

Contribution in collaboration with Minor-Ndako and Esperanto

Reception of child victims of trafficking and/or aggravated smuggling of human beings

Introduction

One in three victims of human trafficking worldwide is a minor⁵⁰⁹. Minors are exploited in various sectors and are also more often subjected to physical and sexual violence than adult victims⁵¹⁰.

This particularly vulnerable group of victims has recently received increased international attention. For instance, the United Nations' annual Blue Heart Campaign⁵¹¹ focused specifically on child trafficking in 2024, and in 2023 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) published a report⁵¹² analysing 20 years of international data on child victims of trafficking.

It is important to have reliable data on the scale and the characteristics of the victims in order to inform policies and empirically support interventions⁵¹³. At national level, the Special Commission responsible for evaluating legislation and policy on human trafficking and smuggling has called for improvements in the statistics relating to the reporting, counselling and reception of child victims. In addition, Myria was asked to include a supplement to its annual report focusing specifically on child victims. This contribution is an initial response to that recommendation⁵¹⁴.

In 2018, Myria devoted the focus of its annual report ('Minors in major danger') to child victims of trafficking and smuggling of human beings. It then made the recommendation to improve the reception of unaccompanied children (UC) by (1) officially recognising Esperanto, a reception centre in Wallonia for children who are victims of trafficking, smuggling with aggravated circumstances (or 'aggravated smuggling')⁵¹⁵ and honour-based violence, as a specialised reception centre⁵¹⁶ and (2) setting up an equivalent structure in Flanders⁵¹⁷.

To date, Esperanto has still not been recognised as a specialised reception centre. In 2022, GRETA⁵¹⁸ emphasised the importance of such recognition⁵¹⁹. On 1 March 2022, the Meza reception centre opened its doors in Flanders, inspired by the way Esperanto operates. Meza focuses mainly on admitting unaccompanied children aged 14 to 18 who are (presumed) victims of sexual exploitation.

509 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*, p. 21.

510 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*, pp. 18, 25.

511 UNRIC, "World Day Against Trafficking in Persons 2024", 12 July 2024.

512 OIM & FXB Center for Health and Human Rights Harvard University, *From Evidence to Action: Twenty years of IOM child trafficking data to inform policy and programming*.

513 G. Tylidum & A. Brunovskis, *Describing the Unobserved: Methodological Challenges in Empirical Studies on Human Trafficking*, p. 30.

514 Belgian Chamber of Representatives, *Special Commission responsible for evaluating legislation and policy on human trafficking and smuggling*, p. 68.

515 In accordance with Article 77quater (1) to (5) of the Aliens Act of 15 December 1980, it is always a matter of aggravated human smuggling if the offence has been committed against a minor. In addition, there are four other situations that constitute aggravated human smuggling, namely situations in which (1) there has been abuse of the particularly vulnerable situation in which the person found themselves, leaving the victim no real and acceptable choice but to be abused, (2) force, coercion, threats or deception have been used, (3) the victim's life was endangered, deliberately or through gross negligence, or (4) the offence caused permanent physical or psychological harm.

516 In Belgium, victims of human trafficking who agree to cooperate with the judicial authorities may be granted a specific residence status (Articles 61/2 to 61/5 of the Aliens Act). This status can be obtained under three fundamental conditions, namely that the victim: (1) cooperates in the criminal investigation into human trafficking, (2) cuts off all contact with the exploiter and (3) agrees to be supported by one of the recognised specialised centres. These are Payoke in Antwerp, PAG-ASA in Brussels and Sürya in Liège.

517 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 158-159.

518 GRETA is the acronym for the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. It is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. For more information on GRETA, see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/greta>.

519 GRETA, *Evaluation Report Belgium, 2022*, Chapter V, point 4.

Based on Esperanto's external contribution in its 2018 annual report, Myria shall first present the profile of the children received and supported by Esperanto over the last 10 years (2014-2023) (point 1). It will then focus on the recent opening of the Meza reception centre (point 2). The origins of Meza, its vision and organisation of reception are discussed, as well as the profile of the young people who are received there (2022-2023). Finally, several thoughts are formulated on how Meza has been operating to date, focusing on its perceived strengths and challenges.

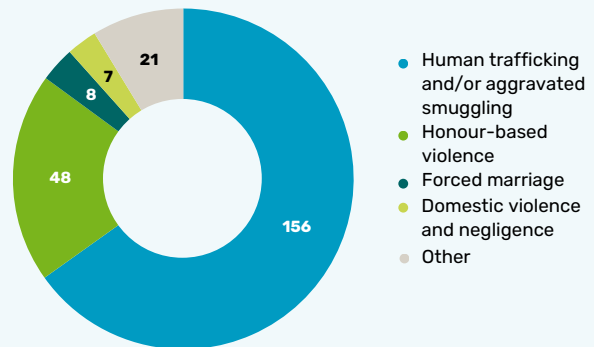
1. Esperanto

Esperanto was founded in 2002. Within a secure environment, Esperanto offers protection, support and reception to:

- (presumed) victims of human trafficking;
- (presumed) victims of aggravated human smuggling;
- (presumed⁵²⁰) victims of honour-based violence.

Esperanto's vision and approach to support and reception are detailed on the Esperanto website as well as in the external contribution written by Esperanto in Myria's 2018 annual report⁵²¹.

1.1. In total, Esperanto received 241 young people between 2014 and 2023



Over the past ten years, Esperanto has provided support and accommodation for **241 young people** (240 of them were minors, one was 18 years old).

The majority of these young people (156, i.e. 65%) were victims of human trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling. In most cases (120) it was human trafficking, in 34 cases it was aggravated human smuggling and in two cases it was a combination of the two.

The second largest group of young people received were victims of honour-based violence (48), forced marriage (8) and domestic violence and neglect (7).

The 'other' category (21) includes, in particular, babies and young children, young mothers supported by Esperanto⁵²² and young people who do not belong to the three abovementioned target groups but who have been temporarily received by Esperanto before being referred elsewhere⁵²³.

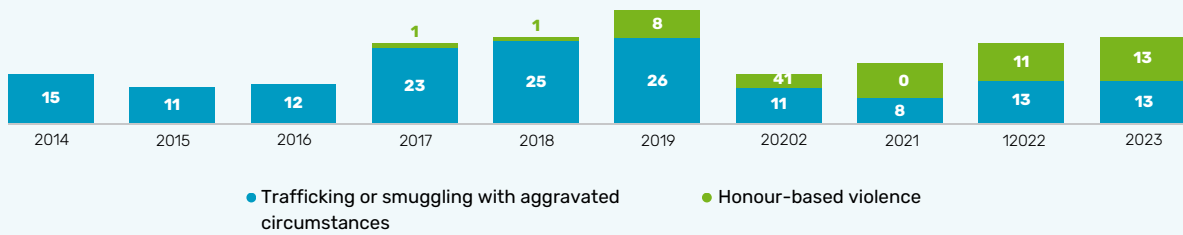
⁵²⁰ For the sake of readability, the term 'victims' will always be used in the rest of the text instead of '(presumed) victims'. Reception and support by Esperanto is not necessarily subject to the request for or obtaining of the status of victim of trafficking or human smuggling. At Esperanto, support can be provided as soon as there are indications of trafficking and/or aggravated smuggling of human beings. Such an indication may result from the situation in which the minor was discovered, from the minor's testimony, etc. Once the minor is admitted to Esperanto, there is a three-month observation phase aimed at better understanding the young person's situation. If, during this period, it turns out that it is not a case of human trafficking and/or aggravated smuggling and that the young person does not belong to Esperanto's third target group either, they will be referred elsewhere.

⁵²¹ For more information on how Esperanto works, go to www.esperantomena.org and Myria, *Annual report 2018 - Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 48-51.

⁵²² Esperanto, *Activity report 2021*, p. 19.

⁵²³ Esperanto, *Activity report 2019*, pp. 19 and 22.

Evolution of Esperanto’s primary target groups over time



While Esperanto mainly focused on providing reception and support services to victims of human trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling, an increased number of victims of honour-based violence have been admitted since 2017. However, it should be noted that Esperanto has in fact been providing support to victims of honour-based violence since its inception, but in these situations, it was always a combined problem where the trafficking component was predominant, thus leading Esperanto to admit them.

Since 2022, Esperanto has also been receiving victims of honour-based violence unrelated to trafficking.

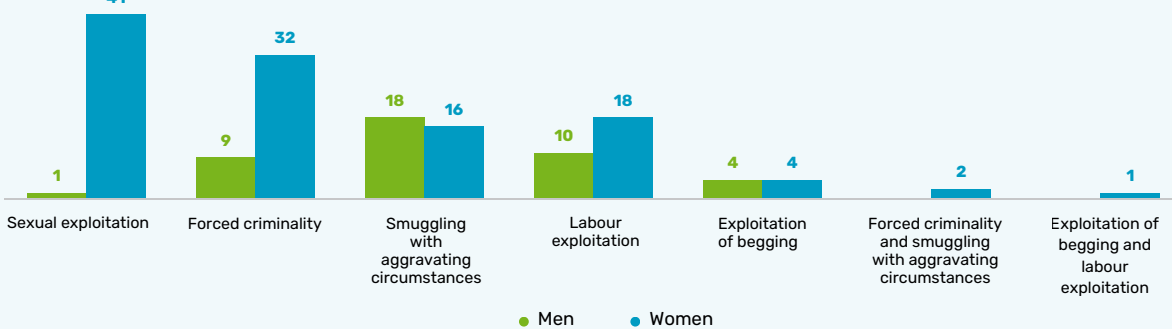
This broadening of the target group was formalised during the period 2019-2022, in particular thanks to additional optional funding from 2021 and an increase in reception capacity from 15 to 20 places in 2022.

Since 2022, the two target groups have occupied about half of the available places at Esperanto.

In what follows, in accordance with Myria's legal mandate, only the cases of victims of trafficking and/or aggravated smuggling of human beings will be explored in depth.

1.1.1. Type of exploitation and gender

Number of trafficking and/or smuggling victims, by gender



Just over half of the 156 young people received by Esperanto over the last decade have been victims of sexual exploitation (42) or have been coerced into committing criminal acts (43)⁵²⁴. The third and fourth largest groups are victims of aggravated human smuggling (36)⁵²⁵ and victims of labour exploitation (29)⁵²⁶. A minority (9)⁵²⁷ were forced to beg.

Of the 156 young people admitted, almost three out of four were girls (114). In the group of victims of sexual exploitation, forced criminality and labour exploitation in particular, they far outnumbered male victims.

524 In total, 43 young people were forced into committing criminal acts; for two of them, it was also a question of aggravated human smuggling. As three young people were victims of several forms of exploitation or trafficking and smuggling at the same time, the sum of the totals indicated for the different groups is higher than the number of young people (159 instead of 156).
 525 In total, 36 young people were victims of aggravated human smuggling, two of whom also committed criminal acts under coercion.
 526 In total, 29 young people were victims of labour exploitation and one of them was forced to beg.
 527 In total, nine young people were forced to beg, one of whom was also a victim of labour exploitation.

1.1.2. Type of exploitation, gender, nationality and age

Nationality	Sexual exploitation		Forced criminality		Labour exploitation		Forced begging		Forced begging & labour exploitation		Forced criminality & smuggling with aggravating circumstances		Smuggling with aggravating circumstances		Total
	F	H	F	H	F	H	F	H	F	H	F	H	F	H	
	Serbia	2		13	5	4	1	1							
Vietnam					5	5							7	8	25
Belgium	18														18
Romania	4		4		1		3	4	1						17
Morocco	3			1	1	3									8
Nigeria	5	1													6
Bosnia-Herzegovina			4								1				5
Congo	2				2								1		5
Iraq													3	2	5
Croatia			3	2											5
France	1		3												4
Afghanistan													1	2	3
Bulgaria	1		1		1										3
Syria			1											2	3
Albania	1												1		2
Cameroon													1	1	2
Macedonia					2										2
Italia			1												1
Algeria											1				1
Angola														1	1
Burundi													1		1
China						1									1
Germany	1														1
Egypt				1											1
Eritrea													1		1
Guinea	1														1
Hungary	1														1
Iran					1										1
Ukraine					1										1
Palestine														1	1
Poland			1												1
Sierra Leone	1														1
Somalia														1	1
Total	41	1	32	9	18	10	4	4	1	0	2	0	17	17	156

The most common nationalities among the victims of human trafficking and/or aggravated smuggling received by Esperanto over the last 10 years (2014-2023) are Serbian (26), Vietnamese (25), Belgian (18) and Romanian (17).

The table above shows the following profiles among the victims received by Esperanto:

Young people (35) from the Roma community of Serbian (18), Romanian (4), Bosnian (4), French (3), Bulgarian (1) and Polish (1) nationality **coerced into committing criminal acts** (for instance, theft). The pressure to commit offences (burglaries of private houses, pickpocketing, theft) comes from the family environment⁵²⁸. The average age of this group is around 14. Between 2014 and 2023, young people corresponding to this profile were admitted by Esperanto every year, except in 2016 and 2022.

In its 2016 annual report rapport, Myria described how these Roma family clans operate⁵²⁹. Belgium has also already been identified by Europol as a destination country for family clans who use children to commit offences under coercion⁵³⁰.

Vietnamese victims, men and women (25 in total), victims of labour exploitation (10) or aggravated human smuggling (15). The majority (19) of Vietnamese victims were admitted by Esperanto between 2018 and 2019. After 2021, this group no longer figures among the victims received by Esperanto. The average age of these smuggling victims is more or less 16. The average age of the young people who were the subject of labour exploitation is around 17. Esperanto explains that reports of this group depend heavily on the level of detection by frontline players (in particular the police).

In 2019, 39 Vietnamese victims of human smuggling were found dead in a refrigerated lorry that had left France by ferry bound for England via Zeebrugge⁵³¹. Following this Essex case, Myria's 2022 annual report focused on the smuggling and trafficking of Vietnamese people to and within Europe. For Vietnamese victims of human smuggling, the decision to leave for Europe is strongly motivated by economic reasons and family expectations⁵³². Moreover, the price to be paid for illegal entry into Europe can quickly reach tens of thousands of euros, and it is often necessary to take out a loan on the informal credit market to achieve this. Due to this debt burden and the possible debt bondage that results from it, human smuggling can lead to a situation of human trafficking. The labour exploitation of Vietnamese victims was particularly associated with exploitation in nail bars and restaurants (in Brussels)⁵³³.

Girls of Belgian nationality who are victims of sexual exploitation through the loverboy method (18). The average age of this group is around 14.5. The drug use of the young girls complicates the support process provided by Esperanto⁵³⁴. This group of victims and the underlying mechanisms of emotional and drug dependency were also addressed by Myria in its annual reports of 2015⁵³⁵, 2018⁵³⁶, 2021⁵³⁷ and 2022⁵³⁸.

Esperanto notes a sharp increase in reports in recent years concerning this group of victims⁵³⁹. In fact, the majority (14) of the victims were admitted by Esperanto over the last five years (2019-2023). Esperanto has noticed that the victims often belong to the same exploitation networks and that the exploitation often takes place in and around Brussels.

This group is characterised by numerous instances of runaway behaviour. Since 2019⁵⁴⁰, five girls out of the 14 were reported as having run away⁵⁴¹. This runaway behaviour has turned out to be more frequent when girls who were the victim of the same exploiter, were admitted at the same time by Esperanto, because they would then run away together to return to this exploiter. This is why Esperanto has also adapted the admission policy for this group of victims, in order to best prevent runaway behaviour. Within the group living at the centre, the decision has now been made to accept only one (or a limited number of) girl(s) from this group at a time⁵⁴². Given that these young girls have often grown up in Belgium and therefore know the languages spoken here, its geography and how its public transport system works, they have less difficulty in running away.

529 Myria, *Annual report 2016 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Beggars in the hands of traffickers*, pp. 42.

530 Europol, *Criminal networks involved in the trafficking and exploitation of underage victims in the European Union*, 2018, pp. 30-33.

531 S. Grommen, *15 jaar cel voor spijfiguur in Essex-drama, waarbij 39 Vietnamese migranten stierven in koelwaggen*, VRT Nieuws, 19 January 2022.

532 Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 10-11.

533 Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 18-19 ; Myria, *Annual report 2023 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings. A chain of responsibilities*, p. 16; Esperanto, *Activity report 2019*, p. 20; Esperanto, *Activity report 2020*, p. 20.

534 Esperanto, *Activity report 2020*, p. 19.

535 Myria, *Annual report 2015 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Tightening the links*, pp. 23-52.

536 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 22-23.

537 Myria, *Annual report 2021 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Visibly invisible*, pp. 64-67.

538 Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 71-76.

539 Esperanto, *Activity report 2020*, p. 19; Esperanto, *Activity report 2023*, p. 24.

540 In 2019, Esperanto modified the way it processes and presents its statistical data. For more information on this, see Esperanto's 2019 annual report on p. 14. This report is available at <https://www.esperantomena.org/statistics>. This allows Myria to specifically identify the number of disappearances within the group of victims of trafficking and/or smuggling from 2019 onwards, whereas this was not possible for the period 2014-2018.

541 Young people who disappeared after running away.

542 Information obtained during an online interview on 7 May 2024 with Sébastien Biau-delle, director of Esperanto.

Running away from the parental home, the foster family or the youth centre where they are staying is also a characteristic feature of the Child Focus studies of 2015⁵⁴³ and 2020⁵⁴⁴ and has been associated with an increased risk of being exploited by traffickers at those times. Child Focus concludes that subsequent episodes of running away also increase under the influence of the exploitation network.

Young people belonging to the Roma community (5 girls, 4 boys) coerced into begging (9). The pressure to beg is rooted in a family context⁵⁴⁵. The average age of this group is around 14.

Myria's 2018 annual report refers to several cases in which victims were forced by certain Roma family clans to beg and commit criminal acts⁵⁴⁶. Belgium has also already been identified by Europol as a destination country for these family clans who coerce children to beg and commit offences⁵⁴⁷.

Roma girls who are victims of labour exploitation exploited in a domestic context (8). Exploitation in a family context sometimes takes place within the family itself and sometimes within the in-laws, when girls move in with the in-laws after a (forced) marriage at a young age⁵⁴⁸. The average age of this group is around 15.

Girls from South-Eastern Europe (Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Albania) exploited in prostitution (9). The average age of these girls is about 15. Some of them arrived in Belgium following a forced marriage only then to be exploited by their in-laws.

Others were victims of pimps who used the loverboy method. Several of Myria's annual reports⁵⁴⁹ refer to this group of victims, the violent control mechanisms used by the perpetrators and the relevant case law⁵⁵⁰.

Nigerian girls (5) who are victims of sexual exploitation. The average age of this group is around 16. The substantial increase in the number of Nigerian women arriving in Europe in 2013-2015 has prompted policymakers and law enforcement agencies to focus their attention on this group⁵⁵¹. In accordance with this chronology, five Nigerian minors who were victims of sexual exploitation were received by Esperanto between 2014 and 2017. Since 2017, this profile is no longer among the minors accepted by Esperanto. Myria's 2018 annual report⁵⁵² describes in detail the underlying Nigerian criminal networks, as well as their control mechanisms and counterstrategies to avoid detection. The relevant case law is analysed in particular in Myria's annual reports of 2021⁵⁵³, 2022⁵⁵⁴ and 2023⁵⁵⁵.

The disappearance of this group among the victims received by Esperanto does not necessarily mean that this group of victims no longer exists. Several factors make detection difficult, particularly the increasingly mobile and transnational nature of the underlying criminal networks⁵⁵⁶. In addition, the exploiter(s) force the girls to pretend to be over 18⁵⁵⁷. Furthermore, the special attention paid to this group by the police may also have had the unintended effect of sexual exploitation increasingly taking place in less visible sectors, rather than in the form of window prostitution or at home.

543 Child Focus, *Slachtoffers van tienerpooiers in Vlaanderen*, 2015, pp. 19 and 43.

544 Child Focus, *Les victimes de proxénètes d'adolescents à Bruxelles*, 2020, p. 34.

545 Esperanto, *Activity report 2021*, p. 22.

546 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Minors in major danger*, p. 26.

547 Europol, *Criminal networks involved in the trafficking and exploitation of underage victims in the European Union*, 2018, pp. 30-33; L. Walker, "Child trafficking action: 92 underaged victims identified and 33 smugglers arrested", *The Brussels Times*, 16 July 2021.

548 Esperanto, *Activity report 2019*, p.20; Esperanto, *Activity report 2020*, p.20; Esperanto, *Activity report 2021*, pp. 3 and 2; Esperanto, *Activity report 2023*, p. 25.

549 Myria, *Annual report 2015 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Tightening the links*, pp. 30-31; Myria, *Annual report 2016 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Beggars in the hands of traffickers*, pp. 81-87, 135-136; Myria, *Annual report 2017 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Online*, pp. 35, 83 and 107; Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Minors in major danger*, p. 133-134; Myria, *Annual report 2019 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Empowering victims*, pp. 104-105, 121; Myria, *Annual report 2020 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Behind closed doors*, pp. 76-79; Myria, *Annual report 2021 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Visibly invisible*, p. 64; Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 71; Myria, *Annual report 2023 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, A chain of responsibilities*, pp. 103-110.

550 For an overview of recent case law on the smuggling and trafficking of human beings, see also Myria's website (case law).

551 D. Brombacher, G. Maihold, M. Müller and J. Vorrath (Ed.), J. Vorrath, "Peculiarity and persistence of a transregional flow: the evolution of human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria to Europe", in *Geopolitics of the Illicit. Linking the Global South and Europe*, Nomos, 2022, p. 133.

552 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 62-73.

553 Myria, *Annual report 2021 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Visibly invisible*, pp. 60-64.

554 Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 64-69.

555 Myria, *Annual report 2023 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, A chain of responsibilities*, p. 96.

556 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Minors in major danger*, p. 63.

557 Ibid., p. 67.

Not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁵⁸, which further intensified this trend.

Young people of Moroccan nationality (8) victims of labour exploitation (4), forced criminality (1) and sexual exploitation (3).

Forced criminality may be linked to the fact that young North Africans live on the street and face problems with addiction⁵⁵⁹. Both Fedasil and Esperanto emphasise the difficulty of cooperating with this group of young people, who express no desire to be supported⁵⁶⁰. It is suspected that they are recruited by adults to commit criminal acts (burglaries and robberies in pharmacies) under the influence of drugs and/or medication⁵⁶¹. In 2020, the Flemish Office of the Commissioner for Children's Rights (Kinderrechtencommissariaat - KRC) emphasised the need to strengthen cooperation on the reception and protection of this group⁵⁶². In 2024, an investigation by the federal judicial police (FJP) concluded that these North African minors were recruited via social media by criminal networks involved in drug trafficking and theft in Belgium⁵⁶³.

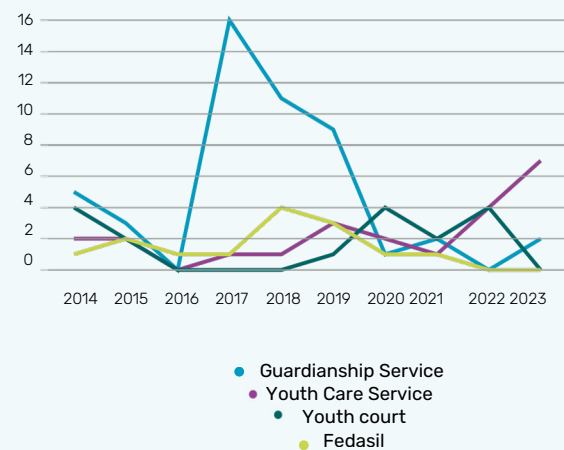
Esperanto came into contact with several Moroccan girls who have been living in Belgium with their families for several years. The girls, aged 14, 16 and 17, had been seduced by young men of Moroccan origin and then sexually exploited through prostitution. Some of the exploiters were also linked to urban gangs in Brussels⁵⁶⁴. Myria's 2022 annual report provides details of the judgment handed down on 30 June 2021 by Brussels Criminal Court in a case involving the sexual exploitation of several underage girls by an urban gang in Brussels⁵⁶⁵.

The other young people received by Esperanto cannot be grouped into specific categories.

1.1.3. Authorities responsible for reporting

Authorities responsible for reporting	Number of reports ⁵⁶⁶
Guardianship Service	49 (31%)
Youth Support Service (SAJ ⁵⁶⁷)	23 (15%)
Youth court	17 (11%)
Fedasil	14 (9%)

Top 4 players who have issued reports over time (2014-2023)



The four bodies that have sent the most reports to Esperanto are listed above. Together, they represent approximately 66% (103) of the total of 156 reports. Esperanto has also received reports from a diverse group of other players, such as the Youth Protection Service (SPJ⁵⁶⁸, 8), the National Social Security Office (7), the Brussels Crisis Centre (7), the police (3), the public prosecutor's office (3), Public Youth Protection Institutions (IPPJ⁵⁶⁹), etc.

⁵⁵⁸ Myria, *Annual report 2021 - Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Visibly invisible*, p. 27.

⁵⁵⁹ Esperanto, *Activity report 2021*, p. 21.

⁵⁶⁰ Information obtained during an online interview on 7 May 2024 with Sébastien Biaudelle, director of Esperanto, and during an online interview on 30 May 2024 with Liesbeth Dhondt, UC policy officer at Fedasil.

⁵⁶¹ Esperanto, *Activity report 2019*, p. 29; Esperanto, *Activity report 2021*, pp. 29 and 33.

⁵⁶² KRC, *Nood aan een versterkte samenwerking om buitenlandse straatkinderen opvang te bieden en te beschermen tegen geweld*, 2020, p. 2.

⁵⁶³ T. Santens, "Dit zijn de 'harraga's': minderjarigen uit Marokko en Afghanistan worden gerekruteerd voor drugshandel en diefstal in België", *VRT Nieuws*, 17 June 2024.

⁵⁶⁴ Esperanto, *Activity report 2022*, p. 24; Esperanto, *Activity report 2023*, p. 24.

⁵⁶⁵ Myria, *Annual report 2022 - Trafficking and smuggling in human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 77-78.

⁵⁶⁶ The totals indicated in point 1.1.3. should be interpreted with caution. The tables of figures received from Esperanto sometimes indicate two reporting authorities when a minor is involved. The table only includes the total when the authority that made the report has been declared as being the sole reporting authority.

⁵⁶⁷ The SAJ (Service de l'Aide à la Jeunesse) offer youth services on a voluntary basis within the French-speaking Community.

⁵⁶⁸ The SPJ (Service de la Protection de la Jeunesse) are support services that intervene in the French-speaking Community when the youth court decides to impose a restrictive measure. It is up to the SPJ to implement this restrictive measure and to ensure the follow-up in practice.

⁵⁶⁹ The IPPJ (Institutions Publiques de Protection de la Jeunesse) are institutions within the French-speaking Community aimed at young people. They provide open and/or closed programmes exclusively for young people (usually aged 14 and over) prosecuted for acts classified as offences.

Most of the reports from the Guardianship Service date from the period 2017–2019 (36). Since 2020, the number of reports has decreased (five in total for the period 2021–2023).

The number of reports received from the SAJ appears to have been fairly stable over the period 2014–2022 (an average of two per year). In 2023, the number of reports rose to seven.

The youth court referred an average of 2.8 reports per year during the period 2014–2023.

The number of reports submitted by Fedasil remained relatively stable between 2014 and 2023, with an average of 1.75 reports per year and a specific increase of four reports in 2018.

1.1.4. Length of stay and running away (disappearances)

The figures provided by Esperanto for the period 2014–2023 do not make it possible to determine the average duration of admission for victims of human trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling. Esperanto indicates that the average duration of reception and support is six months to one year. Since 2021, Esperanto has observed that this period is longer, partly because the lack of places in traditional youth care facilities makes it difficult to refer young people to other youth support institutions⁵⁷⁰.

However, for the period 2019–2023, information is available on the number of times someone ran away. During the five-year period in which 71 victims were admitted, 11 disappearances occurred (in other words, in 15% of cases).

Six of the 11 disappearances involved girls who were **victims of sexual exploitation**. Five of these six girls were of **Belgian nationality**. The runaway behaviour exhibited by the young Belgian girls who were sexually exploited using the loverboy method was mentioned above.

In addition, two **Vietnamese minors** (one victim of labour exploitation and one victim of aggravated human smuggling) also disappeared. They probably ran away with the aim of reaching their intended destination (often the United Kingdom)⁵⁷¹ and/or because the pressure to earn money (rather than the obligation to attend school) in order to repay the debt contracted with the network of smugglers was too great. The difficulty of gaining the trust of the Vietnamese victims had already been reported by Myria, with the Vietnamese unaccompanied children disappearing just as quickly from Fedasil Observation and Orientation Centres and not making statements (or false ones, as the case may be) to the authorities⁵⁷². However, these disappearances at Esperanto would appear to be rather rare, considering that they only involved two people out of a total of 25 Vietnamese accompanied child victims over the last decade.

The other three disappearances involved **victims of forced criminality**, two belonging to the Roma community and one victim of Moroccan nationality⁵⁷³. This issue was also raised during the consultation with Fedasil⁵⁷⁴ concerning these two groups. The disappearances of young people belonging to the Roma community may also be linked to the mobile nature of this group across national borders⁵⁷⁵.

570 Information obtained during an online interview on 7 May 2024 with Sébastien Biaudelle, director of Esperanto.

571 Esperanto, *Activity report 2019*, p. 20.

572 Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Bound by debt*, p. 21.

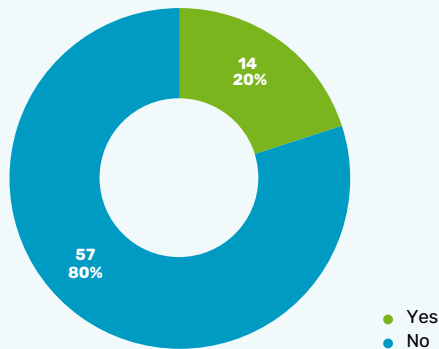
573 This data was shared by Fedasil with Myria on 10 July 2024. Unaccompanied children of Moroccan nationality were already among the two nationalities that disappeared most often from Fedasil reception centres in 2021–2023. In 2021, 316 disappearances of Moroccan minors were recorded; in 2022 and 2023, there were 148 and 234 disappearances respectively. These figures should be treated with caution. The disappearances only concern runaways from Fedasil reception centres and therefore do not reflect any disappearances of UC staying at private addresses. Furthermore, the figures do not relate to individuals, but to reports of disappearances. A young person may therefore appear several times in these figures. These figures also include the disappearances of minors whose age is uncertain. These young people often disappear before an age test is carried out by the Guardianship Service. In addition, these figures include disappearances, spontaneous departures from reception centres and refusals of reception.

574 Information obtained during an online interview on 30 May 2024 with Liesbeth Dhondt, UC policy officer at Fedasil.

575 L. de Witte, *Duurzame oplossingen voor Roma kinderen die slachtoffer zijn van criminele uitbuiting*, 2018, pp. 26–28, 31, 55, 57, 87 and 91; Myria, *Annual report 2016 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Beggars in the hands of traffickers*, p. 42.

1.1.5. Special procedure for victims of human trafficking

Was the special procedure for victims of human trafficking initiated for the victims received in 2019-2023?



The initiation of a protection procedure for victims of human trafficking or aggravated human smuggling is not a prerequisite in order to benefit from reception and support from Esperanto. Esperanto will discuss this possibility with the young person, but will never impose it.

Of the 71 victims taken in by Esperanto during the period 2019-2023, the special procedure for victims of human trafficking or aggravated human smuggling was initiated for 14 young people (10 girls and 4 boys, i.e. 20% of cases). These were mainly Vietnamese victims (9), six of whom were victims of aggravated human smuggling and three of labour exploitation.

When young people are interested in the special procedure for victims of human trafficking or aggravated human smuggling, it is often for the following two reasons⁵⁷⁶:

- To obtain a residence permit. This potential reason therefore does not apply to victims with Belgian nationality, since they already have a Belgian national identity card;
- The desire for the exploiter(s) to be punished.

The 'human trafficking' procedure is not initiated for the majority of child victims, mainly for the following reasons⁵⁷⁷:

- **The conditions are very strict** and it is difficult for the young person to meet them. For instance, they have to cut any ties with the network in which they were exploited, which is very complicated for young people who may experience conflicts of loyalty towards their exploiter, such as the victims of pimps who used the loverboy method, or for young people from the Roma community whose exploitation occurred in a family context.
- **There is insufficient evidence**, which leads to the rapid closure of the police investigation and criminal proceedings. For instance, even if the young person wishes to actively cooperate in the investigation and is willing to make a statement, they do not always have relevant information such as the real identity of the exploiter(s).
- **The trauma** suffered may, among other things, have an impact on memory and hamper the young person's ability to make statements to the police.
- There is a **fear of reprisals from the exploiters** if they enter the procedure.
- **The victim is ashamed of being a victim**, in relation to themselves and to the members of their family.
- **The victim is under pressure from their family** (in Belgium and/or in their country of origin) to continue earning money.
- Vulnerability and a **lack of stimulation during childhood** can discourage young people from reporting offences and cooperating with the police.
- **Other residence procedures are preferred**, namely the special residence procedure for unaccompanied children and the international protection procedure. These procedures are considered to be a more durable solution, but also less restrictive and confrontational for the young person compared to the procedure for victims of human trafficking and human smuggling.

2. The creation of Meza within Minor-Ndako

Minor-Ndako is a recognised organisation within the youth support services of the Flemish Community. It provides reception and support services to unaccompanied children and young people who are in a difficult situation. Since 2022, Minor-Ndako has become an organisation with 10 branches spread across Brussels, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant and West Flanders. Thanks to these 10 sites, it was possible to help 319 children, young people and families in 2023.

⁵⁷⁶ Information obtained during an online interview on 7 May 2024 with Sébastien Biaudelle, director of Esperanto.

⁵⁷⁷ Information obtained during an online interview on 7 May 2024 with Sébastien Biaudelle, director of Esperanto.

In 2022, Minor-Ndako opened a new support group, Meza, which is endeavouring to provide an initial response to a real need for care for unaccompanied children who are victims of trafficking. As previously mentioned, human trafficking affects both adults and children. In addition, the group of child victims also includes a particularly vulnerable group of unaccompanied children (UC). Following the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government has a duty to offer protection and shelter to UC. This protection involves several aspects (in particular the appointment of a guardian), but also includes protection against violence, abuse and exploitation.

However, to date, there is a disparity in Belgium in the availability of reception facilities for adult and child victims of human trafficking. The three approved specialised centres (Payoke, PAG-ASA and Sūrya) offer legal and administrative support to child victims, but their reception facilities are exclusively reserved for adults. Before the opening of Meza, the Flemish Community had no centre specialised in the reception of UC who are (presumed) victims of human trafficking.

2.1. Target group(s) for the Meza section

Meza has **six reception places** mainly intended for **unaccompanied children aged 14 to 18 who are presumed victims of sexual exploitation**. It is important to note here that the term 'presumed' has been chosen deliberately. These are girls who are in a worrying situation with indications of trafficking. However, they are not obliged to make a statement in this regard, as the right to reception is deliberately not linked to the obligation to enter the procedure relating to the status of victim of trafficking. Minor-Ndako prioritises the request for assistance, the need for support and/or the need for accommodation, with the establishment of security and trust being considered as necessary preconditions for initiating and completing the procedure.

Besides this priority target group, Meza can also receive other children who are presumed victims of any kind of exploitation, in particular unaccompanied girls aged 12 and over, vulnerable young adult girls and unaccompanied boys aged between 14 and 18.

In exceptional circumstances, Meza can also receive underage girls and boys who do not fall within these target groups. These include (presumed) victims of aggravated human smuggling, (presumed) victims of honour-based violence, (presumed) victims⁵⁷⁸ of Belgian nationality who are being sexually exploited by pimps who use the loverboy method. This group of victims often has similarities with UC, for instance when the parents are absent from their lives and because they are not of Belgian origin.

2.2. Meza's vision of reception: to provide safe, small-scale, low-threshold, cooperative and multidisciplinary accommodation

Meza means 'middle' in Esperanto. Meza aims to be a turning point in the lives of young people, by paying attention to their trajectory before their admission and striving to improve their prospects after they are admitted.

To reach this turning point, Minor-Ndako believes that a specialised approach is necessary in the form of **safe and small-scale accommodation**. Minor-Ndako has found that many unaccompanied children who are potential victims of trafficking and end up in open, unsecured and non-specialised reception facilities often disappear before they can receive effective help. Minor-Ndako therefore believes that the target group requires a protected and controlled environment, free from the harmful influences of the trafficking network, in order to provide those concerned with the necessary security and mental and physical respite.

Another of Meza's objectives is to provide **accessibility at a low threshold**, so that there are no long waits in cases of emergency shelter. One of the ways of achieving this accessibility is through **cooperation with PAG-ASA**, one of three recognised and specialised centres responsible for receiving and supporting victims of human trafficking and aggravated human smuggling.

⁵⁷⁸ For the sake of readability, the term 'victims' will always be used in the rest of the text instead of '(presumed) victims'.

Reports are made through PAG-ASA, which means that victims can be informed 24/7, thanks to PAG-ASA's on-call service.

Meza and PAG-ASA also collaborate in other areas: PAG-ASA assesses the reports received according to the main target group and will recommend that Meza take charge of the case if there is the slightest indication of trafficking. If the report does not concern a young person belonging to the priority target group, the decision whether to admit this person or not is taken by mutual agreement. In addition, a legal advisor from PAG-ASA is present at Meza once or twice a week to inform minors about the procedure for victims of human trafficking and to support them in all their dealings with the police, the courts, etc. In the follow-up process, PAG-ASA is also responsible for legal and administrative support in the procedure relating to the status of victim of human trafficking. With regard to administrative support for residence outside the trafficking procedure (for instance, an application for international protection, a special residence procedure for unaccompanied children, etc.) or other legal procedures, once a guardian has been appointed, the latter will appoint a lawyer to follow up on these aspects. To follow up on the criminal case relating to human trafficking, PAG-ASA can recommend a lawyer specialising in this field (criminal law and more specifically human trafficking) to the guardian, but the final decision rests with the guardian. With the guardian's consent, PAG-ASA can contact a lawyer and arrange for a pro deo lawyer to be appointed. With the consent of the guardian and the young person, it is possible to establish direct contact with the lawyer as part of the procedure relating to the status of victim of human trafficking (by phone or email), or to communicate through the guardian.

In addition to providing safe accommodation while trying to make the victims inaccessible to the exploitation network and offering legal and administrative support through PAG-ASA, the centre also provides appropriate care and assistance. From the beginning, the multidisciplinary team (a psychologist, a team leader, a team of support workers and a legal advisor from PAG-ASA) endeavours to establish a relationship of trust with the young person. Meza benefits from the pedagogical expertise of **De Wissel**⁵⁷⁹.

Finally, efforts are being made to ensure close **cooperation with the police, the public prosecutor's office, the courts, the Immigration Office, the Guardianship Service and the players involved in the reception of asylum seekers (in particular Fedasil).**

2.3. Meza's reception process has several stages

2.3.1. First stage: the internal stage

The reception process at Meza comprises several stages. During the first stage, the child's daily life takes place entirely indoors, including educational activities and leisure activities. The aim is to create a living environment with a pleasant, family atmosphere. For the security of the target group, there is no free access to phones or the internet. Calls to parents or internet searches can only take place under the supervision of support workers.

During this first stage, the main objective is to present the young people to the other residents, the staff and the guardian, as well as explaining the assistance that is offered to them. In addition, a first appointment with the general practitioner takes place for a health check-up. During the first stage, the objective is to ensure that the day proceeds in a structured and predictable manner, with activities centred on care, the provision of information and relaxation. The aim is to gain trust and, if possible, re-establish contact with the family in the country of origin.

The entirely internal stage is short: an initial evaluation follows after two weeks and a transition to greater freedom is then possible.

2.3.2. Second stage: self-management under supervision

The following stages gradually lead to greater access to the outside world. The second stage consists of 'practising under supervision'. The young person can go out for a limited period of time or with their own mobile phone (without a SIM card), but always under supervision. Training on cybersecurity is also planned.

⁵⁷⁹ De Wissel is a support network for vulnerable young people and young families with six centres in Leuven, Tienen, Wezemaal and Sint-Pieters-Rhode respectively. The support services provided by De Wissel include secure accommodation, emergency accommodation, mobile family support and alternative day care during school hours, etc. For more information see www.wissel.be.

2.3.3. Third and fourth stages: greater independence (particularly in the areas of education and leisure)

During the third and fourth stages, supervision decreases and the freedom to do things alone increases. Educational and leisure activities can take place externally during this stage. However, the use of mobile phones and the internet remains regulated within the residential group, since the various residents may be at different stages of the reception process.

2.3.4. Last stage: transition to follow-up support

The final stage consists of transitioning to support in an ordinary environment once there is no longer any danger for the minor concerned. In consultation with the young person, their guardian and (if applicable) the competent public prosecutor's office, an assessment is made of what is considered desirable and feasible. Meza thus aims to provide tailor-made assistance: referral to a centre providing comprehensive support for families, placement in a foster family, stay in a Minor-Ndako residential group or another structure, support towards an independent life, etc.

A full programme lasts between six months and a year, but the duration of the specialised reception is as short or as long as necessary.

2.4. In total, Meza admitted 26 young people between 2022 and 2023

In **2022**, a total of **13 young people** were accommodated at Meza: 10 minors (under 18) and three young adults (18 and 19). There were 11 girls and two boys. **All the minors accommodated were (presumed) victims of trafficking**, 10 were (presumed) victims of sexual exploitation and three were (presumed) victims of forced criminality.

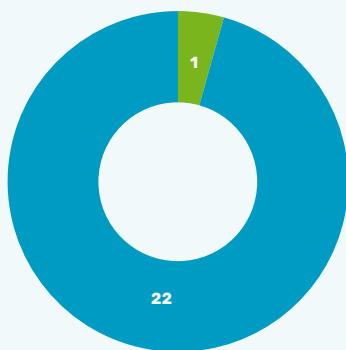
In **2023**, a total of **13 young people** were accommodated at Meza: 12 minors (under 18 years old) and one young adult (19 years old). There were 12 girls and one boy. **Nine of the 13 young people were involved in human trafficking**. Five girls were victims of sexual exploitation, one girl was a victim of a combination of sexual and labour exploitation, and three young people were victims of forced criminality.

For one of the girls, it was a question of aggravated human smuggling. The other three people accommodated did not fit into Meza's main target group or in other target groups. The three unaccompanied children were not actually victims of human trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling, but were exceptionally received by Meza in order to help partners in the youth care system out of their critical situation. This illustrates the pressure on Meza to receive young people outside the target group due to the shortage of places in traditional care facilities in Flanders and Wallonia. In addition to the pressure exerted by traditional youth support services, Meza is also under increasing pressure to accommodate male victims, particularly Afghan boys and young adults who are victims of criminal gangs (more information on this subject below). These pressures stem from the lack of (suitable) accommodation among the players involved in the reception of asylum seekers, such as Fedasil and the Red Cross. The possible negative implications and related recommendations are examined further on in this contribution.

In accordance with Myria's legal mandate, the following will only examine in depth the cases of the 23 victims of trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling who were received by Meza between 2022 and 2023.

2.4.1. Type of exploitation and gender

Breakdown of human trafficking and smuggling victims among those received in 2022-2023



- Human trafficking
- Human smuggling with aggravating circumstances

Victims supported in 2022-2023 according to gender and type of exploitation



The profile of the young people received by Meza mainly corresponds to the primary target group (unaccompanied underage girls aged between 14 and 18 who are victims of sexual exploitation) and the secondary one (other vulnerable minors who are trafficking victims). Of the minors received by Meza, 22 are victims of trafficking, including 16 cases⁵⁸⁰ of sexual exploitation and 14 female minors.

The second most common form of exploitation is forced criminality. Within this group of six people, mostly girls (5) were also admitted. Finally, a young girl who was a victim of aggravated human smuggling was also admitted by Meza.

2.4.2. Type of exploitation, gender, nationality and age

Nationality	Sexual exploitation		Sexual & labour exploitation		Forced criminality		Aggravated human smuggling		Total
	F	H	F	H	F	H	F	H	
	Romania	4		1					
Belgium	3				1	1			5
Afghanistan		2					1		3
Bosnia-Herzegovina					2				2
Serbia					2				2
Tunisia	1								1
Benin	1								1
Bulgaria	1								1
Macedonia	1								1
Malta	1								1
Niger	1								1
Total	13	2	1	0	5	1	1	0	23

⁵⁸⁰ Among the 16 young people mentioned are the 15 young victims of sexual exploitation and the young girl who was the victim of a combined form of exploitation (sexual and labour exploitation).

Romanian (5), Belgian (5) and Afghan (3) were the most common nationalities among the victims of human trafficking and human smuggling received by Meza in 2022 and 2023.

The table above identifies the following profiles among the victims received by Meza:

Girls originating from South-Eastern Europe (Romanian, Bulgarian, Macedonian) exploited in prostitution (7). Of the seven girls, five were minors and two were young adults (aged 18 and 19). The two adult victims had come to Belgium from Romania with their pimp. They knew they were going to work as prostitutes in Belgium, but once in Belgium, the agreements made about the money earned were not respected. In the case of the child victims, members of the family and in-laws (brothers, mother, mother-in-law, 'husband's uncle' and 'husband') were involved in the sexual exploitation. Two of them belonged to the Roma community. References to the involvement of her own 'husband' and/or her own family (by marriage) in the exploitation also demonstrate the interconnection of human trafficking and the practice of child marriage in South-Eastern Europe⁵⁸¹ and, in particular, within the Roma community⁵⁸². The new Directive (EU) 2024/1412583 amending Directive 2011/36/EU adds forced marriage to the forms of exploitation included in the definition of trafficking. Adopted on 13 June, it entered into force on 14 July 2024. Belgium is required to transpose it by 15 July 2026 at the latest.

The dynamic at play between the victim and the exploiter(s) (emotional dependence) bears strong similarities to the dependency mechanisms described in the phenomenon of **sexual exploitation by the loverboy method among Belgian victims, one of whom was of Moroccan origin (3)**. The average age of the two groups is around 16.

When they are admitted, the girls' behaviour is characterised by emotional volatility and problems with aggression, sometimes exacerbated by a drug-related issue. Addiction problems also make it difficult for the girls to accept the rules and restrictions within Meza, which reinforces their resistance to their stay. In addition, Meza and PAG-ASA note that some feel a certain attraction to the old way of life, where prostitution is seen as an accessible alternative for earning money⁵⁸⁴.

This group of victims and the underlying mechanisms of emotional and drug dependency were also addressed by Myria in its annual reports of 2015⁵⁸⁵ and 2018⁵⁸⁶. In its 2022 evaluation report, GRETA also refers to a Belgian police investigation initiated in 2009 in which young Romanian women had been recruited using the loverboy technique and then sexually exploited through prostitution⁵⁸⁷.

Young people (6, five girls and one boy) belonging to the Roma community and of Belgian (2), Bosnian (2) and Serbian (2) nationality, **and coerced into committing criminal acts** (e.g. theft). It is the family and/or the wider community to which the young people belong who coerce them into commit these acts. The average age of this group is around 12.

Afghan boys who are victims of sexual exploitation (2). Myria's 2018 annual report⁵⁸⁸ already highlighted the issue of the sexual exploitation of Afghan boys and linked it to the local custom of *bacha bazi*. Earlier this year, the scale and seriousness of this problem were again highlighted by the prosecution of an Afghan criminal organisation allegedly involved in the smuggling, rape and extortion of a dozen Afghan children⁵⁸⁹.

581 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*, p. 39.

582 Myria, *Annual report 2015 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Tightening the links*, pp.13-22; Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 22-23; Myria, *Annual report 2023 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, A chain of responsibilities*, p. 110; Z. Mazinjanin, "Combating child marriage among the Roma population in Eastern Europe", Humanium, 3 October 2023.

583 Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, O.J. L, 24 June 2024. On this subject, see Part 2 of this report, Chapter 1, point 1.1.1.

584 Information obtained during an online interview on 25 April 2024 with Johan Vangenechten (policy manager at Minor-Ndako), Sally Beeckman (legal coordinator at PAG-ASA) and Melanie Zonderman (legal advisor to minors at PAG-ASA and Meza).

585 Myria, *Annual report 2015 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Tightening the links*, pp. 23-49.

586 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 22-23.

587 GRETA, *Evaluation Report Belgium*, 2022, Chapter IV, point 8.

588 Myria, *Annual report 2018 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 37-38.

589 M. Van Cauwenberghe & H. Decré, "Van mensensmokkel tot seksueel misbruik van tientallen jonge Afghanen: 23 verdachten worden vervolgd in 'zwaar en gewelddadig dossier'", *VRT Nieuws*, 16 May 2024.

Minor-Ndako, PAG-ASA, Fedasil and the federal police⁵⁹⁰ emphasise the problematic role of social media in these situations of exploitation. Social media is used to convince young people to come to Belgium by luring them with the dream of prosperity. The sexual abuse takes place during the journey to Belgium or once they have arrived in Belgium. The sexual exploitation is filmed and the images are then used as a means of pressure (e.g. to give money or hand over other young people for sexual abuse).

Threats (that the images will be posted) are made to the young person through social media⁵⁹¹. In addition, social media is used as a tracking tool, with young people being located and approached again by exploiters based on the information they share on social media.

The other young people received by Meza are less easy to attribute to a well-defined group.

2.4.3. Authorities responsible for reporting



In 2023, Meza admitted one girl on three occasions, and another girl on two occasions. As a result, the total number of reports (26) is higher than the number of victims of trafficking and aggravated human smuggling received by Meza over the period 2022-2023 (23).

As previously stated, PAG-ASA assesses the received notifications regarding potential victims. Most of the reports received came from the police (11) and the youth support sector (4). Reports were also received from Fedasil, youth court magistrates, social organisations (the Brussels crisis point de contactat CAW592 and Violett Antwerpen⁵⁹³), Esperanto, the Guardianship Service, a guardian, Vlaams Agentschap Integratie & Inburgering⁵⁹⁴ and the public prosecutor's office.

In particular, the police reported to PAG-ASA five of the 14 sexually exploited girls⁵⁹⁵ and five of the six young people forced to commit criminal acts.

As for the youth support sector, it reported four of the 14 girls who were victims of sexual exploitation. One of them was reported three times, twice by youth support services and once by a youth magistrate. A fifth girl, also a victim of sexual exploitation, was also reported by a youth magistrate.

590 A. Boersma, "Tot honderden minderjarige Afghaanse jongens in Belgische prostitutie gedwongen: gelokt via TikTok", *De Morgen*, 14 September 2022; T. Santens, "Dit zijn de 'harraga's': minderjarigen uit Marokko en Afghanistan worden gerekruteerd voor drugshandel en diefstal in België", *VRT Nieuws*, 17 June 2024.

591 W. Hertogs, "Duo misbruikt minderjarigen en filmt het: 7 en 8 jaar cel", *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 17 February 2023.

592 CAW is the acronym for Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (general welfare centre), see also www.caw.be/locaties/crisis-bxl.

593 provides information, advice and assistance to sex workers throughout Flanders, see also www.violett.be/nl. Violett also co-wrote the external contribution 'Experiences in relation to diversity and vulnerability in the context of support for sex workers from Latin America' in the focus of this report: see Annex 1 to Part 1.

594 The Vlaams Agentschap Integratie & Inburgering (Flemish Agency for Integration & Civic Integration) contributes to the general objectives of the Flemish integration policy in Flanders and Brussels. For instance, the Agency supports local administrations, organisations and citizens in their integration work, organises the Flemish integration course and has a department responsible for interpreting and translation in social settings. For more information about the Agency, go to <https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/fr/node/464>.

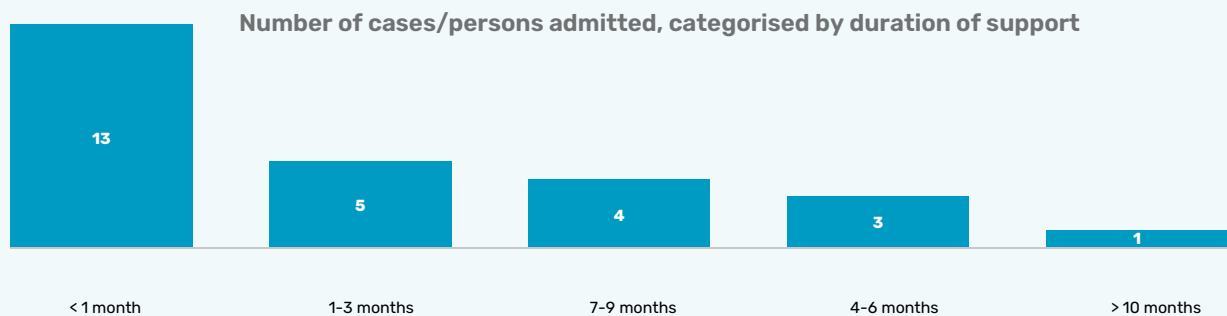
595 Thirteen girls were victims of sexual exploitation. For the 14th, it was a combination of sexual and labour exploitation.

The link that these young girls had already established with another form of youth support or assistance is consistent with the profile described above and with the conclusions of the Child Focus studies in 2015⁵⁹⁶ and 2020⁵⁹⁷. These studies have revealed in particular that pimps who use the loverboy method recruit in and around institutions for young people.

Meza and PAG-ASA point out that reports came mainly from the French-speaking side of the country, while requests from the Dutch-speaking side of the country are fewer than expected, even though human trafficking knows no linguistic boundaries.

Therefore, the reasons for this situation and how the Dutch-speaking part of the country can better find its way to Meza in the future, require further investigation. It is possible that French-speaking youth support workers already have a better knowledge of how to receive child victims of trafficking, given Esperanto's long-standing presence on the French-speaking support scene. Consequently, the existence and added value of Meza among French-speaking youth support players may have been perceived more quickly. Furthermore, the change in Esperanto's target audience – as described above – could perhaps encourage players in French-speaking youth support to also turn more quickly to Meza when looking for a place to receive a young person.

2.4.4. Duration of stay and running away (disappearances)



As indicated above, in 2023, Meza admitted one girl on three occasions and another on two occasions. Consequently, the total number of cases (26) is higher than the number of human trafficking and aggravated human smuggling victims received by Meza over the period 2022-2023 (23).

Half (13) of the admissions for these two groups of victims lasted less than a month. Eight young people only stayed at Meza for a week, or even less. Five admissions resulted in a stay between one and three months. Seven admissions resulted in a stay of four to nine months, and only one girl stayed longer (more than 10 months) at Meza.

The short length of the stay may also be partly related to the challenge Meza faces regarding run aways. In total, **eight young people disappeared.**

Minor-Ndako indicates that these disappearances mainly occur among **young people from the Roma community**. Three of the young people from the Roma community who were coerced into committing criminal acts, for instance, barely stayed a day in Meza before disappearing.

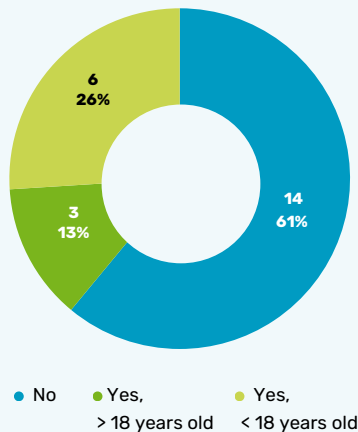
In addition, Minor-Ndako and PAG-ASA report that this group has a great deal of mistrust towards support, which makes it very difficult to establish a relationship of trust. The other factors that complicate long-term support are discussed later in this contribution.

⁵⁹⁶ Child Focus, *Slachtoffers van tienerpoaiers in Vlaanderen*, 2015, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁹⁷ Child Focus, *Les victimes de proxénètes d'adolescents à Bruxelles*, 2020, pp. 10, 35-39.

2.4.5. Special procedure for victims of human trafficking

Was the special procedure for victims of human trafficking initiated for victims received in 2022-2023?



As mentioned above, 22 victims of human trafficking and 1 victim of aggravated human smuggling were received by Meza. The special procedure was not initiated for the victim of human trafficking. **Three of the 22 victims of human trafficking were adults (aged 18-19). The special procedure for victims of human trafficking was initiated for all three.**

Among the **minors (19)**, **five of them chose to enter the special procedure for victims of human trafficking.**

There are many reasons why a minor might not enter the special procedure for trafficking victims: the young person is not willing to make statements and cooperate with the courts; the young person does not agree or is unable to comply with the conditions of the procedure; they choose another procedure (international protection procedure, special residence procedure for UC); they return to their country of origin, disappear or are reunited with their family. In this regard, Minor-Ndako notes that the importance of residence documents for Belgium is not always clear to minors, particularly if they are EU citizens.

2.5. Thoughts on cooperation to date: strengths and challenges

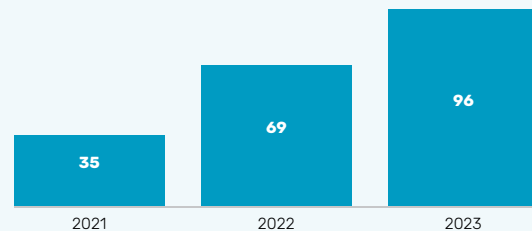
2.5.1. Complementary partnership

Meza is a **partnership that brings together the expertise of De Wissel (education), PAG-ASA (victims of trafficking and aggravated human smuggling) and Minor-Ndako (unaccompanied**

children) and aims to provide a safe place for (presumed) trafficking victims, to prevent a return to the exploitative environment, to provide a place for traumatic experiences and to lay the foundations for a new life free from exploitation. This **complementarity** is Meza's greatest strength, with the players involved drawing on each other's knowledge, expertise and network. For instance, the collaboration between PAG-ASA and Minor-Ndako enables the latter to raise awareness of human trafficking among more players in the youth support sector, and Minor-Ndako can participate in training for magistrates.

2.5.2. Informing and raising awareness among contacts can help increase the number of reported minors

Number of reports of minors PAG-ASA



For years, specialised centres received very few reports of UC who were (presumed) victims of human trafficking. Since the opening of Meza and the recruitment of a legal advisor at PAG-ASA who focuses specifically on supporting minors who are victims of trafficking, an increase in the number of reports of minors has been observed by PAG-ASA. In 2022, PAG-ASA received 69 reports concerning minors and 96 in 2023, compared to only 35 in 2021 (before Meza opened).

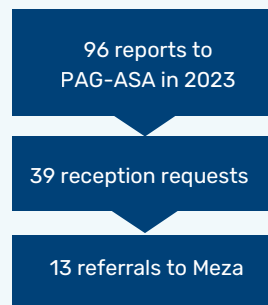
It is important to note that not all reports concern situations of human trafficking and/or aggravated human smuggling, and that they do not always result in a referral to Meza or support from PAG-ASA as part of the procedure relating to the status of victim of human trafficking.

In 2022, PAG-ASA received 69 reports. Two of these reports came from Esperanto, one of which resulted in a referral to Meza.

Of the 69 reports received, 30 were the subject of a reception request, 13 of which resulted in a referral to Meza. As previously mentioned, these were 10 minors and three young adults aged 18-19.



In 2023, PAG-ASA received 96 reports concerning minors. One was from Payoke. This did not lead to a referral to Meza, as this was not considered advisable at the time, given the young people already staying there at the time and staff availability at Meza.



In 39 of the 96 reports, there was a request for accommodation. Meza was able to admit 10 cases. In three other cases, Minor-Ndako decided to respond to a request for admission from their own network (the three people having a standard profile for youth assistance).

The increase in the number of reports could possibly be explained by the informative and awareness-raising contacts that the legal advisor for child victims of human trafficking has with police officers, (youth) public prosecutors, reception centres for unaccompanied children, etc.

2.5.3. Difficulties establishing a durable relationship of trust with the young person

Several factors have already been discussed that make it difficult to build a lasting relationship of trust and cooperation between the minors and Meza's support workers (running away, drug dependency, distrust of support workers).

Minor-Ndako and PAG-ASA have also identified other factors that may make it difficult to build a lasting relationship of trust: the rules at Meza, the difficult transition to the final support phase (transition to another suitable environment), the fast turnaround of the young people admitted to the small-scale context of Meza and the limited legal leverage available.

The rules at Meza

The measures in place at Meza are draconian for a young person: the first stage is entirely in-house, mobile phones are confiscated, internet use is limited and monitored, and Meza's location must not be disclosed to others. In other words, the minor's freedom is restricted. At the same time, several players consider such restrictions for the sake of safety to be crucial. For instance, to protect minors against the pressure and/or threats exerted by the exploiter(s) on them or those around them, to protect them from possible temptations and to limit the risk of running away⁵⁹⁸.

Difficulties organising an exit in good conditions

Given the rules and the draconian security measures in force at Meza, it is important that the stay does not last longer than necessary. However, Meza reports difficulties in getting minors out due to the acute lack of places and appropriate offerings in traditional youth support structures.

Esperanto also emphasises that since 2021, the period during which it takes charge of the young people they support has been increasing, due to the growing complexity of the situations in which young people find themselves, but also to the increasing saturation of the youth support sector. To illustrate this, Esperanto cites the referrals to the General Residential Services (SRG)⁵⁹⁹. Esperanto notes that in some districts, there are rarely any places available in the SRG and if there are, priority is given to young people without accommodation at that time. This has the effect, on the one hand, of taking more time to refer young people from Esperanto to another organisation better suited to their current needs and, on the other hand, of hampering the possibilities of taking in new victims at Esperanto.

⁵⁹⁸ Myria, *Annual report 2022 – Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Bound by debt*, pp. 43-44, 143; Child Focus, *Les victimes de proxénètes d'adolescents à Bruxelles*, 2020, p. 61; GRETA, *Evaluation Report Belgium*, 2022, Chapter V, point 4.

⁵⁹⁹ The *Services Résidentiels Généraux* (SRG) receive young people and support them in the context of their reintegration into the family or in their transition to independent living.

To facilitate referrals, the two organisations emphasise the need to create additional places within youth support services. Esperanto also mentions the need to review the referral procedures.

Esperanto also raises another concern regarding the referral of young people following their period of support at Esperanto. The district where the exploitation has been identified is often the one responsible for following up the young person's case. Following their stay at Esperanto, the young person will be followed by social services or the youth protection services of this district, whose accommodation facilities are also located in the same region. This risks undoing the work already done to break the ties between the young person and the exploiter(s).

The fast turnaround of young people received by Meza and the associated difficulty of creating a stable and trusting environment

At the same time, the problems of running away and the relatively short duration of some young people's stay at Meza have also been described above (13 of the 26 cases of trafficking or smuggling victims admitted stayed less than a month). The staff at Minor-Ndako and PAG-ASA interviewed by Myria⁶⁰⁰ noted that such a rapid turnover does not facilitate the creation of a stable, trusting and family-like atmosphere in the restricted context of Meza. In reality, the presence of young people who have already benefited from support for some time and who show confidence in the support and supervision offered by Meza facilitates new admissions.

The limited (but necessary) legal levers in the running of Meza

When Meza opened, Minor-Ndako expected that any minor found in a situation giving cause for concern, with indications of trafficking, would be referred to the youth court. However, in practice, this has not always been the case. In addition, Minor-Ndako sometimes encounters resistance from youth magistrates when it comes to withdrawing the voluntary basis of the support in order to be able to keep the young person safe and prevent them from running away.

Minor-Ndako emphasises that the involvement of a youth magistrate before and during admission is perceived as an added value throughout the support process. If no magistrate is involved, the admission is by definition voluntary. In these cases, Meza raises the question of what mandate is actually available to impose certain restrictive measures on the minor (e.g. confiscating a mobile phone) and what requests can be made to external players (e.g. whether the police can be asked to search for a young person who has run away and bring them back to Meza). At Esperanto, according to the standard procedure, there is always contact between Esperanto and the youth care service (SAJ) or youth protection service (SPJ) and/or the youth court when admitting a young person. A mandate from the SAJ or the SPJ is sufficient for Esperanto to admit someone. Contact with the youth court is not a systematic part of the admission procedure. According to Esperanto, cooperation with the SAJ, the SPJ and/or the youth court goes smoothly in most cases⁶⁰¹.

2.5.4. Forced criminality: an overlooked phenomenon

In 2022 and 2023, minors from the Roma community who showed signs of forced criminality were received by Meza. As previously stated, some of these minors very quickly ran away from the centre. Meza believes that the police and (youth) prosecutors are reluctant to intervene in these cases. Minor-Ndako notes that these minors are often not considered (presumed) victims of trafficking. Minor-Ndako makes the same observation about North African minors who are apparently forced to commit offences as part of gangs or networks.

GRETA⁶⁰² also expressed their concern, based on interviews with Esperanto, that child victims involved in forced criminality were perceived and approached by the police and the courts as youth offenders rather than as (presumed) victims of human trafficking. This prevents them from benefiting from the necessary protective measures to which they are entitled as victims. However, the FJP does appear to be paying more attention to these issues.

⁶⁰⁰ Information obtained during an online interview on 25 April 2024 with Johan Vangenechten (policy manager at Minor-Ndako), Sally Beeckman (legal coordinator at PAG-ASA) and Melanie Zonderman (legal advisor to minors at PAG-ASA and Meza).

⁶⁰¹ Information obtained on 30 July 2024 through an exchange of emails with Sébastien Biaudelle, director of Esperanto.

⁶⁰² GRETA, *Evaluation Report Belgium*, 2022, Chapter IV, point 8 and Chapter V, point 4.

Since spring 2024, the FPJ has been taking the lead in a European project that focuses on all forms of child exploitation⁶⁰³ and they also raised the issue of the exploitation of young Afghans and North Africans in the media⁶⁰⁴.

2.5.5. Need for additional specialised reception spaces in small structures for specific target groups

In the context of reporting and supporting unaccompanied Afghan minors, Minor-Ndako has noted that there is an urgent need for safe accommodation (secure or otherwise) for unaccompanied children who are boys. This need is linked to the lack of reception places for unaccompanied children previously raised by the KRC in its 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 annual reports⁶⁰⁵. Fedasil also highlights the lack of reception places, particularly for the most vulnerable profiles among UC (e.g. minors under the age of 15)⁶⁰⁶. Furthermore, Afghan UC were invariably among the top three nationalities most frequently reported missing from Fedasil reception centres between 2021 and 2023. In 2021, 127 disappearances of minors were recorded, and in 2022 and 2023, 213 and 254 respectively⁶⁰⁷.

There is also an urgent need to create more places and, more specifically, emergency reception places for (Belgian) minors who are victims of sexual exploitation via the loverboy method. There are a few small-scale initiatives in Flanders that offer specialised reception to victims exploited by the loverboy method⁶⁰⁸, but in 2020, Child Focus highlighted the lack of specialised reception facilities in Brussels for this target group⁶⁰⁹.

603 Federal Public Service Justice, "Ne laissons aucun enfant de côté dans la lutte contre la traite des personnes", 22 July 2024; T. Santens, "Dit zijn de 'harraga's': minderjarigen uit Marokko en Afghanistan worden gerekruteerd voor drugshandel en diefstal in België", VRT Nieuws, 17 June 2024.

604 H. Debeuckelaere, "Drugsbendes lokken kinderen uit Noord-Afrika en Afghanistan; 'Ze worden soms zelfs bedreigd met verkrachtingsvideo's'", De Standaard, 17 June 2024.

605 KRC, Jaarverslag 2021-2022: Meer gewicht aan kinderrechten, p. 83; KRC, Jaarverslag 2022-2023: Kinderen tonen de weg, pp. 79-80.

606 Fedasil, Reception of UC in Schaerbeek, 2 May 2023. This necessity was also emphasised during a multidisciplinary consultation organised by the KRC (Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner) on 17 May 2024 on the theme "The rights of children in migration". During this consultation, the lack of specialised and safe reception places for UC who have suffered violence was raised.

607 Fedasil shared this data with Myria on 10 July 2024. The figures should be treated with caution. The disappearances only concern those from Fedasil reception centres and therefore do not reflect any disappearances of UC staying at private addresses. Furthermore, the figures do not relate to individuals, but to reports of disappearances. The same young person may therefore appear several times in these figures. These figures also include the disappearances of minors whose age is uncertain. These young people often disappear before an age test is carried out by the Guardianship Service. In addition, these figures include disappearances, spontaneous departures from centres and refusals of reception.

608 Child Focus, Les victimes de proxénètes d'adolescents à Bruxelles, 2020, p. 25.

609 Child Focus, Les victimes de proxénètes d'adolescents à Bruxelles, 2020, pp. 24, 28, 55.