

INTRODUCTION

Criminality is growing, the fight is adapting

This is the 20th report published by Myria on human trafficking and smuggling. Twenty years, almost a generation, in which the world has changed considerably. The technological changes during these two decades, especially the internet, have had the desired impact. This certainly applies to the issues covered in this report, in particular the criminal networks which are active in human trafficking or smuggling.

Human trafficking and smuggling often remains invisible. Invisible because the victims are exploited in silence, under the 'omerta' of criminal circles. Invisible because victims all too often protect their abusers, out of fear. Invisible because, like every crime, human trafficking and smuggling adapts to new information technologies.

Two years ago, we approached this 'underground' reality to a certain extent in our report *Tightening the Links* which was partly devoted to the *loverboy* phenomenon. This year, we have decided to devote more attention to the issue of online human trafficking and smuggling. In fact, the internet and social media are meeting places for organising and mutually facilitating human trafficking and smuggling. It is through these social media for example that pimps recruit their victims and market their 'offers'.

Current events also show that smugglers who are exploiting the migration crisis are making their services known to potential migrants through social media, and sharing information about migratory routes. As the European Migration Network (EMN) noted in its report, the increasing use of these networks is due to their anonymity, and lower costs. They also allow a large audience to be reached quickly. In addition, it is less risky for smugglers to communicate with each other via social media than over the phone.

Like an endless game of cat and mouse, internet and social media have also become operational terrain for the police and judiciary. As a true reflection of society, where hundreds of relationships are started and maintained every day, social media have turned out to contain a wealth of information which victims can take advantage of. The internet can also be used to cross-check transfers of funds and other elements that may indicate a criminal offence. In this area, and despite the proactive involvement of the authorities, there is still much progress to be made, particularly in the area of international cooperation. Myria

believes that the use of the internet and social media as a method of investigation should be reinforced, including at the level of the front-line services and the magistrates. Combating economic exploitation requires particular attention. It requires a reinforcement of the resources allocated to this digital fight.

Progress and concerns

Otherwise, and as is the case every year, this report presents an assessment of the policy for combating human trafficking and smuggling, as well as the main statistics and judicial results in this area.

In terms of figures, the police recorded a general decrease in the number of human trafficking offences between 2012 and 2016. In 2016, most offences were committed in Brussels, in the provinces of Antwerp and Hainaut, and in East Flanders. Half of the offences were related to sexual exploitation. The number of persons involved in the procedure for obtaining 'victim of human trafficking' status remains stable. We also note that 2016 was characterised by a large number of victims of sexual exploitation from Nigeria.

However, there was a sharp increase in the numbers of human smuggling. The number of crimes registered by the police tripled between 2012 and 2016. This primarily concerned the judicial districts situated along the E40 motorway (Brussels, Ghent, Bruges), which allows us to make a link between the figures and the sharp increase of the migration flows that reach or pass through our country over the same period.

From a legal perspective, recent events were marked by significant progress in the case which became known as "the Conrad princesses" case, for which Myria initiated civil proceedings. This symbolic case of economic exploitation in the context of human trafficking, for which these princesses from the UAE were prosecuted, is an important signal against impunity for such actions. We observed that this case had a broad international impact, which still resonates. This important ruling should also serve to raise awareness within the hotel sector regarding these trafficking practices, so that hotels can be held liable in the future if they remain silent.

In general, Belgium continues to set a good example in the fight against human trafficking and smuggling. However, as is the case every year, we criticise the lack of a structural solution for financing reception centres for victims of human trafficking. As an independent national

rapporteur for human trafficking, Myria also has concerns regarding the consequences of the recent reform of the Social Inspectorate, which is now integrated within the National Social Security Office. Belgium's expertise in combating human trafficking is based, inter alia, on the specialisation of the social inspection services. It would be highly detrimental if streamlining resulted in a reduction in the quality of the fight against human trafficking.

Furthermore, we can address a particular concern in this introduction: Myria, the Federal Migration Centre, is still confronted with linear, unilateral and disproportionate cutbacks, which were decided on by the federal government in December 2014, contrary to the organic law which is supposed to guarantee its independence by means of fixed funding. This is no small matter, especially as regards our work in the area of human trafficking and smuggling, and promoting the fight against these phenomena: our role as an independent national rapporteur is directly related to our ability to act in complete financial independence. For example, as is the case with all Myria functions, we regret the fact that the cutbacks limit our ability to intervene in judicial matters. In 2016, we were able to initiate civil proceedings in seven cases. This figure is likely to be lower in 2017. This forces us to make difficult choices. This restriction is generally a bad signal in the fight against human trafficking and smuggling. A reduction in our ability to initiate civil proceedings also reduces our ability to defend the interests of society, and to obtain symbolic and favourable verdicts for victims of human trafficking. The weakening of Myria undermines the fight against human trafficking and smuggling.

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