confusion amongst society about what amounts to trafficking. In low income households, the stigma around sex work that used to be there is less of an issue now due to other problems, such as extreme poverty. People see victims as people with a low income, who migrate to Spain or Germany. There are examples of girls from mining towns being taken to Tirana for sex work and then returned back home. In general, Albania is a conservative, moral society. There was clear stigma of VOT in the 1990's and 2000's, but less so now. There is family complicity due to neglect, which leads to less stigma.

The range of trafficking has expanded. It is not just sex trafficking now, but also labour. Albania is now also a destination and transit country.

Q: Do the Albania government receive referrals for suspected VOTs from the UK?

UK referrals – they are followed up through community policing. For example, the UK police will ask the local Albanian police to check if a person they have arrested in the UK has been trafficked. However, the follow up is not thorough. They only rely on police reports that might not indicate the person has been trafficked, rather than looking at the bigger picture, such as the economic situation, family and social structures.

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## Tjeter Vizion, 5 October 2022

**Date:** 5 October 2022

**Meeting with:** An official from Tjeter Vizion

**Tjeter Vizion:** 'Since May 2002, "Tjeter Vizion" offers social services for vulnerable children, youth and women in the city of Elbasan. It has a close collaboration with the Local Government, institutions and other national and international NGO.'<sup>5</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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## Interview

Q. What is the capacity of support shelters for victims of trafficking (VOT)?

A. There are 4 shelters in Albania, we have self-organised and we have established the national coalition for human trafficking (HT) victims. The idea of the national coalition is to provide coordinated services and support for VOT in Albania. Thus far, in regards to identified potential victims of trafficking (PVOT) or VOT cases, the coalition have managed to respond to 100% of all cases, either identified or referred to us.

In the framework of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for VOT are the 4 shelters. As soon as a VOT or PVOT is identified we sit and discuss the case and determine where the individual will be taken. The coalition is a role model and the best example of coordinated support in Albania. Tjeter Vizion (TV) manages a shelter that provides support and services to children VOT, who are aged between 6 and 18 years old. It is the only shelter that provides such support to minors. This means any minor children identified as VOT are immediately referred to TV. Our

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<sup>5</sup> Tjeter Vizion, [OTHER VISION Association \(tjetervizion.org\)](https://www.tjetervizion.org), no date



shelter has capacity of 18 beds and 2 for emergencies, so 20 in total. Even though TV focuses on children, the anti-trafficking support is not delivered to only children, but to adults as well. So the 2 emergency beds are provided to adults until they are accommodated in a long-term shelter.

This is in regard to residential shelters, but when it comes to integration and reintegration our organisation provides to children (girls and boys) and women. Our reintegration services are provided in that individuals get a flat or apartment, are placed into families or supported to live independently.

Q The reintegration support provided to women and children, would they all get help to get accommodation or placed into families?

A. Yes, our services are not short-term but are long-term and robust. As regard children, our services are provided until they leave the shelter and they are placed in a foster family, who are often extended family members, such as grandparents, uncles and so on.

This applies to those children who don't have close family. Those that do have siblings and or parents, they are placed with them.

What we do when we place children with foster families is support the family, and help them out with what they need, either jobs, or to be empowered or strengthened to help the child reintegrate much better.

In our experience reintegration is a long and tedious process which means we support them even after they are well into adulthood. Especially when these children are girls. So reintegration doesn't end with placement into a family, it is an ongoing process until we know that they are no longer at risk of trafficking and can make it on their own.

Regards women and girls, after they are over 18 and cannot be placed with families or foster families, we help them to find protective homes.

Until a while ago we provided apartments to girls aged 18 to 22 years. They were considered protected, by which we mean surveyed by our workers. These protected flats proved to be an excellent tool to integrate women and girls into society. Unfortunately we no longer have funds to run them. This leads us to the high autonomy flats provided to women aged over 22 years of age, high autonomy is accommodation with no surveillance, but we help to provide reintegration support, including help finding jobs, access to vocational training and career guidance.

Reintegration is a very long process in cooperation with VOT or PVOT and contains a whole range of services and support. If you need I can list the services but please bear in mind they are personalised to the individual.

Q. Do you have services in mental health (MH)?

A. One is MH services and we have observed that victims suffer with MH issues due to their experiences and their reintegration process lasts much longer. VOT or PVOT who need support are provided with psychologists, social workers and doctors during their stay with us. As regards education, boys and girls who leave after they are 18, one choice is to move onto university or they can have vocational training.

Fortunately some of the VOT and PVOT supported over time have overcome their issues and gone onto university.

So education is key to us because one of the largest target groups for trafficking are individuals who lack education or training, for this reason we turn this weakness into a strength by improving education capacities.

A success story, back when we didn't have a mobile unit, me and a colleague were driving and noticed a young girl being harassed by young boys and we took her in and found out she was 13. She was supposed to be in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we took her into the shelter and enrolled her in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to cover what she had missed. She graduated from high school as an excellent student, studied nursing and is now a chief nurse in Florence, Italy. A wonderful mother and young lady and we keep in touch. She is one of our top success stories and we are very proud. There are many other success stories. We think education is the key to success, so help them gain necessary skills and knowledge. However not everyone has the right skills to go to university or formal education and so we have vocational training, and once they have learnt how to carry out an occupation we help them find a job or start a small business.

Statistically girls tend to go to university where boys are inclined to go to vocational training.

Q. Is the support you give mostly given to those trafficked within Albania, and does this include ethnic Roma and Egyptians?

A. To us a VOT is a VOT regardless of where they are from or their ethnicity. We support anyone who needs us. Lately we have had incidents of Syrian and Afghan child VOT. According to the NRM, as well as our standard operating procedures (SOPs), we are responsible for supporting any child that is identified as a VOT or PVOT in Albania. Statistically, the number of Roma and Egyptian PVOT or VOT is lower than other children from other ethnicities or minorities. Trafficking is mostly in rural areas. 60% of beneficiaries are men and boys and 40% are women and girls.

The reason why the rate of trafficked men and boys is higher than girls is the former can be exploited for forced labour, begging, criminal drug dealing and theft. Women and girls are mostly sexually exploited.

Q. So with women, could you tell us about societal attitudes and if single women can live independently in Albania?

A. This is actually a sensitive topic, very few families support VOT. Most families, and even Albanian society in general, tend to think a VOT is equal to a prostitute and they can't accept them as victims or accept that they didn't choose to be victims. The situation is aggravated for mothers with children. It is much more difficult to reintegrate these mothers and their children because they are faced with family abandonment as well as societal rejection.

Q. So how are they supported?

A. This is exactly where shelters come into play. We provide housing and help with flats that I mentioned and if needed, we find them jobs, help children enrol in nursery and kindergarten. We liaise with municipalities to provide housing bonuses, stipulated in law. We tackle public institutions and get them to provide all support services in accordance with the law.

By law, VOT are entitled to receive an economic allowance of ALL 9,000 (Albanian lek), €80 (euro) more or less. Unfortunately very few receive this as they need to

prove they are a VOT, so they need paperwork and documents to prove this, which is quite discriminating and stigmatising.

The number of VOT who are employed in public institutions is very low, basically zero. They are mostly hired in businesses or by employers known within the network of shelters. Several organisations help VOT to be employed in the private sector. Business owners no longer see VOT as criminals or prostitutes, that is people you cannot work with, they now see them as victims that need support.

Q. In your opinion, could a VOT with children successfully re-integrate?

A. There are several factors to take into account. I would say in my 20 years' experience, where there is coordination and cooperation between all parties, there is success. I don't mean just inter-institutional cooperation, but also having the mother or VOT on board as well. Reintegration is relative, it is not absolute. If a mother has no education and experience we can never help her become a bank clerk in a short period of time, but we can help her with accommodation and economic benefits or enrol children at school. This is guaranteed. Then we can help her become, for example, a seamstress. The more needs the person has, the greater the need for more cooperation and coordination.

My biggest concern is what happens when we are no longer operational [due to funding constraints]. PVOT are now safe as we are there to help, but what happens in couple of years when we can no longer support them, who will do that?

That is the reason I think that the government should put a system in place to provide long term institutionalised support for PVOT or VOT. The advantage is that the government has started making investments by providing some financing to the shelters.

However that financing is not enough for the shelters and organisations and that is why we depend on support from donors or international organisations. The mobile units that are supported by the British Embassy in Tirana are an excellent example of how much support is needed for VOT and they were the only ones who provide this and they are very effective.

Q. Could you provide information on re-trafficking and people being located by traffickers if they return to Albania?

A. There have been incidents of re-trafficking and reidentification. Why? If the services are inadequate or support from the government is inappropriate, or expectation of support by the VOT is too high or unrealistic. Then the victim leaves the train of support and there have been incidents when we have identified VOT once again as being trafficked. There are instances when the traffickers are stronger than institutions. In Tjeter Vizion in the last 2 years we have had 6 cases of re-trafficking, 4 men and 2 women. This is out of 117 cases we assisted in the last 2 years. To me even one re-trafficked case is a lot, and 6 a whole lot. However this is reality.

Q. Do the authorities intervene when re-trafficking cases arise?

A. Services are provided by shelters only, the government develops policies that is it, they have the words and we have the actions. We do cooperate with government institutions and cooperation, qualification and capacity of government staff is much better than 10 years ago, but in terms of services it is us that provide them.

I talked about the mobile units that do an excellent job in identifying VOT and PVOT. They are the only ones, and whenever the coordinator meets with the government we have arguments about having a robust identification system. It is our staff that identify PVOT and VOT, but it should also be the government, police, schools, labour offices, healthcare staff – they should all be identifying PVOT.

Q. Is it easy to locate a person that has been trafficked within the country?

A. It is not so easy for the victims to be located by traffickers, however it is not always the same trafficker so some VOT are re-trafficked, but not always by the same person.

However, I must emphasise that our shelters have enough capacity to cover all cases. None are left behind, not just Albanians either. I understand that Albania is also now a destination country.

Q. Are men willing to access support services?

A. If we are referring to boys up to age 18 we do support them and they are willing to ask for help and access services. They are used to receiving assistance, even up to age 22 or 23. The biggest problem is men, adult men. They tend to be unwilling or reluctant to ask for help. Nonetheless it is easier for men and boys to reintegrate into society than woman and girls. The LGBTI community finds it extra difficult to be reintegrated into society due to other types of discrimination.

Q. If a male PVOT or VOT identified himself or was identified, aside from shelters they would be able to access same type of support a woman could?

A. In law VOT are equal and there should be no discrimination on ethnicity or gender, so men have the same access as women and girls.

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## NISMA ARSIS, 5 October 2022

**Date:** 5 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 2 officials from NISMA ARSIS, House of Colors Multidisciplinary Center

**NISMA ARSIS:** ‘Mission is to promote the rights, to provide services and sustainable solutions for children, youth and families in vulnerable situations as well as for the marginalized Roma/Egyptian communities and other social groups in Albania.’<sup>6</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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Tour of centre. Facilities for Albanian children at high risk or victims of abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, trafficking, and unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), emergency accommodation (shelter).

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## Overview

As noted on its website:

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<sup>6</sup> Nisma Arsis, [About us - ARSIS \(nisma-arsis.org\)](https://nisma-arsis.org), no date

'NISMA offers its services to children and young individuals who live under conditions of poverty, neglect, victimization, conflict, disapproval, exploitation, isolation, racism, in contact with the law, without parental care, don't have a family or a place to live. Generally, Nisma offers help to those living under difficult situations...

'NISMA ARSIS has established the first model of providing Multidisciplinary [National Emergency] Services to protect children from abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation in the Municipality of Tirana in the center "House of Colors" in the Administrative Unit no.7 in 2010 with the support of UNICEF and Municipality of Tirana. The model established as multi-functional center [including the emergency shelter] developed its services in accordance [with] the needs of children at risk covering the gaps of the system. This model and its methodology are approved by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and replicated in [the] Municipality of Tirana, Municipality of Shkodra and Municipality of Durrës. The center "House of Colors" provides support to children, youth and their families on daily bases, with a multidisciplinary team composed by social workers, psychologists, child care workers, nurse, teachers, social animators, case managers, that work closely with child protection workers providing, food, hygiene, psychological counseling, psycho-social games, non-formal education, administrative and legal support, community development, family strengthening, counselling for employment, case management.'<sup>7</sup>

## **Interview**

Q. Could you provide information regarding the support your organisation provides to victims of trafficking (VOT)?

A. We started helping VOT in 2005 during a period when there was a lot of movement from Albania to Greece and we identified a lot of VOT. Afterwards, a community centre with multi-disciplinary services was established (and in 2011 the emergency shelter was established, with 11 emergency beds). If children are on the street there is a reason. The majority of children are from Roma and Egyptian communities. A 2014 Ministry of Health and Social Protection study recorded that 80% were from Roma and Egyptian communities, with 2,400 'children in street situation' identified in one day, begging, in contact with the street. From this study the state applied findings and identified whom they belonged to and what kind of measures were needed. For the first time the National Action Plan for the Identification and Immediate Response for Children in Street Situation was approved. We were one of the first service providers to develop a referral system. Some children had no parental care, or were exploited by their families or their parents. We tried to refer them to the police. The foster care system is regulated by law in Albania but the number of families identified as potential for foster care is very limited at Municipality Level. In most cases, if a child at high risk or a victim of severe forms of abuse or without parental care is encountered they go to an emergency shelter and then to residential accommodation if the biological families cannot take care.

Today the number of children identified at high risk has increased, they are living in informal areas, selling things or are part of criminal networks, or they are from other

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<sup>7</sup> [Our actions and services - ARSIS \(nisma-arsis.org\)](http://nisma-arsis.org)

areas or cities. The majority of children are living in poverty with not much parental care.

Our team of 12 (psychologists and social workers) provide psycho-social service support in police stations during the interview of the child. Or if a child has been encountered with drugs or crime, the police contact these services for psycho-social support and to help interview the child. So the police call us and we go there. There are cases of these children being part of criminal networks. There is no criminal responsibility under the age of 14, so criminal networks are recruiting children under the age of 14 to distribute drugs and so forth. After the age of 14 children are accommodated in a centre in Kavaja, which is a decision of the court. It is a sort of prison. What is lacking is child protection, the police has limited capacities to ensure proper referral of the cases to the child protection unit, and we are mandated to provide referral after 24 hours of the identification to the child protection unit. We do the mediation and connection with the system.

VOT are girls and boys who are part of exploitation criminal networks, or have behaviours where they leave their homes, children in conflict with the law and so on.

Other cases are children who had abandoned school and left home and the family doesn't know what they are doing. They have been identified as part of trafficking networks.

Q. Do you know why the police don't see the children as VOT or potential VOT (PVOT)?

A. There is no official data publicly shared about the number of victims of trafficking or the potential of victims of trafficking in Albania. The reporting mechanism is functional for the authorities but more efforts should be considered in the feedback process about the measures taken for the cases of VOT/PVOT. Also, there is a tendency to accept the indicators of trafficking from police officers neglecting the importance of having that status (related to the services dedicated to that status).

Q . Do the police receive training to identify VOT?

A. They have been provided with lots of training. Over the past 5 years, UNICEF, OSCE and other organisations have provided a wide range, as well as in-house training. It's a matter of engagement.

Q, Does the government record the number of VOT broken down by gender?

A. There is no public data shared about VOT, not by gender also. There are reports from the US Department of State about human trafficking, from the civil society interventions like the coalition of NGOs against human trafficking, and so on. We have to call, there is no official way to get this information. It is not sufficient.

Q. Regarding adult women with children, do you know what the capacity of shelters in Albania are?

A. There is a state-run shelter (Waiting Center for Victims of Trafficking – in Liza) and 3 NGO run shelters – Different and Equal, Tjeter Vizion and Vatra. The state pays some of the shelters for provision of long term support for VOT and domestic violence (DV). We have a national emergency centre for DV but always in the process of identifying financial resources to cover the needs for services. Shelters have to have long-term programmes for this reason long-term support. We are trying

so hard to provide an immediate response, but long term support is needed. There are limited programmes to cover long term support. We cannot support for more than 11 days in the emergency shelter and more than one year with the existing financial resources, it is not enough.

Shelters provide 3 to 6 months of support, but I cannot say about quality. The economic aid for the status of being a VOT/PVOT, the fee that the state pay is 30 euro per month. After COVID-9 there was an increase of PVOT – women with children.

Q. Is there any public support that a VOT can access?

A. We have a programme with the British Embassy and UNICEF, a holistic approach, policy, reintegration, trying to cover all, but when it's finished what happens? There are not enough public financial resources to cover all the needs.

Q. You think support needs to be long-term?

A. Yes

Q. What about Roma and Egyptian communities accessing support?

A. Roma and Egyptian have more difficulties than other groups. They are roaming in the street and the services should be doubled. We have people that want to change. So we provide after school and psycho-social support, but the children are still going back to the same home, with the same attitudes and norms.

This cycle continues. Some are in the same situation as their parents were 10 years previously.

Q. Is there a reason why they have such difficulty accessing support?

A. There are a lot of programmes from civil society, but there are no services in small municipalities, or they live far from services, so it makes it difficult to access. The other thing is the mentality towards services. They think the support is not enough if they can earn \$200 per day in criminal activity. There is a disconnection.

Q. Could you tell us about societal attitudes towards VOT and PVOT?

A. In smaller communities it is a big issue, a lot of efforts are made to connect the victim with their family. It is difficult. Most cases of VOT do not return to their family or community, but go to other cities or communities. There is a lack of information – societal and cultural norms see the VOT does not have dignity or is not treated like a decent member of society.

Q. Do children from Roma and Egyptian communities face the same level of societal attitudes?

A. Yes. We see this from time to time. If we have children here that have a better economic situation than the Roma, then they don't play together. There are more efforts needed to reduce the stigma.

Q. Are there concerns around re-trafficking?

A. A lot, it's related to the level of services, it's easy to be re-trafficked. We see the same cases repeatedly. During the 2-3 year programme, if something is missing in case management, they leave the programme and turn back (to trafficking). Or when

they are easily identified as someone that could be exploited. We have had the same cases 3 or 4 times.

Q. Are they being re-trafficked by the same people?

A. I don't have that information, we understand they are the same as the VOT identify the same persons.

Q. If at risk of being re-trafficked can you get police to intervene?

A. Our mandate is to report any risk of trafficking to the police. Police are cooperative but the situation changes from one to the other. There are cases when the investigation process is not followed accordingly or when the case is referred to prosecution and takes time. There are cases when the criminal networks are powerful and put pressure on police and the investigation takes totally another direction.

Q. Can a female adult VOT live independently, after she has been identified and received support?

A. I think yes, but they need some support, especially when they have children. If no children it can be easier. On most cases they have to change location due to discrimination and stigma. If from small areas there is little opportunity to be employed. There is more support in bigger areas.

It is more difficult for men to live independently, when we try and integrate men, a social worker or mentor takes care of him for long time, but they still have a lot of difficulties. They are provided with coaching, training and employment support. But they don't want to change, the support is not enough.

Q. Do men access support services the same as women?

A. I think yes, but I think it is more difficult to identify male VOT. Women report more, true, but the level of intervention is the same.

Q. Do men face the same levels of stigma?

A. I have not identified a big difference. For the past 10 years there has been more support services, including from the state. We have more procedures, new structures and more engagement, but there is a need for more financing.

This [House of Colors] is an emergency shelter for children, and mothers with children. It's not part of the national coalition of shelters and we refer VOT for long term support to the 3 NGO shelters and state-run shelter if needed.

We are a member of the national referral mechanism (NRM), according to law if we identify PVOT we have 24 hours to report, we refer to the MoI. But more efforts are needed for feedback and what happens to the case.

Q. How long does your support last?

A. The emergency shelter is for 11 days up until 3 months. Reintegration is from one to three years. We don't let children outside alone.

Q. No foster care?

A. They go to residential care. The foster care system still is not developed accordingly. Municipalities struggle to identify potential foster care families trained and specialised to foster children with trauma or abuse for a dedicated period of time



until the child can connect with their families. But they are placed in residential care institutions as it's the easiest way to give provision of care and support.

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## General Directorate of State Police, 6 October 2022

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 2 officials from the General Directorate of State Police: Anti-trafficking Office

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 representative from British Embassy, 1 interpreter

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### Interview

Q. We will talk today about statistics, support available to victims of trafficking (VOT) as well as societal treatment, but could you first provide an overview?

The anti-trafficking and narcotics unit is part of the criminal police department in the state police, at the central level. At the local level there are anti-trafficking and anti-narcotic sections, located in police directorates in the regions. Criminal offences are stipulated in the criminal code of Albania. The criminal offences we address are in the scope of your mission as we deal with human trafficking for all, regardless of age or gender.

As regards victim identification, it is mostly female victims. So far we have not identified any males. Most of these women are exploited for sexual purposes/prostitution.

The modus operandi is similar to other Western Balkan countries, so the recruiters take advantage of the difficult financial situation that women and girls are in. They target vulnerable women and girls going through family hardships, for example, parents divorced and financial hardships. These women and girls mostly come from rural areas where there is little development, as opposed to in urban areas. So first the recruiters [traffickers] tend to develop romantic relationships with women and girls. Then they persuade them to move abroad and then they start trafficking them through extortion and other forms of exploitation. Lately we have observed new forms of recruitment through social media, Instagram, Facebook. They develop romantic relationships online and it moves into real life.

As regards child victims of trafficking (VOT) we have identified only 4 cases of children being trafficked. These children come from the Roma community. They are mainly exploited for begging on the streets. The traffickers take children from Albania to Macedonia, Kosovo, Italy and other neighbouring countries to exploit for begging. In terms of children VOT none have been identified as sexually exploited, mostly for begging.

Let me move to children that have been identified as VOT and who have been exploited for forced labour and begging in the EU and UK. We carried out investigations and found that it's the parents of children taking them abroad to the EU and UK. So the end goal is for the children to claim asylum or be granted a status as a VOT. An issue is that the EU and UK may consider these children as

VOT or asylum seekers, but in reality they are not as the parents take them so they can become citizens of the said countries. So we have started investigations in Albania for cases against the parents, as we have found that the children have been abandoned by them. All cases reported from the EU or UK say that the child is alone, but our investigations have found the parents are in Albania. That is the overall situation of human trafficking (HT) in Albania.

Lately we have had issues with migration into Albania. It is used as a transit country into the EU, they come in illegally through Greece, but also come from areas of conflict and go to Kosovo, North Macedonia and end up in the EU. This is not an Albanian phenomenon, they just use Albania as a transit country. The anti-trafficking sections at the local level have seen quite an increase in these instances. What happens is that Albanian citizens assist these individuals into the country and then move onto another country. So we received help from the EU from the Frontex mission, they work at the border with Greece and try and prevent or identify people crossing. This is the overall situation.

Q. With regard statistics, was it 4 minors identified this year (2022)?

A. Yes this year.

Q. Does the Albanian government record official data on the number of VOT?

A. Yes we have official statistics.

Q. Is this broken down by gender, age and type of exploitation?

A. Yes

Q. Is this information publicly available?

A. This is an example of our statistics, this has been put into a report and is available to media and other government institutions (January 2022 statistics shown). It shows the article in the criminal code and the title of the criminal offence. It's just a summary, the official statistics are more detailed.

Q. If we wanted to see an example of official statistics could we request them?

A. Unfortunately the Albanian electronic systems have suffered cyber-attacks and we cannot produce any reports/statistics at this time. This situation is temporary, it happened about a month ago and the central system is linked to the local system and this is how we exchange information, we can print out but it's not updated. In maximum 20 days we should be able to provide.

Q. Is this information usually available online?

A. When it comes to state police data they are published in a restricted manner. Other directorates at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) handle statistics and publish them, state police statistics are restricted. By restricted access it is not that they are not available, but if media need them they can submit a request to state police and receive it.

Q. What about support for VOT?

A. This question is not directly related to our directorate. There is another source you can turn to. The General Directorate of State Police mainly deals with state police issues, however the Albanian government also focuses on police related issues and

support provided and they have established the national anti-trafficking mechanism. This includes structures that provides support to victims. The national anti-trafficking committee is subordinate to the Prime Minister's office, the anti-trafficking coordinator is under the Mol and chaired by the Deputy Mol. This national anti-trafficking coordinator is under the anti-trafficking directorate in the Mol. The Mol is the responsible authority against HT. This is the graphic representation about how the fight against HT works in Albania, so state police is only one part of it. You should speak to the anti-trafficking office who at the core of everything.

Q. Are police trained to identify VOT?

A. There are 10,000 officers, they are not all trained, but anti-trafficking officers and border and immigration police, then yes they are trained by state police, EU and UK.

Q. How many males are trafficked?

A. We haven't identified any males at all, this year or in previous years.

Q. Are you aware of any victims that have been re-trafficked?

A. Yes, there is re-trafficking and cases of this in Albania. So victims are mostly female and re-trafficking is due to different reasons including societal attitudes towards women and girls. If links in the chain don't work properly women and girls are forced to go back into trafficking. So maybe the centres for these women and girls, where they go to for reintegration, don't have enough capacity to help them and that is why they end up being trafficked again. In terms of statistics re-trafficking is rare, it doesn't happen often, however it happens. So there is a lot of work to be done on our part in this regard.

Q. What is the government doing to address issues in broken links in the chain that you mentioned?

A. To be honest, formally and organisationally speaking, we have the best system in place, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is composed of the most relevant ministerial departments.

So the institutions are there, on paper its ideal, in practice that is where we have the problem. Also in 2018 we had updated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on how to deal with VOT and PVOT. It's a 200 page document that foresees everything we have to do. So we didn't reinvent the wheel. These were developed with international assistance of course.

Q. You mention societal attitudes can lead to re-trafficking?

A. Unfortunately Albanian society is not very welcoming to these VOT, these women have already suffered and had pain and its extra difficult to be reintegrated into society. The state police deals with things from a police perspective so it's more rigid, so this is just our impression. The reintegration is related to economic development of society and concerned with the mindset of people, which is a bit conservative and traditional.

Q. In your view do you think that a single woman or a single woman with a child could live alone in Albania?

A. It is very difficult for a single woman or single mother to make it in Albania unless they are provided with a job or economic support. If they have neither they can never

make it. So this is not official information but I know it happens. There are cases of women who have been trafficked, and then placed in centres and have later and willingly returned to the trafficker and been re-trafficked as they think that this is more convenient, economically speaking, as they can earn more that way. If you go to our shelters you won't need to ask. You will see why they are willingly re-trafficked.

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## Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN), 6 October 2022

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with:** Ines Leskaj, Director of AWEN – Albanian Women Empowerment Network.

'Our network works in the field of protection of human rights, in particular, the rights of women and girls, aiming at the social, economic, cultural and political empowerment of women. The main thematic areas are:

- Violence against girls and women
- Socio-economic empowerment of girls and women
- Participation of women in politics and decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

Ines Leskaj provided an overview of AWEN:

AWEN is a network of 10 women's organisations working across Albania supporting women and girls with direct social support. There is a psycho-social centre (Vatra) in the south of Albania, the main centre for victims of trafficking (VOT) – the first one to serve VOT. The phenomenon of trafficking is quite widespread in Albanian society. It is a source and transit country for human trafficking (HT).

Vatra is one of AWEN's beneficiaries. AWEN provides funding to its network members, including shelters and including Vatra. There are 2 other shelters within AWEN's network – one in Shkoder in the north and one in Elbasan, which provide emergency shelter for VOT and victims of domestic violence (DV) for 48 to 72 hours.

AWEN works with the coalition of anti-trafficking shelters that work directly with VOT and PVOT (potential victims of trafficking). The 3 NGO shelters include Vatra, Different and Equal (D&E) and Tjeter Vizion [Another Vision, who work with children]. AWEN's work relates to the referrals of VOT and PVOT to these shelters. We have a good collaboration with the shelters. VOT and PVOT benefit from long-term reintegration. There is only one state-run shelter, so the state has started to offer support, but there is a need for more.

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<sup>8</sup> AWEN, [HISTORY – AWEN NETWORK \(awenetwork.org\)](https://awenetwork.org), no date

AWEN provides legal and mental health support and if the VOT needs reintegration we refer them to all shelters.

Q. Are there official statistics on the number of VOT?

A. Not for VOT. There are more than 200 VOT and 4,000 cases of DV that have been issued protective orders by the courts. This is not the true number of victims, just the ones who have been identified and denounced their perpetrators. DV is much more widespread.

Q. Are women VOT able to live independently, with or without children?

A. It is difficult, almost impossible for women to live independently without the support of civil societies. You should not refer to state reports regarding the present situation. VOT need long-term reintegration. There are only 2 centres providing this kind of support. There are few job opportunities, poor salaries unable to meet the cost of living. It is not only difficult for single women, but also for children. Social housing programmes are provided by the state, but there are not many opportunities in rural municipalities. The provision of social services to people in general is low.

Almost in the entire country it is difficult, especially outside of large urban areas like Tirana. When there is no reintegration support in municipalities it is much harder.

Q. What are the attitudes towards women with children born outside of marriage?

A. They are discriminated against, there are intersectional violence issues, so it is more difficult to get support from families, society and the state structure. Social housing laws and others are there to support the vulnerable but financial resources are low.

The main issue is family attitudes. They don't want women and girl VOT. Why? Due to the culture of shame, especially in rural areas and small towns. It is a widespread patriarchal society.

Q. What mental health support is provided by AWEN?

A. Mental health support is provided through licensed therapists. But AWEN is mainly established to be a lobbying network. We choose to provide mental health support due to the need.

Q. Do you see persons from the Roma and Egyptian?

A. Yes, we see all cases. The Roma and Egyptian community are also violated and referred to shelters. They have a lot of intersectional issues including poverty, challenges in accessing social support, housing and education due to registration issues, including the registration of births. If you can't register it's more difficult to attend school. The state is trying to negotiate their status.

Q. Is there any evidence of re-trafficking of women?

A. Yes, though I'm not sure of the percentage. But due to issues and challenges many are re-trafficked as the families don't accept them, they can't afford to live and also due to extortion and threats against the families. Criminal groups are responsible for re-trafficking the same women they trafficked in the first place.

Q. Could a VOT internally relocate to avoid being found by their trafficker?

A. It is difficult. Albania is very small and it is easy for the traffickers to find what they're looking for. There is less possibility to reintegrate and have a normal life.

Q. Are you aware of male VOT?

A. We know from the anti-trafficking coalition that boys are being trafficked for work and begging.

Q. What needs to be in place to enable reintegration?

A. It starts with education and employment, including the education of children and registering them in schools in areas where they live. Also accommodation, either rented or social housing. VOTs need sustainable employment to make a living. Rents are high compared to salaries.

Q. How are people referred to AWEN?

A. Integration services have been working for 20 years now, so support organisations and those providing long term reintegration are well known to the police and they get referred directly. There is a local referral mechanism that has 12 institutions in education, healthcare, police, prosecution, and so forth. Women's organisations are part of the referral mechanism. This is functioning well due their experience and work in the municipalities. The state is doing its role – coordinating in the 61 municipalities. There are municipalities where mechanisms work better due to social services that are provided and due to the presence of women's organizations in the municipalities. In those municipalities where the presence of WCSO [women civil society organisations] is lacking the mechanism is almost not functionable. Each municipality should have a coordinator. The problem is that in most municipalities the coordinator has 2 or 3 different functions. In the municipalities where the coordinator only works in one capacity the mechanisms work much better. This person needs to be the responsible person. The coordinator of gender-based violence in the municipalities is responsible for coordinating all the institutions.

Q. Are women identified as VOT in Albania (trafficked internally) or are they returnees?

A. Both – internal trafficking is widespread, especially in south Albania, in tourist areas. We used to be just a source country, now we are a source, transit and destination country.

Q. How long is mental health support provided for?

A. It depends, we don't have specialised services. We only have a psychologist. For the most severe cases it's an issue. There are lots of survivors of domestic violence with mental health issues. The issue is not regulated in the protection system or state services. There is a lack of mental health support. Community centres are not functioning. AWEN is not working directly with them – we don't know where to refer them. There is a lack of dedicated care, for example, for people with severe mental health needs.

Q. Have there been any successful prosecutions of traffickers?

A. Yes, we know of some but have no statistics. The most successful cases are against criminal groups.

Q. Are the police trained to identify VOT/PVOT?

A. For more than 20 years the police have been provided with training. The issue is staff turnover, not only in the police but amongst all state employees – in healthcare, the municipalities, teachers – they move on and lessons learnt are not maintained.

Q. For Roma and Egyptian communities – can they access subsidiary support, such as social housing and healthcare?

A. They would have difficulty. Prejudice is widespread. They would avoid state shelters and social service – discrimination is everywhere. A woman of Roma or Egyptian ethnicity would face worse discrimination – intersectional for being both a woman and an ethnic minority.

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## Center for Legal Civic Initiatives, 6 October 2022

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 2 officials from Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (CLCI), a civil society organisation (CSO)

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 interpreter

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### Overview

The Center was established as a project of the Lawyer Women's Association and has been operating regularly ever since. On 6 December 2001, by means of Decision No.8 of Tirana District Court, it was registered as an independent legal entity. On December 14, 2004, with the court decision No.8/1 Women's Advocacy Center changed the name in Center for Legal Civic Initiatives.

### CLCI's Mission

CLCI's mission is to support, aid and provide legal education to the citizens, giving priority to women and girls, so as to increase their access to public institutions, and in particular in the justice system.

### The objectives of CLCI are:

- Offering free and psycho-social legal services for the victims of domestic violence and of other violent acts and for the people in need.
- Legal education, with the aim of recognizing and exerting the human rights and freedoms, as provided for by the Constitution, international acts and laws.
- Advocacy and lobbying for democratization of the justice system and building of its effectiveness, by studying, monitoring and generalizing the best experience and practice in the justice field.
- Undertaking and support of initiatives for improving the legislation and for lobbying for draft-laws and state policies in the field of protection of the human rights, focusing on gender equality, fight against domestic violence, fight against corruption and trafficking of human beings, aiming their full compliance with the best advanced international standards and the European Union acquis.

## Interview

Q. Could you give us an overview of your organisation?

Official 1: I am a lawyer and executive director of CLCI. I have worked for CLCI since 2004. The organisation has been established since 1997, and provides free legal aid for victims of gender based violence (GBV), victims of trafficking (VOT), victims of domestic violence and different forms of gender and multiple discrimination. We use legal aid to strengthen the position of women and we identify problems and gaps in the implementation of the legal framework. We also design capacity building for professional justice systems. We use strategic litigation, which is strongly used by experts and lawyers of the centre, aiming to change not only the legal situation of one individual but of the group of individuals in the same position as her. We work a lot with lobbying and improving the legal framework when we identify a gap or issues with the legal framework and in cooperation with other CSOs use the standards stemmed from the conventions ratified by the Albanian state to improve the legislation in compliance with these standards. CLCI designs capacity building activities at a local level for judges, the police and professionals in the justice system. We have a long experience of training police and judges on VOT. We work to strengthen the capacity of police officers in relation to gender based violence. We work with engagement of the students of law in our activity, aiming to increase the number of beneficiaries and on the other side to prepare professionals of the justice system in the future to be more orientated to victim's rights.

Since November 2017, Center for Legal Civic Initiatives in coordinating the Monitoring Network<sup>9</sup> Against Gender Based Violence in Albania. This activity is

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<sup>9</sup> Member Organizations of the Monitoring Network

1. AWEN – Albanian Women Empowerment Network (<https://awenetwork.org/historia-misioni/?lang=en> )
2. "Useful to Albanian Women" Association
3. Counseling Office for Men and Boys, Shkodër
4. Human Rights in Democracy Centre (HRDC)
5. Community Development Center "Today for the Future"
6. Organization "Different & Equal"
7. Young Women's Christian Association of Albania – YWCA of Albania
8. IPSED – Institute for the Promotion of Social and Economic Development
9. Albanian Institute of Public Affairs – AIPA
10. Albanian Center for Population and Development
11. Mary Ward Loreto Foundation
12. "Albanian Helsinki Committee" (AHC)
13. Center "Children Today"
14. Albanian Group for Human Rights
15. National Centre for Community Services
16. Women Towards Integration
17. Roma Women Rights Centre
18. Albanian Disability Rights Foundation – ADRF
19. Association of Women Business Professionals and Skilled Crafts
20. In the family for the family" NFPF
21. National Association of Social Workers
22. Albanian Association of PLWHA
23. National Organization "STOP – AIDS"



financed from the European Commission and is implemented from CLCI with the support of UN Women Albania.

Official 2: I am the former executive director, but I am also a lawyer and professor of law at the Faculty of Law, University of Tirana.

Q. You help in the justice system, with regard prosecution or convictions, how successful is that, do you have numbers? Do you have information on traffickers themselves?

A. Data is available from the General Prosecutors Office. We have written a lot of reports on trafficking issues.

Q. Are they online?

A. Yes, but some are in Albanian. At end of meeting we will share some important sources under the framework of regional project that CLCI has implemented. ASTRA [an organization dedicated to eradicating all forms of exploitation and trafficking in human beings, especially women and children<sup>10</sup>] in Serbia has been the leader organisation in a regional project implemented by civil society organisations in Western Balkan countries<sup>11</sup>. We have gathered data for a report, which focuses on anti-trafficking policies<sup>12</sup>.

The monitoring Report “The implementation of the National Strategy on Gender Equality and its Plan of Action 2021-2030” which is adopted by members of the

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24. Refleksione Women Association
  25. Centre of Integrated Legal Services and Practices (CILSP)
  26. Counselling Line for Men and Boys (CLMB)
  27. Tirana Legal Aid Society, (TLAS)
  28. “VOICE OF CHILDREN CALLS”
  29. “Ad Litem”
  30. Child Rights Centre Albania (CRCA)
  31. ALO 116 – Albanian National Child Helpline
  32. Center for Development of Rural Women (CDRW)
  33. Pink Embassy / LGBT Pro Albania
  34. Center for Legal Civic Initiatives
  35. Observatory for Children and Youth Rights
  36. Shelter for Abused Women and Girls–Albania
  37. WDN-Women’s Democracy Network Albania
  38. Albanian Center for Family Development
  39. Women in Public Service Albania
  40. Women Counselling and Social Services Center, Kukes
  41. Bridging communities
  42. Intellectual Women Association
  43. Woman Center “Light Steps”
  44. Center for Gender Justice in Albania

<sup>10</sup> [About ASTRA](#)

<sup>11</sup> BAN III, the Project “Balkans Act Now” - (BAN III), is financed by the European Union and implemented by the Center for Legal Initiatives (CLCI) in Albania in partnership with leader organization-the ASTRA-Anti Trafficking Action, Serbia, International Forum of Solidarity –EMMAUS, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Women’s Rights Centre, Republic of Montenegro; Association for Action Against Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings – Open Gate La Strada, Northern Macedonia and Netherlands Helsinki Committee, Netherlands.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.gag-al.org/publikime/raport\\_antitrafikimi.pdf](https://www.gag-al.org/publikime/raport_antitrafikimi.pdf) [in Albanian]  
[https://www.gag-al.org/ang/publication/trafficking\\_report.pdf](https://www.gag-al.org/ang/publication/trafficking_report.pdf) [in Albanian]

Gender Equality National Council is already published on line. This report has important data on the work done on addressing trafficking in human beings.

Q. How does a VOT reintegrate into society and obtain support?

A. We provide free legal aid for VOT focussing on compensation claims. Since 2008 we have been working on compensation rights for VOT. There are a lot of services supporting VOT and we are in the network and collaborate systematically with other organisations. We are focused on legal services as part of the coalition. Maybe we can give you some new data in the last report prepared by us on judicial aid granted by the state – free legal aid<sup>13</sup>.

Q. How are VOT referred to you?

A. Regarding the right to compensation, the first case for a VOT started years ago and the victims benefited from a first level court award of 40,000 euros in compensation.

Regarding how VOTs are referred I have prepared some information that I would like to share.

‘With the aim preventing of abuse and risk of trafficking, Ministry of Health and Social Protection provide financial support for three specialised antitrafficking services<sup>14</sup> in three big districts of country Tirana, Elbasan and Vlora in the amount of 29,0879,324 ALL. For the year 2021 it is reported the referral and support on rehabilitation and reintegration for more than 254 women and girls, and their children as it is the case.’<sup>15</sup>

Official 2: During my experience in referrals, the prosecutor’s office and judges made the most referrals to CLCI.

Q. Can you tell us about single women and their ability to live in Albania, and their ability to relocate, how can they live alone or with children?

A. It is very difficult.

Official 2: My perception, based on my personal opinion, is that it is difficult, when we speak of VOT and human trafficking (HT) there is a lack of data and even when we have the [https://www.qag-al.org/publikime/raport\\_strehimi.pdf](https://www.qag-al.org/publikime/raport_strehimi.pdf) [Monitoring of Law No. 22/2018 "For Social Housing" in Local Government Units – in Albanian]. Speaking of VOT and those who apply for social housing, we have good law on social housing and legal aid and all these laws that I mentioned foresee VOT as beneficiaries. In practice the number of cases applying for these benefits is low. It is not because we don’t have laws, but there is hesitation to apply due to prejudice, which makes VOT reluctant to apply for economic help, legal aid and social housing.

CLCI published a report showing that, in 2021, we have seen in Tirana municipality 22 persons, part of specific categories out of which 20 GBV and 2 VOT, and all

<sup>13</sup> This report is not yet published online.

<sup>14</sup> “Organizations “Të Ndryshëm dhe të Barabartë”, Tirana, in the amount of 9,091,458 ALL; Organization “Tjetër Vizion”, Elbasan, in the amount of 9,034,794 ALL and Psycho Social Center “Vatra”, Vlorë, in the amount of 11,753,072 ALL”.

<sup>15</sup>The monitoring Report “The implementation of the National Strategy on Gender Equality and its Plan of Action 2021-2030”, for year 2021. This report is available in the link <https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Raport-Monitorimi-per-vitin-2021-SKBGJ.pdf> (page 45) [in Albanian]

applications were accepted, so it's not that we're not ready to provide support<sup>16</sup>. There is a lack of information for VOT and how they are considered and supported by the state. Support from civil society organisations who work on these issues is very important to inform individuals of their support entitlements. We (CLCI) cannot reach everyone. What I have seen in municipalities is that there are good practices and models supporting VOT to apply for support. At first they need to find and believe in the system and then when the VOT goes to the municipality office, they see an official and are asked for documents, so they need support with this too. Documentation requirements can cause barrier in getting support. Municipalities are doing their best in helping victims apply for support.

There are established good models of providing support for VOT to apply for help.

Q. Are you saying that the support is there, the law is there, but there is a lack of knowledge and awareness?

A. The support is there but there is a lack of knowledge. Good practices have to be shared across the 61 municipalities of the country.

Q. As well as a lack of knowledge, is there is an element of stigma? Or are VOT afraid to expose themselves as VOT?

A. I think stigma, yes, and they have been threatened and they are afraid to follow criminal or civil procedures. VOT are afraid to continue asking for compensation and continuing with the judicial process as the compensation comes from the trafficker.

Albania has changed, at the beginning I saw stigma in the courts, and that it existed in the law. Now the law has changed and has improved, even the attitudes of judges and prosecutors have changed now. But stigma against VOT exists through the people and society.

There are gaps that exist in the execution of court decisions and implementation of the laws, in general. But focussing on VOT, we have had a lot of problems with the execution of court decisions in regard to compensation claims. Until now I don't know if we have had any decision enforced on compensation. It has been awarded but not given. We have 4 or 5 decisions but these are only on paper but not executed. But they tried to make some legal changes to enforce the execution of court orders. Since 2016, when the last change on the anti-mafia law occurred relating to compensation of victims, we have never had any decision executed or compensation given to victims, so they have the court orders on paper, but no money.

Q. Is this because traffickers are found and prosecuted?

A. We asked the courts and also law makers to foresee some effective remedy, such as the execution of this sum to be taken from the traffickers seized assets. Because the state continues to seize these assets but don't give the money to victims.

Q. Is the compensation supposed to go to victims?

A. The law has foreseen 2 ways: the money confiscated should be used for social programmes in the interest of the victims to rehabilitate and fund restorative justice. The other is this money should go to the victims by way of compensation ordered by the court.

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www.gag-al.org/publikime/raport\\_strehimi.pdf](https://www.gag-al.org/publikime/raport_strehimi.pdf) (page 24) [in Albanian]

We have had 4 decisions from the courts ordering compensation, but no one has received anything.

Another point is regarding single mothers. We would also like to see the execution of court decisions provide alimony in cases of divorce. The lack of execution of court decisions affects children as they don't receive any child support. They have a lot of problems, in cases of divorce or separation.

Q. So the father isn't paying support?

a. Yes. Separation/divorce in Albanian law is related to marriage but there is nothing for partnerships. But many single mothers are in this situation, they are single mothers following a partnership. We represent cases for custodial rights. With the right of custody and visiting rights, women are faced with stigma by the court because of their situation and they are not seen as good parents. Because the mother is trafficked and is seen as not the best parent, custody may go to the father. They have financial difficulties as they receive no alimony.

Q. Do you see male VOT?

A. We are strongly focused on women, but if referring to official data I can share with you from the centre for sexual violence. It is named Liliun [state-run shelter]. For the period January to July 2022 there were treated in this centre 18 cases of victims of sexual violence, out of them 3 men and 15 women<sup>17</sup>.

In 2016 there was a big reform in victims in rights, for VOT and PVOT. Victims of sexual violence are seen as specific victims with specific rights.

The coordinator for the victims, within the General Prosecutors Office and district prosecutor office, has strengthened the functioning of the victim coordinator. They are called administrative staff but they are professionals indeed.

Q. What does the coordinator do?

A. Inform and refer victims to civil society organisations and shelters. To inform and support victims during criminal proceedings.

We are also working on shadow reports under the framework of UN conventions and with CEDAW convention.

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## General Prosecutors Office, 6 October 2022

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with: General Prosecutors Office (GPO),** Director of Institutional Coordination at GPO: Kostaq Beluri

Joined by Victims Coordinator and a prosecutor

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives UK Home Office, 1 representative from British Embassy, 1 Interpreter

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<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Protection. "Information on violence in family relations 2021-2022". This information is shared in the fifth meeting of the Gender Equality Council on September 9, 2022.

## Interview

Q. We are looking for information on the support available to VOT and will ask about the support your office gives to victims of trafficking (VOT).

A. Here at the General Prosecutors Office (GPO) we have victim coordinators and there is also a prosecutor that deals with training with regard human trafficking (HT). I will need to retrieve statistics but cannot give them right now.

I will share a general overview. In 2017 Albania started a justice reform which included legislation and justice institutions. Currently we have 2 prosecutor offices, the GPO and the Special Prosecutors Office (SPO), which works against organised crime and corruption. Both prosecutors are independent of one another and the law stipulates the function of each. The GPO has under its jurisdiction the General Jurisdiction Prosecutors Offices (GJPO) and the SPO is headed by a chairperson who works against organised crime and corruption.

Q. How many offices are there?

A. As regards the GJPO there are 22 of them, operating across Albania. There is only one SPO and it's based here in Tirana. The responsibility and function are stipulated by the criminal procedure code and HT is tackled by the GPO. HT is dealt with by the GPO as long as it takes place in a simple form. However, when an organised criminal group (OCG) or other armed force is involved then the SPO deals with the crime.

The victim coordinators in district prosecution offices work directly with victims of different criminal offenses. The target group they work with don't only include victims of trafficking but also victims of domestic violence, victims of sexual violence, and minors in contact and in conflict with the law. Victim coordinators at the GPO receive information about the problems that the coordinators face during their work and they work for a quick solution for the highest interest of the victims.

Regarding the need for training of the victim coordinators in district prosecution offices, victim coordinators at the GPO plan and organise periodically training and information sessions. They regularly cooperate with state structures and non-profit organizations that work in the fields of victimology and criminal justice.

The GJPO have a specialised section for HT in larger regions of the country.

Q. How many specialised sections are there?

A. We don't have the numbers but they're in the larger regions of the country. The prosecutors that work in these sections have been trained on HT or have a lot of experience in this matter. In any case of HT, the prosecutor's office is in charge of working with the state police who have their own structures in place for HT and protection of victims.

The law includes a whole range of articles, starting with the way we communicate with VOT, from the police to the judiciary.

We have 4 shelters, one state-run and the other 3 are NGOs: Different and Equal in Tirana, Vatra in Vlore, and Tjeter Vizion in Elbasan.

Regarding the GPO and the GJPO, the GPO is not in charge and does not have competence of investigating. Only the GJPO can investigate and carry out

procedures with victims. The only competence the GPO has is to represent cases in the supreme or high court. There are special sections and sectors for VOT and the coordinators office and here at the GPO we assist counterparts at GJPO, we compile information and this goes into statistics.

Q. Does the Albanian government record the total number of prosecutions and convictions of traffickers, broken down into type of exploitation they were involved in?

A. The GPO reports to parliament, not the government. Our stats are reported to the parliament of Albania, and show trends, criminality, types.

As soon as we report to parliament, they review and develop recommendations for us for the following year. This is called the parliament resolution in Albania

Q. Are these reports in English?

A. No, in Albanian.

Q. When are they published?

A. March / April, so this year's has already been published.

Q. What are the criminal sentences or punishments that traffickers receive if prosecuted?

A. I will have to refer to the code.

Q. What are the types of sentence they receive in practice?

A. All sentences are imposed in practice unless the sentence is passed in absentia.

Criminal Code Article 110 sub paragraph A. First paragraph, 5 to 8 years and 10 to 15 years sentencing and 7 to 15 years depending on how serious. When an individual's life is at risk then no less than 15 years. If someone dies due to trafficking no less than 20 years or prison for life. If a public official is involved in trafficking the sentence of imprisonment is increased by one fourth of the punishment given.

Q. What is the amount of compensation that is offered to VOT?

A. For any criminal offence that provide criminal proceeds we are responsible to seize assets and use them accordingly, the same applies to HT which is a criminal offence, we seize the assets and use accordingly. A percentage of criminal proceeds seized are passed to the victim.

Q. What percentage?

A. There is actually a board that decides how much will go to victim, how much to the police and how much to the GPO, this board sits periodically.

Q. How do they make a decision on how much is awarded?

A. I have never been part of that board so I cannot give you that information. It must be noted that in Albania we have an agency – the Agency of Seized and Confiscated Assets Administration, under the Ministry of Interior (Mol) – that administers and manages seized assets and they follow legal procedures up until selling assets at auction.

Q. Courts are trained on trafficking and indicators. Is there a procedure for identifying individuals that have been trafficked?

A. There are methodologies in place that help us identify VOT, where we communicate with them and deal with them. However, the state police are the first to identify VOT, then they refer to us.

Q. What happens when VOT are referred?

A. A prosecutor becomes in charge of the case, they speak with judicial police officers and they collect evidence and we go ahead with case.

Q. If the person is found to be a VOT are charges dropped?

A. The criminal case is against the trafficker not the victim

Q. What if a VOT is found to have committed a criminal offence (if picked up in a situation of exploitation, for example)?

The criminal code stipulates that if they commit an offence they have to be punished for that, for example prostitution is punished, even if they are a VOT they may have received criminal proceeds and so they can be prosecuted. However this is decided by the prosecutor in regard to what is and what is not the fault of the victim. This is done on a case by case basis. There is no golden rule, it is up to the prosecutor to see if the victim has committed a crime.

Q. Are special measures taken for those aged under 18?

A. Yes, there are special measures in place. The justice reform brought in a juvenile justice code. This should be available in English, translated by UNICEF.

Q. Regarding conviction rates, could we contact you for that information?

A. If you give us some time we can translate for you.

Q. Can you tell us about the role of the special coordinator regarding long term support for VOT?

A. As soon as the prosecuting officer has received a case of HT then the victim coordinator comes into play and they are the linking bridge between the victim, police and GPO. We first provide psychological support to the victim and after we inform them of their rights. Of course the victims have a lot of needs and what we do is find the shelter that is closest to them and refer them there. The victim coordinator is in charge and coordinates with all centres across Albania. The victim coordinator follows up with the victim until the case goes to court. If the victim has any questions about the legal procedure they can ask the victim coordinator. If there is confidential information we don't reveal it so we don't violate the investigation.

Q. If the victim didn't want to cooperate to identify the trafficker what would happen?

A. The form that the victim signs describes their rights and also has a clause box which says, 'I refuse to receive any assistance from the victim coordinator'. If they tick that we can't help them. But we encourage them to assist the prosecutor and the criminal proceedings. We want them to agree, they need our help.

If the victim refuses to work with the justice system and help identify who or where the trafficker is, then we try to convince them that is right thing to do and that the

trafficker should be held to account. If the victim still refuses we use our own methods to collect evidence and do our own investigation.

Q. Do some victims opt not to receive support?

A. Here at the GPO we do not work with victims directly, but we receive reports from other (GJPO) offices that some victims refuse help.

Q. Do they provide an explanation about why they refuse?

A. Stigma, as well as fear of being harmed by the trafficker, being afraid of families, or not supported by the family. A series of reasons why.

Q. What sort of protective mechanisms are put in place if they are in fear?

A. It is the state-owned shelter and they are placed there whilst the investigation is ongoing. So they have state protection.

Q. Is there security at shelter?

A. Yes. Security is provided. The procedures that take place in shelters are confidential.

Q. Are location of shelters generally known?

A. If you are asking about whether regular Albanian citizens know, they don't. But we as professionals know.

I would like to share my personal experience. If a victim refuses to receive support or go to a shelter and we see a situation that is aggravated and could be harmful to them or their family, we work with the police and organise in such a way so that we protect the victim and their family, we patrol round homes and provide protection so they are well protected even if they don't know.

Q. When a case is referred how does the prosecutor decide how to proceed with the case?

A. When the prosecutor receives the file from the state police, they register a criminal case and tell the police what evidence is needed to make a case. The police only suggest to the prosecutors that it could be a criminal case, it's up to the prosecutors to review the file and see if makes a case. So the only competent authority in Albania is the prosecutor. According to the law the prosecutor is in control of leading and carrying out some investigative actions of their own.

Q. If an offence of trafficking took place outside of Albania would you still prosecute the trafficker if they are here, if located?

A. If the victim is Albanian then, yes, we can proceed.

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## Statistical data from the Prosecution Offices of General Jurisdiction

### Year 2021

Article 110/a Trafficking of adults

Number of registered proceedings: 8

Number of proceedings in court: 2



Number of defendants registered: 2

Number of defendants in court: 4

Number of Victims: Total 3

1 (female) until 18 years old and 2 (females) over 18 years old

Article 128/b Trafficking of minors

Number of registered proceedings: 2

Number of proceedings in court: 2

Number of defendants registered: 2

Number of defendants in court: 2

Number of defendants convicted: 12

### **Year 2022 (January to June)**

Article 110/a Trafficking of adults

Number of registered proceedings: 1

Number of defendants in court: 2

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### **Caritas, 6 October 2022**

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 2 officials from Caritas

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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### **Interview**

Caritas has been involved in anti-trafficking since 1995, we started by focusing on prevention. For several years we have invested a lot of resources to improve and increase the capacity of the government in regard to protection and reintegration. In 2015 we started a new project working with border police to support those apprehended crossing the Albanian border. We both managed the implementation of anti-trafficking policies.

Q. Do you work with shelters in Albania?

A. We had a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with shelters. From 2015 to 2018 we offered support for integration, so once a women left the shelter we invested in reintegration, for example, accommodation, professional training and extra services for children, as most women have children and we support them.

Caritas Albania is an ecclesial-humanitarian organization that works to improve the living conditions of the poor in Albania. It was founded in 1993 by the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church in Albania, two years after the end of the

communist regime, and we are project based. So when a project finishes, the service finishes. It is difficult to find sustainable projects for VOT. Since 2015, Rozalba Home, run by the Venerini Congregation, was founded as a result of several requests coming from the social services and Albanian courts to take in minor females, victims of abuse and trafficking. There is also a signed Agreement between “Venerini Youth” Center and Lezha Municipality for the 72-hour emergency shelter for the domestic violence victims and victims of trafficking run by this congregation. Currently, there are 18 girls accommodated in the house, which are referred by the State Police, Regional State Social Services and Child Protection Units.

“Rozalba House” already has the experience working with young girls who come from the most dysfunctional family contexts and have experienced violence. It represents a safe place where young woman can feel protected and respected through psycho-social recovery, giving them a new chance to reintegrate back in the community.

Generally, the girls stay in the facility till they turn 18 years old and there they have access in the health care, legal sector, and education aiming their reintegration into society. The sisters work in collaboration with Caritas, we offer training and support. Since last year they open a shelter for boys, there are only 6 boys there now.

Q. How long can they stay?

A. Until they are 18. Some of them are aged 9 or 11 years old. There is now an emergency shelter for 3 days for adult women and girls in Lezha. And another shelter for integration – education, support in employment. At Caritas we work at a national level in prevention and protection, providing education, awareness sessions and an after-school centre. We also work with Roma communities. We also work with parents to inform them on how to protect their children.

Q. You say you work with Roma, is that a big issue in regard to trafficking?

A. It depends on the category of trafficking. Roma are exploited for begging in the street. Two years ago we had a joint project with the French Embassy, a cross-border project with 3 other counties, including Montenegro and Kosovo, and the State Agency for Protection. We worked together to create an action plan on how to work with these people and how to protect children. Also Albanian children are begging in Montenegro and Kosovo and we published an assessment report and identified from which areas these children were coming from, their realities and how to empower families. This was before COVID but it was not followed up.

Q. Is the report available?

A. I can share with you. It is in English. There are 15 Caritas in Europe and we have a report on trafficking in Europe and we can share the action plan.

Q. After VOT have left the shelters, what support is provided?

A. The first shelter started 7 years ago. A few cases are now adults and have left and are in university. The sisters are following on the integration process of these women. There is a new home in Lezha and the sisters support the integration of the women who have no support from families. All cases are referred by social services.

Q. Can women live independently in Albania, either with or without children?

A. Albania is facing a lot of migration movement and a lot of people are moving abroad and seeking asylum in France, UK and Germany. A lot of rural people are coming to Tirana, some of them are divorced or their husband is outside the country or they have a lot of social issues and are living alone. The poverty has increased, this is a big indicator and has a big impact on trafficking. Trafficking is a good and fast way to earn money. For single women with children this is a big issue, we are receiving a lot of requests for financial support and support with housing costs. It is expensive here in Tirana, they are not well educated, they have some problems with their families, and sometimes they marry someone who is not accepted by their family and so they are not supported. And so before, a lot of money from outside was received and 200 euro was enough, but now remittance is very low, and it's not easy to live in Tirana. For women victims of violence and VOT it seems impossible to integrate as they don't have the psychological ability to stay in employment.

Q. Do Caritas offer any kind of mental health support?

A. We don't have experts for this but we are hiring, the shelter in Lezha is to cover this. This is one of the main services that they need. For example, there is a case in Shkoder of 2 girls that have been abused, they will need continued support.

Q. Would you say the barriers for women are economic?

A. And social, for living independently. Some are not very educated. They may feel afraid of life in Tirana, sometimes they want to be integrated immediately. They can be the first to be trafficked.

Q. Do you have any information on re-trafficking – men and women?

A. Many women are trafficked. I don't have a lot of information on men. Before COVID we had several projects on anti-trafficking and now only one project with an American bishop. We are now trying to activate prevention through inter-religious groups. For 2 to 3 years the integration service was only done by the sisters in the shelter.

Women are the first target. It is easier to traffic women who are not stable or who are fragile and sensitive. One girl worked (legitimately) every day to earn 200 euro per month and she was very tired. She said that she could earn this amount in one night. Sometimes, when the economic situation and integration process is not going well, then it is very easy to re-enter trafficking. That is why work with victims is very important. When you work with VOT it should be for life. A 2 to 3 year project cannot resolve the issue. VOT need support, their family may not accept them and the public may not accept them.

Q. Do you think VOT can be supported if returned to Albania?

A. Victims are better supported when they are identified. They mostly want to live in Tirana, it is another reality, it's different. For women from outside it is difficult for them to reintegrate in Tirana. Most students are facing economic difficulties, they are very easily recruited by traffickers.

Q. Those that are re-trafficked, are they trafficked by their original trafficker or picked up by someone else?

A. We are a very small country, we all know each other. It might not be the same trafficker, but someone from within the same network.

Q. If someone could relocate would it be easy for a trafficker to locate them?

A. Yes of course, most of them are not usually forced. Traffickers give the VOT a small percentage of the profits. So they are not a victim, they want to be recruited. If they've been in the UK and returned to Albania, and live away from where they were originally trafficked, it is case by case. Traffickers might fear the implementation of laws so use other methods. If the trafficker is related to the family, usually they are not forced. Some VOT decide to return to their previous life (of trafficking).

Q. So you are saying traffickers have moved away from forcing girls into trafficking and exploitation, but have other ways for them to return to them?

A. That is right. Sometimes re-trafficking is the choice of women and girls. For example, when the re-integration process is not going well or the girl might find it difficult to follow the re-integration plan.

Q. Do you find most of trafficking is internal, or abroad?

A. Internal trafficking mostly but we have both. In shelters here we have minors but also young girls in Italy and in France. And here we have girls in night clubs in tourist areas and also in bars in Kosovo. And also tourists use the euro so the girls are very well paid. In Montenegro there are more children begging in the street.

We also work in border areas, we have been working on the border since 2015. There is a project with UN Women on identifying, referring and supporting migrants and refugees, those returning and staying in Albania, and we have been there to identify PVOT. This is a worry as it's a transit route through the Balkans. We think trafficking is an issue, but it's difficult to identify cases. There are separated children who claim to be travelling with a brother, sister or cousin, so in these cases we need a very detailed interview in order to understand if really they are with the people they say they are. It's a good project, sharing information on refugees and migrants and offering psychological support. Until now there have not been any cases, only foreigners crossing the border.

Q. Do police have sufficient training to identify VOT or PVOT?

A. We worked a lot from 2014 to 2016 to increase the capacity of the police. We have 12 regions in Albania and 12 anti-trafficking regional committees. Most training is in Tirana, but we went for the first time to rural areas to work with social services, police, and so on, training on how to identify and locate VOT. Always you need to invest. We produced a manual for academia of police. But it's not enough, the project finishes and it's not enough. Identification of VOT/PVOT is very low. Change within the national co-ordinator is needed but it is not a big priority for the government.

Last year we completed an assessment with the French Embassy. We are trying to launch and present our recommendation to the Albanian government.

Q. If a woman goes voluntarily into the sex trade or seeks to be re-trafficked, are they still considered a VOT?

A. The Albanian government is only identifying VOT, not PVOT. Women are voluntarily seeking out trafficking. They no longer need to have coercion or force as women have no choice. For us they are VOT.

It's a big issue as data collection is a big challenge The government are only recognising those identified first time, but not those on the second time.

Everything is case by case. It's not like they are collaborating with traffickers, a lot want to be out, and their wish is to be like normal women, but then they re-enter (trafficking) because of the economic situation or because of the difficulties of being accepted into society.

Q. Does society recognise VOT as victims?

A. No, they think of it as prostitution. We work a lot with communities to try and tell people that these people are victims. Stigma exists.

Q. Are you a member of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)?

A. I presented a request in 2019 because we have shelters and accommodation for vulnerable people but I am still waiting for a response.

Q. So if you (Caritas) identify a VOT they are not officially recognised?

A. Yes

Q. So your figures are additional to government figures?

A. Yes

Q. Do you work nationally with prevention? What activities?

A. Yes, national work on prevention, and informal education such as after school, social activities, summer school, visible materials, sports. We did the story 'Pinocchio' to educate about VOT. With women, we organise counselling meetings, and we have a big network within schools.

We are also preparing activities for 18 October national anti-trafficking day.

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## Mobile unit, Kukes, 7 October 2020

**Date:** 7 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 2 officials from Mobile unit, Kukes

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 2 representatives from British Embassy, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

Q. Could you tell us about the work of the mobile units?

A. We work on site all the time and we are in constant contact with groups at risk of trafficking as well as vulnerable groups. In addition to that we have a lot of meetings in the remotest administrative units of Kukes. It was perhaps the first time an organisation has reached out to remote areas.

When we went to these remote administrative units, we found a lack of information and awareness regarding human trafficking (HT). However we have had cases where we went to certain administrative units and 2 days later a case of HT was reported to the police because of the awareness we brought there.

I have very long experience in local government social services and so it was easy for me to adapt and address social issues of individuals, and I had already identified hotspots where trafficking could happen.

The first year of the project was challenging as it was at the same time as COVID-19, which made it difficult to reach out to rural areas due to restrictions and curfew. Then the second phase was more intensive as there were less restrictions. Organisations helped us to reach out to the 3 municipalities of Kukes – Has, Kukës and Tropojë.

We reached out mostly to Has and Kukes as they are closer and easier to drive around, while Tropojë is a bit further, and difficult to drive there especially during winter.

It is very important for us to appoint focal points in different areas and in the administrative units of municipalities. We work with the community police, they know the issues of the community, so they are the right ones to talk to. In villages the administrators or the elderly are in charge of communicating and have local power. We spoke with them too and had meetings in schools to bring awareness to teachers and parents, on who might be most vulnerable to HT. So raising awareness is key.

Q. Does the project have other aims other than raising awareness of risks of trafficking?

A. The main aim is identifying victims of trafficking (VOT) and potential VOT (PVOT) and referring them to services.

Q. You mention identifying groups at risk, how do you identify those at risk of being trafficked?

A. These focal points – the police and village administrators – they are well informed on the problems in their areas. They know the families with problems of domestic violence (DV) and also financial hardships. The mobile units are told about those at highest risk of HT and we can support them.

I must emphasise how difficult it is for people on site to reach out to communities. We have the possibility to do it, we have transport and logistics. However someone who doesn't have that, someone in a public institution in charge of identifying VOT, encounter a lot of challenges as they don't have the logistics in place. Those in remote and poor areas are at the highest risk. There may be parents with disabilities or unemployed who cannot provide and support. There are no businesses and no industry and nothing to live on in these areas, there are huge issues and that's why we reach out to these areas.

Q. How many mobile units in are there in Kukes?

A. Only one.

Q. Once you have identified a VOT what happens next, what's the referral process?

A. As soon as we identify a VOT it is up to authorities to organise and take on the case. As we work for Tjeter Vizion [shelter in Elbasan], which has direct links with the responsible authority, we are on site identifying persons and help filling out forms and checking indicators that the person is a VOT or PVOT, and then make referrals.

Q. What is the profile of VOT/PVOT – male / female?

A. They are mostly female VOT, but there are a few male. In addition to working on site and reaching out to remote areas we work with the customs service at the border because we know there is a lot of trafficking going on there, especially in the summer.

An issue we encountered in the summer at the border was related to minors crossing from Albania to Kosovo. Kosovo legislation handles cases differently. If a minor crosses the border into Kosovo they are deemed to have committed an offence. But when we have interviewed that minor, we find that, under Albanian legislation, they are actually a VOT or PVOT as they are exploited. There will be trafficking in other EU countries. So there should be some unification of legislation in that regard.

Q. Do you have any statistics of VOT or PVOT, in the past year?

A. We have a database and each month we collect data regarding the gender as well as age. However we mostly focus on minors so usually it's under 18s, but this doesn't exclude other cases. In the first year of the project there was COVID so we couldn't reach out, so in total there were 4 cases referred and handled by the responsible authorities. In 2021, during the second phase we worked more intensively so we referred 42 cases to the responsible authorities and it is that authority that categorises as PVOT or VOT. So far in 2022 we have referred 15 cases.

Q. Were the 42 cases all minors?

A. Mostly minors and these were boys and girls, but we don't have here the exact number. When it came to adults they were considered PVOT and they were all female.

Boys are mostly exploited for forced labour, girls are usually caught illegally crossing from Albania to Kosovo, the border police return them but they are mostly exploited for prostitution. They are taken to night clubs and exploited there.

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## Ministry of Interior, 7 October 2022

**Date:** 6 October 2022

**Meeting with:** An official from the Ministry of Interior (Mol)

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 2 representatives from British Embassy, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

Official: I have been working for 12 years at the Anti-trafficking and Migration Directorate under the Mol and recently promoted to Chief of Anti-trafficking sector.

Q. How are VOT identified and referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process?

A. The Albanian government and Mol decided to establish a legal and institutional framework that was complete and provided full support to the protection of victims of trafficking (VOT), that is the identification, referral and reintegration of victims.

In 2002 the Government developed a strategy and action plans, based on the 4 Ps – prevention, (criminal) proceedings, partnerships and protection.

In addition to the strategy and action plans we also created other by-laws, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). The first was in 2011 and later reviewed and updated in 2018. We added new processes, broadened the range of actors and stakeholders in human trafficking (HT) and these were included in the HT plan. We also worked on adding new elements in criminal proceedings. The police were trained to complete a full and complete file on the victims, so a full profile of the trafficker could be provided to the judiciary.

Regarding identification of VOT, the SOP are just an annex to the NRM. As such the members of the NRM at the central level, including the responsible authority, are in charge of identifying, referring, assisting and reintegrating the VOT as well as assisting with their voluntary return.

In addition to state institutions, the NRM consists of national and international organisations, which means the MoI and the government are prioritising VOT and the fight against HT. I believe that this is the key to the success of the NRM.

The NRM is chaired by a national coordinator and includes the MoI, state police, representatives from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Education and Youth and Ministry of EU Affairs. There are representatives from the General Prosecutors Office (GPO). It also consists of the 4 shelters, one is state-run and the other 3 are NGO-run. There is also the International Organization for Migration (IOM), World Vision, ARSIS Tirana, Mary Ward Loreto, Tjeter Vizion and others. So there are only a few government institutions and others are national and international organisations.

Q. What do you mean by voluntary return?

A. I will give you a summary of the process, it is long process. This applies to foreign VOT who are identified and referred in Albania, or Albanian VOT who are identified and referred in another country (Albanian victims coming back to Albania), or foreign victims going from Albania to their home county. So for example, a child comes from The Philippines and is identified as a VOT. The process is to help them to return to their home country. The border police are involved first with paper work, then the child protection unit (CPU) as well as social services who analyse the situation, the family and financial situation, to see if is safe for the child to return or if they should be placed in shelter. IOM cover the related costs of travel and such like.

Q. We are interested in hearing about Albanians that are returned to Albania and how they are identified on return and whether they self-identify.

A. The exact term is assisted voluntary return (AVR). National and international organisations from other countries co-operate with Albanian authorities and organisations that operate here. IOM is important in AVR, these organisations have their own network, links and ties and when they identify a VOT they inform them of the procedures to return to Albania and how they can be assisted. If they want to come back they proceed with necessary steps. When it comes to neighbouring / bordering countries, we have additional protocols. Agreements with Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Greece. We also signed an agreement with the



UK in 2014 regarding illegal migration and VOT. However there is room for discussion.

Q. Are AVRs directly referred into the NRM process when they return?

A. Yes, they are immediately referred into the NRM and the responsible authority, which is a technical structure and it sets in motion and follows all the necessary steps for a voluntary return to Albania. This is all in the SOPs, I don't have them right now but they are in English.

Q. For people who return, but not through the AVR process, would border police be able to identify them as a VOT or PVOT?

A. We have organised training and meetings with border police to identify VOT, and also to inform them of the indicators that could show that certain individuals could be at risk, and we have trained them on how to conduct interviews. There is also an action plan and framework in the UNICEF project (financed by the UK government) so we are thankful for that. It's been one of our main objectives to increase the capacity of the border police, and also the community police, lawyers and prosecutors to identify VOT and co-ordinate with other professionals. If the border police identify a VOT it doesn't end there. If the VOT is a minor they have to contact the CPU, or if they have mental health issues they would contact the health care services. The anti-trafficking officers should be there, too, so it's a series of professionals involved.

Q. Those returned, are they mostly men or women?

A. Based on statistics its mostly women and girls, returning to Albania.

Q. Are the statistics published?

A. They are not online now due to the cyber-attacks, we do have them in our system but not online. We had to remove everything from our website. Once fixed they will be reloaded when it's safe to do so. We can share with you. We have data since 2013 which are in table format and include assisted voluntary returns.

Q. Is re-trafficking an issue?

A. If we are to talk about the main challenges we face in terms of HT, I would say there are 2. The first is reintegration, this takes a long time, and a lot of resources and financial resources. I would like to thank the British Embassy, Home Office and UK Government in general for helping in the fight against HT. And particularly mention a UNICEF project in transforming the national response to HT. It has been very productive and yielded positive results and outcomes

Based on statistics since 2013 there has not been more than 3 or 4 cases of human re-trafficking. Nonetheless one case is a lot and needs special attention, prevention is key and reintegration, services are crucial in this respect as well as social services, vocational training, healthcare, employment, psychological assistance and legal aid. We have provided for VOT not to be re-trafficked and amended legislation such as the Decision of Council of Minister (DCMs). We have provided free text books to children, and subsidies to VOT of trafficking to rent premises for businesses or homes. We have worked with labour offices around the country to carry out different programmes to aid people. Also the 2019 UNICEF project has been a ray of hope to many young women and girls because they have seen and heard that there

are a lot of opportunities to continue living in Albania. So this helps with the fight against HT, and the brain drain too, as we giving opportunities here without them having to move somewhere else.

The UNICEF project awarded grants and I saw a lot of women crying tears of joy because of the work and reintegration component of the project. When I saw the girls I thought how much better things would be and a brighter future if more people had the same opportunities, and if the project continued. We are not talking about a few people we are talking about families too, some are single mothers or lone women who face stigma from their families. We need help for the whole community. Some are victims of violence and now they finally have some help.

We have worked to complete a legal and institutional framework to assist VOT and their children as well, health care, legal aid, educational support. We work hard with prevention and this is anti-trafficking month and we are carrying out awareness campaigns across the country. The hardest challenge is reintegration, which is why we need budgets and more support. The work the project has done is self-explanatory. You will see some marvellous achievements, in addition 70% to 80% of VOT are women and girls, meaning the rest are boys and men. So more needs to be done to help reintegrate them (boys and men) into the community.

Based on the needs of Albania, we have developed an action plan that sees the establishment of a multifunctional centre in the north of the country, though the area is not specified yet. Maybe Kukes as it's close to the border and centre of the north. Maybe we're asking for too much, but we need help with the establishment of a centre to increase the capacity of the municipality and to later manage the project if (outside) assistance no longer there.

We have issues with the Roma / Egyptian community crossing to Kosovo to beg, these are mainly men and boys. Maybe a multifunctional centre will be good for PVOT and VOT, but also for migrants and victims of domestic violence (DV) or any violence. This is why it would be multifunctional.

We have the 4 shelters, and a state budget is allocated to the 3 NGO shelters including food for individuals living there as well as salaries for employees.

Q. You mentioned earlier about stigma for single mothers, what kind of stigma do they face, and from whom, and do male VOT experience similar stigma issues?

A. Let me start by saying that here in Albania we call it a small village as we all know each other. We tend to get involved with other people's business more than our own, so this means stigma is there. A specific case, which is prevalent, a young woman in a forced/arranged marriage in North Macedonia, she had 2 children and then separated from her husband as he wanted to traffic her. She went back to her village and lived with her family and sibling, and her village discriminated against and stigmatised her. It's not her fault as it was the father who decided she should be married. The issue is further aggravated when the family don't have much income or opportunities to provide. However, we have made efforts to mitigate risk and worked with social administrators across Albania who work and live in their own communities and they know everyone and whether there is a problem. And they also consider community leaders, one unwritten rule is to always follow the leader. We are working with leaders in training and raising awareness so the VOT understands that they are victims and it is not their fault. Also we tell people not to move – life is not all good

abroad – as they risk being trafficked and owing money, and then they risk being forced into labour. This is how we are working around stigma and prejudice. We would like this initiative to roll out across Albania – currently it's only in 4 regions. The same issues apply across the country.

Q. Do you think the initiatives are working and society is seeing people more as victims?

A. Yes, they are working. By cooperating with state actors and stakeholders we raise awareness with teachers, doctors, security officers in schools, so front line professionals.

A security officer may see a young girl accompanied by stranger so this might be an indicator, or a doctor may see scars and bruises. So bringing awareness to professionals we bring awareness to citizens. But more work is needed. We also have meetings with regional committees and these are another brick in the wall of prevention of HT and illegal migration. So it is ideal to have these initiatives in all regions.

Q. In relation to returns from the UK to Albania. You have contact with organisation including IOM, do you have contact with other trafficking support organisations in the UK?

A. To the best of my knowledge, no.

Q. How do organisations become members of the NRM?

A. The NRM was established in 2006 with a few actors, new actors joined in 2012. A lot of non-state actors joined in 2012. New members can join by unanimous voting of current members, they have to file an official request and there is an official vote. There is criteria, one being that they are involved in the fight against HT.

Groups are invited to join or approach the NRM themselves.

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## Kukes Municipality, 7 October 2022

**Date:** 7 October 2022

**Meeting with:** Municipality officials: Abdulla Domi, Chairman of the Kukes district council. Besarjie Geca – Specialist Regional Directorate of Social Services, Kukes

**Present in the meeting:** 5 representatives from UK Home Office, 2 representatives from British Embassy, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

Besarjie Geca introduced herself and described the department's role in regard to trafficking.

I am a social worker in the state social service under the regional directorate of Kukes. The regional directorate of Kukes prioritises support for potential victims of trafficking (PVOT) and victims of trafficking (VOT). We provide assistance with referrals, carry out interviews and offer psychological support, identify needs and assess levels of risk. Depending on our findings we refer to the relevant authorities /

police. When we find someone is a VOT we refer to residential centres [shelters] in Tirana. We don't have shelters in Kukes so we can't keep or reintegrate VOT here. So they are referred to Tirana for any further services they need.

The same logic applies to those who are not VOT but are at high risk of trafficking. We refer to residential centres as it's too risky to keep them here.

Awareness raising is important to us and we carry out meetings, activities and campaigns to make citizens aware of trafficking risks and indicators, especially now in October as it is anti-trafficking month. We talk to a lot of citizens so they are aware that they may become trafficked. Some people might not always realise the indicators/signs of trafficking without help.

The main regional directorate is in Kukes and being a border point we have a lot of people coming in and out of the country. We have different Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for how we treat VOT who are residents of Kukes and other SOPs for those who are not residents of Kukes. If someone is a PVOT or VOT and from Kukes we carry out an assessment and evaluate their needs and we refer them to the relevant services here. If they are identified as high risk then we refer to shelters. If the person is from outside of Kukes we co-operate with the regional directorate and we carry out all the assessments and then we make sure they return back to their city or town of origin where they undergo other procedures.

Abdulla Domi introduced himself and welcomed everyone to Kukes.

I have been working as head of regional council of Kukes for 3 years and for 6 years I have been secretary general of prefecture as well as chairman for anti-trafficking in Kukes.

Q. How do VOT come to the attention of social services and how does that lead to other support?

A. As regards identification of PVOT and VOT we work closely with schools, social administrators and the community. When they suspect someone is a VOT they refer either to the police, then to us and the process begins. We also provide continuous training to schools, teachers, social workers on indicators of human trafficking (HT) and if they suspect a case they refer to us or police. There is another way, through schools and communities.

Another way to identify PVOT is through the technical anti-trafficking round table. This round table consists of several institutions in Kukes, such as nurses, doctors, labour office officials. If they notice something wrong or think someone is a PVOT, this is raised during round table meetings.

Also the border or state police may identify PVOT or VOT and they refer immediately to us.

A recent positive change was the addition of social administrators as they have been trained in how to identify VOT as they know their communities well and can tell when human trafficking (HT) is happening.

An issue we frequently face is how we can differentiate between HT and illegal migration. I refer to cases of parents who take their children abroad and abandon them there. I don't think this is HT but it's the decision of parents to do that.

Q. How do you decide a person is a VOT rather than they have been subject to illegal migration?

A. Institutionally and legally speaking, our regional directorate tackles VOT in a different manner compared to those subject to illegal migration. With VOT we conduct direct interviews. With children we go to the police station and have a child-friendly interview room. Other professionals talk to them also, such as a police psychologist, we don't want to overwhelm them. For those subject to illegal migration we talk to their families and carry out a family assessment. With VOT it is the victim we talk to directly, with those subject to illegal migration we interview the families.

Q. At what point is the distinction made between someone being an illegal migrant and someone being a VOT?

A. When it comes to illegal migrants we are notified by the destination country that an Albanian minor has been encountered and they will return them to us and we have to carry out procedures. So to do that we talk to the family. With VOT we receive referrals, not for all that are crossing the border illegally, but maybe a minor with a stranger, or something suspicious was noticed. So we have notification and referrals, if an illegal migrant is returned to Albania, or if the person identifies themselves, then they are probably a VOT.

Q. You mention awareness raising, identifying and working with high risk groups. What amounts to a high risk group?

A. I will use a specific case. We had case of a young woman who married a man and moved abroad. She was trafficked, but she escaped and came back to Albania, her family did not accept or welcome her back and so this case was referred to us. As she couldn't go back to her husband as he was her trafficker, and her family was not supporting, we took her to a residential shelter. If cases are high risk, so at risk from family and trafficking from husband, these are the procedures we follow.

Shelters are always our last resort, we always aim for family support, we don't want to separate families. When families support the VOT and are welcoming then we leave them there, but we keep in touch constantly and we look for financial allowances from the government and provide them with all legal possibilities.

When there is no family support and no other way out, we place them in the shelters.

Q. What leads to a lack of family support and accepting the VOT back?

A. The first challenge is bringing awareness of HT. Family tradition and practice is to keep things under wraps as they don't want to reveal that someone has been trafficked, so it is kept secret. However, this has started to change with awareness raising activities. The awareness activities have a clear schedule and in terms of prefectures they hold frequent round table meetings in the fight against HT.

The 16th of October is international day against trafficking. Upon instruction of the national coordinator we carry out a lot of awareness activities, in schools, in hospitals, and we carry out marches, talk to high risk people, we have even gone on television to cover this topic and reach out to the remotest areas. Fortunately, based on surveys, we have found communities are much more aware now of what HT is and they are more sensitive to this issue and report more to police and other authorities.

Q. Do you have numbers of VOT that have returned to families and stayed there?

A. With statistics it is confidential information and we have to receive permits to share this information according to law. We do know a lot of projects, such as those funded by UNICEF and the UK government, have been run and support has been provided to families to help the VOT stay with them.

Q. How long do you continue to monitor those returned to families?

A. There is no standard duration, it is on a case by case basis. We don't stop providing financial or psychological support until we are sure the individual has fully reintegrated into society, like going back to school, working or living independently, personally or psychologically. So support continues until we are sure we have filled all the gaps. We don't leave them behind.

Q. Can you confirm if anyone has been fully reintegrated after being a VOT?

A. Yes. We are unable to give numbers – that is confidential. According to legislation and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), public institutions are in charge of helping VOT in helping them get jobs that last 6 months to one year, renting houses until they can afford their own home and rent, and psychological support as needed. If the traffickers manage to track down the person then we provide police support and protection. A few years ago, in 2015, there were a lot of Albanians moving to Europe and migration was high. At the round table, one member said that a VOT came back from Italy and she had been sexually exploited. When she came back here the state provided her with the necessary support. When they told her they would find her a job she asked what was the salary and they told her 200 euro minimum wage, and she said, 'I earn 300 euro in one night in Italy so this is nothing', so she refused support. So this is something that you should bear in mind. But the situation is similar now. We are a small country so this is all we can help them with.

Q. Do you have any information about male VOT?

A. Male VOT is a new phenomenon, which has increased recently. Also I want to say that the main cause of HT is due to a difficult economic situation. Please bear in mind that there are good Albanians out there, we are not happy with the negative instances, but Albania and Kukes are generally peaceful. So it's not necessarily as portrayed by the media.

I would suggest we carry on with more direct projects that help vulnerable groups and reaching out to the community, reaching out and helping raise awareness. This could be the solution.

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## **Vatra Psycho-Social Center, 10 October 2022**

**Date:** 10 October 2022

**Organisation meeting with:** Brikena Puka, Executive Director, Vatra Psycho-Social Center

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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### **Overview from Vatra**

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Vatra is an organisation that has been involved in anti-trafficking actions since 1997. From 1997 to 1999 we had a group of women led by the founder of Vatra, Vera Lesko. We started to work on a study on the development of human trafficking (HT) in Albania, when migrants from different districts of Albania came to Vlore and the traffickers took girls to Italy by boat and other European countries. This included minor girls who had been recruited through forced / false marriages. Families wanted to marry their daughters to secure them a better life in an EU country. They were unaware that the girls would end up being trafficked and the girls didn't know that they were victims of trafficking (VOT).

Vatra started to gather information on how these women and girls were recruited and other information on HT. Vatra has had support from the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), which has offices in Vlore, from DFID (Department of International Development) and the British Embassy, as well as financial support from the US embassy. Firstly we worked on prevention, working with youths in schools and in communities, especially in rural areas, providing information on HT and how girls are trafficked and the kinds of exploitation, in order to reduce the trafficking of girls. During 1997 to 1999, 100% of VOT were girls, not men and boys.

In parallel, using awareness raising and round tables we informed institutions what was happening to raise awareness regarding the trafficking of girls and risks of being trafficked in European countries. At the time the government did not accept that HT was a problem. Since 2001 the government has started to recognise that HT was a problem and started to take measures by creating anti-trafficking units, the prosecution and Court of serious crime and creating law and policies. Vatra has been a member of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) since 2005.

In 2004, Vatra, with the support of IREX USA, established the first Regional Anti-trafficking Network composed of local institutions and representatives by prosecutors of serious crime and NGOs. After that, following the model of Vatra as best practice, the Albanian Government established Regional Anti-trafficking Committees and anti-trafficking technical tables in 12 districts.

Vatra have continued to undertake awareness raising activities and are in contact with VOT and potential VOT (PVOT). All VOTs that have been deported from Europe have no place to stay because, despite the fact the family have put them in the situation (forced marriage), they don't accept them back into the family. The situation is very bad, they have no food and no shelter. Vatra established its first shelter in Albania in 2001.

The Vatra shelter for VOT accommodated Albanians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Romanians, North Macedonians, Kosovans, Serbians – Albania at that time was a transit country. All the victims that had been deported or identified by police were referred to Vatra shelter. In 2001 Vatra was referred and assisted 428 VOT.

## **Interview**

Q. How many VOT have you supported?

A. Vatra have supported more than 2,600 VOT since the beginning. Actually, more than that as some of the victims were with children, so we support single mothers.

Q. How many can you support in the shelter?

A. We have 16 beds, plus 2 for babies. It's not only Vatra who have a shelter, different NGOs, such as the Different and Equal and Other Vision [Tjeter Vizion], and there is the state-run shelter. The state-run shelter provides only reception and rehabilitation services, not reintegration and only short term, not long term.

But NGOs provide reintegration for women, men, girls and boys. Tjeter Vizion provide for children only. Few VOT are men but we provide housing, rented apartments, food packages, medical and psychological assistance. We have a multi-disciplinary team with social workers, nurse, doctor, psychologist, teacher and lawyer. Some cases have never gone to school and we provide support to enrol children or get them back into school. We also have shelter security and use a private security company, licenced by the Ministry of Interior, and the service is 24 hours for VOT and staff. We provide medical assistance and a doctor and collaborate with health institutions.

Psychologists work in the legal clinic which gives legal support to VOT, PVOT and victims of GBV.

Vocational training is provided in different districts in Albania in collaboration with Vocational Trainings Directorates, not only for cases in shelters but also for those that don't need shelter. We provide for these cases the tool kit for vocational training and the state provides the training free of charge but not the tool kits. We also provide coaching for employment, on the job training /internship, and we pay salaries for 3 to 6 months in the business sector, working with employers to secure contracts after the internship. Another important service we provide is that we establish micro businesses and business plans, and how to manage a business. We also provide rented apartments for all VOT.

Q. How long is rent provided?

A. Sometimes 6 months and sometimes a year, especially when the victims have children. We do advocacy work to local authorities in order for them to provide support for victims through receipt of social housing bonus, after 6 months (or 1 year's) support provided by Vatra.

Q. How many have you supported in this way?

A. More than 2,600 since the beginning. Between 2020 and September 2022 we have supported 201 VOT and PVOT, and 114 of their children (61% minors and 39% adults).

Q. How many were men?

A. 21% men and boys and 79% women and girls. 32% or 45 cases were single mothers.

Some of the single mothers got pregnant during exploitation, but some of the victims had experienced DV. In Albania there is a mentality in rural areas that families don't accept divorce. A family thinks when their daughter gets married she should stay with her husband despite DV. The other issue is there may be no possibility for families support their daughters, because of poverty and lack of accommodation. Families do not have the resources to support their daughters due to acute financial needs. They do not have support from local municipalities. Actually they only receive



9,000 lek (\$80 USD) per month by the state. They cannot do anything with this amount of money. Without support from the system and family, VOT are preyed upon by traffickers who promise accommodation, food and support, but then they are forced into the sex trade and, to keep them, the traffickers begin to threaten their children or they tell the VOT that their children will be harmed if they do not work in prostitution for the traffickers. So they are forced to become prostitutes.

Q. If women are threatened, do they go to the police?

A. If they do this the traffickers will threaten the women and their children. Some police refer women to us as victims of DV. But some women come to the shelter and they start to explain more, saying my husband or partner has forced me to become a prostitute. They do not reveal they are exploited to the police, but to us they do.

Q. Do you tell police that the referred case is not a victim of DV but a VOT?

A. Yes, we report immediately to the responsible authority.

Q. What action is taken?

A. If the VOT denounces their trafficker then action will be taken, we help together with lawyers and police. If they do not want to denounce we cannot force them. Sometimes the VOT do not trust the justice system. We have cases where traffickers have been denounced and the process has been so long, 2 or 3 years, so they have a lack of trust and patience in the process. The other VOT share what has happened to them (in the justice system), and, based on the experience of others, they choose not to make the denunciation. The trafficker is free and the VOT is in a shelter. VOT go out for training and education accompanied by the social worker, and the shelter is not closed. Linza (state-run shelter) is a closed shelter where protection is provided by the state police. It is high security. For employment, we make a risk assessment and the victims can go to the job placement by themselves.

Q. How long after someone leaves the shelter is reintegration support provided?

A. The reintegration lasts 5 years based on national standards for VOT and those at risk of being trafficked. But if the VOT after 2 years says, 'I do not need any more support', she signs an agreement and they can opt out of the shelters and services. We follow up after they leave the shelter and we continue to offer support. In cases of mental health problems, we have some with more than 5 years support. In order to prevent re-trafficking we continue to offer support.

Q. Are VOT that you see internally trafficked, or also trafficked abroad?

A. Most cases are exploited within Albania. Just a few are from England and also The Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Kosovo, Serbia, and others, but very few. I will mention that even in European countries identification is a problem and not a priority for governments of European countries. Compared to the past when we had a lot of VOT returned from Europe and referred by the EU, we do not have so many now. Based on information gathered it is said that Albanian women and girls are exploited in other countries. VOT testify that other women are not identified. In 2021, 159 new cases have been identified, supported by the national anti-trafficking coalition shelters. 66 of them have been supported by Vatra.

This is not an exact number of cases that have been exploited. This is only the tip of the iceberg. We don't know about other countries or cases in Europe. Around 70%

are identified by mobile units. Vatra has 5 mobile units in 5 districts, most of the cases are identified by these mobile units and every case identified by mobile units has to be referred immediately to the anti-trafficking unit of the police and also to national responsible authority to the Ministry of Interior. In some cases, social workers of mobile units go with the PVOT, at their will, to be interviewed by the police and by a social worker of the child protection unit of the municipality, to be identified as a PVOT.

We see that there are a few number, compared with other years, who are identified by responsible local authorities, under the SOPs.

Q. Do you have evidence of re-trafficking?

A. With cases assisted by Vatra we cannot say exactly if they have been re-trafficked or have left the programme. Or they tell us they don't want any more contact, this is only 2%, but we cannot say if they have been re-trafficked or just living their own life. One former VOT is now in Spain. We think maybe she could have been re-trafficked from photos we have seen on social media. She is still in contact with us and I ask her how it is going, she says she is working and well, but we suspect that she has been re-trafficked. She was working in Vlore and we don't know how she got to Spain.

Q. Did she drop out of the programme?

A. She was supported for 6 months in a rented apartment, then she continued to support herself and after that she said she no longer needed help.

Q. Would you notify police of your concerns?

A. Yes, but of course they need evidence.

Q. Is that the only case (of re-trafficking) you are aware of?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you have any evidence of former VOT being located by their trafficker?

A. It is not difficult to find someone, because sometimes the girls or the women are not very careful and they put themselves on social media. Even when they go to a job placement we say don't share information with those in the work place, don't share your story as you don't know about the other people, you don't have to share. We are here to help you.

We make a risk assessment for the VOT to re-join their family, especially with the minor girls. Sometimes it has been the family itself that has exploited the girl, for sex or begging. If the family is supportive and does not judge the victim we work to reinforce the relationship. When they have support of family the reintegration is easier for them. We, the family and institutions need to work together on reintegration for it to be successful.

Q. Is that common, do you have a lot of success?

A. Yes a lot of success stories. We have a case of one woman going to university. She was pregnant and had the baby in the shelter and she stayed in the shelter for one and half years. During this period the woman's father didn't know she had a child, he might have killed her as it would be seen as shameful and she would be seen as a prostitute rather than a victim. But after mediation with her siblings they

eventually began to accept her and she is in rented accommodation near the family. We gave financial support and her mother takes care of her child whilst she is at university. She is studying law. Her father has now accepted his daughter.

We have a lot of success and, through projects with UNICEF and other donors such as CIES Onlus and so on, we support projects with setting up micro businesses, There is a consortium of funding by UNICEF along with British Embassy funds, and the women manage their income through this and also for cases where they have children.

Another case example is that a girl came to Vatra at age 15 and she stayed in the shelter for 3 years. Her mother sent her to Italy for prostitution, and although her sisters were married they didn't support her. She finished school at 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but she has now finished at 9<sup>th</sup> grade following support from Vatra. And now she has got married, she is 20 years, and we are happy as last week she asked me to facilitate the process to help with documents she has sought for vocational training, but she wants to follow high school part time.

Q. Is the husband aware of what happened to her?

A. Yes she has shared the information. But her in-laws don't know.

Another case, during an anniversary event, one girl made a speech making recommendations to the government on how to improve legislation and policy for the protection of VOT. This former victim is now a member of the advisory board in the national anti-trafficking co-ordinators office. She knows what victims need.

Q. Are shelters always full?

A. Not always, but all cases will be provided with shelter if necessary. In all the 4 shelters no one is without shelter, if there is no capacity in one, they go to another shelter. We make a risk assessment on a case by case basis. A VOT can choose when it is safe and where they want to go.

Q. Do you have any numbers for those helped into business and employment?

A. From 2020 until September 2022 we supported 10 cases into micro businesses, 4 were supported by UNICEF with British Embassy funding.

Q. You spoke about the history of Vatra in helping with VOT and support services. Do you think awareness raising is changing societal attitudes?

A. Yes absolutely. At the beginning even Vatra faced societal discrimination, and people would say we support prostitutes, but actually now we have cases referred to us by the community. We work in schools and we work to provide information on HT. We now have sessions with men and women, at the beginning we worked only with women. But now we have changed the approach, we organise the sessions for men and women together and provide information about HT. Sometimes after an information session we have people that go to mobile units and give information about PVOT, so we have cases referred by youth and community, as they now trust our work. To start we were not so well known. In the north the distrust is more prevalent. We have to continue to work on awareness raising for other generations.

Q. Do you find there is less prejudice against men?

A. Yes absolutely. Based on our statistics for males, 3% of cases have been minor boys exploited sexually, 7% forced begging and forced labour, 13% criminal acts such as burglary, distributing drugs, 16% forced labour, 61% forced begging.

Q. Do you think that a VOT can be relocated back to Albania and reintegrate into the country?

A. Considering the many cases we have protected and provided services, of course they can. But before that the Home Office need to make a risk assessment. If the trafficker is in prison, the VOT can return and follow the process of reintegration.

If the trafficker is not in prison then the VOT would be at risk. Sometimes the women are victims at first, then they become the exploiter or pimp. In shelters, some of the girls (especially adult women) manipulate the other girls, especially minors. Of course, the staff are very vigilant and prevent this phenomenon.

In Albania we have a law on witness protection (WP), this was approved in 2005 and was improved in 2009. Up until 2005, Vatra was included in a WP programme with the support of task force of OSCE Presence in Albania and IOM. Eight cases have changed their name and gone abroad. After 2005, only one girl from Vatra and one girl from a different NGO have been included in WP supported by the government.

One case in 2009 or 2010 was assisted by Vatra and stayed in a shelter for 3 years, she was considered high risk, as well as her family members. Even her family had to come to the office to meet with her secretly. She was trafficked to England, and her traffickers have been linked with politicians. When this issue was raised by our office to the prosecutors who were investigating the case, even when the woman's body had a lot of signs – bruises, burns, including information from hospitals where she had multiple abortions in the UK – even after that the prosecutor did not accept to refer this case to the Witness Protection Programme Office. She was later referred to the US Embassy witness protection and she is now living in the US. Albania has very good legislation and policies, it's the implementation that is the problem.

We have advocated to the national anti-trafficking coordinator to have specific laws to give protection to VOT. We have a law for victims of domestic violence but not specific for VOT. Drafting of this law is part of the national action plan 2021 to 2023 and we are advocating to put this through parliament.

For its dedication and the contribution in anti-trafficking actions in Albania, Vatra has been awarded by Anti-slavery International (2003), US State Department (TIP Report 2009), Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2010), OSCE (2015), Vlora Municipality (2014), and Child 10 Sweden (2021), and so on.

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## Vatra organisational profile and history



### Organizational profile

Vatra's activity dates back in 1999. It has been initially registered as a non-profit organization at Vlora District Court (Decision 693, dt. 02.10.2001). Later, in

accordance with the Law on Non-Profit Organizations, it has been registered at Tirana District Court (Decision 211, dt. 17.01.2005). Since 2004, Vatra has been licensed by the National Licensing Center for (1) Provision of Residential Services; and (2) Provision of Community Services. It is also has been registered to Tax office with number K47201205W.

“Vatra” Psycho-Social Center aims at “preventing trafficking in human beings, domestic and gender-based violence and social-economic empowerment of victims of these phenomena through information, education, advocacy, and social residential and community services”.

Target groups of “Vatra” include people in need, especially women, girls, youth, and children—victims of trafficking and violence in Albania.

The main priorities of “Vatra” include:

- Preventing trafficking in human beings, violence, and sexual abuse (through sensitizing campaign in overall Albania, supporting with services children, girls, and women in the vulnerable situation)
- Identification of victims and potential victims of human trafficking through outreach work from mobile teams.
- Shelter, rehabilitation and reintegration services for victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and violence.
- Access to justice for victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and violence.
- Capacity building for representatives of local government institutions and other NGOs
- Lobbying and advocacy (Contribution to the drafting and improvement of Albanian legislation and policies, inputs and recommendations for national and international reports, studies and researches etc.)

“Vatra” has a staff of 32 professionals including social workers, psychologists, lawyers, teachers, medical doctors/nurses, as well as administrative and financial management staff. “Vatra” Psycho-Social Center is directed by an external Board of 5 people representing education institutions, civil society, and business.

22 volunteers have been engaged to Vatra’s activities and services.

### **The history of the organization:**

In 1997, Vlora, as a port city was the main point in Albania where human trafficking and smuggling was developed. During those years a considerable number of girls were trafficked for sexual exploitation to Italy and other European Countries by national and international trafficking network. In June 1997, a group of women activists led by Ms. Vera Lesko, (the founder of Vatra Center), considering the increase in the number of girls recruited and trafficked by these organized networks, started to work in preventing this phenomenon. Their work consisted in contacting directly the victims of trafficking, direct meetings with the community members, especially in rural areas (where the victims come from) providing information on human trafficking, forms of human trafficking, ways that traffickers used to recruit the

victims, consequences of trafficking, etc. Besides this, based on what was happening to the Albanian women and girls, Ms. Vera Lesko raised this as a concern at local, central, and international institutions. In fact, the government at that time did not accept the development of human trafficking as a phenomenon. International institutions such as the OSCE, the British Embassy, and US Embassy, etc. appreciated and considered as valuable the information given by "Vatra".

In 1999 with the support of the US Embassy, British Embassy and DFID was created "Vatra" Psycho-Social Center. Only in 2001, the Albanian Government started to take the first measures against human trafficking and considered Vatra Centre as one of the main partners in the fight against human trafficking.

Since 1999, "Vatra" has implemented numerous projects focusing on community information and awareness on trafficking in human beings, violence, direct services for the victims, capacity building of structures dealing with anti-trafficking and violence, advocacy, and lobbying. More than 36,000 people have benefited from awareness projects till now.

In 2001, "Vatra" with the support of Save the Children expanded its activity by establishing **the first Shelter in Albania**, which continues to provide accommodation, rehabilitation, and reintegration services for, Albanian and Foreign victims of human trafficking and their children, as well victims of gender-based violence.

Since 2001, "Vatra" has assisted 2606 victims of trafficking, 622 children of victims, as well as over 2300 victims of gender based violence and also their children.

Since 2001, 10 victims of human trafficking (one of them with her child) have been supported by Vatra to be included in witness protection programs of international agencies and another victim has been supported to be included in the national witness protection program in 2018.

In 2004 with the financial support of IREX, USA Vatra has established **the first Anti-trafficking Network of Local Institutions** which has been evaluated and followed as a model by the Albanian government in 2006. Thus, in May 2006 Albanian Government established the Regional Anti-trafficking Committees in 12 districts of Albania, composed of local institutions and NGOs.

In 2018 Vatra with the financial support of the European Commission through Save the Children, has established **the first Legal Clinic in Southern Albania** which provides legal and psychological support and assistance for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence. Every year the Legal Clinic assists more than 250 victims of trafficking and violence and their children.

**Recently (September 2022) Vatra has been licensed by Ministry of Justice to provide legal assistance for victims of trafficking, victims of gender based violence and their children.**

Since 2001, "Vatra" is involved in the implementation of Albanian government programs to fight trafficking and violence.

#### **Contribution to national policies – Networking and partnerships:**

- Vatra Center is a member and signatory of the Agreement of National Referral Mechanism for identification, referral, and protection of victims/potential victims of

trafficking (since 2005 and upon its revision in 2012) and also a member of the Anti-trafficking National Responsible Authority.

- It is also a member of the National Anti-trafficking Task Force led by the National Ant trafficking Coordinator (in the Ministry of Interior) and a member of the Transnational Referral Mechanism.
- It is a partner of the Albanian Government in the development and implementation National Anti-Trafficking Strategy and Action Plans (since 2001 and ongoing);
- It has participated with its expertise in the Working Group established by the Ministry of Labor, Social Welfare and Equal Opportunities (now Ministry of Health and Social Protection) for the development of standards for the distribution of social services for victims of trafficking (approved with Decision of Council of Ministers Nr. 195 dt 11/04/2007).
- Vatra's experts have provided their expertise for the development of Standard Operating Procedures for the identification and referral of victims/potential victims of trafficking (approved with the Decision of Council of Ministers No. 582 dated 27/07/2011). In 2017 these procedures were revised and are approved with Decision of Council of Minister No.499, date 29.8.2018 "For the approval of standard operating procedures for the protection of victims/ potential victims of trafficking." Vatra has given its contribution to drafting these revised and improved procedures.
- Contribution in drafting the "Action Plan for socio-economic reintegration of girls and women victims of trafficking "approved with the Decision of Council of Ministers Nr. 115 dt. 17/02/2016.
- In 2017 was a member of the working group (between 6 organizations in Albania) in drafting the first Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2023 for "Legal Public Education".
- Contribution in drafting national strategies and action plans for gender equality.
- Every year Vatra contribute with inputs and recommendation for US Tip Reports and EU progress Report for Albania in the anti-trafficking field (for this last directly to consultation meetings in Brussels facilitated financially by Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation since 2010)
- "Vatra" Centre has delivered its activities and services through the collaboration, endorsement, and implementation of agreements with public institutions at the central and local level, and NPOs operating overall in Albania.
- Vatra is also a member of different networks and coalitions such as Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelter (since 2007), Albanian Women Empowerment Network, (established in 2009), WAVE network, RENATE network, La Strada International Network, United Response Against Human Trafficking , "Justice for all coalition", Netzcraft movement", "End Slavery Now" Movement, Washington DC, USA, etc.
- Vatra is member of National Assembly of Code of standards for Non Profit Organizations.

**Awards:**

The success and contribution of “Vatra” demonstrate its hard work, efforts, and sacrifices, which are awarded by the Albanian government as well as international organizations and institutions. Some of them include:

- “Antislavery International” award, awarded by the Antislavery International, London, UK, November 2003.
- “Gratitude Award “from Catholic Mission in Blinisht Lezhe on 3 March 2006.
- “Women of Courage” award, for Ms. Vera Lesko (founder of Vatra center and actually Honorary President and former Executive Director of “Vatra”) awarded by the US State Department (handed by the American Ambassador, Mr. John Withers during a high-level ceremony in Tirana on 12 March 2009).
- “Heroin of Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings” for Ms. Vera Lesko awarded by the US State Department (handed by State Secretary Hillary Clinton during a ceremony in Washington on 16 June 2009 in the frame of the 2009 State Department Report on trafficking in human beings).
- “Ambassador of Honor” for Ms. Vera Lesko, awarded by the Albanian Government, recognizing her work against human trafficking, handed by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilir Meta, 4 February 2010).
- In December 2014, Vlora Municipality awarded “Vatra” with "Protagonist of the Year" for its active role in the protection of women and girls victims of trafficking and domestic violence.
- In December 2015, The OSCE Presence in Albania gave Ms. Brikena Puka, Executive Director of Vatra, a Certificate “In recognition of her outstanding contribution to fulfilling the broader humanitarian and security goals of the OSCE mandate in Albania.
- In February 2021, the Swedish organization Child10 awarded “Vatra” with the “Girls’ rights have no price” Child10 Award 2021, recognizing the work and contribution that Vatra is doing against child trafficking, among many organizations all over Europe.

### **Donors and financing bodies**

During these years Vatra Center has been supported financially by different donors such as US Embassy in Albania, DFID, British Embassy, The Sigrid Rausing TRUST London, UK, Norwegian Church Aid, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation Sweden, SIDA, UN Voluntary Trust Fund, Albanian Women Empowerment Network (with SIDA funds), IOM, USAID, Save the Children, UNICEF, Terre des Home, European Commission, Austrian Development Agency, Australian Embassy in Rome, King Baudouin Foundation, Post Code Foundation in Sweden, CIES Onlus, etc. Since 2015 Vatra is supported financially by the Albanian government (Ministry of Health and Social Protection) for the services for victims of trafficking in shelter and also by Vlora Municipality.

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[Vatra statistics](#)





**Cases of victims/potential victims of trafficking assisted during 2020-september 2022 by Vatra Psycho Social Centre**

	<b>No of cases of VoTs/PVoTs and their children</b>
<b>2020</b>	96 VoTs/PVoTs and 53 their children. From 96 VoTs/PVoTs, 33 VoTs / PVoTs and 17 their children were new cases and 63 VoTs/ PVoTs and 36 their children were ongoing cases from previous years.
<b>2021</b>	66 VoTs/PVoTs and 54 children (all new cases)
<b>January – September 2022</b>	39 VoTs/PVoTs and 7 their children (all new cases)
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<p><b>201 VoTs/PVoTs and 114 their children</b></p> <p><b>So during 2020-September 2022 have been assisted :</b></p> <p><i>63 cases of VoTs/PVoTs and 36 their children were ongoing cases from previous years.</i></p> <p><i>138 cases of VoTs / PVoTs and 78 their children are new cases in the reintegration program.</i></p> <p><b><i>112 cases of VoT or 80% have been identified and referred by mobile units in Vlora, Berati, Durres and Dibra established and supported by Vatra in the framework of its projects . In some cases mobile units have collaborated with antitrafficking police officer and child protection units of municipalities to make the initial interview and to give the status as potential or victims of human trafficking (through formal interview).</i></b></p> <p><b>26 cases or 20% have been identified and referred to Vatra by local institutions or other NGOs.</b></p>

- **Through the program supported by UNICEF with the funds of British Embassy during 2020- April 2022 have been assisted 145 cases of VoTs/ PVoTs and 78 their children.**

- 32 % of the cases of VoTs/PVoTs in Vatra’s program are single mothers.
- 61 % e of the cases VoTs/PVoTs who are assisting by Vatra are minors and 39 % are adults, but some of them have been minors when they have been recruited by the traffickers and have been exploited mostly sexually.
- 79% of the cases of VoTs/PVoTs are girls and women and 21% men and boys (mostly of them under 15 years old)

### **Forms of exploitation of males**

<b>Forms of exploitations of males</b>	<b>%</b>
Forced begging	61 %
Forced labor	16 %
Low criminal acts (theft; distributing of narcotics)	13 %
Forced begging and forced labor	7 %
Sexual exploitation	3 %

### **Brikena Puka**

**Executive Director**

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### **Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 10 October 2022**

**Date:** 10 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 3 officials from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP)

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 British Embassy representative, 1 Interpreter),

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### **Interview**

Q. Can you tell us about your work in the Ministry in terms of supporting VOT?

A. First of all we are responsible for drafting policies, such policies including strategic documents and legal framework.

For VOT or PVOT (potential victims of trafficking) we have a legal framework, this includes law on social care services and the beneficiaries are PVOT and VOT. In addition we have a law on child rights protection, it stipulates the prevention of violence and sexual use of minors, and there is also a mechanism in place for the referral of children being trafficked. Also we have a law on domestic violence (DV) because we have considered DV is one of the main issues that leads to trafficking, and we have a 2021 to 2030 strategy on DV. More recently there have been amendments to the criminal code in line with the strategy and international conventions.

The law on DV is also backed by sub-legal acts, which are implemented by relevant coordinators and departments. Moreover we have a law on social assistance, law number 59 (2019), and one of the benefits of social assistance is for VOT and PVOT. Also, in December 2021, a Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) was approved, overseeing the necessary paperwork and allowance for victims of DV and PVOT/VOT. The allowance, or economic aid has now tripled, however this is provided on condition that the VOT is not placed in a shelter.

Since the sector that I chair is in charge of drafting and implementing law we are responsible for setting up new social services for all vulnerable categories including VOT. Recently we have taken steps to increase financing to social services, with the establishment of the financing mechanism (Social Fund). The fund has been planned for 3 years, funded by the state budget to help the municipality to improve or set up new social services, to better meet the needs of vulnerable communities, including VOT/PVOT. Over these 3 years we have financed services at municipality level as well as regional level. At regional level we support 3 shelters for VOT, these 3 shelters are managed by civil society. A state funded budget is allocated for operating expenses as well as salaries for those employed there. We have also established 2 national online helplines, for children and adults, both male and female, and we provide assistance to individuals who may have experienced sexual abuse, DV and trafficking.

For over 3 years we have also financed the LGBTI shelter as there have been instances of sex abuse, violence and trafficking against LGBTI persons as well. In Tirana hospital, the Liliun centre provides assistance to victims of violence, including sexual, and VOT. Such assistance is provided for men boys, girls and women, so for all individuals. In 2 regions, we have established 2 one-stop shops that provide support to children who are victims of serious forms of violence, mainly sexual abuse. The centre and shelters provide support to all individuals, although 90% of victims are women and girls.

As regard the forms of financing and number of cases, I can provide the numbers. From 2021 to June 2022 the shelters provided support to 396 VOT or PVOT. These 396 are not necessarily all placed in shelters but they are also helped in the community with reintegration, with education, vocational training, free legal aid, housing and so on. As regard the 2 helplines we provide support by referring cases to relevant institutions and sectors : (i) for child victim of violence and abuse and (ii) for victims of gender-based violence. During 2021, respectively there are: (i) 32,116 phone calls; of which 887 cases referred to relevant institutions and 2,383 online counselling and psycho-social; (ii) 3,469 phone calls; of which 827 direct counselling sessions (face to face) and; 742 legal assistance; and 1,235 referrals to care services.

We have helped 6,074 cases (not all VOT) (legal assistance, face-to-face counselling, online counselling and psycho-social support and cases referred to care institutions) in 2021.

Q. So nationally 35,585 people have contacted you?

A. They have received support. The support the helplines will offer is over-the-phone or face-to-face counselling and referral to relevant institutions, on a case by case

basis, either from government or other organisations. Up to June 2022 there have been 65 beneficiaries from the LGBTI shelter.

Regarding statistics we will share the most up to date information and regard helplines we will verify and send to you. The 2,122 phone calls from 2 helplines have been referred to relevant institutions. At the Liliun Centre at Tirana hospital, from 2018 until 21 July 2022 there have been 110 beneficiaries. Out of these 80% have been children – in total 90% were women and girls.

Subordinate to the MoHSP and funded by the state budget are 2 national centres, one for treating victims of DV and the other for treating VOT. Until June 2022, 48 individuals have had assistance from the national centre for domestic violence, of whom 13 were boys. Currently only 5 women receive support at the national centre for VOT. This is up to date information, as we speak to the trafficking centre.

In the framework of social funding we provide support to municipalities. We have established 4 multi-functional community based services, professional psycho-social support and family empowerment as well as legal aid. Until June 2022, 569 beneficiaries have received services from the 4 multi-functional centres. We have also established 2 community based services in Vlore and Korçë. These 2 community based services aim to avoid children being institutionalised and providing positive parenting courses which is relevant to HT. This is an approximate figure, but funds reach up to \$70 million USD.

There are awareness raising campaigns, with economic aid for single mothers, this was doubled since January 2022 and it increases depending on the number of children. The more children they have, the higher the economic aid. When I was talking about legal framework I should have mentioned the law on social enterprises, which stipulates that 30% of staff must come from a disadvantaged group, such as single mothers, VOT and so on.

October is the awareness raising month against HT and November is the month against DV. A lot of activities are carried out, the Ministry of Interior (Mol) has a cross-cutting strategy against HT and also carries out awareness activities. When you meet with representatives from the State Agency for Child Protection and Rights you will receive more information on this. The referral system works closely with our state social services.

We are part of the National Action Plan against HT 2021-2023, as implementing institution, with specific action in the social and health sector. This action plan includes several cross-cutting pillars and is managed by the Mol by the national coordinator of HT. In the framework of cross-cutting community and decision making the NRM was established, it has high level membership and representatives. Also another inter-sectorial body is the Responsible Authority, with technical level members, including a representative from the health sector of MHSP, which cooperates with complex cases that cannot be resolved at a regional level, by Regional Committees Against Trafficking of Human Beings (technical multidisciplinary group).

The NRM is actually one of the most robust and well established mechanisms in the country, working with the standard operating procedures (SOPs), which were renewed in 2018. SOPs give ways to identify, refer and support PVOT/VOT as well as responsibilities to the social sector. Based on the SOPs, the MoHSP has drafted

sector manuals on social services and health. All the services mentioned have specialised or specific service standards.

In the framework of SOPs we have carried out training sessions in 2019/20 and 2021 in health and social sectors to train front line staff in identifying, supporting and referring VOT and PVOT.

In terms of prevention, the local health care units have their own focal points against trafficking and sessions against HT are implemented as an inter-sectorial approach and these are more frequent during anti-trafficking month.

Q. Is the legal framework implemented across the country?

A. Law number 12/2016 on social services stipulates the monitoring and inspection of social services provided in the country. By monitoring we don't mean imposing penalties on organisations, but we provide mentoring to improve standards and the institute in charge of mentoring is state social services. State social services is responsible for monitoring social services funded by the state budget. The state social services inspectorate is in charge of inspecting services to ensure they are up to standard.

Regarding protection of VOT, the 2014 law on compulsory health care insurance was enacted in 2014 and health insurance for VOT is covered by the state. This enables these individuals to become part of the public health system and reduce the burden to those who provide care. So this assistance is provided from primary health care and also includes referral and provision of secondary and tertiary care including mental health (MH) services. This is provided free and covered by the state budget to VOT, so could include medicines and intermediary diagnostic or treatment services, as well as other free of charge healthcare packages, provide by both public and non-public hospitals (as in nephrology, cardio-surgery, hearing problems, etc.). These packages are 100% financed by the Compulsory Health Care Insurance Fund and are implemented based on protocols approved by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection.

Q. Does this cover their dependents?

A. If by dependents you mean children, then yes. Children, whether they come from parents of VOT or not, are provided free health care services in any case.

Q. Is this health support long term?

A. Yes, as far as they are part of this category, as foreseen in the above mentioned domestic legal framework.

Q. Are VOT or PVOT outside of Albania made aware of support available in Albania?

A. We cannot answer that, but believe that this could be answered by the anti-trafficking coordinator. Agreements are in place between governments on this issue, for example, the Albanian government has an agreement with Greece on unaccompanied children who are caught in Greece and these minors are returned to Albania under that agreement. The Ministry of Interior coordinates this. Also there are NGOs that work in this field, IOM and UN agencies. In addition to all these, the responsible authority comes into play for minors that want to voluntary return. The responsible authority carries out an assessment of the social and economic situation of the family to see if it is safe to return.

Q. If someone is accepted to be a VOT and returned to Albania, are they accepted as a VOT on arrival or will you make your own decisions when they return?

A. If they have received status of a VOT in the UK they automatically are considered a VOT in Albania. The MoHSP is not the one communicating with the other countries authorities, that authority is the national anti-trafficking coordinator. As soon as a victim arrives in Albania the system and necessary services are in place for them. There is a whole prepared process taking place in Albania while the individual is being assessed in another country, so they may have a safe place to return, and we will decide if it is ok to come back to Albania. We will look at the social economic situation of the families and see where they will be placed, so with their families or in a shelter. If it is not safe for a foreign VOT to return to their country of origin we have a law on asylum seekers and refugees so that they will be as safe as possible. The same applies with a foreign VOT who is recognised in Albania, when they go back to their home country they carry that VOT status over.

Q. Are there any societal barriers that prevent long term reintegration of VOT in Albania?

A. Any victims, of abuse or trafficking, if they are not economically or professionally empowered it is difficult for them to reintegrate. If they do not contribute to society they will be left out. So economic empowerment is a challenge but also the key to success.

We have received information from different municipalities that VOT fail to show up for planned social programmes – not just for social care and benefits but also housing rent bonuses, education, employment opportunities and vocational training. The main reason why VOT don't show up to the municipality to benefit is that they need to prove they are a VOT or a victim of DV and so on. This is in respect of VOT who are not placed in shelters. Those in shelters work with the case manager and have an individual reintegration plan and are provided with all the necessary assistance. Case workers follow up with the victim even 6 months after they have been reintegrated and live on their own. We say 6 months but it could last longer than that. This is all in social services standards. In 2019 or 2020, a 3-member advisory board was established in order to better represent the needs of VOT in the country. The members are previous VOT and they assist the NRM with information about the needs of VOT. This is crucial as it helps VOT have a say in policy making and decisions.

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## SHKEJ, 10 October 2022

**Date:** 10 October 2022

**Organisation meeting with:** SHKEJ – Erion Prendi

**SHKEJ** – 'Shoqata Kombëtare Edukim Për Jetën: NGO - takes action towards societies and vulnerable groups promoting rights, facilitating social integration, and taking part in developing their future. It offers different services, building capacities by making educative activities and advocacy.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> SHKEJ, [About Us | SHKEJ](#), no date

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 British Embassy representative, 1 Interpreter

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## Interview

Q. Please provide an overview of your organisation in terms of trafficking.

A. We work in direct services with children, youth and families in extreme poverty and target for trafficking, not directly with victims of trafficking (VOT), but identifying those at risk, or returnees from outside. For 2 years we have worked with awareness, training for youth in different cities but mainly centres in Tirana, and in particular with the Roma and Egyptian community, they are the most vulnerable and a community that moves around a lot. It is difficult to tell where they are and if they are registered and sometimes they do not register at the civil registry office, especially large families.

Children are able to be registered but it depends on the parents, they often only have one parent, maybe a single mother. Or there is a lack of identity documentation because they have not registered in the city from where they are from. So they just don't register, or they give birth and don't register the birth within the required 3 months because it costs money. This is for civil registration.

Their children don't attend school or kindergarten they are not registered, or they don't have economic support to be registered.

We don't work with VOT, but in the prevention of trafficking. We have worked with VOT trafficked into the country, as well as with Albanians who have been trafficked and returned from abroad, such as from France, Syria, Greece and so on.

Q. Are those returning mostly from Roma and Egyptian communities?

A. They are mostly Albanian. Most are not from the Roma/Egyptian community, they are Albanians. But Albanians regardless of ethnicity have returned to Albania having been trafficked abroad.

Q. Have they been trafficked?

A. This is difficult to know because they don't know they have been trafficked. With minors, they say they have not been trafficked, but that they have travelled by boat and never felt insecure as they were with family members. They think trafficking is only if you've been kidnapped. But we (SHKEJ) know this is trafficking or smuggling, but they do not think it is. Even when they have been outside the country they have always been in the company of people they know. But they have always been forced to beg or forced into labour.

Q. When they return, how do you identify them as a VOT or PVOT?

A. It is quite difficult when they return to find the person, as we work very much with the community, and working for 20 years we are well known and trusted. So other people tell us that an individual or family has returned from abroad, or they come to us and ask for help, for rent, food or accommodation, and then we start the conversation.

Q. What kind of support do you provide?

A. Two types, before COVID 19 we provided direct support. There were centres for children aged 6 to 16 and then for youths aged 16 to 21. We help them register with school and their civil status in the municipality. We have classroom support with homework and materials and activities. We are not a second school, we are a support centre. We do not want to be a second school, just provide activities so that they can feel relaxed. Then, depending on the case, we can provide food for families, clothes and rent and we can help find a job for the father, as the mother is looking after children.

The Albanian mentality is that the mother stays at home. But when you do the activities in the centre it is mainly the mothers who attend and not the fathers. Outside the centre, we try to find as much support as we can alongside our partners, maybe support through the university or professionals at school or find interviews for work.

Q. You said that you were able to provide support, has that changed?

A. There is less economic support since the pandemic and we are in a crisis.

Q. Do you receive funding from the government?

A. No

Q. Who are you funded by?

A. Charity or funding from projects like UNICEF, or with Caritas, and some organisations in Italy, so funding from international NGOs.

Q. You say supporting families into work, what about women who come back with children but no husband?

A. It depends on the children, how many and how old they are. We always help the mother find a job, but we have also tried to support children with schooling so the mother can work. This issue is the mothers don't have training. As an NGO we are careful to find work. We don't want them to work as just seamstresses or in the textile industry where they are not paid well and have to work 12 hours a day. We try to be respectful in terms of finding suitable work. We have helped employ men and women in Tirana for cleaning the city, it is a private corporation and it is related to the city council. We have a good collaboration with Tirana municipality. We know that they have a job with pay and who to contact. The work in Albania is not related to equality.

Q. Can you tell us about general attitudes to single women and mothers?

A. If they have been trafficked it is really hard to communicate as first they don't trust you and give you the wrong information, they don't want to engage and think, 'who are you?' They keep their distance. We approach the situation slowly as we have the patience to work every day with them, but not to ask too many questions. We can help with activities for the children, and small things, and once trust and a relationship is built then we can discuss things with them about the trafficking. Even then they don't give specific information about their experience, especially the name of cities that they have been. We have 2 girls, one trafficked inside of Albania and one outside, one knew us from before. She was very open from the start and she told us how she was trafficked.

Q. Are these women accepted easily into society?



A. Usually they don't return to where they were trafficked from. They may return after 3 or 4 years. One girl who was 18, we knew that she returned to Albania 6 months after she disappeared, but she didn't return to the community, not the same neighbourhood, until after 3 years. Everyone knew this girl was lost. She came back after 3 years and provided an excuse about why she was away. She said she was ok and had been working as a waitress. This was told a long time after we talked to her.

Q. Because she thought she would be rejected?

A. She felt ashamed. She felt people would be pointing fingers at her and would know that she was a prostitute and call her names. She was Albanian and not from the Roma or Egyptian community.

Q. Is that common?

A. Yes that is common. Even now I was working with a family who returned from Syria. They want to move as they know everyone will accuse them of fighting for Daesh (ISIS) and know that they have been in Syria.

Q. Do men who return from abroad face the same stigma?

A. No, or at least they pretend that there is no stigma. In Albania men need to be strong. They say they are men, and they don't accept they have been trafficked or placed into labour exploitation. They would rather say that it was their choice.

This is my personal opinion outside of my work: my friends who have gone to the UK don't realise that they have been slaves sitting 6 months inside a cannabis house.

Q. Are you aware of VOT being re-trafficked?

A. Inside Albania (internal trafficking) but not outside, re-trafficking within Albania but not outside Albania.

Q. Who is at risk of re-trafficking?

A. Always young women, girls who have returned from outside. I don't know if they've been deported or returned to Albania because their trafficker was having problems. Once they have returned they have been trafficked in Albania especially to the seaside in the summer, and in the winter into big cities. I don't know why they're not trafficked outside of Albania, maybe due to the documents. But they have been re-trafficked here in Albania.

Q. Why are they trafficked?

A. Women mainly for prostitution, and men for forced labour and drugs.

Q. You said a lot of children don't recognise been trafficked as they are taken by someone they know.

A. Children from Roma/Egyptian communities don't know they have been trafficked. You ask them what is trafficking and they still don't know. They are not recognising all the steps of trafficking. They don't say have been trafficked, instead they say that they have travelled abroad.

Q. Did you say that they are with their families?

A. Not always, a cousin or person from their community. They say I travelled with them and then they go begging with someone they know but they don't see it as forced labour, they think 'no, we're just working'. This is mostly within Albania.

Q. With regards male VOT, can they access support in education and training?

A. I don't work with these men.

Q. Once a child is identified as a VOT or PVOT do you refer them to the police?

A. We immediately refer to social services, to the child protection officer. If we see a child is high risk we may contact the police, but first step is the child protection officer.

Q. What happens then?

A. The child protection officer in the municipality, they will interview the child or they establish if the child is really at risk. Then there is a meeting with the police and social services and altogether we make a decision whether the child needs to be protected, removed or surveillance put in place. If risk is high then immediately we refer to the police.

Q. What does surveillance mean?

A. The police monitor the situation. Even when I call the police about a child at high risk I have to be very clear and very specific for the police to intervene, otherwise the police do not have time to look into the case.

Q. Do you think police find it difficult to identify VOT?

A. I do not think the police are trained to identify VOT in the community. There are now a lot of younger police so it's my hope this will change. The police inspector of the area, I don't see they are well trained. When talking with schools they (the school) can be the first to identify a child is at risk. There is not a connection between all the actors. We have these meetings, but the police and teachers, they never come. If we see that a child is not ok and has different behaviours we go to the school and see why the child is like that, but not the police.

Q. Because they don't recognise those people are at risk?

A. They don't recognise the signs.

Q. Some children might be trafficked and might be forced to engage in criminal activities, if the police encounter a child in a criminal situation would police consider them as trafficked?

A. I don't know, we have police on the border. The police say whether the child is at risk of being a criminal or not, and then they return the child to their family. But there is no follow up. Police won't go to the home to see if the child is ok.

Q. Have you ever encountered a case that you might have referred to the police and they have ended up in another trafficking situation?

A. As an example, I don't know if he's still here but he worked for the US Embassy as a trainer for the Albanian police. His wife was giving lessons in Tirana and she saw a girl whom she suspected was trafficked. The girl was working on the streets, not being looked after by her mother. The wife called me and we chatted with the girl and we saw that the situation was very difficult, she wouldn't speak in front of her mother, and then she said that sometimes men come to see her. We told the police and they said we will look into it, but we need 2 weeks, we said that's too long, the girl was only 15. After 3 days the police made some investigation and then they

arrested the mother for pimping the girl. But they made a big mistake when they called us as the mother saw us, and she knew we were the ones who reported her to the police. The mother went to prison for 3 months and the girl was in a safe house, not a children's home. After 3 months the mother was released and took the girl and she ended up on streets again.

Since 2020 online trafficking has increased, for us it is very difficult to identify and control. Even traffickers are using online methods, they are no longer in the neighbourhood. After 2021 we opened a centre with 5 or 6 computers so we could monitor what the children did. Traffickers use the internet as a method to contact them. They go online to play games but they don't know how old the people they are speaking with are. So this is the difficulty they are facing now. We need to close internet points and have safe computers for children and so on.

Q. Can the people you support access state benefits?

A. Yes with our support, but we need to make a big effort to help them. Now the documents are all online so we try to work with the families to help them access. E-government is not working at the moment due to the cyber-attacks. We are talking about families who don't know how to read or write so we try to help them a lot with this process. And families in difficult economic situations do not even have a phone. With our help they can access state support. Everything is online. So it's difficult for those without internet access.

Q. What mental health (MH) support is available?

A. Only psychiatric support is available from the state, but not psychological support. There is one psychologist for every 2 or 3 schools, but they are only there twice a week for 600 children. Psychological support has to be paid for. Psychologists are not free for anyone, only free psychiatric help.

Q. We were told about Liliun centre in Tirana hospital, what do they do?

A. They support female victims of violence, I think it's only for women. The good thing it is inside hospital and so the woman has care inside the hospital. I don't know how long the support lasts.

Q. We have spoken to government departments about the legal framework to support VOT. We were told that there is a comprehensive framework in place, do you think it is implemented?

A. They may have told you about the framework, but did they tell you that the budget is zero. We have laws and frameworks and we have strategic plans, we have everything but they are not monitored, they have zero budget and change every 2 or 3 years. We have not, as a civil society, seen any evaluation report to show what they have done within this framework

Q. Do you think that it is possible for a VOT to return to Albania and safely reintegrate and obtain the support that they need?

A. To be honest no, at the moment it is really difficult. We have only 3 centres for trafficked women, 2 are private (Vatra and Different and Equal) and one is government run. It would not be difficult to find a shelter for one or 3 months but it's difficult to find support for a year. If you want to enter into the system you will need at

least 3 months and then they (the state) will say whether you can be helped or not. But then the aid of the help is really low. I don't know if a VOT will be helped.

Those returning from Syria, they are asking for me to pay for the first 3 months' rent. How can I find 3 months' rent?! And then they need food, a job and so on.

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## State Agency for Child Rights and Protection, 11 October 2022

**Date:** 11 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 3 officials from the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection, under the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP).

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 representative from British Embassy 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

I am not elected, I am appointed. I want to explain about the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection that has been established since 2010. There is a new law (18/2017) on the 'rights and protection of the child'. For the first time the term 'child' is in all legal documents, before it was only minors / juveniles. Under the new law a "child" is defined as aged 0 to 18. Our role as state agency is to establish a system for children to protect them from every form of violence, neglect, and trafficking. Our law and constitution has guaranteed protection for all children in Albania.

Now we have a new National Agenda on the Rights of the Child 2021 - 2026, a strategic document that is in line with the Council of Europe Strategy on children's rights. This is an important statutory policy document.

The new Agenda is very important to implement this programme under the MoHSP, also we now have a Minister of Youth and Children. Decision of Council of Ministers no 578 and 129 give special attention on protecting children from trafficking, at the same time they provide a mechanism for the protection of children from forced labour and trafficking in Albania. Before this new law, child protection workers were not included, but we now have child protection workers. We have 61 municipalities in Albania, and we have 61 child protection units (CPUs), one in each municipality.

Now we have built this system of child protection workers to identify, report and manage cases, under this DCM 578 (available online and in English). Our website is [www.femijet.gov.al](http://www.femijet.gov.al)

Legal and sub-legal acts define the obligation of the Albanian state at the central and local level.

Q. So is the purpose to enforce these laws at a local level?

A. The system provides services at a local level for the protection of children in the community. In each municipality there are Child Protection Units, 61 CPU in all Albania. Child Protection Workers are employed in each municipality and administrative units of the municipality. At the moment there are 241 child protection workers in the country. Most of them are social workers and psychologists. The law provides that there should be one child protection worker for every 3,000 children in

an administrative unit. The child protection worker performs the function of the case manager for children in need of protection from the moment of identification or referral, and the Individual Protection Plan until their termination.

Q. So it depends on the population of an administrative unit as to how many child protection workers there are?

A. Yes, so Tirana is a big city. Any administrative unit of the municipality having more than 3,000 children shall have at least one child protection worker. They may not be engaged in other duties. When the administrative unit has less than 3,000 children, this task may be performed by one of the employees for local social services, whose job description includes the function as a child protection worker

Q. Why was a stronger child protection framework introduced?

A. The first law on child rights that established the first child protection system in Albania was adopted in 2010. The new law 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child" improved some of the procedures of child protection system and gave the State Agency on the Rights and Protection of the Child the mandate to monitor and coordinate the organization of the integrated child protection system, including the implementation of interventions and taking of measures for prevention and protection of the child from abuse, neglect, maltreatment and violence.

Q. How is the system working?

A. At the moment it is a strong system, we have trained for many years but absolutely we have challenges like all countries. But now children are being identified and we have the system to protect the children at any time, at any place. In our law child protection is prevention of and response to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of the child, including kidnapping, sexual abuse, trafficking and child labour.

Q. How many children are in the system?

A. Case manager is one per child. CPW manage approximately 2,300 cases of children in need for protection.

Q. Are children in forced labour defined as potential victims of trafficking (PVOT)?

A. Not all, but some. It depends on who is their legal guardian.

From January to August 2022, 25 child VOT or PVOT have been taken into protection.

Q. When you have identified a VOT or PVOT, what is process?

A. We have standard operating procedures (SOPs adopted by Decision of Council of Ministers) for the evaluation of child VOT. Police perform a formal interview with the child to identify whether he is a PVOT or VOT. Child protection workers make the risk assessment of the child.

Child protection is realized through protection measures, interventions, aiming at the development and well-being of the child in the family environment or when, because of the best interest of the child, the latter may not be entrusted to parental care.

Then the child protection workers, together with police, provide protection for the child. Child protection workers apply protection measures if the child is at risk,

regardless of whether they are a VOT or PVOT. Child protection workers decide whether the child will stay with the family or will be placed in alternative care.

Child protection workers collaborate with the inter-sectorial technical group at local level. The inter-sectorial technical group is composed of local representatives of police structures, social services structures, and representatives from the field of education, health, justice, representatives of non-profit organisations, as well as any other specialist who is familiar with the situation of the child or who may contribute in taking or implementing child protection measures, who are obliged to attend the meetings of the inter-sectorial technical group. As soon as a child is considered a VOT or PVOT the child protection worker assesses the case and then calls a meeting with inter-sectorial technical group to draft the child protection plan.

The meeting of technical group provides services the child and its family as: housing, psychological assessment, food, clothing, family visits etc on a case by case basis.

Q. If the child is suspected of being trafficked or exploited by parents what happens?

A. This is actually a problem in Albania. As soon as the police receive such a report they carry out investigations. However when the case goes to court the judges sometimes decide that there is not enough evidence which means the case will be dismissed.

Q. Will the child then be returned to their parents?

A. The emergency protection measure for removing a child from the family and placing the child in alternative care is a temporary protection measure taken for the child who is in a situation of high and imminent risk because of abuse, exploitation, neglect or any form of violence and the child protection worker and state police or prosecution structures have allegations or possess facts that the family or environment where the child stays is not safe for the child. The parents may not exercise their parental responsibility during the period of validity of an emergency protection measure taken by the director of the structure responsible for social services, or of a court decision confirming the measure. The child, child's parent, relatives and any other person, who has a lawful interest, have the right to appeal with the court within 5 days from the taking of the emergency protection measure by the director of the structure responsible for social services. The appeal shall not suspend enforcement of the measure. The appeal shall be examined by the court along with the request for evaluation of the measure by the court

Q. Are you saying the court's want more evidence despite concerns of child protection workers?

A. Yes – it is a new system so it's challenging for courts and the community to become familiar with it. We should not forget that the justice reform has left us with fewer staff. There has been a cultural shift with our awareness raising. We now have 2,389 (in 2021) children in protection. Before these children were not identified, but with awareness raising at a local level we manage now to have these children under protection. So all categories of risk, abuse, VOT and so on.

Q. Do you have figures for 2017 before the law was introduced?

A. It could have been 500 or 600. The department has a lack of resources. We need them to be involved as much as possible. We have a lot of children under protection and all of them are in management. At the same time we need to improve our human

capacities for cybercrime. This is my recommendation. Many of the children are exploited online.

Q. Does the ministry have a sufficient budget to carry out all the services?

A. The budget for child protection services is allocated at local level, by each municipality. No we don't have sufficient budget, the budget for case management is not enough. I think that all child protection workers should have a budget for each case, but there are not enough financial resources.

Q. What is the impact of this?

A. We have problems with the legal side, there is a gap in law regarding procurement of services for children. Needs can arise at any time, we should be ready and have a budget for that. In most cases we have worked with partners and donors, but they won't be there forever so we need to solve this gap. There is also an issue that, in general, partners and donors mainly focus on training the staff. They have enough training but they don't have enough money to put it into practice. If there is no money to help children then why have all the training.

I have seen a slight shift over time, a slow one but it is on the right path. What we need to focus on is empowering families and increase their capacity, as staff are already trained. Yes they do need to refresh and update knowledge time to time, but on the job training is the best option. We as an agency call for transparency, anyone who wants to provide training to child protection workers should go through the state agency first as we are the ones carrying out professional assessments and we know where the gaps are. So training could be irrelevant if they go to a municipality without letting us know. That's just training for the sake of training.

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## Information provided by State Agency for Child Rights and Protection

### General information on child trafficking

The protection of children is in the attention of politics and institutions, whose efforts are to establish a real system for the protector of children from all forms of violence, including trafficking, by concretizing it with a clear legislative and institutional framework.

Law 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child", National Agenda for Children's Rights 2021-2026, DCM No.578, DCM No. 129, these legal documents in their provisions/objectives pay special attention to the protection of children from trafficking and have provided mechanisms for the protection of children from forced labour and trafficking.

These legal and sub-legal acts define the obligations of the Albanian state at the central and local level in the protection of children from economic exploitation, forced labour and trafficking.

From the reports of Child Protection Unites throughout the country, it appears that so far for 2022, 25 cases of trafficked children or potential victims of trafficking have been taken into protection.

Child Protection Workers manage and monitor cases of children in need of protection including VT/VPT children. Pursuant to the Procedures Standards Evaluation, the Child Protection Worker is part of the formal interview of the children, and in cases where the child is found to be a VT/VPT take the case for protection according to the legislation in force, implementing the steps for case management. The Child Protection Worker, in cooperation with the Intersectional Technical group at the local level, draw up the Individual Child Protection Plan.

Every service is offered with complete professionalism, focusing on the child from the Child Protection Units. The package of services offered to victims of trafficking includes the following:

- Meeting the basic economic and social needs of children and families at risk or victims of economic exploitation, including Children in Street Situation.
- Family visits and psychological, social, and economic assessments
- Housing
- Psychological counselling
- Support with food packages
- Clothing
- Hygienic-sanitary package
- Medicines
- Mediation for employment
- Psycho-social service
- Mediation and assistance in conducting medical visits
- Registration in nurseries, kindergartens, schools
- Assistance for re-entering the school system
- Registration in civil status
- Free legal service
- Professional training
- Development of life skills during reintegration

SARPCH provides advice and technical support to CPU in case management of child victims of trafficking/potential victims of trafficking and economically exploited children.

SARPCH has close cooperation with the Responsible Authority with the aim of supporting the cases of child victims of trafficking/potential victims of trafficking and addressing the problems identified by the CPW during the process of managing these cases.

The State Agency for Children's Rights and Protection in cooperation with the Responsible authority, in the first half of 2022, held meetings in the municipalities of Kukes, Diber, Berat, Kamez, Korce, Bulqize, Elbasan, Vlore, Shkoder and Tirana with the employees OF THE Units of child protection as well as with local actors representing the Intersectional Technical Group. The purpose of the meeting was to closely discuss and promote cooperation at the local level with CPW, traffic specialists and other actors, who are part of the Intersectional Technical Group on



the progress of the management of cases of the VT/VPT children and addressing the problems encountered in this direction.

From the meetings, it was recommended that there be a continuous need for joint meetings/trainings between the CPW, the police and traffic specialists regarding the strengthening of knowledge and the increase in capacities for issues related to child trafficking.

SARPCH in cooperation with OSCE has worked on the establishment of a data system for trafficking in order to provide disaggregated data for each case of identified trafficking victim/potential victim managed by the CPUs. The new indicators have been integrated into the new DCM of statistical data. The source of the data is the Ministry of the Interior and CPU to have disaggregated and unified data.

Recently, as part of the Anti-trafficking Month, SARPCH has requested the cooperation of the Child Protection Units to support activities planned by the Regional Anti-Trafficking Committee.

### **Preventative initiatives**

- In addition to the implementation of laws and the adoption of protective measures for victims of trafficking, an important aspect that must be focused on to reduce cases of trafficking remains education for the prevention of this phenomenon and appropriate institutional interventions.
- Through the organization of awareness campaigns in schools, day care centers, with parents and children. Educating children to avoid trafficking, raising their awareness not to drop out of school without completing compulsory education, and neither to leave home nor to emigrate prematurely abroad. Children need to be made aware of the dangers associated with leaving home and emigrating to earn a living as elsewhere within the country or even abroad.
- To assess the current measures for border control in relation to accompanied or unaccompanied children, and to increase professional capacities through training of border police staff to detect and stop child trafficking and traffickers to provide initial protection for children trafficked.
- Provision of services for the protection and reintegration of current or potential victims of trafficking, by public and non-public social service institutions, supported by organisations. To promote the reintegration of victims through referrals to institutions responsible for a wide range of services, including education, vocational training, employment, housing, treatment and counselling, as well as other social services, according to the needs and interests of the victim/victims themselves possible traffickers and their children.

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**Terres des Homme, 11 October 2022**

**Date:** 10 October 2022

**Meeting with:** An official from Terre des Hommes - (a Swiss child relief agency): Reintegration of returned migrant children and young people and their families in Albania<sup>19</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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## Interview

Introduction by an official from Terre des Hommes:

Terre des Hommes foundation mission in Albania is supported by Terre des Hommes organisation. Everything we do has children at the heart and child protection within the system. In Albania we were the first to start a project in 2010, which was developed over 8 years, for the creation of child protection units at municipality level. We helped develop the State Agency for Child Protection and laws for child rights adopted in 2018.

We introduced the idea of a child protection unit, and piloted at a local level to demonstrate that it was worthy as there were no child protection workers, particularly at the local level.

Terre des Hommes is known for its anti-trafficking work at a transnational level, we were here for a child trafficking project 2003 to 2009. The core focus was drafting a bilateral agreement between Albania and Greece to return unaccompanied minors who had been trafficked. And also a bilateral agreement between Albania and UK. From 2010 to 2015 we worked in partnership with Save the Children regarding children on the move in south eastern Europe, mainly in the Western Balkans, and as a result there was an agreement between Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro for case management of victims of trafficking (VOT) and unaccompanied minors.

Q. Was this transnational work in relation to migration flows, so you worked with government in Greece to share information?

A. Not at that level, the national referral mechanism (NRM) in both countries has changed since then. The agreement was in 2006 and we tried to review the agreement. Before, Greece said we have no VOT, so we have tried to revive the agreement between Albania and Greece. But now the memorandum of understanding (MOU) is stuck due to the change of staff in respective offices.

We have done our part to get it back on the table, but for now we are told it won't be signed because they have finally reached a police cooperation agreement between Albania and Greece. So there is no longer a formal MOU but police agreed to work together.

Q. Was your organisation involved in the MOU between UK and Albanian government?

A. Our contribution was back in 2005 and drafting a bilateral agreement. So we were involved in first phase led by UNICEF.

Q. Could you tell us about prevention work?

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<sup>19</sup> Terre des hommes, [Albania | Terre des hommes \(tdh.ch\)](https://www.terredeshommes.org/en/albania), no date

A. In Albania we have three programmes. We are dealing with the prevention of people at risk of trafficking. We have a migration and anti-trafficking programme, and the access to justice programme. We are present in 8 municipalities in covering both urban and rural areas. We work in multi-functional community centres, which includes outreach and field work. The community centres are hubs where we can provide social intervention to potential victims of trafficking (PVOT). The communities, and to some extent state institutions don't recognise there is a risk of trafficking, because immediately you are faced with rejection as they think trafficking is not an issue. To prevent stigma, we don't use the term 'trafficking'. We offer support on 'migration services'. So we work with the community as well as state institutions.

Q. How do you identify the areas where people might be at risk of trafficking?

A. In some areas we have been present for more than 10 years. In some others we have been there 4 to 5 years and we know the local institutions that are around. Our multi-functional centres are premises that have been given to us from local government, and the activities placed there are shared responsibilities. We don't pay rent or utilities, it's all covered by the government and sometimes staff are paid by government. Because we've been working in these areas for a long time we have good relations with child protection workers and the whole of the social services, which includes child protection worker, social aid administrator and co-ordinator against violence. On the other hand we work with schools. Usually high schools. It gives us access in that territory, and based on criteria – who is at risk – and we consider the vulnerabilities that VOT display.

Q. Can you tell us about types of vulnerability/categories at risk?

A. At present domestic violence (DV) is one of the most vulnerable situations associated with trafficking. Also if people have disabilities in the family, alcohol, mental health (MH) issues or physical issues. The economic situation is an issue too. Plus dysfunctional families (violent) and single headed households, and children who have dropped out of school. Not everyone that has these vulnerabilities are at risk but if they have two or more, then yes. Also some families or mothers who have a history of arranged marriages indicates a risk that could end up in trafficking. And then there is the cultural traditions of each of the area – knowing the history and prevalence of migration.

Q. What type of intervention do you provide?

A. All interventions are based on a case management approach, meaning each centre has a social worker and psychologist, together with the child protection worker from municipality. Teams identify vulnerable persons and start an intervention plan. The case manager is assigned from our centre. The intervention plan is devised for the individual and whole family. In the centre we have educational catch up classes or reintegration for those who have dropped out of school, and we have after school classes for life skills for children. Also, movement, games and sports. The children lack behind socially as well as educationally.

We have parenting and support groups for adults. They are mainly mothers that attend. Beyond the project intervention are support groups. The parent support group tend to be women support groups, the women who attend have bonded well and support each other.

Q. Do you have official assessments to see if strategies are working?

A. Yes we do, I mentioned we work with children and we also work with youth. We explore community issues that they want to solve and empower them to get involved, through youth engagement activities. Everything springs from the 5 pillars of wellbeing, networking, help, connection and feeling secure. All youth report an increased resilience to adverse factors. Whatever intervention is planned, it is to increase resilience of children, youth and adults.

Q. Have you seen reduction in the migration of children outside of Albania?

A. It is difficult to claim that, there are many factors, yes we are trying to do our part to prevent irregular migration of unaccompanied children. We try career counselling, and it is for the youth to define their strengths and how to find an employment path, as what they actually want to do is migrate due to the lack of opportunities in Albania. This is why we work with each of the groups mentioned to work on resilience and to find hope and connection.

Q. So it's more about increasing resilience rather than avoiding migration?

A. Being able to speak up and say how they feel, nobody asks their opinion, it's something we are faced with. It is impossible to claim we will stop migration but we can make them aware that there are regular labour migration routes. For example, Germany is reviving their policy on labour migration, and Italy are using the seasonal work route for agriculture, like Greece.

Q. Do you support returnees?

A. Not specifically. We work on reintegration with returned migrants and some of them claim that, during their asylum claim, they were involved in a minor crime, but they don't say they have been identified as a VOT. So when they return they are not returned as a VOT, but we do provide support to families. We have a wide package of services for vocational training, education, employment and small business start-ups. The service is open to all returning migrants.

Q. Are there any barriers to long term reintegration?

A. Yes there are. Because although we claim that we have a well-developed national referral mechanism (NRM) with the responsible authority at the centre to manage assessment of VOT adults and children, and rights and protection of children, in real terms all of the work is actually done by the NGOs. The state claim they have a case management system in place, they do not, they have a case management approach but it is not systemised as it should be. Long term integration happens at a community level, not at the shelter, it has to happen in the community. Some types of service are not available or accessible. Sometimes they don't exist at all.

Q. Albania has a framework for reintegration but are there budget concerns?

A. Albania has a developed framework. NGOs know about case management and long term integration, there are hundreds of manuals. But do the state institutions know? They just ask the NGOs to do the job and take the credit.

I have been implementing regional protection for the last 5 years and now writing a proposal. Right now looking at the reality of Balkan counties and compared to other countries, the government of Albania is doing better, but of course it's never enough.

It's not even half of the funding that is needed for reintegration. So they may do better than neighbouring countries, but they barely reaching half of the financing.

Q. Could you tell us about societal attitudes towards trafficking?

A. The average Albanian will say that the exploitation of women for prostitution is very bad, but it's not trafficking. Children begging in street are used by parents but not recognised as VOT. Adults and youth are used for petty crime – they say they're keeping bad company, not trafficking. Labour exploitation is not recognised as such. And young women are 'asking for it' if they want a boyfriend. It's always 'blame the victim, not the perpetrator'.

Q. The government talks about awareness raising, do you think awareness raising campaigns are working?

A. Each of us try and raise awareness, we try to adopt our messages to the common understanding of people, but I think they don't see or they don't want to see. With awareness raising I am more hopeful of the younger generation, that they will recognise signs and protect themselves rather than the older generation who don't make the distinction between who is a prostitute and who is a person trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Q. Are there any barriers to reintegrating in other areas, such as moving from rural areas to Tirana?

A. Exploitation usually happens from outside of their local area, when they are already away from their original area.

Reintegration is better outside their local communities. In terms of returning it is best to go elsewhere, in my opinion, unless they have strong family support. It's part of the reintegration plan to discuss what they need and if that should include family. It has worked well sometimes.

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## Mary Ward Loreto, 11 October 2022

**Date:** 10 October 2022

**Meeting with:** Mary Ward Loreto, UK and Albanian Mission Against Human Trafficking: 'We work in both Albania and UK to help those most vulnerable to Human Trafficking. In addition to providing immediate shelter and care to those rescued, we run a number of programs to prevent future Trafficking.'<sup>20</sup>

**Present in meeting:** 3 representatives from the UK Home Office

Imelda Poole: former CEO and now President of Mary Ward Loreto (MWL).

Ana Stakaj: CEO of Mary Ward Loreto

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## Interview

Q. Could you please tell us if you support those internally trafficked or VOT returned to Albania?

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Ward Loreto, [Human Trafficking Mission in Albania and UK - Mary Ward Loreto](#), no date

Both, those who are in Albania and those in the UK. We work with the [Medaille Trust](#) (UK), and provide psychological reports to support asylum claims. The Mary Ward Loreto Foundation (MWLF) work online with victims of trafficking (VOT) who are Albanian, in the UK and in shelters.

We also support those that return to Albania with reintegration via direct services and also refer to the relevant services. We make sure they enter a programme or enter joint programmes.

Q. So the VOT housed by the Medaille Trust, is that how you become aware of when they return?

A. There are multiple approaches, we have collaborated with Medaille Trust since 2013. They approached us for support and training around Albanian VOT in their shelters. The Albanian VOT in Medaille Trust shelters have not returned and instead have claimed asylum in the UK. The process of support is ongoing for them in the UK.

There are not many returnees from the UK, I think just one, many years ago. From what we know we have never had a returnee from the UK who is a female and exploited for sex. But it is different for men as they don't see themselves as being trafficked.

I have had 3 cases where social workers in the UK have phoned us as they have seen our website, so our work is right across Europe. Of the 3 Albanian cases, one was going through the stages of prosecuting their trafficker in the UK and she was terribly abused, there was a request that she be brought back to Albania as her brother had been murdered and she wanted to go to his funeral, so with support from us we gave her a safe journey from England. In Albania she stayed in a shelter, attended the funeral, went back to shelter and then back to the UK where she won her case.

Another case was where a woman VOT, who was deemed homeless, was to be deported twice, she was held at Heathrow. We asked for support from the Jesuit refugee service and Caritas support. She was very sick with a bad leg, and had been in hospital. She was then sent to Yarlswood and then amazingly her sister was found and she went to live with her. She had claimed asylum and in the middle of our dialogue she was moved to Heathrow to be removed. It was very traumatic. As far as I know she is still in the UK.

With cases like that we provide psychological support. I have no doubt that they were not real VOT, some would not have psychological issues if their story was not genuine. And we make sure their stories are understood and evidence is provided.

Q. You mention that you have not seen many women returning to Albania, but in regard to men do you see them return even if they don't self-identify?

A. They don't self-identify because of the shame, so they return (to Albania) but with the intention of leaving again. They wait until they can find the money to borrow and then they leave. We have a boy as part of a programme and in his case he would not go through migration to another country again due to the trauma, as it's very hard to speak about their experience, they just say they would never set foot in a foreign country again. Because of the suffering they received in being exploited.

Another story that applies to many men is this. There are legitimate businesses being run, successful businesses paying taxes and inviting very young men to come and work for them. The men go and, the one I know of, he worked for a year and he was paid and had a good job, but due to costs of fares and the debt, he came after a year and he was used as a drug mule. So he came via a legitimate route, but after that he was recruited.

You have to understand about Albanian youth, illegal migration is booming to the UK. They go to the UK for a better future. Even though they know they're going to end up working in a cannabis house. They are promised they'll be paid £5,000 per month. They go to get money to open a business and so they can provide health care for their family and not be a beggar.

Q. Did you say that they are promised they will be paid £5000 a month?

A. Yes, in the cannabis houses, they need to cultivate the marijuana and keep it growing. To get there they pay £30,000 to a system of recruiters and smugglers. It's a well-established system. They are promised that after they pay back the money they owe for their journeys they will start to earn money. However, if they encounter problems, like the drugs being stolen, they must repay the loss. That is how they are kept in the loop of debt bondage.

For example, a boy had debts after borrowing money for medical expenses. He was trafficked to the UK to pay back the debt. He worked for 3 years to pay the debt and then the drugs were stolen so he was kept enslaved. He was rescued but didn't want to return as the traffickers in Albania knew his family well. While he was in the UK, those linked to the trafficking gangs raped his mother and sister and sent him photos of it. They did not want to denounce the attackers to the police as they feared they would be killed as they (gangs) are well known for revenge.

Albanian gangs are travelling across Europe. Another case was of a man who was approached by someone sitting on the plane next to him, he was offered sex with a girl in a city in Europe. He took the details but instead he helped the girl and called the police. There was a cross-border criminal gang across 4 different countries in Europe, with 9 traffickers involved, and lots of girls being used in hotels across Europe. The man was given protection from criminal gangs.

Officials talked to the girl and they caught the criminals and they rescued more girls, who were offered psychotherapy for a year, the whole protection was remarkable in mid-Europe. So we are dealing with something that is destroying the lives of many people. We have to ask why people are running from Albania and what is going on that is hidden. And we know that in the marginalised isolated areas they are closing down the statutory systems and forcing people out of their homes, but there is nowhere to go so many of these are fleeing the country. The Home Office says Albania is a safe and prosperous country but that is incredible. It is certainly not safe. There might be good practices, but it is not safe.

Albania is safe for tourism; Albania is safe to live in if you are not vulnerable. If you are vulnerable and poor you are not safe, basically you are in survival mode, the only alternative you see is to escape your country. We haven't had a census since 2011. The population then was 3 million, now it is assumed we are 1.5 million, and 1 million of those live in Tirana. There is huge internal migration into cities to find a better way of life and also a legal way into Germany. Germany get all our skilled workers like

those working in medicine. Also women are working as carers in Belgium and Switzerland. Albanian young men, especially in the north, are being recruited as agricultural workers in cannabis fields.

The basic minimum wage in Albania is 33,000 lek a month (about 300 euro), and cheapest rent is 200 to 250 euro a month, leaving only a 100 euro to live on and with rising cost of living, it is almost impossible to live, it is moving into starvation level really. And that is for people in good jobs working in call centres. Call centres are the biggest employers for the youth. Wages in factories are even less – in sweat shops you earn 150 euro a month. But there is no alternative. And in the south they are not even declaring employees so they are not protected and recruited on the black market.

I see many families in the north that are on a debt register to market owners because they have no money. So the debt can go up to 300 to 400 euro. The mindset of the people who live here is that they have to go somewhere else. There is a lot of apathy and learned hopelessness which is relevant to the situation. Some have jobs, but some don't see any opportunities and so have to go somewhere else and they don't have enough to pay for legal migration.

The economy is one of the main factors for human trafficking but there are also other social issues such as domestic violence, these are areas difficult to change. There is the stubborn patriarchal mentality, and other issues, they are not developing.

Victims of domestic violence receive services but they are so minimal that the victims are now victims of system as well as being vulnerable to human trafficking. Services to VOT are so basic they cannot recover from the trauma of being trafficked. They feel abandoned. It's like selling them a dream of reintegration but it's not true.

Q. How do you help with reintegration?

A. We try to help by providing services and support alongside others, we try to help in the long term but resources are hard. We also try to highlight the fact that existing services are not enough to support long term integration.

We have the story of a village that migrated from north to south Albania about 10 years ago. We were invited to do a talk and we employed a psychotherapist to help as all the families from the village owed money to the shop owner of the village. The shop owner was trying to force families to pay off debts by selling their daughters into sex work to repay the debt. MWL helps by trying to overcome feelings of helplessness. This particular village was completely reintegrated through economic empowerment provided by our teams – up to 50 women and girls. We have been told that they are all now working and are independent, so we can offer services in another village. We help to bring dignity and skills development to people.

We work initially at grass root level and we start to build networks. The needs were so huge that we invited other organisations to support us. Cases are referred to us – identification, rescue and reintegration – the approach is holistic. Economic empowerment starts with vocational training, employment support and targeting those who want to stay in Albania.

We are trying to get to the route of the problem. There is a need for learning in schools and new way of teaching and working with young people to become active citizens and enhance their analytical thinking, empower themselves. Then there is



network building, because some organisations (NGOs) at the moment are substituting state services, and in some municipalities there is a lack of funds, staff and skills. The NGOs also are in huge need of funds, we rely usually on organisations from abroad, we try to combine activities and have joint approaches for specific cases and this need made us more united in our approach and have more positive impact. Although it doesn't provide long term sustainability for reintegration.

We found working on prevention is important. So we implemented last year a programme called Empowerful and invited 10 VOT to attend a course on economic empowerment and at the end of the session we noticed a great improvement. When given basic programmes there is always a risk of revictimization.

Also working with vulnerable communities to empower and train them to resolve their own issues. Training for transformation, we are seeing we can work more effectively with certain age groups. So it's about learning from our approaches and failures. We usually involve the community as we don't want them to feel excluded but what we see is effective change with certain young people.

Q. Could you tell us about family and society attitudes to VOT, can women live independently, how they would be viewed?

A. There is a huge difference between villages and cities. In Tirana there are some independent girls and women, but there are also some that are submissive to male relatives. Women and girls are mostly blamed and considered responsible for anything that happens to them by men. 'Don't dress up and don't go out', so males are not considered guilty because they are just being men. This is the mentality in isolated areas, women and girls are mostly submissive and some of them are not allowed to go to school, some have arranged marriages since they were adolescent, so they cannot escape. Some come to Tirana to study and are independent here, but when they go back it is the same and they go back to being submissive. If women and girls get caught up in trafficking there is shame in the family and they are told not to return. It is a system of honour. So they shouldn't come back to their village as what others think is very important to the family, as it is their reputation. So it is how others will treat them from now on.

With adultery or those trafficked they would even be stigmatised by friends and family and would lose status, be abandoned or rejected or some would even be killed. There is a difference between fathers and mothers, mothers usually like to accept, but pressure from fathers and male relatives means that they often cut contact with daughters. So the reason why girls don't want to come back from the UK is that the family would know. It's a small country with relatives everywhere, and girls are afraid they would be found and killed. Women face psychological stigma and it might lead to being trafficked.

With arranged marriage (more like forced marriage), for the communities in Albania, in the north mostly, the attitude is that woman should be married, if not she has no worth. She is created to be married and have children. She has no rights even in her own house. If a 25-year old girl is unmarried, not in university and at home, she is thought to be worthless as no one wants her. Marriage is often arranged through match making. Many of these 'leftover' girls are matched with North Macedonian, Montenegrin or Serbian men, whose only intention is to have a submissive woman to

work in the field and shut up. Some have a good marriage but many do not, some are killed and there is a lot of violence and abuse.

Five years ago, a village of single women were sold for 500 euro each to Macedonian men. The traffickers know who to target. They study the family and social circle and they know who to recruit. In northern areas there is a difference between Catholics and Muslim, they wouldn't marry each other. The recruiter will introduce himself as someone of a different religion (to the girl he's trying to recruit) to create a barrier to her family, as he knows the girls family will not accept him and so she feels compelled to escape her family to be with him.

For a single woman with a child it would be very hard due to the lack of financial support but she will also be stigmatised. She would be blame shamed. It's seen that a woman cannot live without a man.

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### Key Adviser, 12 October 2022

**Date:** 12 October 2022

**Meeting with:** An official from Key Adviser,

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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Key Adviser is licensed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance as a private employment agency. They are part of a project led by UNICEF Albania and financed by the British Embassy Tirana, 'Transforming the National Response to Human Trafficking in and from Albania', working in 6 Regions all over Albania to contribute in the skills development and employability for victims of trafficking (VOT) and potential victims of trafficking (PVOT)<sup>21</sup>.

#### Interview

Q. How do you support VOT?

A. For 5 years Key Adviser Albania has been supporting vulnerable groups, including ones that receive economic aid, have suffered domestic violence (DV) or are VOT. We also target women heads of households. In the past 2 years we have focused on VOT and PVOT, based on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) indicators.

Our work focuses in 6 municipalities, in the north, however we do also operate in central Albania, Tirana and Elbasan, because despite huge economic developments there are many social issues in these places, too.

In regard to the project implemented with UNICEF, it has been 2 very intensive years and implementing the full cycle of reintegration for VOT, PVOT as well as individuals at risk of trafficking. The latter are not specifically cited in the law as being PVOT, only as vulnerable groups. However we should consider that they too are at risk.

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<sup>21</sup> [About us | Key Adviser](#)

For the full cycle of reintegration, the most important thing that we had to do at the start was identify the target groups, through cooperation with local social services as well as representatives from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in the area we were going to operate. In addition to the indicators in the SOPs we also used some additional indicators that were related to those at risk of trafficking, so those in receipt of economic aid, parents who didn't take children to school, men that got job offers but always declined, and individuals that left Albania often, for a month or so. This mainly happened in the north especially in Kukes, and during the holidays. We noticed the trafficking was temporary, with Roma and Egyptian children going to Kosovo for a month or two and then they come back to Kukes and then the next holidays they do the same.

After putting in place everything I mentioned, we cooperated with local public offices to design a simple programme that was both entertaining and didn't last for many hours a day. So it wasn't tedious to the beneficiaries. This programme is basic, quick and effective as it meets the requirements of employers in the area. There were 3 main objectives of the programme: soft skills (indispensable for labour and social integration), ICT skills, and vocational and professional skills,

In addition to employment, another important area is self-employment, so people who have a certain skills, such as hosting or tailoring, we helped them start a small business, maybe as tailor or for those with spare rooms in their home to open a guest house. So something small that is beneficial and helps them to provide for their families.

Q. How many have you supported through your programme?

A. 240 first year (2020 – the first phase) and 210 in the second year (2021). For these people involved in the project, 80% of them successfully completed the programme and they showed enhanced skills. In 2020 we financed 28 business ideas and 36 people were employed. In 2021 we financed 12 business ideas and 46 people were employed. In 2020 COVID 19 hampered activities. With regard to 2021/2022, we will continue with the project until December and so this information will be updated.

Despite these outcomes we have had challenges. Firstly, with psychological support – economic and social support goes hand-in-hand with psychological support. Small local communities they are not always accepting of receiving psychological support. The second challenge is related to families, which is sad. Despite economic empowerment of VOT through the programme, their families are sometimes unwelcoming and not prepared to support them or help them out in any way.

Q. Why is this?

A. In my opinion there are several reasons. First the family has also gone through trauma and this is unhealed trauma. Also stigmatisation is a huge issue in local communities, and early marriages are a phenomena which are not viewed as human trafficking (HT) in these families. Not only talking about early marriages but people who go and work in drug houses, the local community considered them as illegal migrants instead of VOT.

Q. What is the gender split of those supported?

A. 90% of the people we support are women, and if we refer to the total number of those identified it's mostly women, but this does not mean there are no men or boys who are VOT. The ones who work in drug houses are mainly boys and men but they don't admit that they were VOT even if they are identified as such, and they don't accept our support and assistance.

Q. Why is there a barrier to accepting psychological support?

A. In the Albanian context psychological support is a new concept. Not just in small communities but also in wealthy and well-educated communities. Personally speaking, if you ask for psychological support in Albania people consider you are insane. If you tell someone they need this support they feel judged and feel reluctant to accept such support. But we include psychological support in our soft skills training so they can step in if needed, this way we don't directly target beneficiaries by saying they needed psychological support, so there is a way around it. Psychological support is indispensable for these people, they need the full support and counselling.

Q. Is there enough support?

A. As regard to the psychological support we provide I would say not enough. First we don't have enough time and second, people were not accepting. Most beneficiaries did not accept psychological support but it was provided through soft skill training.

As regards social services I would say this has changed for the better over the last 5 years, however there is still a lot of work to be done especially in small local communities. In Tirana it's easier, you can find private psychologists.

Q. Is it mostly women who suffer the stigma?

A. Stigma affects both men and women, boys and girls, I would actually say boys and men feel much more stigmatised than women. When we talked to our vocational students about human trafficking they recalled an old phenomenon in the 1990s when young girls were taken on boats to Italy for sexual exploitation. So they associate trafficking with sexual exploitation and feel insulted and never admit they are VOT. They cannot cope with the fact that trafficking has evolved and now displays in other forms and doesn't just equate with sexual exploitation. They don't think that they meet this category. They don't see labour exploitation as trafficking.

Q. How does the stigma present itself in the community and family?

A. The core of the problem is the family. When we talk to VOT we find that they fear they won't be employed because they think the employers will judge them for being a VOT. However the opposite has happened. Businesses and employers were welcoming and didn't have a problem and treated them equally, a great achievement. The problem lies with the family. For example, in Dibra we found a job for a girl VOT. She was well prepared and ready to work, she went to work the first day, but on the second day her family did not allow her to go back to work. The family thought that when she was working and going to work that people were pointing and saying she was a VOT. This is the perception of the family. It is common. The community is not very welcoming either.

Q. How do women support themselves if they are rejected by their family?

A. It is very difficult for VOT to make it without family support. Legislation stipulates a series of entitlements for VOT but in practice the services are difficult to access. So we came up with a plan together with the Ministry of Interior (Moi). The first point of support is with the social administrator, who assesses the VOT and their situation. Once a VOT has been identified and reported to the police, the social administrator talks to the VOT, assessing the family and overall situation. If the social administrator is well informed and willing to do proper job then they can refer the VOT to the relevant services. So far we haven't had many outcomes, however this is the key to success and we will continue to work towards these outcomes.

This year we have trained 120 social administrators in cooperation with the Moi. We trained on SOPs, and how they can refer and follow up cases. However the state should provide more support to the social administrators as they are a key focal point and link to communities. They are the ones who sign the papers so the family can get economic aid and they know the families as well as problems in the community very well. They are familiar with the family situation, for example, if they know that a man wants to travel to the UK and work in a drug house, the social administrator can take them to the labour office and help them find a job and stay in Albania instead of them being trafficked somewhere. Social administrators are respected by the whole community and seen as community leaders.

Q. Do social administrators have a role in helping the community understand what trafficking is?

A. I don't think that is a specific task on their job description. However social administrators are subordinate to the state social services directorate who have a mandate to raise awareness of HT, so indirectly the social administrators should do that.

Q. Are you aware of cases of people being re-trafficked?

A. The group that we support - none of them were re-trafficked, so zero. However there is frequent migration, individuals going and coming back. So this is evidence of re-trafficking even if they don't recognise it as such, the community know they have been re-trafficked.

Q. Do the VOT or PVOT know their traffickers? Are they family or organised criminal groups (OCGs)?

A. Yes, in the majority of cases they know their trafficker, it is sad to say that traffickers can be close family or relatives, so a cousin for example. There are cases where PVOT pay OCGs to take them somewhere and be trafficked.

Q. So then they would be in debt to the criminal group? Do you know of any cases when someone has returned and owed a debt and are at risk?

A. I am not aware of specific cases but have heard, at round tables in the north, that there are frightening stories on such trafficking by criminal groups. I don't have concrete facts so I am not able to elaborate. So these cases are handled by the General Prosecutors Office (GPO) or the police, so they are not referred to social services as these are serious cases. So this is probably the reason for the confidential information.

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## BIRN Albania, 12 October 2022

**Date:** 12 October 2022

**Meeting with:** Kristina Voko – Executive Director, BIRN Albania – ‘Balkan Investigative Reporting Network’: a non-governmental media organization based in Tirana, which specialises in investigative reporting, publishing and media monitoring.<sup>22</sup>

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

Since 2014 I have been the executive director of Balkan Insight, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN<sup>23</sup>, focused on media development and investigative reporting, the only non-profit investigative organisation so we can report more in depth, and we have an impact on human rights and trafficking. I can't say trafficking has been a special focus for us. For background I am a psychologist so before joining BIRN I worked with different human rights organisations, sometimes with a focus on child protection.

A 2014 report, ‘Children on the move in Albania<sup>24</sup>’ identified the gaps and difficulties in the system about the movement of children, unregistered children and so on, this report has a special focus on Roma children. How these children are non-registered and move within and outside the country with parents, for exploitation, for begging and so on.

Balkan Insight have looked at trafficking at different angles, and how Albanians from the north travel to the US illegally and how this is profitable for gangs in the UK, and how minors travel to the UK.

[Printed copies of the following reports were provided to the FFM team:

[Albanian Minors Risk Everything to Escape Poverty Trap | Balkan Insight](#), 12 February 2018

[Gangs Grow Rich on Smuggling Albanians to New York | Balkan Insight](#), 19 March 2015

[ISIS Holding Albanian Children ‘Hostage’ in Syria | Balkan Insight](#), 4 January 2016

[London Calling: Albanians Count Cost of UK Illegality | Balkan Insight](#), 29 October 2020

[UK Drug Gangs Recruit in Albania’s Remote North | Balkan Insight](#), 19 June 2019

[Vicious Circle: Albanian Victims Struggle to Escape Shadow of Sex Trade | Balkan Insight](#), 25 January 2016]

The reports looked into problems in Kukes, which was an unexplored area when we didn't know a problem existed. We did another story on how routes from Bilbao and from Spain and Portugal were being used in shipping containers to the UK. Our

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<sup>22</sup> BIRN Albania, [BIRN Albania About - BIRN](#), no date

<sup>23</sup> [Balkan Insight](#)

<sup>24</sup> Save the Children and Terre des hommes, ‘[Children on the move in Albania](#)’, November 2014

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focus on human trafficking were on areas you may not see directly linked to what you are looking for. We have done a series of stories in 2015 on how children were trafficked with parents to join ISIS. It shows how easily children can go through the airport without the consent of the mother or without being accompanied, and most people, even if watched by the police, were able to join ISIS and take their children. The follow up stories we ran were after the parents were killed and how social services could bring the children back. So it was a gap in the system. There is a story into the history of women trafficking and sexual exploitation in western Europe. It's an important story as it looks at what happens to victims and also how our government didn't take into account any of the issues identified by the authorities in Belgium in relation to the traffickers, so the issues were overlooked and they never went after the traffickers. We also looked at the verdicts given when the traffickers were caught in Albania. Stories from Kukes show how the system helps with reintegration.

My personal view does not always represent my work with BIRN. I look into reasons and context and how social services respond, which is problematic. It is the differentiation between male and female that is a problem. We don't see men and boys as victims. If you look at the situation in Kukes with regard to one of our stories. A journalist had a meeting with a high school and was told that in the first year of high school they had only one boy attending, as everyone else was leaving. And suddenly you realise that this is well known among the local community and that boys leave Albania when they are around 16.

We have interviewed boys in the UK and they have said that when they are caught in the UK they are provided with services and they may be given a permit to stay. We also looked at how much families paid and the route taken. But no one sees this as trafficking.

The state mechanism invested a lot in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but the focus was girls being trafficked for sexual exploitation. Many girls were promised engagement and marriage and were moved mainly to Italy and Belgium where they were exploited. Albanian mentality accepted that women were sexually exploited, and that this was immoral. This is why a system was established and embraced in the referral of potential victims of trafficking (PVOT), due to social attitudes.

Something different is happening now, in that boys are being trafficked to work in cannabis houses in the UK, but locally this is not seen as immoral. They know it is illegal, but not immoral. Before we were given funds to develop a system, the anti-trafficking mechanism did not work perfectly and it engaged the sentiment of society, meaning that if you were a PVOT there was no obligation by frontline services – the police, social services, teachers or health care providers to report it. When we first did the story on Kukes, the question was how come nobody ever reported things, when boys disappeared en masse, no part of the system ever reported it, not the teachers or the police, health care providers or the community. This is because it was accepted.

Q. So are you saying when the state responded to the problem, it was in respect of girls, but boys were not seen as a problem as the family accept that they will leave and support families?

A. Exactly, yes it is important to provide social services and other activities for youth in these communities but, because of our work as investigative journalism, we look at the responsibility of the state. No one asked what this mechanism is when children disappeared. Nobody back then was looking.

In 2013, along with the London School of Economics (LSE), I looked at sex imbalance at birth in Albania, that is gender selective abortion. We looked into the reasons. It is not that girls are not wanted, but that boys are needed in north Albania especially. Because even at age 14 or 15 boys would be able to provide for their family by going into Greece, illegally. Working to provide for family in olive fields and so on, this was never considered to be a problem. It was just accepted as they were poor, so no one ever stopped to look into this part of trafficking or considered that it was problematic. In Greece, poor families just need to pass by the mountain and you are in Greece and you can find a seasonal job.

Now it is more difficult, but they have found a more lucrative way in the UK.

Q. Why do men identify as a VOT in the UK, but not in Albania?

A. It's a way to get into the system, and you read stories from 2018/19 and 2020 about arrivals on the coasts of UK, and how children will be provided for until they are 18. This is well known and this is part of this reasoning, that if you are a minor alone in the UK, they know they will be provided for. The system is known, every family can mention exactly how the system works in the UK and if they can profit from it or not. Another thing that is generally accepted, even by high officials and the current (Albanian) Prime Minister (PM), is people that have been engaged in human trafficking (HT) or drug trafficking have gone into politics. This acceptance is unbelievable and should not be accepted, and the international community should address this.

An investigation published in 2015 reported that 2 members of the socialist party had been sentenced outside Albania for drug trafficking and HT. We published that story. It was hard for us to secure the documents but we collaborated with people in those countries, and we were lucky, we took huge risks as had anonymous sources, so if we were ever called into court we would be sentenced as we couldn't reveal our sources.

One story was about the Mayor of Kavaje and what he had done in Italy, we found out that he was responsible for gang rape, and was sentenced [see [Albania Starts Combing Officials' Crime Reports | Balkan Insight](#)]. We published the story and he admitted that he had changed his name. That night the Prime Minister was interviewed about this and he threatened to send us to court. The Mayor himself issued a statement saying that he would sue us and anyone that published this story for 100,000 euro and he would send those funds for reconstruction of schools. This was the immediate reaction, and then the PM did a campaign event in Kavaje and he laughed about the story and called the candidate Mayor by both names. So he did not deny it, he just ignored the story [see [Criminal Pasts of Albanian Election Candidates Exposed | Balkan Insight](#), [Albanian Mayor Resigns After Admitting Criminal Past | Balkan Insight](#)].

Now politicians have to fill in a form about previous convictions. Then the same guy lied in a form and he was eventually sentence for lying on that form. We have had candidates from the Socialist Party being involved in sexual exploitation.



Q. In the UK we see claims from people with a fear of money lenders and organised criminal gangs (OCGs), so are there concerns regarding links to HT and OCGs?

A. A lot of stories that we have looked into with regard HT are linked to OCGs, but OCGs are mostly involved in drug trafficking. There is much information on how gangs work and how they are interlinked between different countries, and how they are specialised. We have published several stories about trafficking cocaine from South America to Europe. Also why they are now so powerful, because of the Albania mafia. One part of the organisation is dealing with bringing cocaine to, say Rotterdam, another group moves it from Rotterdam, others then deal with trafficking the drugs into other countries, especially the UK. The profit is good with cocaine in UK. Then you have another Albanian gang to do the selling and distribution.

When I look into trafficking I say we have looked into minors only, yes it's trafficking, but it is more problematic than that and linked to the distribution of drugs and drug trafficking.

Children or people who use the route to get a job, ask for asylum or work to send some money back is a totally different route to those who are exploited in drug trafficking and marijuana houses.

Q. Are the Albania mafia linked to political figures in Albania?

A. Yes and no, some in the late 1990s and 2000s. Then they (mafia) came back and needed a clean way to be recognised as businessmen, and to enter into politics. Specifically the Socialist Party was caught in so many cases. Three years ago a local election was held, but the Democratic Party, the main opposition, had left Parliament, they decided not to enter the local election. So in 2019 we had a local election with just one political party running. We didn't think this would be accepted internationally, we thought this election will have to be repeated as communism is back again, but what happened was the Socialist Party ran alone, the election happened and no one did anything. In the following 6 months documents from the Democratic Party and media revealed that at least 5 Socialist Party candidates had been convicted for drug trafficking in different countries. So yes, they're linked (to the mafia) in different ways. We have a lot of vote buying, so it is difficult to run against the party in power. To enter and to win, organised crime finances the campaign. It is a closed list so you vote just for the party. Dubious people linked with organised crime were in the list.

The former Minister for Interior – Saimir Tahiri – a young member of the party, back when he joined, the fight against corruption was very important, and he did quite a good job in fighting it. He was a member of the Tirana Socialist Party and it was discussed that he might be the leader after PM Rama. But then after 3 years the Italian authorities sent a file of surveillance on how he had facilitated his cousins for drug trafficking in Italy. This file by the Italian police was not announced first to the Albanian authorities as they were afraid that people concerned would be notified, so they only delivered it once they did a full investigation. It was requested that Tahiri be dismissed and sent to court, so members of the Socialist Party had to vote on this. The members of Socialist Party gathered and said, no he shouldn't be prosecuted. Although now he has been sentenced to jail [see [Albania Prosecutors Seeks Prison Term for Ex-Interior Minister | Balkan Insight](#), [Albania Opposition Condemns Ex-Minister's Suspended Sentence | Balkan Insight](#) and [Albania's Ex Interior Minister](#)

[Jailed for Helping Drug Traffickers \(occrp.org\)](#)]. And they named the leader of justice reform as the new Minister of Interior, but then we saw that his brother was convicted of trafficking [see [Albania PM Slates 'Fake' Claims About Minister's Brother | Balkan Insight](#)].

Q. Could a person fearing an OCG get protection from the police?

A. If you're asking will it be sufficient, no, in my opinion.

Take the story on trafficking drugs by the brother of one of politician. They just say, why judge him (the politician) just because of what his brother is doing. Even when that Mayor was finally convicted, he never went out with a public statement to say sorry and we didn't even expect it, this is problematic.

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## Tirana Municipality, 12 October 2022

**Date:** 12 October 2022

**Meeting with:** Tirana Municipality, Representative of General Directorate for Social Services in Tirana

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 British Embassy representative, 1 Interpreter

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### Interview

The General Directorate of Social Services has 6 directorates:

- Social inclusion and Protection
- Housing
- Employment
- Local political policy on education
- Health care and integrated services
- Reconstruction

Two years ago we had a big earth quake and more than 2,000 houses were destroyed in Albania, so we are working to reconstruct all buildings. We needed a new directorate (in reconstruction) to manage this.

The issue of human trafficking (HT) is under social services and protection and inclusion. We have a focus on gender issues, domestic violence, human trafficking (HT), LGBT+ persons and the Roma and Egyptian community.

For HT we are working with policy, resident institutions, Ministry of Interior (Moi) and with the administrative units in Tirana. We have 27 administrative units that are under the umbrella of Tirana municipality. They have sectors on social inclusion and protection, economy, legislation and so on. Tirana is huge capital city, it includes 14 urban and 13 rural areas, approximately 1 million people. We don't have any policy specific for HT and maybe this is an issue we can work on, but as per law all persons, whether identified as potential victims by the institutions that make the initial identification, or whether persons identified as victims of trafficking by the structure

responsible for formal identification, will be provided with immediate access to the necessary assistance following the standard operating procedures (SOP).

For example, when a woman is trafficked and returns, they go to the police and they are placed in an institutional residence [shelter]. When they leave that residence and they come back to the community, that is when we start with our services, the administrative unit gets involved. Or if we have a document that says a person is a victim of trafficking (VOT) or is at risk of trafficking. We start with services, such as housing, give them rent (they have to apply for rent) and also other services such as child care or school, health, employment services, this is where we start. This is the service that we offer to all people.

The rehabilitation and reintegration of trafficking victims requires a multifaceted approach involving different actors. Assistance to victims of trafficking is not conditioned by the victim's desire to testify, it is provided in response to the victims' needs and includes at least: suitable and safe housing, psychological and material assistance, access to immediate medical treatment, translation when necessary, counselling and information, especially about legal rights, assistance for presentation and consideration during the trafficker's proceedings, access to education, professional training and employment. The services offered by the Directorate of Social Services in Tirana Municipality are:

- a) free legal and/or psychological counselling
- b) employment with the support of the Employment Promotion Directorate and the Tirana Regional Office
- c) long-term housing through social housing programs that Tirana Municipality offers
- d) support with the package of services offered in community centres

Q. Are you part of national referral mechanism (NRM)?

A. Yes, and of the community and the war against trafficking, the Prime Minister (PM) has a committee. The Municipality of Tirana is a member of the Regional Committee for the Fight against Trafficking in Persons established by Order No. 6, dated 26.01.2017 of the Prime Minister. The creation of this Committee aims to supervise and coordinate state and non-state actions, for the prevention of this phenomenon, for the protection of victims of trafficking/potential victims of trafficking.

Q. Once a VOT of trafficking is referred to you how long do you provide your services?

A. We don't have a specific time, it is until the person is ok or they are reintegrated into the community.

Q. Do you have any figures on the number of people supported, over the last 2 years?

A. Yes, we have 10 women VOT in 2022 that were provided with economic aid. And approximately 25 people receiving support in community centres in the last 3 years.

We have 5 community centres in Tirana for the elderly, children, people with disabilities, women, and Roma and Egyptian people, VOT and PVOT. Most people who use the centres are VOT or potential victims of trafficking (PVOT) or category at risk.

Q. Do you make referrals to shelters?

A. Yes we do, we have cooperation with Different and Equal and all the people that are at risk we will refer to them. We also cooperate with the state run shelter, Linza.

Q. Were the 25 people you mentioned only women?

A. Yes, we don't have men asking for reintegration services from Tirana Municipality specifically as VOT, although we had one trans person who was a PVOT. During the last year we had one male provided with economic aid as VOT.

I will give you some information on reintegration and rehabilitation. In cooperation with other organisations we provide free legal aid and psychological counselling. We have provided employment opportunities alongside the employment directorate, and long term housing through housing programmes. The housing services include rent subsidies, loan interest subsidies. For example, for a person in the middle economic level they can take a loan from a bank and we ensure that the interest is low. So if the interest rises we pay that for them. They pay a fixed amount of interest for 30-35 years. We also support them through service packages in community centres, for example food packages, hygiene and sanitation packages. We use employment encouragement programmes as well as empowerment and entrepreneur fostering. We have this for all of the community in Tirana, but it is based on a scoring system, so we prioritise certain groups, including women and men VOT. All children of women and girls who are VOT are exempt from fees for nursery schools.

Since our scope of activity includes educational policies, and there is a directorate on education, we carry out awareness raising in high schools, to prevent trafficking but to also avoid re-trafficking. Not only in schools, but also in community centres. Our focus in community centres is on the prevention of re-trafficking. Tirana municipality is a member of the anti-human trafficking regional committee that was established by the PM in 2017. The aim of the regional committees against HT is to supervise and coordinate actions by members, as well as local and central government. The committee includes the regional council, municipality, local police directorate, regional directorate of border and migration, regional social service directorate, regional labour offices, educational directorate and public health directorate and also civil society organisations and state labour inspectorate.

Q. Regarding VOT, those that have been reintegrated in Tirana, are they originally from outside or within Tirana?

A. I don't have that information as we tend to receive that from the police. What is important is that we provide services no matter where they come from.

Q. Could you tell us about societal attitudes towards VOT?

A. It's not easy for VOT in that regard because the society is not very accepting or welcoming. We provide full confidentiality in community centres and do not share that they are VOT. Family is often the route of the problem, and employment is also a problem. When we try to find employment we make sure not to share that information as the VOT could be judged and discriminated against, as people still don't accept.

Q. How does the non-acceptance present itself?

A. Put simply, the mindset of society regarding VOT is that the victim is not a victim but are the ones to be blamed. The situation is not the same as in the 1990's, people have changed but they still believe VOT were either the cause of trafficking or they asked for it. That is the reason why they are often prey to judgment, prejudice and non-acceptance.

Q. Would non-acceptance be worse against single mothers?

A. The mentality is still the same, whether a single mother or single woman, it is still the same. However, reintegration is extra hard for single mothers as they have more challenges to overcome. It's actually multi-faceted as in addition they have someone else to care for, financial issues, find a job, child care is an issue when they find a job, who will care for child? Lack of family help, or lack of a family, is an issue also.

Q. You mentioned re-trafficking, is that a problem in Tirana?

A. It's not that re-trafficking is an issue, it's just that we want to prevent it from happening, that is the aim. The possibility of re-trafficking is very high among children who are Potential Victims of Trafficking who are mainly identified in situations of economic exploitation.

In order to stop the phenomenon of human trafficking, Tirana Municipality, in cooperation with civil society organizations, periodically conducts information and awareness-raising activities in all the schools of the city. There are at least 12 to 13 schools per month where students of different classes benefit from these activities.

Q. Are men seen as exploited when trafficked?

A. Since we haven't dealt much with male VOT we cannot provide accurate information, just our perception. Personally what we know is that the patriarchal mindset prevails here and men are not viewed as VOT, though maybe boys and minors could be.

From the information we have from the Police, in general the male victims of trafficking are young boys who have suffered exploitation for forced labour outside Albania, in EU countries. They were deceived with promises of high-paying work and regular documentation and when they arrived at their destination, they were exploited for unpaid or minimally paid work, living in poor conditions, small rooms, many people in one room, and without documents. Passports are often taken from the users so that they do not leave. As for male children, from the data we have from the Child Protection Officer, possible male victims of trafficking are mainly identified from situations of economic exploitation or conflict with the law. Cases are reported according to Standard Operating Procedures.

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## **National Agency for Employment and Skills, 12 October 2022**

**Date:** 12 October 2022

**Meeting with:** 3 officials from National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES)

**Present in the meeting:** 3 representatives from UK Home Office, 1 Interpreter

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### **Interview**

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We are working with victims of trafficking (VOT) who are one of the 15 special groups that we support, including youth, returning migrants and people with disabilities. One of these groups that we provide support to is VOT. It is proscribed in law that VOT are part of this special group and we supply all the support through our work, financial support schemes and programmes. We don't have many VOT that are declared in labour offices and of the total number of those currently registered, they are all women. Sometimes unemployed jobseekers (men and women) come to our labour offices and even if they refuse to declare they are VOT, we still support and provide a counselling service.

Q. You mention employment programmes and counselling, can you explain more?

A. VOT are considered a disadvantaged group in Albanian legislation which means that they are beneficiaries of special opportunities including Employment Promotions Programme (EPP).

We have established a new electronic information employment system where we have transferred data from the old system and entered new information, so we have all the necessary data on citizens (jobseekers), including VOT. Now that we have up-to-date information, it shows that the number job seekers has decreased and the number of VOT seeking a job has decreased as well.

VOT to us, and according to our data, are usually females and they have been registered in our labour offices by shelters. Until the end of last month [September 2022] there were 16 women registered, and every month we have a report on the number of VOT job seekers. So this number is for 2022 until the end of September.

From our perspective VOT are one disadvantaged group, while returning migrants are another disadvantaged group. Returning migrants may register at labour offices directly but it is up to them to declare themselves as VOT. They can come to the office and register as unemployed and they state that they are returning migrants, so they have returned to Albania within the last 2 years, although they don't say if their migration was legal or illegal.

We have data for job seekers and active labour programmes. Sometimes an individual may be a combination of disadvantaged groups, such as VOT, returning migrants, require economic aid, from Roma/Egyptian communities, youth, and those with disabilities, so they are given higher priority if there is a combination of factors. For example, a Roma person who has been trafficked will belong to 2 groups and so they are more likely to receive assistance from employment programmes.

Q. So the more groups they fit into, the more priority they receive?

A. Yes

Active measures in the labour office are in 3 types: employment, employment promotion (encouragement) programmes, and vocational education and training. Vulnerable groups usually participate in the third level of employability, so they are a good fit for vocational and training as well as employment promotion programmes.

Our services are free to job seekers. First, the job seeker comes to the labour office, second, they have an interview and a file is completed on their skills, education and so on. Based on this, the electronic system does some kind of selection and categorises into tiers:

Tier 1: employability is considered easier, and we try and match them to a job

Tier 2: employability level is not as high, but with vocational training they can possibly get jobs, or employment promotion programmes, like internships.

Tier 3: employability is much lower, so we cooperate with and incentivise employers to employ this group by subsidising/paying salaries and/or social/health contribution and other expenses according to the costs determined in each employment promotion programme (EPP).

These incentives (EPP) can be used at any tier, but mostly with tier 3.

Every time we have a job seeker in our labour offices, we design an individual employment plan and we have different schemes that we use for different individuals. For example, newly graduated students might be on tier 2 so they might need support with internships, so they get an individual employment plan and maybe 6 months internship in a business.

Generally speaking, 4 Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCMs) stipulate the different programmes and support we can provide. For example, self-employment, employment with job training, community and public work, and internships.

DCM number 608 was designed during COVID due to circumstances at that time and lots of job losses, so it provided for 4, 8 and 12 month employment periods for job seekers.

The formula that the electronic system uses is based on several indicators, for example, level of education, how long the person is out of the labour market and so on. VOT job seekers usually score quite low because they usually have a low level of education and have been out of the labour market for some time. But by law they are considered disadvantaged whether or not they are categorised as tier 3.

Since it is difficult for VOT to find jobs or, when they do find jobs, to go to their workplace, we have found vocational training courses have been quite effective. They are tailored courses through training centres and there have been quite a few success stories between shelters and training centres, including Mobile vocational training centre as well.

Q. Are you always able to find VOT work or vocational training?

A. Our counsellors provide options to these individuals: finding them a job, employment promotion programmes or vocational training. The most success is in vocational training where the VOT finds it easier to integrate.

Tirana has 2 training centres that are subordinate to us, one of the most successful centre is called centre number 4. It has a very good cooperation with Linza, the state-run shelter, they were training VOT in nail art, manicure, pedicure and so on, as well as tailoring. During 2021, VTC Tirana 4, in collaboration with the Center for the Rehabilitation of Trafficked Women in Linza, developed a tailoring course and a manicure and pedicure course with VOT. The trainees attend the course at the Vocational Training Center accompanied by their social worker.

Q. What's the process for illegal migrants to gain employment?

A. The key word here is self-declaration. Vulnerable groups such as VOT or returning migrants and any other disadvantaged groups must self-declare to obtain support. Even though we might hear that someone is Roma/Egyptian or has returned from abroad, we cannot ask them to declare this as that would be considered as discrimination. But we will know from the system if they receive economic aid, or are unemployed but this specific status is something they have to tell us themselves. So the questionnaire asks: are you a migrant or have you returned from x country? They can tick yes or no, it's up to them. If a woman is a VOT but has not been placed in a shelter, we wouldn't know they are a VOT unless they declare it. Returning migrants are considered a disadvantaged group and so are entitled to special treatment and specific programmes that we provide.

With regard to returning migrants we have received support from GIZ (German development cooperation office). They focus on migration and train our staff on how to deal with them and offer support.

Q. Are you told about migrants returning to Albania, for example, by immigration services?

A. No. This agency is at the central level and that kind of communication operates at the local one. Our agency doesn't receive any official information or list by the border police station but they can inform or guide this category to go to local employment offices in order to receive services.

Q. In absence of support from the labour office, what would be the barriers to VOT/returning migrants finding work themselves?

A. Our support programmes are provided to all vulnerable groups, it is not something we have especially for VOT. Nevertheless VOT would find it difficult to find a job if we were not here, for psychological reasons and due to the mentality of society and prejudgement. The Employment Promotion Program 'public work in the community' is a program which would best suit this category due to its characteristics because under this we cooperate with NGOs. If there were any NGOs that operate in the fight against HT it would be helpful if they could provide part time jobs or involve VOT in their activities, as they would also be mentored and trained. Our statistical reports are on our webpage (in Albanian) and the number of VOT are not published as their numbers are low.

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#### National Agency for Employment and Skills data on returned migrants and VOT

Year	Category	Unemployed jobseekers		Employment	EPPs	Vocational Training
		Total	Women			
2020	Returned immigrants (stock)	572	164	67	11	52
	VOT	17	16	1	1	0
2021	Returned immigrants (stock)	567	167	28	6	44
	VOT	17	16	0	1	0
2022	Returned immigrants (stock)	363	96	2	6	5
	VOT	16	16	0	0	0

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# Version control

## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **13 December 2022**

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### **Official – sensitive: Start of section**

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use.

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### **Official – sensitive: End of section**

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