



Policy Paper 2. National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) in the EU: Mapping, Analysis and Further Guidance

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Abbreviations

ANITP	National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (Romania)
BFA	Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (Austria)
CAP	Centros de Acolhimento e Proteção – Reception and Protection Centres (Portugal)
CIG	Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (Portugal)
CPD	Child Protection Department (Bulgaria)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EKKA	National Centre for Social Solidarity (Greece)
EME	Equipa Multidisciplinar Especializada – Multidisciplinary Teams (Portugal)
EMN	European Migration Network
EMPACT	European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats
EU	European Union
EU ATD	EU Anti-Trafficking Directive
EU ATH	EU Anti-Trafficking Hub
EU MS	EU Member States
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
ERM	European Referral Mechanism
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JHA	Justice and Home Affairs
KCIK	National Consulting and Intervention Centre for Victims of Trafficking (Poland)
MIPROF	Interministerial Mission for the Protection of Women Victims of Violence and the Fight Against Trafficking in Human Beings (France)
MNIOP	National Medical Identification and Support Platform (France)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRPiPS	Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (Poland)
MSWiA	Ministry of Interior and Administration (Poland)
NACR	National Anti-Trafficking Coordinators and Rapporteurs
NAP	National Action Plan
NAS	National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking (Finland)
NCCTHB	National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Bulgaria)
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
LEA / LEAs	Law Enforcement Authority / Authorities
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE)
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PIP	State Labour Inspection (Poland)
PRG	Permanent Expert Working Group (Bulgaria)

RIS	Reception and Identification Service (Greece)
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
TCN	Third country National
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
TRM	Transnational Referral Mechanism
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Definitions of key terms

Trafficking in human beings (THB): the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (...) Exploitation shall include, as a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, including begging, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the exploitation of criminal activities, or the removal of organs, or the exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage, or of illegal adoption. (Art. 2 of Directive 2011/36/EU - Anti-trafficking Directive and Directive (EU) 2024/1712 amending Directive 2011/36/EU).

Identified victim of trafficking in human beings: person who has been formally identified as a victim of trafficking in human beings by the relevant formal authority in an EU Member State', this is to say, after a process that establishes that they are victims; often, but not always, involving the police ([Eurostat, 2015](#); [European Commission, 2020](#)).

Presumed victim of trafficking in human beings: person who meet the criteria of the EU Anti-trafficking Directive, but who has not been formally identified by the relevant authority as victim of trafficking in human beings or who has declined to be formally or legally identified as trafficked ([Eurostat, 2015](#); [European Commission, 2020](#)).

National Referral Mechanism(s) (NRM(s)): transparent, accessible and harmonised framework facilitating the early detection and identification of, assistance to, and support for the victims of trafficking, and facilitating their referral to the responsible national organisations and bodies. Such a framework should identify the participating competent authorities, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders, and set out their respective responsibilities, including the procedures and lines of communication. Those referral mechanisms can take the form of established procedures, guidelines, cooperation arrangements, or protocols. A referral mechanism should apply to all victims and to all forms of trafficking offences, considering the individual vulnerability of the victims. EUMS are encouraged to have one single referral mechanism in place when the organisation of public administration so allows (see Article 11(4) and Recital 15 of Directive 2024/1712).

National focal point for cross-border referral (focal point): a point of contact for the cross-border referral of victims, in the relations between the authorities or institutions responsible for the cross-border support of victims in the various EUMSs, but not a point of contact for the victims themselves, as defined by Article 11(4) of Directive 2011/36/EU as amended and Recital 15 of Directive (EU) 2024/1712. Focal points can be based on existing mechanisms or governance structures and will not have to replace national complaint mechanisms or hotlines. It is responsible for receiving and transmitting referrals so that victims can access protection, assistance and support in another Member State.

European Referral Mechanism (ERM): an EU-wide transnational referral mechanism envisaged in the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025).

Detection: the process of identifying a possible situation of trafficking in human beings (EMN, 2022).

Identification: the process of confirming and characterising a situation of trafficking in human beings, for the implementation of further support (EMN, 2022).

Minimum quality standards (for detection and early identification): Baseline requirements that NRMs must fulfil when organising detection and early identification procedures, as required by Article 11(4)(a) of Directive 2011/36/EU as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712.

1 Executive Summary

National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) are now present in most EU Member States and have progressively evolved into more structured and formalised frameworks, reflecting substantial progress towards the requirements of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive (Directive (EU) 2024/1712). This paper provides an EU-wide overview of the structure and functioning of NRMs, based on comparative analysis across EU Member States.

The analysis underpinning this paper shows that NRMs in EU MS rely on a wide range of legal, regulatory, and administrative instruments, resulting in considerable variation in enforceability, clarity of obligations, and institutional stability. These differences largely reflect varying stages of development and ongoing reform across EU Member States. Importantly, the analysis indicates that formal legal anchoring does not in itself guarantee legal certainty for victims or consistent accountability, as implementation in practice often diverges from formal frameworks. In some systems, discrepancies between formal design and operational practice continue to affect overall effectiveness of NRMs, underscoring the critical role of both legal and practical dimensions in their functioning.

NRMs are predominantly designed as multi-agency frameworks, with broad and consistent involvement of key actors across Member States despite remaining coordination challenges. The examination of national systems demonstrates that law enforcement authorities, migration and asylum services, social and child protection bodies, labour inspectorates and civil society organisations are routinely involved in NRMs.

Civil society actors, in particular, play a critical role in early identification, victim support, accommodation and cross-border continuity of care. In most cases, their involvement is well established, although in some Member States their role is not always formally anchored, and cooperation is still partly dependent on project-based funding or informal arrangements, which may affect system sustainability and continuity.

Procedural frameworks for identification, referral and assistance are increasingly formalised across EU Member States, but early detection remains uneven across the different types of exploitation.

Many EU MS have adopted written procedures and standard operating protocols (SOPs) covering core NRM functions. Nevertheless, the comparative assessment shows that early detection mechanisms are most effective for cases of sexual exploitation, while labour exploitation, child trafficking, forced criminality and other less visible forms of trafficking in human beings remain under-detected. In some systems, continued reliance on police-centred identification models may limit proactive detection in labour, social, health, and migration contexts, despite the Directive's emphasis on early, multidisciplinary identification.

Standards of immediate victim protection have improved significantly across the EUMS, yet access to longer-term support – especially after the reflection period – remains largely conditional in practice. The analysis indicates that crisis assistance and short-term support are widely available across EU MS. At the same time, longer-term protection measures — such as extended accommodation, residence stability for third-country nationals and durable reintegration support — are in some cases

linked in practice to cooperation with the authorities or outcomes of legal proceedings or formal identification decisions.

Cross-border referral is increasingly recognised as a key component of NRMs and is currently developing further across EU Member States. Although cross-border cooperation occurs through law enforcement channels, international organisations and NGO networks, the assessment shows that formally designated national focal points, as now required by the revised EU Directive, are at different stages of development across EU Member States. Even where focal points exist, procedures, secure communication channels and follow-up mechanisms are still being strengthened in some cases, leaving cross-border protection dependent on informal cooperation rather than structured arrangements.

Monitoring, data collection and evaluation systems are increasingly being established across EU Member States, although their scope and focus vary considerably and gaps persist. Data collection continues to focus primarily on victims identified or criminal justice outcomes, rather than on the functioning and performance of referral mechanisms themselves. As a consequence, many EU Member States still have limited evidence on delays, attrition between detection and assistance, or outcomes for victims, limiting the impact of policy learning and accountability.

Overall, further strengthening of NRMs is required to ensure full compliance with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and their effective operation in practice. The analysis points to the need for clearer and more enforceable frameworks, strengthened early detection across all forms of exploitation, unconditional and sustained access to victim support, fully operational cross-border referral structures and improved monitoring and data systems, as well as strengthened and more consistent training for all frontline actors. Overall, the findings point to a broader structural challenge: the effectiveness of NRMs depends not only on their formal establishment but also on the consistency of their implementation across sectors, actors, and stages of the referral process. Addressing these issues would support the effective functioning of NRMs as victim-centred mechanisms in practice. Given the ongoing transposition of the revised Directive across EU Member States, these findings reflect a snapshot at the time of data collection. It is expected that a number of the issues identified may be further clarified or addressed as the transposition process progresses and national implementing measures are finalised.

2 Introduction

The overall objective of this Policy Paper is to support the effective transposition and implementation of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, in particular related to the obligation of EU Member States (EU MS) to formally establish one or several National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) and appoint national focal points, aimed at the early detection and identification of, assistance to and support for identified and presumed victims of trafficking in human beings, as well as – where relevant – their cross border referral. Hence, this paper aims to update the knowledge base around the formalising of NRMs and focal points, analyse recent legal and institutional developments, and formulate practical, forward-looking recommendations. The study is a follow-up of the Rapid Response on NRMs and related focal points shared with EU MS in January 2026.

The study was conducted from October 2025 to April 2026. As EU MS are currently transposing and aligning their systems with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, the study reflects a snapshot in time. Developments occurring after the data collection for this policy paper may not be fully captured.

2.1 Scope of the study

The Policy Paper seeks to provide a comprehensive and comparative overview of existing national frameworks for the identification, referral, assistance and protection of victims of trafficking in human beings. It covers the structure, functioning and, where evidence allows, indications of effectiveness of NRMs in all 27 EU Member States, in the context of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

The scope of the study includes:

- EU-wide mapping and analysis of existing NRMs, distinguishing between formal and informal mechanisms and identifying recent legal, policy and institutional developments since the 2018 DG HOME-commissioned study,
- Examination of coordination structures and cooperation mechanisms among relevant actors, including state authorities, law enforcement and civil society organisations,
- Review and analysis of illustrative national case law that has influenced the interpretation and implementation of victims' rights and NRMs at the national level,
- Development of policy-oriented recommendations, model provisions and operational tools to support coherent and effective transposition of the revised Directive across all Member States.

2.2 Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method design combining desk research, survey data collection, and qualitative interviews.

A comprehensive desk review analysed existing literature, legislation, policy documents, official statistics, and national case law across all EU Member States, providing a robust foundation for comparative analysis.

This was complemented by an EU-wide **online survey**, disseminated through national coordinators and/or rapporteurs in January and February 2026, which yielded 26 responses from 25 countries in total¹.

To deepen the analysis and contextualise findings, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with authorities, practitioners, and legal experts in nine selected countries by country researchers in February and March 2026. In total, 41 interviews were conducted.

Additionally, two in-depth interviews were conducted with European stakeholders – one with the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA) and one with Frontex in March 2026.

Finally, the **Validation Workshop**, involving THB experts from in-depth case study countries, took place on 27th March 2026 to discuss the findings and inform recommendations from the study.

Criteria for Selecting Countries for In-Depth Study

To ensure a comprehensive and representative analysis of NRMs across Europe, a systematic approach was adopted to select 9 countries from the 27 EU MS for an in-depth study. The selection methodology aimed to capture diversity in geographic regions, governance structures, and stages of NRM development, while also considering feasibility and expert recommendations.

The selection of countries was based primarily on the existence and maturity of their NRMs, favouring those with formalised systems or clear progress toward formalisation. Efforts were made to ensure geographic and political diversity across the EU, including countries of origin, transit, and destination of victims of trafficking, as well as different governance models such as federal systems. Recent innovations – such as new NRM tools, handbooks, or procedural or legal reforms – also guided the choices. Expert input from NGOs and research bodies, such as La Strada International and HEUNI, helped identify strong examples of practice. Feasibility also played a role, with priority given to countries where stakeholder information and reliable data were readily available.

Selection Criteria:

1. Existence and Maturity of NRM

Preference was given to countries with formalised NRMs or to those making significant progress toward such formalisation.

2. Geographic and Political Diversity

Representation from different EU regions and governance models was ensured, including countries with federal systems. Furthermore, it was ensured that countries of origin, transit, and destination were included, allowing for some research focus on referrals between countries.

3. Recent Developments and Innovation

Especially those countries which recently introduced new NRM-related tools or reforms (e.g., handbooks, updated procedures) were selected.

¹ Germany, Malta and Poland did not submit the survey. For Ireland, one survey response was coordinated by the National Coordinator and completed following engagement with a number of relevant organisations, including An Garda Síochána, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and migration and asylum services. A separate response was submitted by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in its capacity as Ireland's Independent National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings.

4. Expert and Stakeholder Recommendations

Input from NGOs, experts, and research organisations such as HEUNI was considered to identify best practices across countries.

5. Feasibility and Data Availability

Prioritisation of countries was further based on whether relevant stakeholders' information and other reliable data were available and accessible.

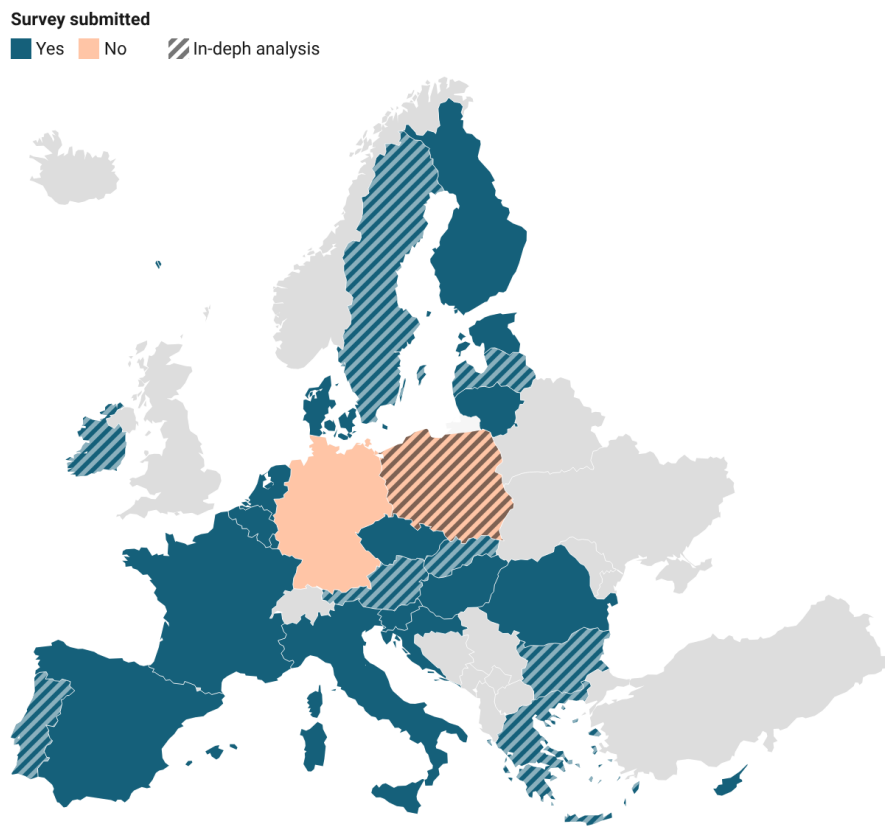
6. Exclusion Criteria

Countries with minimal progress or those explicitly advised against by experts were excluded, including those with little progress or those where significant changes are ongoing or expected, which would limit a clear overview of current practice.

The final selection reflects a balance of these criteria, ensuring diversity and inclusion of good practices and emerging systems.

Selected Countries for in-depth analysis: **Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Sweden.**

Figure 1. EU Member States analysed for this Policy Paper



2.3 Key considerations & limitations

The Policy Paper employs a comprehensive, comparative approach across all EU MS, supported by targeted, in-depth research in nine selected countries. However, several methodological and contextual limitations should be noted:

- **Diversity of national contexts:** EU MS differ significantly in administrative structures, legal traditions and institutional capacities. Comparisons across NRMs should therefore be interpreted with caution, acknowledging national specificities and context.
- **Data availability and quality:** Access to up-to-date, comparable and disaggregated data on victim identification, referral and assistance remains uneven across the EU. Some countries lack robust monitoring or evaluation frameworks for NRMs (see 6.1.4 for further details).
- **Ongoing reforms:** As EU MS are currently transposing and aligning their systems with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, the study reflects a **snapshot in time**. Developments occurring after the data collection for this policy paper may not be fully captured.
- **Scope of fieldwork:** While all 27 EU MS are covered by the desk review and survey, **only nine countries** are examined in greater depth through interviews and case law analysis. These case studies offer illustrative insights, rather than statistically representative findings.
- **Stakeholder input:** The availability and depth of contributions from national authorities, civil society and other stakeholders may vary between countries, affecting the level of detail in the comparative analysis.
- **Case law coverage:** The review of national case law focuses on **illustrative examples** that inform practical and policy-oriented findings, rather than an exhaustive inventory of judicial decisions. While case law on trafficking in human beings is generally available, its broader implications for National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) and for the overall assistance, referral, and protection of victims are not always readily apparent, as judicial decisions primarily focus on the circumstances of individual cases.

Despite these limitations, the study employs a **triangulated, mixed-methods approach** that combines desk research, survey data, and semi-structured interviews, which are validated through stakeholder workshops and expert consultations. This ensures methodological rigour, comparability, and policy relevance of the findings.

3 EU legal, policy and institutional framework for THB

The revision of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive², adopted in 2024, marks a significant turning point in formalising national frameworks for the identification, referral and support of trafficked persons. Under Article 11(4) of this Directive, EU MS are now required to establish formal national referral mechanisms (NRMs) and national focal points for the cross-border referral of victims:

“Member States shall take the necessary measures to establish by laws, regulations or administrative provisions one or several mechanisms aimed at the early detection and identification of, assistance to and support for identified and presumed victims, in cooperation with relevant support organisations, and to appoint a focal point for the cross-border referral of victims.

The tasks of the referral mechanisms operating in accordance with this paragraph shall include at least the following:

(a) establishing minimum standards for the detection and early identification of victims, and adapting the procedures for such detection and identification to the various forms of exploitation covered by this Directive;

(b) referring the victim to the most appropriate support and assistance;

(c) establishing cooperation arrangements or protocols with the asylum authorities to ensure that assistance, support and protection is provided to victims of trafficking who are also in need of international protection or who wish to apply for such protection, taking into account the victim’s individual circumstances.”

Recital 15 also clarifies that *in order to enhance the national capability to detect and identify victims at an early stage, and to refer them to the appropriate protection, assistance and support services, it is necessary to establish, by laws, regulations or administrative provisions, one or several referral mechanisms in the Member States. Establishing formal referral mechanisms and appointing a national focal point for the cross-border referral of victims are essential measures to enhance cross-border cooperation. A referral mechanism should be a transparent, accessible and harmonised framework facilitating the early detection and identification of, assistance to, and support for the victims of trafficking, and facilitating their referral to the responsible national organisations and bodies.*

Such a framework should identify the participating competent authorities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders and set out their respective responsibilities, including the procedures and the lines of communication. Those referral mechanisms can take the form of a set of established procedures, guidelines, cooperation arrangements or protocols. A referral mechanism should apply to all victims and to all forms of trafficking offences, taking into account the individual vulnerability of the victims. Member States are encouraged to have one single referral mechanism in place when the organisation of public administration so allows. The focal point should serve as a point of contact for the cross-border referral of victims, in the

² 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. OJ L, 2024/1712, 24.6.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1712/oj>

relations between the authorities or institutions responsible for the cross-border support of victims in the various Member States, but not as a point of contact for the victims themselves. Focal points can be based on existing mechanisms or governance structures and will not have to replace national complaint mechanisms or hotlines.

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive stresses the involvement of and cooperation with civil society. Evidence clearly shows that civil society organisations (CSOs), especially specialised anti-trafficking NGOs, play a central role within NRMs, particularly in early detection, victim support, specialised assistance and cross-border continuity of care and therefore are – or should be – integral actors within NRMs.

Moreover, regarding the assistance and support to victims, Article 11 (5) stipulates the assistance and support measures [...] shall be provided on a consensual and informed basis, and shall include at least standards of living capable of ensuring victims' subsistence through measures such as the provision of appropriate and safe accommodation, including shelters and other appropriate interim accommodation, and material assistance, as well as necessary medical treatment including psychological assistance, counselling and information, and translation and interpretation services where appropriate. (5a) The shelters and other appropriate interim accommodations referred to in paragraph 5 shall be provided in sufficient numbers and shall be easily accessible to presumed and identified victims of trafficking. The shelters and other appropriate interim accommodations shall assist them in their recovery, by providing adequate and appropriate living conditions with a view to a return to independent living. They shall also be equipped to accommodate the specific needs of children, including of child victims.

EU MS must transpose these new obligations by **15 July 2026**. Several practical issues have been raised by EU MS regarding the transposition of the amended Directive. These focus on the distinction between early detection and identification, the definition of minimum quality standards, the role/mandate of national focal points and how to establish or adapt the NRM in federal systems. EU MS also requested good practices and model approaches to guide them in the transposing and implementation of the amended EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, the appointment of the national focal points, as well as the interlinkages between the implementation of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The overall discussion reflected a strong interest in ensuring coordinated, standardised mechanisms for early victim identification and support.

This Policy Paper builds on the work of the EU Anti-Trafficking Hub on the **Rapid Response to ad hoc questions in relation to the National Referral Mechanisms and related focal points**, completed in January 2026, which offered operational guidance that EU MS can refer to while setting up formal NRMs as required by the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

4 Mapping and Analysis of Existing NRMs in the EU Member States

In line with the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, a national referral mechanism (NRM) should be a transparent, accessible, and harmonised framework that facilitates the early detection and identification of victims of trafficking, provides assistance and support to victims, and enables their referral to the responsible national organisations and bodies. EU Member States are not legally required to adopt a single nationwide NRM but are encouraged to do so where their national administrative governance structure allows. Such a framework identifies the competent authorities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders involved, as well as their respective responsibilities and communication channels.

The NRMs must be established on the basis of laws, regulations or **binding** administrative provisions, depending on the specific national system, rather than relying exclusively on informal practice and should apply to all victims and all forms of trafficking in human beings, considering victims' specific vulnerabilities and regardless of the victim's nationality or residence status – including nationals of the Member State concerned, nationals of other EU Member States, and third-country nationals.

4.1 Formality and Legal Basis

The vast majority of EU Member States (21³ out of 26) state to have NRMs established fully or partly through legislation, regulations, or binding administrative provisions, showing a clear trend toward formalisation in line with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive. Most survey respondents (13 out of these 21)⁴ confirmed that their NRMs are fully anchored in legislation, and an additional seven⁵ – partially.

The current degree of formality and legal grounding, however, significantly varies between the EU Member States. It should also be noted that opinions among stakeholders in these countries differ on whether a country has an NRM in place, and, if so, whether it is sufficiently formalised.

In some EU MS, significant progress towards formalisation has only been achieved recently⁶ and therefore further formalising and tailoring based on its evaluation in practice may be required.

When analysing how NRMs are formalised, it is noted that NRMs are established via parliament's acts (Czechia⁷, Greece⁸), regulations/executive acts (Hungary⁹, Romania¹⁰), ministerial orders/circulars

³ 20 EU MS who participated in the survey: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and one additional EU MS covered with in-depth research (Poland). The EU MS with no NRMs in place are: Estonia, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Malta.

⁴ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain.

⁵ Austria, Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Sweden.

⁶ For example, the Polish NRM entered into force in 2024, Romania adopted its new NRM in 2023, and Italy updated its NRM in 2023. In Slovakia, a comprehensive update of NRM was adopted in 2025.

⁷ Resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic.

⁸ L. 4198/2013 "Prevention and Combating Human Trafficking and Protection of its victims and other provisions", published and entered into force on 11/10/2013, transposed into the national law the Directive 2011/36/ EU "preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA"

⁹ Government Resolution No. 1018/2008 on the national strategy against trafficking in human beings for the period 2008–2012, <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2008-1018-30-22> (accessed 9.03.2026)

¹⁰ Government Decision No. 88/2023 for the approval of the National Mechanism for the identification and referral of victims of trafficking in persons.

(Belgium¹¹, Slovakia¹²), policy/strategy documents such as national (action) plans (Croatia¹³, Ireland¹⁴, Netherlands, Portugal¹⁵, and Sweden¹⁶) and memoranda (Sweden), combinations of law plus administrative instruments (Cyprus¹⁷), and other instruments like manuals/protocols or handbooks (Finland¹⁸, Slovenia¹⁹, and Spain²⁰).

Table 1. Institutional Approaches to Legal Anchoring in EU MS

Degree of legal anchoring	Primary legal / policy instruments used	Number of EU MS	Examples of EU Member States
Fully	Acts of parliament	2	Czechia, Greece
	Regulations / executive acts	2	Hungary, Romania
	Combination of law and administrative instruments	1	Cyprus
Partially	Ministerial orders / circulars	2	Belgium, Slovakia
	Policy or strategy documents (e.g. national action plans)	5	Croatia, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden
	Memoranda	1	Sweden
	Manuals, protocols, or handbooks	3	Finland, Slovenia, Spain

Note: Some Member States rely on more than one instrument.

Among the EU MS that indicated having ‘partially formalised NRMs’, this is partly attributed to the lack of a legally binding character for this formalisation. For example, **Sweden** has an NRM formally established through an administrative government assignment in 2016, but this is not legally binding. Stakeholders consistently describe the Swedish NRM as an official, nationally recognised coordination framework with defined procedures and guidance, grounded in existing Swedish legislation and international and EU obligations. However, it is not enshrined in law, nor does it create enforceable obligations beyond existing sectoral mandates.

In **Austria**, stakeholders broadly agree that, while multiple cooperation arrangements and victim support structures exist for long, they do not constitute an NRM. Here, the system relies on informal and sector-specific cooperation, primarily between law enforcement and specialised NGOs, supported by internal

¹¹ <https://www.myria.be/files/circulaire-23-12-2016.pdf> (accessed on 9.03.2026); basic principles of the NREM are in the law (the referral basic instructions) – <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/1995/04/13/1995009398/justel#LNK0005> (Law of 13th of April 1995 – art 11§1er and following) <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/1980/12/15/1980121550/justel> (Law on foreigners art 61/2 and following);

¹² <https://www.minv.sk/?informacne-centrum-na-boj-proti-obchodovaniu-s-ludmi-a-prevenciu-kriminality-1> (accessed on 9.03.2026).

¹³ National Plan for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings until 2030; Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Plan for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings for the period 2024–2026; Protocol on Identification, Assistance and Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking; Protocol on Procedures during Voluntary Return of Victims of Human Trafficking; Protocol on Integration/Reintegration of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings.

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/publications/second-national-action-plan-to-prevent-and-combat-human-trafficking-in-ireland/> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁵ https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSH_Book_M06.pdf ; [Sistema-de-referenciação-nacional-de-vítimas-de-tráfico-de-seres-humanos.pdf](#) (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁶ <https://nspm.jamstalldhetmyndigheten.se/stod-i-ditt-arbete/manual-vid-misstanke-om-manniskohandel/> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁷ https://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/enop/non-ind/2014_1_60/full.html; <https://www.gov.cy/media/sites/21/2024/07/Strategy-Documents-and-Action-Plan.pdf> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁸ <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/items/271cea88-b2a9-4591-afe0-49132cd0e07d> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.si/assets/vladne-sluzbe/UKOM/Boj-proti-trgovini-z-ljudmi/Dokumenti/Prirocnik-o-identifikaciji-pomoci-in-zasciti-zrtv-trgovine-z-ljudmi.pdf> (accessed 9.03.2026).

²⁰ <https://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/otrasformas/trata/normativaprotocolo/marco/> (accessed 9.03.2026).

administrative instructions, rather than a comprehensive framework. The NRM currently under development by the national anti-trafficking task force, is expected to take the form of a Council of Ministers decision, giving it political authority but not the status of law or regulation, and with limited binding effect, particularly at the 'Länder' (separate federal states) level.

In **Poland**, the NRM *Krajowy Mechanizm Referencyjny*²¹ operates on a semi-formal and administrative basis²². While it has been created by the national Inter-Ministerial Team for Combating Human Trafficking, it is not statute-based; rather, it is a systemic set of procedures and principles for cooperation among law enforcement agencies, state institutions, and non-governmental organisations, aimed at identifying, protecting, and supporting victims of human trafficking. The broader anti-trafficking framework in Poland is set out in the National Action Plan (NAP) Against Human Trafficking.

Other EU MS, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal or Slovakia, have already established a formal, legally grounded mechanism that represents a highly structured, technically developed system in line with the requirements of the Directive.

In **Bulgaria**, a formally established and legally anchored NRM was officially adopted by a Decision of the Council of Ministers in 2016. The NRM constitutes a state-approved cooperation framework through which institutions implement their obligations towards the protection and assistance to victims of trafficking in human beings. Its legal basis is explicitly recognised in the national Law on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, which assigns responsibility for coordination of the NRM to the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. The mechanism was originally developed between 2008 and 2010 through a multi-stakeholder process and was later assessed and formally endorsed by the government. It is structured as an operational manual containing definitions, guiding principles and detailed standard operating procedures covering identification, referral, protection and reintegration. While comprehensive in design, the NRM does not have a dedicated statutory budget and relies on project-based and programme funding for implementation. Since 2022, it has been fully digitalised and made publicly accessible.

In **Greece**, the NRM is created by law and ministerial decision and administered by the National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA) under the supervision of the Office of the National Rapporteur. Similarly, in **Portugal**, the National Referral Mechanism is a well-established and highly structured system that has evolved progressively since the late 2000s through national action plans, legislative amendments and formal cooperation agreements. At the same time, even if the NRM is highly formalised, a process of further strengthening its legal basis is ongoing, with the development of binding legislation to codify procedures and consolidate safeguards, reflecting a policy focus on sustainability, institutionalisation, and alignment with evolving EU standards.

In **Slovakia**, a fully formalised NRM is embedded in the national anti-trafficking framework and coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior. The NRM is not established by a single dedicated law, but rather through a combination of criminal, victim protection, and migration legislation, national anti-trafficking strategies, and binding administrative instruments. The mechanism was first developed in 2008 through a participatory process under the national Expert Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and has since undergone several revisions, with a comprehensive update adopted in

²¹ Krajowy Mechanizm Referencyjny - Portal o przeciwdziałaniu handlowi ludźmi - Portal Gov.pl (accessed on 25.03.2026).

²² Poland's de facto National Referral Mechanism was not established through a single legislative act but evolved through administrative and regulatory instruments.

2025. The current NRM functions as an official procedural framework that defines victim identification standards, referral pathways, institutional responsibilities, and access to assistance, including child-specific and cross-border procedures. Its latest revision is explicitly linked to the transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1712 and is operationalised through internal regulations governing the Programme of Support and Protection for victims of trafficking.

Several EU Member States, which state that they currently do not have an NRM or that their NRM is not fully formalised, are currently in the process of formalising their NRMs or further strengthening related legislation and practice. Four EU Member States (Estonia, France, Lithuania, and Luxembourg) stated that they do not currently have a formal NRM, regardless of the existing referral and support structures in place. EU MS such as Latvia, Austria or Ireland are currently in the process of strengthening their “partially formalised” NRMs.

In **France**, authorities are now actively developing the regulatory, technical, and operational framework for a future mechanism, including a pilot phase and ongoing work on the legal foundation and data protection requirements.

Estonia, although not yet operating a formal NRM, has developed an agreed ‘NREM’ (National Referral and Evaluation Mechanism) and is preparing its full implementation by 2026, including standard operating procedures, multi-agency structures, and required legislative elements within the mandates of core authorities.

Latvia similarly lacks a fully established legal instrument (NRM is partially formalised), relying instead on internal documentation and procedures, while draft legislation, foreseeing a formal NRM – including defined first contact institutions and a national coordinator with methodological oversight – is already under consultation and expected to be adopted by the transposing deadline of July 2026.

In **Austria**, as mentioned, the NRM is currently being developed (Note the survey response indicated partially formalised as there are, in general, referral and support structures in place), and the national Task Force against Human Trafficking is developing a policy document that summarises existing ministerial decrees, administrative provisions, and institutional procedures that establish and define the NRM. It will be further adopted by the federal government as a strategy and administrative document.

Ireland currently operates a hybrid system combining formal and informal elements, with coordination led by the Department of Justice and victim identification remaining the exclusive competence of An Garda Síochána (national police and security service). While formal identification decisions are currently made by An Garda Síochána as the competent authority, the NRM forms part of a wider multi-agency response involving a range of statutory bodies and non-governmental organisations which may identify and refer potential victims.

In 2021, the government approved a proposal to revise the NRM to address systemic deficiencies and gaps in the referral, assistance, and identification of victims. In 2024, the Criminal Justice (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2024, Part 3, placed a new NRM for the identification and assistance of victims of human trafficking on a statutory footing, but this aspect of the law is not yet operational in practice. It is also not clear when the new law will come into force.^{23,24}

²³ It was originally expected to be completed by the end of 2024 and is subject to long delays.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/news/third-national-action-plan-to-prevent-and-combat-human-trafficking-is-published/> (accessed on 25.03.2026).

Finally, while there is no formal NRM in **Malta** the key entities collaborate on referrals and exchange of information via designated contact points. Cooperation takes place by regular engagement in technical working groups and inter-agency meetings, which aim to promote alignment, foster a shared understanding, and support coordinated decision-making.

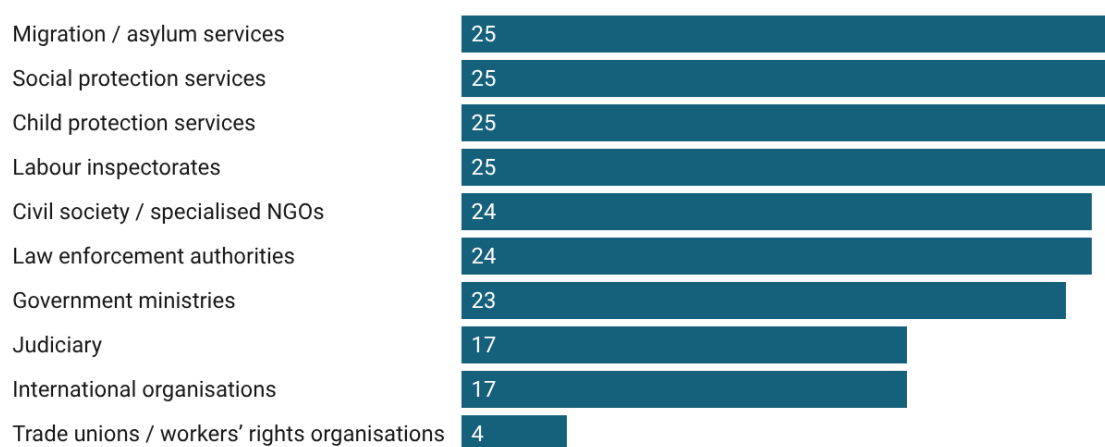
4.2 Actors and Roles

The amended EU Anti-trafficking Directive requires that, for a formalised NRM, the participating competent authorities, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to be identified, with their respective responsibilities set out and their means of communication established.

The survey responses show that, across all EU MS, NRMs are deliberately multi-agency, involving actors from migration, law enforcement, social and labour protection.

All surveyed EU Member States (25 out of 27)²⁵ stated to include, in their NRMs, at a minimum, migration/asylum services, social and child protection services, labour inspectorates and civil society, including specialised NGOs. Regularly involved are also law enforcement authorities (in all EU MS except Lithuania) and other governmental ministries (in all EU MS except Lithuania). Less frequently, EU Member States involve other types of institutions in their NRMs, including the judiciary (17 out of 25 EU MS)²⁶, international organisations (17 out of 25 EU MS)²⁷, trade unions or workers' rights organisations (four out of 25)²⁸ or others²⁹.

Figure 2. Number of EU MS Involving Each Type of Institution in NRMs



Source: own elaboration based on the findings from the online survey.

Similarly, the revised NRM in **Ireland** (not yet operational) is expected to have a multi-agency basis, including involvement of the following actors³⁰: a national coordinating body or national task force;

²⁵ 25 countries responded to the survey, excluding Germany and Poland. Poland was, however, one of the ten focus countries for which additional information was collected also confirming the multi-agency approach of their NRM.

²⁶ Exceptions are: Finland, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

²⁷ Exceptions are: Belgium, Croatia, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain.

²⁸ Finland, France, Greece, and Italy.

²⁹ Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, and Romania.

³⁰ The new NRM legislation distinguishes between "competent authorities" and "trusted partners". The former will include: (a) the Garda Síochána, (b) the Minister, (c) the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, (d) the Minister for Social Protection, (e) the Child and Family Agency, (f) the Health Service Executive, and (g) the Workplace Relations Commission. The „trusted partners“ are relevant bodies that apply to the Minister for designation as a trusted partner for the purposes and fulfil certain conditions.

social and child protection services; health services; law enforcement actors; civil society, including specialised NGOs; lived experience experts/survivors; trade unions or workers' rights organisations; labour inspectorates; migration/asylum services; and the Independent National Rapporteur; and other relevant experts.

4.2.1 Law enforcement authorities (LEAs)

Law enforcement authorities play a central and consistently formalised role in NRMs across the EU Member States, with police typically acting as primary actors in detecting presumed victims and triggering referrals to assistance services – a pattern observed in nearly all surveyed EU MS³¹. Beyond their gatekeeping role in detecting and referral, law enforcement authorities across the EU MS typically perform three interlinked functions based on their anti-trafficking mandate, that relate to the referral and assistance function of NRMs: (i) criminal investigation and evidence gathering, (ii) formal confirmation of victim status for the purpose of triggering legal entitlements, and (iii) cooperation with assistance actors to ensure continuity between criminal proceedings and victim protection.

While not all law enforcement activity is directly related to the NRM, it is an important stakeholder in the NRM because of its first-line responder function and mandate to detect victims and refer them to the NRM. They routinely participate in multi-agency cooperation frameworks, including the NRM, working alongside social services, labour inspectorates, migration authorities, NGOs, and prosecution services³².

Many EU Member States have established specialised police units or dedicated anti-trafficking investigation capacities, demonstrating a more advanced institutionalisation of law enforcement expertise³³. In some EU MS, specialisation primarily consolidates investigative capacity within organised crime or criminal police structures (e.g. Austria, Portugal), while in others it also centralises formal victim identification and coordination with victim assistance systems (e.g. Slovakia, Poland).

In **Austria**, police authorities play a central role in detecting trafficking cases, initiating investigations, and formally identifying victims. Specialised police units dealing with organised crime and trafficking in human beings are key entry points into the mechanism. In **Sweden**, trafficking-related expertise is organised through specialised or regional police functions that work closely with social services, rather than through a single national anti-trafficking unit.

Beyond the police, a wide range of law-enforcement authorities play essential, often formally defined roles within NRMs across the EU, reflecting the broader enforcement ecosystem required to identify, protect, and support victims of trafficking. Border management bodies – such as immigration authorities, asylum services, and border guards – are frequently positioned as 'first contact' (frontline) actors in EU MS with the responsibility to screen individuals on trafficking indicators, initiating risk assessments, supporting early protection measures, and managing repatriation or relocation procedures³⁴. In **Cyprus**, the Civil Registry and Immigration Department and the Asylum Service collaborate with police and Social Welfare Services to screen vulnerable persons and manage safe return and cross-border referrals. In **Estonia**, the Asylum Service and immigration officials participate in

³¹ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

³² Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

³³ Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania.

³⁴ Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

vulnerability assessments, identification, and initial assistance during the reflection period, in accordance with the Victim Support Act and the Aliens Act. In **Slovenia**, border control authorities participate in identifying and safely referring victims, cooperating with police and the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator during cross-border return procedures.

4.2.2 Migration and asylum authorities

Migration and asylum authorities support vulnerability assessments, early screening within reception facilities, coordination of accommodation and support services, and onward referral to specialised actors³⁵. In **Greece**, the Hellenic Reception and Identification Service (RIS) developed specialised Standard Operating Procedures for detecting THB within asylum accommodation facilities. These procedures were updated in 2025 in cooperation with EKKA (NRM management team) and include early screening, protection and internal referrals. Similarly, the **Finnish** Immigration Service works with the National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking (NAS) to identify victims during asylum procedures and support referrals.

4.2.3 Prosecutors

Prosecution services guide investigations, determine charges, safeguard victims' procedural rights, and, in some systems, contribute to formal victim identification³⁶. Even if not generally perceived by stakeholders as NRM actors, they play an important role in broader anti-trafficking frameworks. In **Poland**, a special prosecutor-coordinator for human trafficking has been appointed within the National Prosecutor's Office. In Spain, the Prosecutor General's Office hosts a specialised unit on trafficking and immigration, with liaison officers from law enforcement bodies. In **Romania**, prosecutors safeguard victim identity during proceedings, apply data protection safeguards, and contribute to risk assessments and referral decisions as part of the NRM established under Government Decision 88/2023. In **Czechia**, prosecutors participate directly in the identification and protection of victims through their role in the Programme for Support and Protection of Victims of Trafficking. Planned legislative changes will formalise their discretion to discontinue prosecutions where victims committed offences under coercion.

4.2.4 Labour authorities

Labour inspectorates contribute to detecting trafficking for labour exploitation by conducting inspections, identifying abusive conditions, reporting suspicions, and supporting criminal investigations with specialised expertise³⁷. In **Portugal**, labour inspectorates cooperate with law enforcement and NGOs to detect trafficking, especially in contexts involving migrants, asylum seekers, and high-risk sectors (e.g., construction, agriculture). In **Hungary**, labour inspectorates are listed as key NRM actors and participate in referrals and preventive inspections linked to victim identification. In **Poland**, the State Labour Inspection (PIP), where foreign workers are involved, conducts joint inspections with the Border Guard under a cooperation agreement dating from 2018, enabling trafficking cases identified during labour inspections to be passed directly to law enforcement. At the central level, the State Labour Inspection participates in the Inter-Ministerial Team for Countering Trafficking in Human Beings, and at

³⁵ Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

³⁶ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

³⁷ Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

the regional level, its bodies contribute to the Voivodeship anti-trafficking teams. The Polish State Labour Inspection also cooperates with NGOs, specifically with the La Strada Foundation, connecting its enforcement role to specialist victim support services.

Ministries of Labour play a key role in addressing labour exploitation, supervising labour inspectorates, developing labour market monitoring mechanisms, and coordinating enforcement responses with employment services or inspectorates³⁸. They also participate in policy development related to employment standards and vulnerable worker protection³⁹.

For example, in **Portugal** and **Poland**, labour authorities are explicitly integrated into NRM referral pathways, enabling cases detected during workplace inspections, often involving migrant or posted workers, to be transmitted to law enforcement and victim support services.

In **Austria**, labour market oversight bodies cooperate with police and social security institutions during inspections, strengthening the detection of trafficking situations embedded in complex subcontracting arrangements.

4.2.5 Other enforcement authorities

Additional enforcement bodies – including financial crime units, social security inspectorates, anti-fraud services, and customs authorities – support trafficking responses by uncovering exploitative business practices, illegal subcontracting structures, document fraud, or suspicious financial flows, and thus are important actors in the overall anti-trafficking framework and can play a role in detecting and referral of victims; such roles were explicitly referenced in Austria, Belgium, Greece, and Portugal. For example, the Austrian Anti-Fraud Office (Financial Police) works jointly with labour inspectorates and social-insurance institutions during proactive workplace inspections. This cooperation helps uncover illegal subcontracting chains and exploitative employment structures, particularly in construction and other high-risk sectors. During such actions, victims can be identified.

4.2.6 Other ministries

Governmental authorities, such as ministries of interior, justice, social affairs, labour, migration, or foreign affairs, generally play a role in addressing human trafficking, often with a more coordinated or strategic role rather than involvement in operational matters.

As further described in section 3.3, the **ministries of interior** usually play a key role in national coordination, by chairing NRM governance structures, overseeing anti-trafficking strategies, supervising police and other enforcement bodies, and managing cross-border cooperation⁴⁰. They also support data collection and national reporting, often through specialised internal departments mandated to conduct these tasks⁴¹.

For example, in **Slovakia**, the Ministry of the Interior hosts both the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and the National Anti-Trafficking Centre, which combines coordination, referral management, monitoring and national rapporteur functions.

³⁸ Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

³⁹ Finland, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia.

⁴⁰ Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

⁴¹ Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Romania, and Slovakia.

Similarly, in **Bulgaria**, the Ministry of the Interior plays a central role through the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, which operates as a permanent interministerial body with a dedicated administration responsible for implementing the NRM and managing specialised services.

In **Latvia**, the Ministry of the Interior oversees coordination structures and cooperates closely with police, social services, and NGOs, ensuring that identification and referral pathways are embedded within broader internal security governance frameworks, and, as such, also oversees/coordinates the NRM.

Ministries of Justice are generally responsible for legal and procedural frameworks, including drafting or revising anti-trafficking laws, defining victim rights, regulating formal victim identification, and ensuring alignment with the EU Directive (EU) 2024/1712⁴². The Ministry of Justice is usually responsible for the overall functioning of the country's prosecution system, even if individual prosecutors act independently, and hence, they also oversee judicial coordination and should ensure the application of the non-punishment principle. EU MS who involve the judiciary in their NRMs mainly foresee its roles in direction and supervision of trafficking-related investigations and prosecutions⁴³, ensuring the application of the non-punishment principle, either through explicit statutory guarantees or interpretation in case law,⁴⁴ and protection of victims' data and privacy, preventing disclosure of personal information in court records or public databases⁴⁵.

For example, in **Poland, Bulgaria** and **Slovakia**, prosecutors influence access to protection and assistance through decisions on case qualification and continuation of proceedings, particularly where formal identification is linked to criminal justice outcomes. Courts and prosecutors also ensure victims' access to justice, overseeing evidence collection, legal representation, compensation mechanisms, and child-sensitive procedures⁴⁶. In a number of EU MS⁴⁷, the judiciary also participates in multidisciplinary cooperation or contributes to formal identification outcomes.

Often, justice authorities are also responsible for regulating or accrediting victim support services under general victims of crime legislation, which operates alongside trafficking specific assistance schemes. This is, for example, the case in **Bulgaria, Poland** and **Latvia**.

In **Latvia**, justice authorities play a role in ensuring victims' access to legal aid and compensation and in aligning procedural safeguards with EU and international standards. Across these systems, the involvement of justice ministries reinforces the legal enforceability of victim rights within NRMs, even where day-to-day coordination lies elsewhere.

Ministries of Social Affairs / Social Protection / Family / Welfare hold responsibility for victim assistance systems, including for the (availability and financing of) social support, crisis accommodation, long-term reintegration, guardianship for children, and coordination of specialised service providers⁴⁸. They also guide child protection responses, managing best interest assessments and multi-disciplinary interventions⁴⁹.

⁴² Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

⁴³ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

⁴⁴ Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia (in progress), Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Spain.

⁴⁵ Romania, Slovenia, Spain.

⁴⁶ Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

⁴⁷ Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Romania.

⁴⁸ Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

⁴⁹ Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, and Slovenia.

In **Austria, Ireland** and **Sweden**, this is the case. Here authorities responsible for social affairs, family or welfare are responsible for organising and delivering assistance to victims, regardless of their cooperation with criminal proceedings, ensuring access to accommodation, psychosocial support and long-term reintegration.

In **Poland**, the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy (MRPiPS), in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and Administration (MSWiA), the Border Guard, and non-governmental organisations, conducts an annual series of training sessions for employees of social assistance organisations.

In **Bulgaria** and **Slovakia**, child protection authorities operating under social or family ministries play a particularly prominent role, managing guardianship arrangements, best interest assessments and multidisciplinary responses for child victims of trafficking.

Ministries of Migration / Asylum / Integration oversee screening and identification in asylum and migration procedures, e.g., within reception centres or vulnerability assessments. In some EU MS⁵⁰, these ministries coordinate with NRMs to ensure that presumed victims identified through migration pathways are referred for protection. They also contribute to cross-border return and international referral frameworks⁵¹.

For example, in **Greece**, the Reception and Identification Service applies trafficking specific standard operating procedures within reception centres, enabling early identification and internal referrals in cooperation with the NRM coordination body.

In **Sweden** and **Ireland**, migration and asylum authorities cooperate with social services and police to ensure that presumed victims identified during asylum procedures are referred to appropriate protection mechanisms.

In **Poland** and **Latvia**, migration authorities and border services support vulnerability assessments and contribute to return and cross-border referral procedures in coordination with interior ministries.

Generally, Ministries of Foreign Affairs support the NRM through consular protection, international cooperation, participation in transnational anti-trafficking initiatives, and communication with foreign authorities⁵². They also facilitate voluntary return and safe repatriation procedures, often jointly with international organisations⁵³.

For example, in **Bulgaria** and **Poland**, consular services support the identification and repatriation of nationals trafficked abroad, working in coordination with interior ministries, service providers and international organisations. In **Portugal**, foreign affairs authorities participate in cross-border cooperation frameworks and support voluntary return procedures, particularly in cases involving third-country nationals. In **Greece**, the Office of National Rapporteur at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supervises NRM, which is managed by EKKA at the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family.

Finally, several EU MS foresee a role for **international organisations** in their NRMs, in particular in terms of facilitating cross-border referrals, voluntary returns, and continuity of protection, especially through IOM⁵⁴. They provide technical guidance and develop tools, including SOPs, manuals, protocols, and

⁵⁰ Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

⁵¹ Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Portugal, and Slovenia.

⁵² Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia specifically mentioned this.

⁵³ Cyprus, Greece, and Portugal.

⁵⁴ Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

capacity-building frameworks⁵⁵. Monitoring bodies such as GRETA and the OSCE were further mentioned for their role in reviewing national systems, identifying challenges, and guiding reforms⁵⁶.

Several countries specifically also mentioned the role of European bodies such as Europol and Eurojust, which enable joint investigations, information exchange, and operational coordination⁵⁷. They also deliver specialised training to national NRM actors (law enforcement), strengthening identification, case management, and victim-centred- approaches⁵⁸. Although not specifically mentioned by the EU MS, other European institutions relevant to the implementation of NRMs include the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and Frontex. In addition, EUAA plays an indirect but increasingly relevant role in the functioning of NRMs in the context of asylum and reception, notably by supporting Member States through mapping exercises, practitioner exchanges, guidance development, and capacity building on trafficking in human beings within its Reception and Vulnerability workstream⁵⁹. EUAA also contributes to early detection and referral through the development of practical tools and training, including indicators and guidance aimed at ensuring that trafficking-related vulnerabilities identified during screening or reception procedures are appropriately flagged and transmitted to the competent national authorities for referral under national mechanisms. Similarly, Frontex plays an indirect but operationally relevant role in relation to NRMs by supporting Member States at the EU external borders through early detection of trafficking indicators, training of border officers, intelligence-sharing, and the use of operational tools such as the VEGA handbooks and screening guidance, with any presumed cases systematically referred to competent national authorities in line with national referral mechanisms⁶⁰.

It should be noted, however, that neither EU institutions (Europol, Eurojust, EUAA, Frontex) nor international actors (Council of Europe/GRETA and the OSCE) play a direct role in NRMs. For example, when Frontex personnel detect a presumed trafficking victim, the person is referred by Europol to their national counterpart, e.g., the national border police, who is then responsible for ensuring that the victim is identified and referred to the national referral mechanism⁶¹.

4.2.7 Involvement of CSOs

The survey findings show that most EU MS have established structural cooperation with specialised CSOs to implement NRMs. 18 out of 25⁶² EU Member States confirmed having a fully structured cooperation with CSOs, and another five⁶³ have it partially structured. In most EU Member States, CSOs are entrusted with clearly delineated operational responsibilities within NRMs. These responsibilities typically encompass the provision of specialised accommodation, psycho-social counselling, legal assistance, and long-term reintegration support, but frequently also extend to early identification, outreach and referral, particularly when victims are not encountered and referred for assistance through law enforcement or migration pathways.

In several EU Member States, cooperation with CSOs is embedded in the broader national anti-trafficking governance framework, as well as the NRM. For example, in **Romania**, cooperation

⁵⁵ Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Portugal, and Slovenia.

⁵⁶ Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, and Slovenia.

⁵⁷ Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

⁵⁸ Estonia, Greece, Portugal, and Slovenia.

⁵⁹ Interview with EUAA.

⁶⁰ Interview with Frontex.

⁶¹ Interview with Frontex.

⁶² Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia.

⁶³ Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta

between state actors and specialised CSOs is regulated in the National Identification and Referral Mechanism. In **Italy**, cooperation with specialised organisations is provided for in the National Action Plan and ensured through the Technical Committee; it is also operationalised through SOPs and Guidelines for the implementation of the NRM at the local level. In **Denmark**, cooperation is set up through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and other cooperation agreements. In **Bulgaria**, such cooperation agreements, clearly defined operational roles, and regular engagement ensure CSOs' structured and effective involvement at all stages of victim support and adequate NRM implementation. Here, the development of NRM itself has been initiated by the NGO sector⁶⁴.

In other EU Member States, cooperation between CSOs and law enforcement authorities is regulated through binding administrative or procedural instruments. In **Austria**, cooperation between the police and the victim protection institutions is regulated by a decree of the Federal Ministry of the Interior. In **Spain**, cooperation is regulated by Instruction 6/2016, issued by the Secretary of State for Security, on actions by State Security Forces and Corps in the Fight Against Human Trafficking and in Collaboration with Organisations and Entities with Proven Experience in Assisting Victims⁶⁵. In **Lithuania**, cooperation between pre-trial investigation bodies and NGOs is regulated in the Prosecutor's Order⁶⁶. Similarly, in **Czechia**, Methodological Manual No. 4, signed on 14 December 2022 by the First Deputy Minister of the Interior for the Management of the Internal Security and Police Education Section, describes the general nature of cooperation with specialised NGOs.

In **Ireland**, there is currently no active centralised, structured cooperation agreement for specialised CSOs. Collaboration with specialised NGOs, nevertheless, reportedly takes place in practice. Also, **Estonia** and **France** indicated that they have no formal, structured cooperation agreements signed with CSOs, though both refer to ongoing collaboration with specialised NGOs in practice, which might be the same for Ireland.

Several EU Member States provide state-level funding for CSO service delivery⁶⁷. For example, **Hungary** funds two CSOs to run five adult shelters. In **Slovenia**, CSOs that deliver assistance are selected through calls for proposals. In **Luxembourg**, NGOs have an agreement with the Ministry of Equality for assisting THB victims. The **Swedish** Gender Equality Agency is funding the national support programme⁶⁸ providing support and shelters to victims of trafficking. In **Cyprus** and **Ireland**, NGOs assist the government in providing financial, psychological and social support to victims. In **Bulgaria**, specialised NGOs are formally integrated into the NRM as service providers, providing residential and consultative services to victims and serving as partners in identification, referral, counselling, and reintegration processes. Here, foreign funding that NGOs as service providers obtain also contributes to NRM. The involvement of CSOs is central to ensuring a victim-centred approach within NRMs. As further elaborated in sections 3.5 and 3.6, in **Sweden**, **Ireland** and **Austria**, NGOs deliver accommodation and specialised support regardless of the victim's procedural status or willingness to engage with law enforcement authorities. Similar practices are observed in **Bulgaria** and **Slovakia**, where CSOs provide both residential and non-residential assistance under national protection or support programmes

⁶⁴ The NRM itself was initially developed with the initiative of the NGO sector and later formalised in 2010 under a project implemented by La Strada International and the Animus Association Foundation, funded through the Dutch MATRA Programme.

⁶⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/esp-2-eval-report-annex-1-thb-comprehensive-plan-2015-2018/1680790618> (accessed 11.03.2026).

⁶⁶ Order of the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Lithuania, the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, the Minister of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania On the Approval of Recommendations for the Identification of Victims of Human Trafficking, Pre-Trial Investigation and Inter-Institutional Cooperation, December 17, 2015. No. I-327/1V-1015/A1-758.

⁶⁷ Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden.

⁶⁸ <https://nspm.jamstalldhetismyndigheten.se/samverkan/samverkan-med-civilsamhallet/> (accessed 11.03.2026).

coordinated by state authorities. This operational independence is frequently cited as crucial for building trust with victims and enabling sustained engagement with support services.

In some EU Member States, CSOs form a structurally embedded part of the NRM through institutionalised service-delivery models. This is a case of **Poland**, where a key role in the NRM is played by the National Consulting and Intervention Centre for Victims of Trafficking (in Polish, the acronym KCIK is used), which is a publicly funded task commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration through an annual open tender. It is currently operated jointly by La Strada Poland (Foundation Against Trafficking in Human Beings and Slavery) and, since 2025, jointly with the Fundacja Dialog (which replaced the PoMOC Association). In addition to KCIK, assistance to victims of trafficking in human beings is also provided by other organisations, including IOM Itaka, and specifically for children, KIND and the Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę.

There is no legislative act that formally establishes KCIK as a statutory body (same as there is no statute for the NRM as a whole); instead, its status derives from the public task framework under Polish administrative practice and the Ministry's anti-trafficking system implementation obligations.

Comparable programme-based arrangements exist in **Slovakia**, where CSOs are contracted within the Programme of Support and Protection for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings, and in **Bulgaria**, where NGOs operate licensed crisis centres and shelters under the NRM. These models illustrate the EU MS's intention to shift from ad hoc cooperation towards structurally integrated service delivery, even in the absence of a single statutory act establishing the NRM. However, as further elaborated, this is not functioning without challenges.

In addition to service provision, CSOs contribute to the maintenance and development of NRM systems through training, consultation, and guidance development and awareness -raising, next to advocacy based on their service provision. In **Bulgaria, Slovakia** and **Sweden**, NGOs participate in or deliver training programmes for police officers, social workers, labour inspectors and other frontline professionals on victim identification and referral procedures.

In several EU Member States, CSOs participate in national coordination bodies. In **France**, CSOs are regular partners of MIPROF, the national authority that coordinates the country's anti-trafficking work and participate in all work on the development of NRMs, as well as monitoring and implementation of the measures envisaged in the Third National Plan to combat exploitation and THB. In **Slovenia**, representatives of individual NGOs are members of the National Working Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. In **Slovakia**, specialised CSOs are members of the Expert Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, which is chaired by the National Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (the 1st State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior of Slovakia). In **Sweden**, NGOs participate in the national coordination's strategic group (twice a year) and in seminars and conferences. In **Estonia**, CSOs are part of the national roundtable and actively involved in the THB policy planning and anti-trafficking work. In **Finland**, NGOs participate in local cooperation platforms. In **Bulgaria**, all CSOs involved are members of the Permanent expert working group (PRG) and are invited to participate in the Inter-Institutional Coordination Team for case management, according to the specifics of each case and their expertise. In the **Netherlands**, the NGO CoMensha and other NGOs are involved in the development and implementation of the national action plan. Moreover, CoMensha is part of the national THB task force, chaired by the Public Prosecutor, which is, however, currently inactive.

Finally, while in **Malta**, there is no structured cooperation with specialised CSOs, the National Strategy and Action Plan on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings in Malta (2024-2030) was drafted in collaboration with various NGOs. The strategy emphasises stronger cooperation between the authorities, law enforcement and civil society in the fights against THB.

The involvement of CSOs in national coordination fora faces challenges. In **Ireland**, IHREC (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Irish Independent National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings) is a member of the Human Trafficking Stakeholders Forum, which is provided for under the Anti-Trafficking National Action Plan (NAP) and established by the Department of Justice as National Coordinator. This forum comprises community and voluntary sector organisations, State agencies, State Departments and other expert stakeholders.

The Department of Justice did not convene the Forum in 2025. The Forum was convened on 29 June 2026, during a critical period that included the development of the new NRM and its operational guidelines, transposition of both the Amended EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and the Asylum and Migration Pact, as well as the mid-term review of the NAP. CSOs flagged issues with communication from the State, including regarding the Stakeholders Forum. At the same time, multi-stakeholder coordination bodies are considered to be more effective mechanisms of collaboration and cooperation with stakeholders than bilateral cooperation, and the need for a higher frequency of their meetings was recommended by IHREC.

Finally, some NRMs foresee a role for trade unions and workers' rights organisations in detecting labour exploitation and referring potential victims, particularly through workplace monitoring or cooperation with labour inspectorates⁶⁹. They also raise awareness among workers, provide information on rights, and contribute to training or professional development initiatives for frontline sectors⁷⁰. In several countries⁷¹, trade unions participate in NRM discussions or policy development, helping shape responses to labour exploitation. A number of EU Member States foresee (expanded) future involvement of unions, as reflected in ongoing reforms or forthcoming national action plans – most notably in Denmark's 2026–2029 strategy.

Some EU MS mentioned that there are actors in their countries who should be involved in the NRMs but are currently not engaged. The actors suggested to be involved in the NRMs concern, in particular governmental actors such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Luxembourg) or Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare (Cyprus), the judiciary (Greece), healthcare institutions and professionals (Austria, Lithuania, Latvia), selected social institutions (Austria,) municipal-level institutions, in particular those responsible for social services and child rights protection (Lithuania), educational level institutions and representatives of the education system (Lithuania), trade unions and employers' organisations (Bulgaria, Denmark, Luxembourg), and non-governmental organisations active in fields other than THB (Luxembourg). In Poland, despite a formal mandate of labour inspectors to identify THB victims, they fail to do so effectively.

⁶⁹ Belgium, Finland, France, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

⁷⁰ Finland, France, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia.

⁷¹ Belgium, Finland, France, Portugal, Romania, and Slovakia.

4.3 Coordination in Practice

Strategic coordination structures at the national level generally oversee the development of procedures, policy guidance and cooperation frameworks related to trafficking in human beings, which often include the formal strategic coordination of NRMs.

4.3.1 Coordination bodies at national and local levels

The survey response shows that the vast majority of EU Member States (20 out of 25⁷², and Poland) have established coordination bodies.⁷³ 18 out of 25 have a national coordinating body or national task force⁷⁴, and 17 out of 27 EU Member States have a functioning National Rapporteur or Equivalent Mechanism, even though the latter is no longer a requirement of the Directive.

The setup of each coordination body differs, depending on the country. Some EU Member States have their coordination bodies affiliated with one of the ministries – for example, the Ministry of Justice (Estonia, Ireland, Netherlands), the Ministry of Interior (Cyprus, Czechia, Hungary), or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Greece) or other governmental bodies (Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities in Croatia, Department for Equal Opportunities at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in Italy, Prime-Minister's Chancellery in Romania).

Inter-ministerial bodies operate at least in Austria (Task Force against Human Trafficking, led by Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs), Belgium (Interdepartmental Coordination Unit for the fight against trafficking and smuggling, chaired by the Minister of Justice), Bulgaria (National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings), Luxembourg (Interministerial Committee on Trafficking), and Poland (Inter-Ministerial Team for Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings is chaired by Deputy Minister of Interior and Administration).

Specialised agencies take on NRM coordination roles in Denmark (Danish Centre against Human Trafficking), France (Inter-ministerial Mission for Protection of Women and Anti-Trafficking, Miprof), Portugal (Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality), Slovenia (National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator and Anti-Trafficking Service), and Sweden (the Swedish Gender Equality Agency). The Netherlands introduced a hybrid governmental-NGO operational model, in which CoMensha (NGO) performs the operational coordination role of the assistance to victims (registration, referrals, training of part of the relevant stakeholders), while the Ministry of Justice and Security coordinates the overall anti-trafficking policy, including the national action plan.

In practice, coordination bodies often exercise primarily strategic and facilitative functions, while operational coordination and case management remain with sectoral authorities. In Sweden, for example, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency coordinates the NRM by issuing guidance, developing referral tools, providing training, and convening stakeholders, but does not manage individual cases at an operational level, which remains the responsibility of the police, social services, and migration authorities. A similar separation of functions is observed in **Austria**, where the Task Force Against

⁷² EU MS with no coordination body is Spain and Malta; Finland and Lithuania selected "hard to say" in the survey; Slovakia explained that it has different coordination bodies for different processes (support to adult victims, support to child victims, investigation and prosecution), and not a single coordination organ.

⁷³ Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden.

⁷⁴ Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden.

Trafficking in Human Beings provides strategic oversight and multi-agency coordination, while operational case handling remains decentralised across institutions.

Some EU Member States operate multi-layered coordination arrangements in which different institutions assume coordinating roles at different stages of the NRM. In **Slovakia**, strategic oversight is exercised by the National Coordinator within the Ministry of the Interior, while operational coordination, referral management and cross-border contact functions are entrusted to the National Anti-Trafficking Centre, which also acts as the National Rapporteur. This model differs from systems structured around a single coordination body responsible mainly for policy steering.

Several EU Member States⁷⁵ have developed structured local or regional coordination systems that complement national level governance. **Bulgaria** provides the most formalised example through its 10 Local Commissions under the NCCTHB, which manage decentralised NRM implementation, coordinate multidisciplinary teams, oversee local victim support services, and ensure systematic case management at the municipal level. **Poland** established Provincial Teams for Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings, which, subject to the decision of the province governor, include representatives of various public institutions, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organisations operating at the regional level. **Italy** has similarly embedded local coordination frameworks into its NRM Guidelines, requiring regional and municipal authorities to establish multiagency platforms that apply SOPs consistently across territories and strengthen identification and referral pathways. In **Greece**, local coordination is operationalised through EKKA/NRM structures: municipal social services, health providers, and local NGOs work in close partnership with the national mechanism, submitting Reporting Forms and applying common SOPs to ensure unified procedures nationwide. **Portugal** also reports strong local and regional cooperation, with regular joint meetings among NGOs, public administration bodies, and enforcement actors forming an integrated multilevel coordination system. By contrast, some countries rely on less formalised local coordination practices. **Latvia** reports that local service providers currently coordinate responses primarily through ad hoc contacts or training-related interactions, without a formal local coordination mandate. Further formalisation of local coordination structures is expected following the adoption of forthcoming NRM legislation.

A number of EU Member States further emphasise local level operational teams or platforms. **Croatia's** monthly Operational Team, which includes national and local authorities, serves as a regular venue for inter-institutional coordination and information exchange at the operational level. **Spain** implements regional coordination through the Framework Protocol, enabling autonomous communities to convene frontline actors for regular coordination, supported by liaison officers embedded in local law enforcement structures. **Belgium**, while lacking a formal NRM, relies on its specialised local reception centres (PAGASA, Payoke and Sürya) that act as de facto coordination hubs by linking police, social services, and medical providers in their respective regions. The **Netherlands** similarly coordinates actions at the municipal level, where local authorities, CoMensha and other NGOs collaborate on victim placement and support arrangements. However, there is no coordinating body, and thus the coordination is dependent on the local context and may differ per category of victim.

Some EU Member States are moving toward formalising regional/local structures. **Latvia** reports that local service providers currently coordinate responses unofficially, and that forthcoming NRM legislation will formalise these local mechanisms. **Lithuania** highlights the involvement of municipal-

⁷⁵ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain.

level institutions – such as social services and child rights authorities – and indicates that strengthening local coordination is a national priority for future system improvement. **Denmark**, while not operating a formal local NRM, uses the national Danish Centre against Human Trafficking (CMM) as a local coordination partner and plans to reinforce territorial coordination under its 2026–2029 action plan.

4.3.2 Coordination strengths

Only around half of the surveyed EU Member States (15 out of 25)⁷⁶ claimed that the roles and responsibilities of all competent authorities, including the coordinator/coordination body, are clearly defined and documented in their countries. Nine EU Member States⁷⁷ reported a lack of full clarity in this respect.

National coordinators or other coordinating bodies play a significant role in coordinating NRMs at the national level. 18⁷⁸ out of 25 EU Member States, when asked about the strongest enablers of coordination of the national referral mechanisms and cooperation with all relevant actors, referred to their roles and their relevance in this regard. 13⁷⁹ out of 25 EU Member States mentioned **CSO/NGO partnership and funding** as functioning well, 11⁸⁰ mentioned **effective referrals and case management**, seven⁸¹ mentioned clear **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and other written procedures**, seven⁸² mentioned **training and capacity building**, and six⁸³ mentioned well-established **data and monitoring routines**.

In **Sweden**, apart from the coordinating role of the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, several other coordination forums were mentioned as highly effective, including the National Task Force, which meets four times a year to promote the exchange of experiences, collaboration, and skills development among public actors in the work against prostitution and trafficking in human beings for all purposes, regional coordinators, who are specialised social workers within THB, that work on a strategical and operational level in all regions of Sweden, and collaboration with the civil society which inputs are used to enhance the work of the National Task Force and the Support Programme.

In **Estonia**, apart from a clear division of responsibilities and roles in the NRM, regular meetings and training are taking place, including simulation exercises, which contribute to increasing NRM effectiveness.

In **Cyprus**, the existence of Standard Operating Procedures, along with regular interagency communication and case-based cooperation, contributes to effective coordination in practice. Finland mentioned the strong mandate and competences of several institutions (labour inspectorates, network of specialised prosecutors, independent national coordinator, active and dedicated CSOs), along with well-functioning coordination across different lines (between authorities and CSOs, multi-agency,

⁷⁶ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, and Spain.

⁷⁷ Austria, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Slovakia.

⁷⁸ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden.

⁷⁹ Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

⁸⁰ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Malta.

⁸¹ Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Italy, Slovenia and Spain.

⁸² Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.

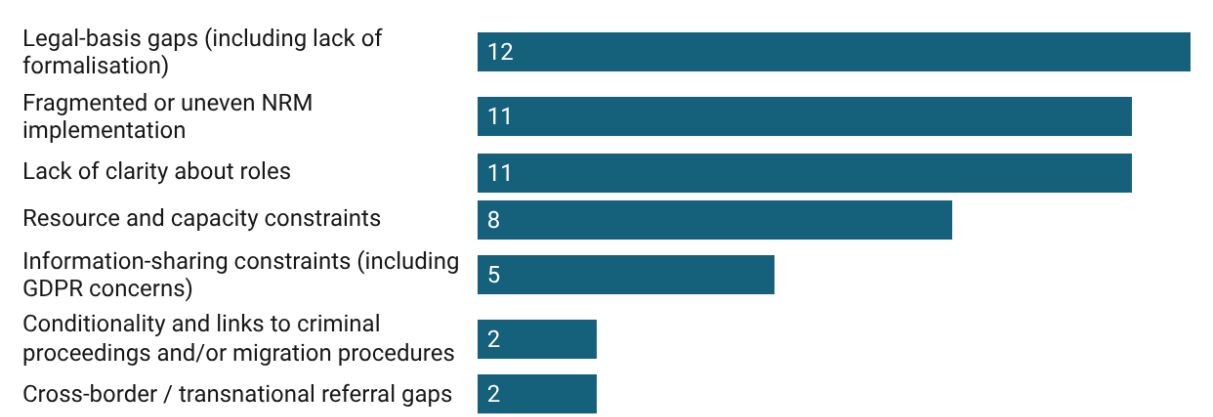
⁸³ Czechia, Greece, Ireland, Romania, and Slovakia.

national coordination in the Ministry of Justice) and clear guidelines (National Action Plans, NRM handbook) as enablers of NRM effectiveness.

4.3.3 Coordination weaknesses

Legal-basis gaps (including lack of formalisation) (12 out of 25)⁸⁴, **lack of clarity about roles, and fragmented or uneven NRM implementation** (11 out of 25)⁸⁵ **were, on the contrary, the most frequently reported coordination and cooperation challenges.** Other challenges experienced by the surveyed EU Member States included **resource and capacity constraints** (8 out of 25)⁸⁶, **information-sharing constraints** (including GDPR concerns) (5 out of 25)⁸⁷, **conditionality and links to criminal proceedings/migration procedures** (2 out of 25)⁸⁸, and **cross-border/transnational referral gaps** (2 out of 25)⁸⁹.

Figure 3. Coordination challenges in NRM implementation



Source: own elaboration based on the survey's results.

To illustrate the above challenges, **France** mentioned the need to give the National Medical Identification and Support Platform (MNIOP) a legal basis through legislation, the need for a digital ecosystem offering an intuitive user interface with GDPR data security guarantees⁹⁰, and the need to develop an MNIOP that enables the early identification and assistance of suspected victims of trafficking in human beings, independently of any legal proceedings.

Sweden mentioned that the NRM is informal and voluntary for participating stakeholders, as the national coordination does not have the right to direct the work of other agencies. Another challenge is the support for victims of labour exploitation, for example, in legal advice and support in claiming compensation.

⁸⁴ Mentioned by Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Malta, Slovakia, and Sweden.
⁸⁵ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Sweden.
⁸⁶ Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Malta.
⁸⁷ Bulgaria, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Slovakia.
⁸⁸ Austria, and Ireland. In Ireland, this challenge was identified by an independent National Rapporteur (IHREC), whereas according to the government, the assistance is provided to victims unconditionally.
⁸⁹ Hungary,
⁹⁰ The ecosystem has been identified and selected, and it will incorporate the digital, technical, and security foundations of the Ministry of Health's digital tools.

In **Cyprus**, coordination can be affected by differences in mandates, operational priorities and capacity among the various actors involved. Additional challenges include the need for continuous training of front-line officials, ensuring consistent application of referral procedures across all sectors and populations, and managing increased caseloads with limited resources. Strengthening systematic communication, monitoring mechanisms, and inter-agency follow-up remains important to further enhance coordination within the NRM. **Finland** mentioned the current lack of a task force or similar permanent working group within the Government structures. **Romania** sees the intersectionality of victims' vulnerabilities and, in relation to this, the multitude and diversity of procedures to integrate and harmonise as the biggest challenges. **Austria** considered the detection and identification of (presumed) cases of trafficking in some situations⁹¹ challenging, as well as combating bogus companies employing workers on construction sites and the use of complex subcontracting chains.

Resource constraints and staffing instability further undermine coordination in practice. **Greece** and **Bulgaria** reported that high staff turnover, understaffing, and limited funding for continuous training undermine operational continuity and coordination among NRM actors.

In **Poland**, challenges relate mainly to the limited formalisation of the NRM, notably the absence of binding multi-agency procedures for proactive victim identification beyond law enforcement. While several formal elements are in place – such as a standardised law enforcement identification algorithm, defined roles for key authorities, and legal provisions for reflection periods and residence permits – stakeholder views diverge on whether these constitute a coherent system. Government and law enforcement actors tend to point to existing procedures, the identification algorithm, KCIK's operational capacity, and the 16 Provincial Teams as constituting a functioning system in practice, whereas civil society and academic stakeholders point to fragmentation, reactivity, and reliance on time-limited NGO funding in the absence of a clear legislative basis. Across cases, remaining gaps include unclear follow-up procedures after informal identification, undefined timelines for formal identification decisions, limited involvement of labour inspectorates, and the lack of a centralised mechanism to consolidate trafficking-related data.

4.4 Procedures for identification, referral, assistance and access to justice for victims of trafficking in human beings

The majority of the EU MS survey respondents (17 out of 25) reported that written procedures are fully in place for identification, referral, assistance, and access to justice for victims of trafficking. These EU MS have formal, functioning procedures, embedded in legislation (**Belgium**⁹², **Finland**⁹³, **Hungary**⁹⁴, **Romania**⁹⁵), in manuals (**Czechia**, **Slovenia**), or in national protocols (**Bulgaria**⁹⁶,

⁹¹ (i) during reception and support procedures for migrants and asylum seekers, (ii) throughout the asylum procedure itself, and (iii) when uncovering presumed cases of labour exploitation in illegal or precarious working conditions, as well as presumed cases of sexual exploitation in private settings.

⁹² <https://www.myria.be/fr/traite/statut-de-victime> (accessed 9.03.2026).

⁹³ <https://www.finlex.fi/en/legislation/2011/746> (accessed 9.03.2026).

⁹⁴ Government Decree 354/2012. (XII. 13.) on the procedure for identifying victims of human trafficking.

⁹⁵ Government Decision No. 88/2023, Law No. 211/2004.

⁹⁶ The NRM includes two formally adopted annexes (Integral Parts of the NRM):

- Annex 1: Indicators for Identification of Victims of Trafficking, divided into indicators related to criminal acts committed against the victim and indicators describing the victim's situation and vulnerability.

- Annex 2: Criteria and Standards for Provision of Social Services to Victims of Trafficking, covering hotline services, crisis intervention, accommodation, psychological counselling and psychotherapy, social support, and development of skills for social and labour market integration (empowerment).

Croatia⁹⁷, Cyprus⁹⁸, Denmark⁹⁹, Greece¹⁰⁰, Italy¹⁰¹, Portugal¹⁰², Slovakia¹⁰³, Spain, Sweden). **Estonia** has already agreed on procedures and uses them in practice, but the full version is still in design and will be available in 2026¹⁰⁴. The scope typically includes victim identification, referral and interagency cooperation, support (medical, legal, social), access to justice, reintegration and return procedures, identification indicators, and service standards.

The remaining eight EU MS (Austria, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Malta) assessed that the procedures are partially in place. In those EU MS, procedures are sectoral (**Austria, Netherlands**), in the form of guidelines (**Lithuania**) or lack of harmonisation across sectors within countries (**Ireland, Latvia**). Some EU MSs have procedures in place, but these are not public due to sensitive information, e.g., shelter addresses (**Luxembourg**).

Figure 4. Degree of Implementation of Written Procedures for Victims of Trafficking Across EU MS

Relevant legal framework includes:

- Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act (particularly provisions on identification, protection, assistance, and reflection period);

- National Referral Mechanism of Bulgaria (2016), including institutional framework and operational procedures (https://antitrafficking.government.bg/uploads/NRM_Bulgaria_BG.pdf; accessed 9.03.2026)

⁹⁷ Protocol on Identification, Assistance and Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings

⁹⁸ Relevant Action in the 2023-2026 Strategy Document and Action Plan for the Prevention and Tackling of Human Trafficking and the Protection of the Victim.

⁹⁹ <https://www.cmm.dk/temaer/nationale-retningslinjer-for-opsporing-og-stoette-til-personer-udsat-for-menneskehandel> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁰⁰ <https://ekka.org.gr/index.php/en/ethnikos-mixanismos-anaforas-en>

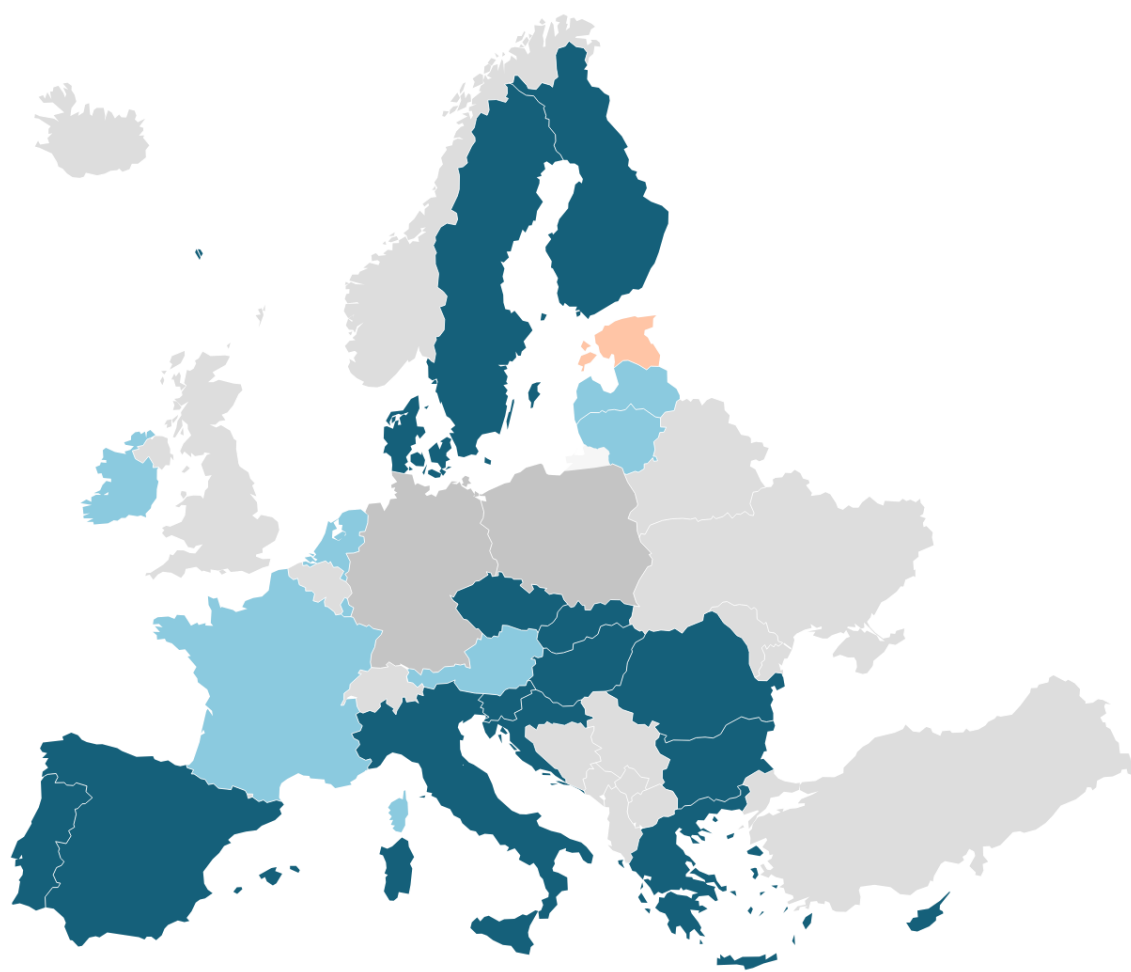
¹⁰¹ <https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/media/2wjin405x/national-referral-mechanism-2023.pdf> (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁰² https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSH_Book_M06.pdf (accessed 9.03.2026).

¹⁰³ <https://www.minv.sk/?program-podpory-a-ochrany-obeti-obchodovania-s-ludmi> (accessed 9.03.2026)

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.justdigi.ee/kuritegevus-ja-selle-ennetus/inimkaubandus> (accessed 9.03.2026)

■ Procedures in place
 ■ Procedures partially in place
 ■ Procedures under development
 ■ No data



4.5 Early Detection and Identification

Based on the data obtained, identification of victims of trafficking in human beings in the EU Member States is typically a multi-stage process, starting with initial detection by frontline services and ending with formal recognition by government authorities. Detection is generally carried out by a network of frontline services, including the police, labour and social welfare inspectorates, healthcare professionals, NGOs, and border guards, but varies by EU MS.

Good Practice Example: Slovakia

Slovakia has established a multi-stage process for identifying victims of trafficking in human beings through the NRM. The identification process begins with early identification, based on the detection of signs of trafficking in human beings by a wide range of entities that may come into contact with potential victims in practice. This stage serves as an initial filter that can lead to formal identification.

For operational and statistical purposes, the NRM distinguishes three categories of victims. A *potential victim* is someone who has been identified as having signs of trafficking in human beings, for example, through outreach activities or contacting the national hotline. A *presumed victim*, identified by designated institutions, is considered a victim and offered protection and support, regardless of

cooperation with law enforcement. The final category is the *formally identified victim*, whose status is typically confirmed through law enforcement action during criminal proceedings.

The implementation of this framework is supported by a multidisciplinary institutional structure encompassing law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, social and migration services, civil society organisations, and a contracted victim support service provider.

In **Finland**, proactive early detection is facilitated by a nationwide specialised police unit dedicated to trafficking in human beings. This institutional capacity is further bolstered by significantly increased resources for the labour inspectorate to conduct on-site surveillance and a legislative expansion of the Border Guard's mandate to investigate trafficking offences¹⁰⁵. In **Slovenia**, this network is reinforced by a mandatory obligation for professionals, such as health and education workers, to immediately report suspected child trafficking, overriding professional confidentiality¹⁰⁶.

Article 11(4) of the EU Anti-trafficking Directive, as revised by Directive (EU) 2024/1712, establishes that *'the tasks of the referral mechanisms operating in accordance with this paragraph shall include (...) (a) establishing minimum standards for the detection and early identification of victims*. Detection and identification of victims are conceptually and procedurally distinct phases. Detection refers to recognising indicators suggesting that a person may be a victim, while identification is the formal determination made by competent authorities in accordance with national procedures.

Although the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive leaves the definition of these minimum standards to MS, available evidence from international sources¹⁰⁷ – both binding human-rights duties and a wide body of soft-law guidance and reports, including those by EU agencies – can help define what early detection and identification entail in practice.

The previous ad hoc Rapid Response Paper concluded that minimum quality standards for early detection and identification require: (i) early, proactive and systematic screening using indicators covering all forms of exploitation; (ii) trained and multidisciplinary frontline responders; (iii) confidential, trauma-informed interview conditions; (iv) child-sensitive and protective identification procedures; (v) detection across all relevant state and non-state settings; (vi) clear, unconditional referral pathways; and (vii) human rights safeguards that prevent punishment, coercion or unlawful removal during the identification process.

4.5.1 Early, proactive and systematic screening using indicators covering all forms of exploitation

Many EU MS emphasise the use of indicators and structured procedures for early and systematic screening. **Bulgaria's** NRM includes "Annex 1: Indicators for Identification of Victims of Trafficking," which are categorised by criminal acts and victim vulnerability. **Portugal** is updating its indicators to

¹⁰⁵ Interview with EU MS.

¹⁰⁶ Manual on identification, assistance and protection of victims of trafficking in human beings, <https://www.gov.si/assets/vladne-sluzbe/UKOM/Boj-proti-trgovini-z-ljudmi/Dokumenti/Prirocnik-o-identifikaciji-pomoci-in-zasciti-zrtev-trgovine-z-ljudmi.pdf> (accessed 10.03.2026).

¹⁰⁷ See FRA (2014), Stepping up the response to victims of crime: FRA's findings on challenges and solutions; FRA (2023), Underpinning victims' rights: support services, reporting and protection; FRA (2014), Victims of crime in the EU: the extent and nature of support for victims.

include new forms of exploitation like surrogacy and forced marriage, while **Greece's** NRM Handbook provides specific indicators for different forms of exploitation.

Overall, existing systems tend to be more developed and operationalised for more visible forms of trafficking, particularly sexual exploitation, where awareness, indicators and institutional experience are generally stronger than for other forms.

Hungary uses an "Identification Data Sheet", which includes indicators of high, medium, and low likelihood, including appearance, working conditions, and personal circumstances¹⁰⁸. **Belgium** relies on detailed lists of indicators to refer cases to specialised centres immediately¹⁰⁹. The **Slovenian**¹¹⁰ manual and **Bulgarian** NRM¹¹¹ also include extensive annexes detailing indicators for various forms of exploitation and risk factors. **Slovenia** also plans a new manual with a two-tier recognition system that combines police and multidisciplinary professional identification to ensure victims have access to assistance regardless of criminal proceedings¹¹². **Romania's** NRM, updated in January 2023, incorporates new procedures, such as risk assessment, with user-friendly guides for various professionals and specific victim types¹¹³. **Denmark** deliberately separates initial, trauma-informed "assessment interviews" from formal trafficking assessments but also relies on a list of indicators.

However, significant gaps persist in several EU MS, particularly in relation to forms of trafficking that are less visible or fall outside traditional law enforcement paradigms. Labour exploitation and child trafficking remain especially under-detected.

In **Austria** and **Ireland**, the absence of binding referral or screening requirements leaves identification largely dependent on individual discretion, particularly in labour exploitation cases. **Latvia**¹¹⁴ and **Sweden** show a different weakness: while guidance exists, it is dispersed across multiple instruments or unevenly developed, meaning that certain forms of exploitation - especially those affecting children or involving forced criminality or marriage - remain institutionally under-recognised. **Poland** illustrates how routine enforcement activity can coexist with low identification rates when inspections are framed narrowly around regulatory compliance rather than victim detection.

4.5.2 Trained and multidisciplinary frontline responders

Multidisciplinary training is widely recognised as essential, and training programmes are being further developed and expanded. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies considerably across MS – training provision often is fragmented, sporadic, or limited in scope, and does not consistently reach all frontline professionals who are likely to encounter victims.

Many EU MS have developed training initiatives involving police, judiciary, social services, labour inspectors, NGOs and other frontline actors within their NRMs. For example, **Austria** integrates

¹⁰⁸ Government Decree 354/2012. (XII. 13.) on the procedure for identifying victims of human trafficking.

¹⁰⁹ COL 01/2015 for identifying indicators related to economic exploitation and COL 04/2011 for identifying indicators related to sexual exploitation, forced begging, organ removal, or forced criminality; <https://www.myria.be/files/circulaire-23-12-2016.pdf> (accessed 10.03.2026).

¹¹⁰ Manual on identification, assistance and protection of victims of trafficking in human beings, <https://www.gov.si/assets/vladne-sluzbe/UKOM/Boj-proti-trgovini-z-ljudmi/Dokumenti/Prirocnik-o-identifikaciji-pomoci-in-zasciti-zrtev-trgovine-z-ljudmi.pdf> (accessed 10.03.2026).

¹¹¹ Annex 1: Indicators for Identification of Victims of Trafficking, divided into indicators related to criminal acts committed against the victim and indicators describing the victim's situation and vulnerability.

¹¹² Survey.

¹¹³ Interview with EU MS.

¹¹⁴ In the Human Trafficking Prevention Plan 2025–2027, a task is included to develop a screening tool by 30.06.2026.

specialised NGOs into advanced police training, **Bulgaria** provides initial and ongoing training for a wide range of professionals, **France** stated to have trained approximately 7,000 professionals on trafficking in human beings indicators in 2024 and 2025¹¹⁵. Regular specialised training is also provided in **Czechia**¹¹⁶, **Finland**¹¹⁷, **Italy**¹¹⁸, **Romania**¹¹⁹ and **Slovenia**¹²⁰ often embedded within their National Referral Mechanisms and coordination structures.

Despite these initiatives, overall needs remain high, indicating that the impact of existing measures is uneven and often limited. **Latvia**'s training for specialists is considered "insufficient, irregular, and therefore considered ineffective". In **Sweden**, a significant challenge is the lack of awareness among law enforcement, with only 30% of police officers reportedly being aware of the NRM. **Poland** recognises a gap in expertise among officials encountering victims of forced labour, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking.

4.5.3 Confidential, trauma-informed interview conditions

While explicit details on trauma-informed interview conditions are not always provided, data suggest practices that contribute to confidentiality and victim-centred approaches.

Bulgaria's NRM includes "Guiding Principles of Work" such as confidentiality and protection of personal data. **Portugal**'s Regional Specialised Multidisciplinary Teams provide immediate psychosocial stabilisation and ensure continuous accompaniment, adopting a victim-centred and trauma-informed approach. **Ireland**'s Rosa's Place, a specialised shelter, provides specialised, gender- and trauma-informed holistic services. However, its capacity is limited at just eight places, and eligibility is restricted to international protection applicants. By contrast, the use of Direct Provision centres in Ireland for victims of trafficking has been criticised for lacking gender- and trauma-informed approaches and presenting a risk of re-traumatisation.

4.5.4 Child-sensitive and protective identification procedures

The problem of protecting children as victims of trafficking in human beings is recognised in many EU MS, although its reflection in practical solutions is uneven.

Bulgaria's NRM has a dedicated coordination mechanism for the identification, care, and protection of repatriated unaccompanied minors and child victims, ensuring coordinated action by relevant institutions for the safety, support, and reintegration of children. **Portugal** uses practical, context -specific indicators applied at both territorial and border checkpoints. Its two-line system combines rapid initial screening with more detailed, adapted interviews when concerns arise¹²¹. The limited number of child trafficking victims noted in **Poland** suggests shortcomings in -child sensitive identification measures and specialised training. **Sweden** faces significant challenges in the identification and referral processes for child victims, with many children being "overlooked due to insufficient documentation". **Ireland**'s rate of identification of child victims is lower than the UK and European averages, raising concerns about under-identification.

¹¹⁵ Survey.

¹¹⁶ Interview with EU MS.

¹¹⁷ Interview with EU MS.

¹¹⁸ Survey.

¹¹⁹ Interview with EU MS.

¹²⁰ Survey.

¹²¹ https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSH_Book_M06.pdf (accessed 9.03.2026).

4.5.5 Detection across all relevant state and non-state settings

The involvement of a wide range of actors, both state and non-state, in the NRM system is evident. However, their active role in detection and or identification is not always clear. Significant differences exist across EU MS regarding the role of police and LEAs in victim detection and formal identification.

Some EU MS grant law enforcement exclusive authority for formal victim identification, which directly influences access to residence permits and comprehensive assistance¹²², whereas others employ shared or multidisciplinary identification models, reducing dependency on police¹²³. In EU MS where formal victim identification is reserved exclusively to law enforcement authorities, access to residence-related rights and specialised assistance is procedurally linked to criminal justice decisions (e.g. **Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland**). This contrasts with NRMs, where non-law enforcement actors, working alongside police, can recognise presumed victims and trigger referrals to assistance at an earlier stage (e.g. **Austria, Greece, Ireland, Sweden**).

Finland and **Czechia** provide examples of good practice in which detection is approached as a shared responsibility among multiple actors. **Finland's** NRM involves different authorities, NGOs, and frontline actors, with the anti-trafficking coordinator working with various government ministries and authorities to implement a "whole of society" approach¹²⁴. **Czechia's** interministerial coordination group includes members from any relevant state institution, police, judicial part, and NGOs, with detection efforts including schooling for unemployment offices, police, and NGOs¹²⁵.

By contrast, challenges arise in certain EU MS, where detection is not clearly defined as a shared responsibility. In **Austria**, other frontline actors (e.g., labour inspectors, health professionals) are not legally obliged to refer potential victims directly to NGOs, thereby limiting detection in non-law-enforcement settings. **Latvia** notes that many institutions see their role only as informants who report a criminal offence to the police and that many municipal social services do not recognise victims of trafficking in human beings¹²⁶. **Poland** lacks binding, multi-agency standard operating procedures requiring proactive victim identification across healthcare, social services, labour inspection, or immigration contexts.

Good practice example: Finland¹²⁷ – Detection as a shared responsibility among multiple actors.

In Finland, detection of trafficking in human beings is explicitly understood as a shared responsibility. The NRM is conceived not as an endpoint for victim assistance, but as a process of identification and referral involving a wide range of authorities, NGOs and frontline actors. These actors are expected to identify trafficking indicators and refer victims to appropriate services rather than relying on a single institution to detect cases.

The system places strong emphasis on sensitising and training different actors who may encounter victims in practice. To support this approach, Finland has prioritised identifying key frontline actors

¹²² Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France,, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

¹²³ Croatia, Lithuania, Portugal, Finland, and Slovenia.

¹²⁴ Interview with EU MS.

¹²⁵ Interview with EU MS.

¹²⁶ Tiesibsargs. (2022). *People trafficking in Latvia: Monitoring report* (No. 1.8.26/1-1589357898). Retrieved from https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/1_8_26_1_1589357898.pdf

¹²⁷ Interview with EU MS

and providing them with continuous training, guidance, and practical tools, including a national NRM handbook. The handbook offers concrete guidance on recognising trafficking indicators, appropriate responses, and cooperation pathways.

Detection responsibilities are distributed across multiple authorities, including police, labour inspectorates, border guards and other relevant actors, each with a mandate to identify trafficking within their areas of competence. This multi-actor approach is coordinated at the national level and linked to a nationwide victim assistance system, ensuring that once a victim is identified, referral to support services is clear and accessible. This model reflects a “whole of society” approach, where detection is embedded across institutions, supported by coordination, training and shared responsibility rather than concentrated within a single authority.

Clear, unconditional referral pathways and human rights safeguards that prevent punishment, coercion or unlawful removal during the identification process are analysed in the following section.

Overall, while EU MS are moving towards more formalised identification frameworks in line with the new obligation embedded in the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, significant disparities remain in early detection, multidisciplinary engagement and coverage of less visible forms of exploitation.

4.6 Minimum Protection Standards for Victims of Trafficking: Access and Safeguards

4.6.1 Clear, unconditional referral pathways

Victim support frameworks are generally phased, beginning with unconditional crisis intervention, as part of or progressing into a reflection period, and culminating in longer-term residence based on varying conditions of cooperation.

17 out of 25¹²⁸ surveyed EU MS report unconditional immediate access to initial support, encompassing crisis accommodation, medical, and psychological care. A further eight¹²⁹ EU MS indicate that access is provided with limitations. No EU MS reports the absence of immediate access to assistance¹³⁰. While the EU MS reported providing unconditional, immediate assistance to victims of trafficking, operational data suggest that in several jurisdictions, this support is temporally bound to the **statutory reflection period**. These reflection periods exhibit significant regional variance in their statutory duration. **Bulgaria, France, and Slovenia** provide a 30-day reflection period, during which victims are entitled to stabilisation and assistance regardless of their cooperation with law enforcement. **Belgium** grants a 45-day reflection

¹²⁸ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

¹²⁹ Austria, Cyprus, France, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovakia.

¹³⁰ The classification of victim support in Ireland is described differently by the reporting entities. The government submission states that support is provided unconditionally after a “reasonable grounds” determination and is not dependent on participation in criminal proceedings. It also notes that support can be provided where there is no active criminal investigation in Ireland, including cases where the exploitation occurred outside the State.

IHREC, the National Rapporteur, notes that *An Garda Síochána* currently acts as the competent authority for identification decisions and as the referral point for state assistance. This indicates that identification and referrals are managed through a police-led structure. While this does not necessarily mean that access to support is conditional on participation in criminal proceedings, the fact that the police act as the main entry point may raise concerns that some victims could be discouraged from reporting or seeking assistance, particularly where they are reluctant to engage with law enforcement.

period, during which the expulsion order is suspended while the victim receives support from recognised specialised centres. In **Estonia** and **Portugal**, the reflection period is set between 30 and 60 days. **Croatia** provides a 60-day decision-making window for adults - extended to 90 days for children - to determine whether they will formally enter the assistance programme. In the **Netherlands** and **Slovakia**, the reflection period may be up to 90 days (30 days in the Netherlands for victims who fall under the Dublin Convention), and in Latvia, it is 180 days.

Beyond the differences in how immediate support is operationalised in practice, where assistance may be effectively time-limited to the statutory reflection period, the duration of which differs markedly across EU MS, there are other systemic limitations to access to protection across the region. In **Luxembourg**, the granting of full rights and comprehensive protection remains dependent on a formal identification process, managed exclusively by the police.

The picture concerning **longer-term assistance independent of cooperation in criminal proceedings** is even more mixed. 13¹³¹ EU MS report that longer-term assistance is fully independent of cooperation, while 11¹³² indicate that it is only partially independent, and **Luxembourg** – that such independence is not in place. In many EU MS, the designation of “fully independent” is narrower than it appears at first glance. In practice, it often refers only to the provision of social and psychological support, which is indeed available without requiring a victim’s cooperation with the criminal justice system. However, **key aspects of long-term stability – such as residence status for non-EU nationals or access to extended accommodation – remain conditional on cooperation or on satisfying formal identification requirements**. As a result, while the basic support package may be delivered unconditionally, the more structurally significant elements of protection continue to hinge on procedural engagement with authorities.

Among the EU MS that assessed themselves as “partially” offering unconditional support, a common pattern emerges. Most offer an **unconditional reflection or recovery period**, after which continued assistance becomes dependent on cooperation with investigations or prosecutions. In EU MS such as **Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus** and **France**, certain longer-term measures - including prolonged shelter stays and specific protection or residence statuses – are linked to ongoing cooperation, even though broader reintegration measures (counselling, education, vocational support, psychosocial assistance) are generally provided without such conditions.

In **Luxembourg**, cooperation is a legal prerequisite for obtaining a residence permit for victims of trafficking, and the available submission does not clarify whether long-term social support outside of the residence regime is independent of cooperation. As a result, the system is categorised by the survey respondent as not meeting the requirement for unconditional long-term assistance¹³³.

The Immigrants’ Council of **Ireland** reports that access to support for victims of trafficking in human beings remains largely dependent on police involvement, as key services – such as legal aid, healthcare, housing, and inclusion in the NRM – are typically only available after a police referral, requiring victims to disclose their situation to law enforcement. Formal identification as an alleged victim and access to related support, including residence-related entitlements, are linked to the National Referral Mechanism. Under the current framework, *An Garda Síochána* acts as the competent authority for identification

¹³¹ Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain.

¹³² Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Hungary, Latvia, Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden.

¹³³ This may reflect a broader pattern across multiple countries, which we will examine in more detail at a later stage of the analysis.

decisions¹³⁴. The Council highlights the lack of explicit humanitarian leave to remain for victims facing medical constraints or threats to family members – a gap that, according to them, particularly affects women and limits formal identification. Stakeholders differ in their interpretation of whether cooperation is necessary to access services, partly reflecting the shift from the previous legal framework, which mandated participation in investigations, to the Criminal Justice (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2024, which appears to fundamentally separate support from cooperation.

4.6.2 Human rights safeguards that prevent punishment, coercion or unlawful removal during the identification process

The data indicate broad formal recognition of minimum protection standards but persistent divergence in unconditional access, longer-term support guarantees, and the application of the non-punishment principle.

Regarding **the regulation and application of non-punishment and data-protection safeguards**, 15 out of 25¹³⁵ EU MS report that these safeguards are fully in place; six indicate partial implementation, and 3 report that they are not in place.

The two **Irish** submissions assessed the non-punishment principle differently. Ireland does not provide for the principle through a specific statutory defence; instead, it is operationalised primarily through prosecutorial discretion and guidance¹³⁶, including guidance of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, alongside victim-centred procedures and trafficking-specific training for relevant authorities. One submission therefore considered the safeguards to be in place in practice, while the IHREC submission assessed implementation as only partial, pointing to concerns about legal certainty, enforceability and consistency of application.

This distinction is important. The absence of a dedicated statutory defence does not, in itself, explain the discrepancy in compliance assessments, since a number of EU MS assessed as fully implementing the principle also rely on guidance or practice rather than statutory codification, including Croatia¹³⁷, Finland¹³⁸ and Portugal¹³⁹. The issue in Ireland, therefore, appears to concern not only the formal legal basis of the principle, but also the extent to which prosecutorial guidance, operational protocols and training ensure consistent, predictable and enforceable protection for victims in practice. This is consistent with recommendations by GRETA and IHREC calling for clearer legal and operational safeguards, including legislation or binding protocols, and targeted training for prosecutors, judges and other criminal justice professionals.

¹³⁴ This means that individuals may need to engage with *An Garda Síochána* for the purposes of identification. However, this should be distinguished from participation in a criminal investigation. According to the government submission, access to services is linked to identification through the NRM and is not contingent on cooperation with a criminal investigation. At the same time, the police-led role in identification may raise concerns that some victims could feel discouraged from coming forward or seeking assistance, particularly where they are reluctant to engage with law enforcement.

¹³⁵ Including Ireland; **Denmark** did not submit any response to this question.

¹³⁶ Mullalley, S (2021) *he Non-Punishment Principle in International Trafficking and Human Rights law* [Online]. Available at <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/un-special-rapporteur-on-trafficking-in-persons-publishes-non-punishment-report/>

¹³⁷ The Protocol on Identification, Assistance and Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings provides guidance to competent authorities to ensure a victim-centred approach, including protection from inappropriate penalisation and the handling of personal data in accordance with applicable data protection legislation.

¹³⁸ J Hannonen and H Kainulainen, *Ihmiskaupan uhrien rankaisemattomuusperiaate* (Oikeusministeriö 2022) <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/items/ab84aee9-8b1f-48ac-b714-561f1100eaea> (accessed 10.03.2026)

¹³⁹ There is no specific general rule, but this has been filled in judicial practice by resorting to general principles of law that would inevitably shape any specific legal provision that existed, with no reports of cases with convictions based on the misapplication of such principles.

Table 2 presents the EU MS interpretation of the question and the corresponding implementation in each country.

Table 2. EU MS Survey Assessment of Non-Punishment and Data Protection Safeguards vs. National Implementation

IMPLEMENTATION / USE IN EU MS						
EU MS ASSESSMENT IN THE SURVEY REGARDING THE NON-PUNISHMENT AND DATA-PROTECTION SAFEGUARDS EXPLICITLY REGULATED AND APPLIED IN PRACTICE		Law ¹⁴⁰	Guidelines	Practice	In the process of changing the law	No data
	Fully	Austria ¹⁴¹ , Belgium ¹⁴² , Bulgaria ¹⁴³ , Cyprus ¹⁴⁴ , Greece ¹⁴⁵ , Latvia ¹⁴⁶ , Lithuania ¹⁴⁷ , Malta ¹⁴⁸ , Spain ¹⁴⁹ , Slovenia ¹⁵⁰ , Romania	Croatia, Ireland	Finland, Portugal		
	Partially	Estonia ¹⁵¹	Ireland (by IHREC)	Hungary, Luxembourg	Czechia, Netherlands ¹⁵² , Slovakia ¹⁵³ ,	
	Not in place			Italy ¹⁵⁴	France	Poland, Sweden

Good practice – Cyprus: Non-punishment principle.

The non-punishment principle is enshrined in the *Anti-trafficking Law 60(I)/2014*, Article 29, which exonerates trafficked persons from criminal liability for offences committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Article 29(1) provides that victims shall not be prosecuted or sanctioned for their participation in criminal activities where such participation was a direct consequence of the fact that they were victims of offences under Part II of the Law.

¹⁴⁰ In the subsequent stages of the analysis, we will present a distinction between legislation related to anti-trafficking and provisions contained within the criminal code.

¹⁴¹ Erlass vom 17. Februar 2017 über das Absehen von der Bestrafung von Opfern von Menschenhandel, die Straftaten begangen haben, zufolge entschuldigendem Notstand - § 10 StGB.

¹⁴² Article 433quinquies, §4 of the Criminal Code.

¹⁴³ Article 16a of the Criminal Code.

¹⁴⁴ Ant-trafficking Law 60(I)/2014, Article 29.

¹⁴⁵ Article 323A par. 8 of the Hellenic Criminal Code and Article 59 par. 4 of the Hellenic Criminal Procedure Code, Article 187C par. 3 of the Hellenic Criminal Code.

¹⁴⁶ It is defined in the Criminal Law and has been implemented in practice, but only for petty crimes.

¹⁴⁷ Article 147 of the Criminal Code.

¹⁴⁸ Article 33(b) and 248E(6) of the Criminal Code.

¹⁴⁹ Article 177bis of the Criminal Code and Organic Law 19/1994 of December 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Article 23 and 113 of the Criminal Code.

¹⁵¹ Data protection is applied. The non-punishment principle is provided in the Penal Code, but it is not specific to trafficking in human beings.

¹⁵² Following the approval of the House of Representatives, the Senate is currently reviewing a legislative proposal to modernise trafficking in human beings laws, which includes the formal codification of the non-punishment principle.

¹⁵³ The non-punishment principle in relation to administrative, including immigration, minor offences, is expected to be adopted in Slovak legislation during the summer of 2026.

¹⁵⁴ Under Article 54 of the Criminal Code, courts grant immunity to identified trafficking victims by applying the "state of necessity" provision, which exempts individuals from punishment if they were coerced into committing a crime to avert imminent, serious harm to themselves or others – provided they did not cause the danger and the necessity arose from an external threat.

Article 29(2) extends this safeguard to third-country nationals who are victims within the meaning of the Law, including in cases involving illegal entry, illegal residence, unlawful employment, or employment in breach of the applicable terms and conditions prescribed by the Aliens and Immigration Law, as amended.

Article 29(3) further provides that where proceedings are brought against a victim, and the conditions under Article 29(1) are met, the court shall not impose any penalty or punishment, even if the criminal proceedings are not terminated, and the victim is found guilty. To date, no identified victim of trafficking in human beings has been charged or punished for any illegal act or omission committed as a result of their victimisation. However, it is possible that an individual is not recognised or identified as a victim and is instead penalised for an illegal act or omission.

It is worth noting that legal standards and practical access often diverge, as discussed during the validation workshop. Participants said that legal frameworks may provide for unconditional protection or support, but in practice, key services remain scarce, especially safe accommodation and legal aid.

4.7 Tailored Support: Child-sensitive procedures, dedicated resources for women and individuals with disabilities

While the vast majority of EU MS report full implementation of protection standards for trafficking victims, the support landscape remains fragmented, characterised by comprehensive frameworks for children and women but a notable deficiency in dedicated, specialised programming for persons with disabilities.

Minimum Protection Standards for victims of trafficking also encompass tailored support specifically designed for children, women, and persons with disabilities. The vast majority of EU MS (18 out of 25)¹⁵⁵ report that tailored measures for children, women and persons with disabilities are fully in place, and the remaining seven¹⁵⁶ report that they are partially in place¹⁵⁷. However, EU MS strategies for providing support tailored to the needs of trafficking victims vary. The most frequently mentioned and most extensive are procedures and support for children and moderate attention to women, and systemic gaps regarding persons with disabilities.

Child-specific support is the most advanced area, particularly in EU MS such as **Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal** and **Spain**, where child victims trigger priority child protection mechanisms, guardianship, and specialised procedures. However, under identification, the lack of nationwide specialised shelters, and inconsistent local capacity remain recurring challenges (notably in **Austria, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia** and **Sweden**).

Good Practice: Dedicated Child Sensitive National Referral Mechanisms.

¹⁵⁵ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain.

¹⁵⁶ France, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Sweden.

¹⁵⁷ Only the second submission for Ireland by IHREC answered “not in place” rather than “partially” as a governmental representative.

Portugal

Portugal demonstrates good practice through the establishment of a specific referral mechanism for child victims of trafficking in human beings (THB) in 2021. This child's sensitive NRM is publicly available online and has been disseminated through targeted training activities for frontline professionals working directly with children.

The mechanism sets out a structured protocol defining clear procedures for the identification, referral, assistance, and protection of presumed child victims of trafficking, including children in transit or present in the national territory. It operates within the framework of the IV Action Plan for the Prevention and Combat of Trafficking in Human Beings and is designed to ensure a coordinated, multidisciplinary, and rights-based response.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has established a special Coordination Mechanism for the referral, care, and protection of repatriated Bulgarian unaccompanied minors and child victims of trafficking, coordinated by the State Agency for Child Protection. This mechanism provides an inter-institutional framework for both domestic and cross-border cases, regulating cooperation among child protection authorities, law enforcement bodies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Social Assistance Agency.

All child victims are classified as "children at risk" under the Child Protection Act. Their cases are monitored by the Child Protection Departments within the Social Assistance Directorates for a minimum period of one year, with the possibility of extension based on an individual risk assessment. For each case, multidisciplinary teams are established and tasked with developing an individual action plan aimed at protection, reintegration, and the prevention of re-trafficking.

In addition, a separate coordination mechanism exists for unaccompanied foreign children and children seeking or granted international protection, ensuring coherence between the child protection, migration, and asylum systems.

Support tailored specifically to trafficked **women** is largely focuses on women of sexual exploitation and delivered through specialised shelters, or women-focused NGOs. Strong examples exist in **Austria, Portugal, Greece, Spain** and **Belgium**, although services are also available for men, but shelters and services capacity seem generally more limited for male victims or LGBTIQ+ victims. The validation workshop identified serious shortcomings in accommodation for male victims, especially **fathers with children**, underscoring another gender aspect.

Several EU MS rely on gender-neutral victim frameworks with limited explicit differentiation. Greece indicated to have resources allocated for specialised services for LGBTIQ+ victims.

Good Practice: Tailored Support for Women Victims of Trafficking – Austria

Legally Anchored Cooperation with Specialised NGOs

Austria demonstrates good practice through its institutionalised cooperation between security authorities and specialised victim protection NGOs, notably LEFÖ-IBF and MEN VIA. This cooperation

is legally grounded in § 25(3) of the Security Police Act (SPG) and reinforced by data-transfer provisions under § 56 SPG.

Key strengths of this model include:

- a stable contractual mandate for specialised women-focused NGOs,
- proactive referrals by the police,
- provision of unconditional assistance regardless of residence status or willingness to testify.

This framework serves as a de facto component of the National Referral Mechanism, ensuring high-quality, rights-based support for women once they are identified.

In practice, identified victims receive comprehensive assistance, including procedural accompaniment in criminal proceedings (Prozessbegleitung), support for civil claims and compensation, access to compensation under the Victims of Crime Act (VOG), and the possibility of a residence permit under § 57 of the Asylum Act. The Constitutional Court has also addressed the role of NGOs in early detection and identification, underscoring their significance within the system.

Across almost all EU MS, persons with disabilities remain the least addressed group. Disability is often recognised as a vulnerability in principle, but rarely supported by clear protocols, accessible accommodation standards, or specialised referral pathways. **Cyprus**¹⁵⁸ and **Spain**¹⁵⁹ are notable exceptions, while **France**¹⁶⁰ and **Italy**¹⁶¹ are still developing relevant mechanisms.

Detailed information per EU MS is shown in Table 3 below. EU Member States not listed in the table have general non-discrimination regulations that allow for individualised support, yet they lack dedicated, specialised programmes (**Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Netherlands**).

Table 3. Tailored Support Measures for Children, Women, and Persons with Disabilities

EU MS	CHILDREN	WOMEN (GENDER-SENSITIVE MEASURES)	PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
AUSTRIA	Non-binding guidance for relevant authorities and institutions to identify, deal with, and prevent child trafficking, working group; no nationwide child shelter; guardianship gaps	Strong gender specific NGO support (LEFÖ IBF); shelters and independent living	No specific provisions
BELGIUM	Best interest child regime; guardianship; child-specific shelter	Gender sensitive- specialised centres	Considered during identification and support planning
BULGARIA	Dedicated coordination mechanisms; child-at-risk model; guardianship; helpline	Shelters for women, gender-specific and trauma-informed psychological support, medical assistance, empowerment and vocational programmes,	Individual needs assessment, limited detail

¹⁵⁸ Survey.

¹⁵⁹ Survey.

¹⁶⁰ Survey.

¹⁶¹ Survey.

		safety planning and protection measures	
CROATIA	Guardian appointment, specialised assistance	Not specified	Not specified
CYPRUS	Guardian, shelters, best interest- assessment	Gender sensitive- measures	Individualised care plans, accessible services
CZECHIA	Strong child protection system (legislation, dedicated specialists)	Based on individual needs	Based on individual needs
FINLAND	Specialised services, rapid response	Structured support system	Regulations explicitly addressing disability
FRANCE	Child coordination mechanism under development	Not specified	Disability fields included in upcoming identification mechanism
GREECE	Juvenile Prosecutor oversight, specialised shelters	Specialised shelters, national helpline, specialised services for LGBTQI+ victims	Mental health- support programmes
IRELAND	Extensive child protection response via Child and Family Agency (Tusla); social workers, foster/residential care, education, health, reunification; concerns on -under-identification	Gender specific accommodation limited to pilot (Rosa's Place); gender based- violence trafficking disconnect	No protocol; accessibility and specialised provision underdeveloped
ITALY	NRM includes child specific- measures	Included in the national action plan, vulnerability specific measures under development	Disabilities explicitly recognised as vulnerability
LATVIA	Child Protection Centre; weak recognition; limited identification	No tailored programmes, only adaptable services	No tailored support described
LITHUANIA	Rapid response, specialised accommodation	NGO-led- specialised programmes	Equal access without discrimination
LUXEMBOURG	Child victims accompanied by ad hoc administrator	Case by case support	Case by case support
MALTA	No dedicated safe houses for trafficked minors; FSWS may refer child victims to residential homes for children who have experienced exploitation or abuse	Not specified	No dedicated disability-specific safe houses; FSWS would collaborate with Agenzija Sapport where a victim has a disability.
POLAND	NGO-led child support; crisis centres; identification and accommodation gaps	No gender specific measures detailed	No tailored support described
PORTUGAL	Dedicated child-specific NRM; shelters for minors; legislative reinforcement	Women-specific shelters and autonomy structures	No disability specific provisions detailed
ROMANIA	User-friendly guidance developed for specific victim groups, including underage victims ¹⁶²	Not specified	Not specified

¹⁶² Interview with EU MS.

SLOVAKIA	Child specific- pathways; strong legal framework; variable local detection	Specialised women-only accommodation and support services within the broader assistance network	Individual assessment of needs, individual support plan
SLOVENIA	Comprehensive system, multidisciplinary teams, specialised accommodation	General victim services	Individualised assistance plans and adaptations (accommodation)
SPAIN	Vulnerability based- model; special procedural safeguards	Public funding for women/girls trafficking projects	Disability considered in vulnerability and procedure
SWEDEN	Child protection via Social Services; major identification and referral gaps	Gender considerations included	No tailored support described

4.8 Cross-border Coordination and Focal Points

Cross-border referrals operate through a combination of formal and informal channels, including communication between NGOs, international organisations and public authorities. The coexistence of multiple contact points and uneven service availability can create fragmentation and disrupt continuity of protection when victims move across jurisdictions.

The survey responses confirm a heterogeneous landscape in relation to cross-border cooperation, ranging from formalised referral procedures embedded in NRMs to decentralised or case-by-case arrangements relying on existing law enforcement, migration, NGO or international-organisation channels.

Concerning the existence of procedures for cross-border cooperation and transnational referral, ten EU MS report that such procedures are fully in place¹⁶³, 13 report that they are partially in place¹⁶⁴, and two report that they are not in place¹⁶⁵.

Figure 5. Degree of Formalisation of Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU MS

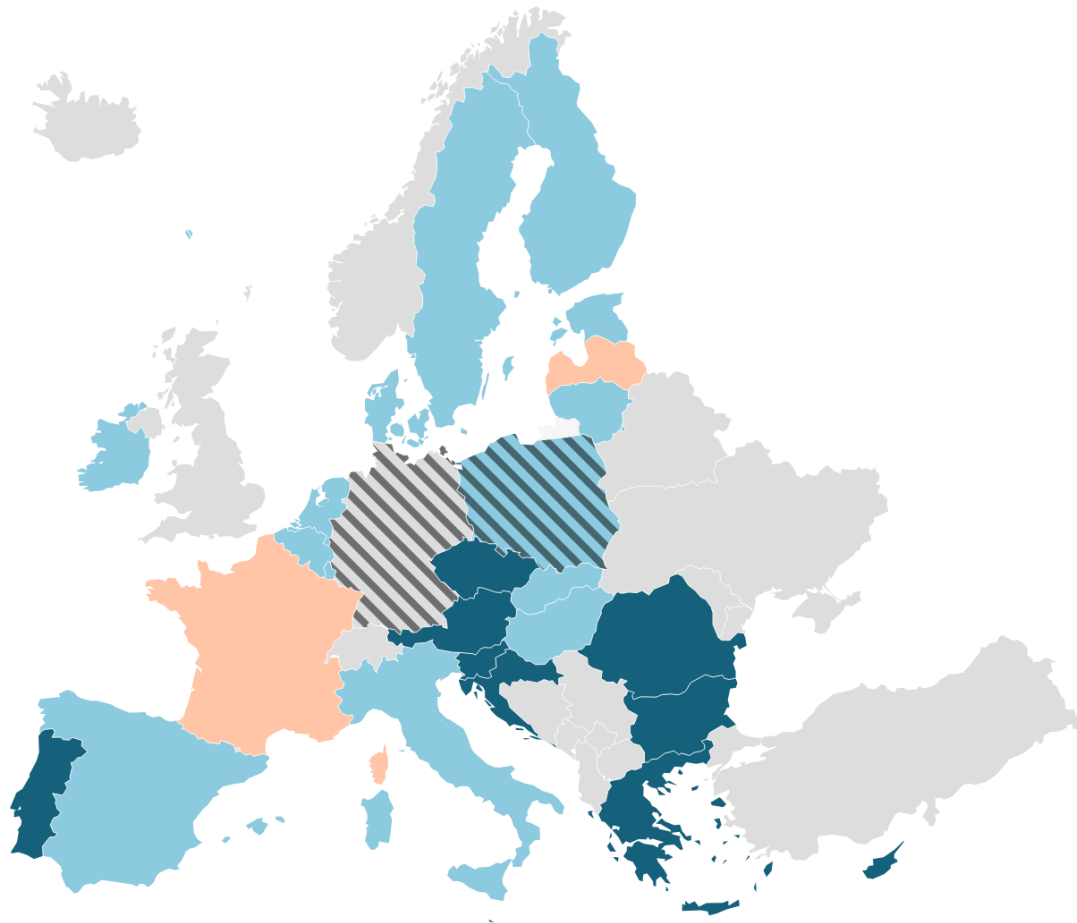
¹⁶³ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Malta, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia. For Czechia: Methodological Manual No. 4 on 14 December 2022; for Portugal: https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSH_Book_M06.pdf; for Romania: <https://anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/docs/Proiecte/ISF01/MNIR%20English%20version.pdf> (NIRM: Chapter 7 - Specific aspects of identification and referral of victims with a nationality other than Romanian and Chapter 8 - Assisted voluntary repatriation (victims of trafficking Romanian citizens, specific aspects of the repatriation of child victims, specific aspects of the repatriation of victims who are foreign nationals).

¹⁶⁴ Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden. For Hungary: <https://www.ravot-eur.eu/>. For Sweden: The Swedish Gender Equality Agency is responsible for the Voluntary Return Programme, in cooperation with IOM in Finland: <https://finland.iom.int/support-programme-sweden-persons-subjected-human-trafficking-or-exploitation>.

¹⁶⁵ France and Latvia.

Cross-border cooperation should not be understood only through law enforcement channels and focus on the prosecution of criminal but rather focus on the adequate referral and assistance to victims across

■ Fully
 ■ Partially
 ■ Not in place
 ■ No survey



borders. In several EU MS, **operational cooperation for such referrals and assistance involves international organisations, specialised civil society actors, consular authorities and, in cases involving children, dedicated child-protection structures.**

Bulgaria combines the general NRM with specialised coordination mechanisms for child victims, bilateral agreements, multilateral forums and cooperation with international organisations, while **Slovakia** reports that practical cross-border handling still often depends on established police channels and transnational CSO networks rather than solely on the newly designated focal point. This suggests that, in practice, continuity of protection across borders depends on a layered ecosystem of actors rather than on a single, clearly structured referral channel. Additionally, the formal existence of procedures does not necessarily correspond to structured or consistent operational pathways. In several cases, reported arrangements coexist with fragmented institutional responsibilities, limited procedural detail, or reliance on pre-existing cooperation channels.

Several EU MS reported that cross-border cooperation is primarily embedded within existing law enforcement or migration frameworks, but this likely refers in particular to law enforcement’s cross-border cooperation to trace perpetrators and investigate crime, or the role of migration authorities and EU bodies to screen migrants – including vulnerability assessments, as well as cooperation on return of migrants.

Cyprus refers to cooperation through Europol, Interpol and bilateral agreements¹⁶⁶, including data exchange systems and reintegration cooperation. Austria similarly grounds cooperation in the Police Cooperation Act and EU operational platforms such as Europol, joint investigation teams and EMPACT. **Spain** notes that collaboration currently operates through bilateral and multilateral police cooperation and confirms that no dedicated transnational referral mechanism exists, although a national focal point will be designated in light of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive. **Italy** likewise reports that, despite strong internal links between trafficking assistance and asylum procedures¹⁶⁷, no dedicated or formalised cross-border referral mechanism is in place; nonetheless, links between trafficking assistance, asylum procedures and operational cooperation are in place.

Other EU MS describe more structured cross-border provisions embedded in their NRMs. **Bulgaria** outlines a highly formalised model, including explicit international coordination procedures within the NRM, bilateral referral mechanisms (including with Germany), cooperation protocols with North Macedonia, BG-Swiss guidelines on safe return, participation in EU and South-East European anti-trafficking networks, and operational collaboration via Europol and Interpol¹⁶⁸. **Lithuania** refers to inter-institutional recommendations regulating return, consular cooperation, child protection abroad and consent-based data exchange. **Croatia** identifies cooperation through EU and regional frameworks, coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior, with involvement of the Croatian Red Cross in cases concerning minors. **Greece** highlights the role of EKKA as the authority responsible for facilitating communication with foreign NRMs and references a trilateral cooperation arrangement with Bulgaria and Romania developed under the EU-funded 'Service Coordination for Victims of Trafficking in South and East Balkans' initiative¹⁶⁹. Greece also reported a bilateral agreement with Albania (ratified by Law 3692/2008) focused on child victims, and the use of IOM as a de facto cross-border coordination actor within the NRM.

In several EU MS, cooperation appears operational but decentralised. **Latvia** does not have a designated cross-border focal point, and coordination depends largely on whichever institution first receives the notification, in the absence of binding referral obligations or a formalised coordination structure; in practice, referrals often rely on institutional goodwill, personal contacts and the recognisability of specialised NGOs. **Estonia** refers to return counselling and liaison with support organisations in the country of origin. **Luxembourg** describes cooperation between national assistance services and IOM. **Belgium** refers to exchanges within the Benelux framework and plans to deepen coordination through a dedicated working group. **Slovakia** notes extensive police cooperation but acknowledges that the national focal point for cross-border referral is still in an early implementation phase due to practical and structural constraints. **Poland** reports strong law enforcement cooperation through bilateral agreements with numerous European and third-country partners, supplemented by Europol and Interpol channels. In practice, IOM Poland coordinates voluntary return and reintegration

¹⁶⁶ Cyprus, Law 60(I)/2014, Article 70

¹⁶⁷ Article 10 of Legislative Decree 24/14. <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto-legislativo:2014-03-04;24>

¹⁶⁸ Guidelines for the Development of Transnational Referral Mechanisms (TRMs) developed by the Department for Equal Opportunities at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Italy and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2010); BG-Swiss Bilateral Guidelines for Identification and Safe Return (2018), developed under the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme, establishing procedures for identification, referral and safe return; Protocol on Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2019), regulating institutional coordination in cross-border cases with North Macedonia; Bilateral Referral Mechanism (BRM) between Bulgaria and Germany (2021), focusing specifically on cases of trafficking for forced labour and labour exploitation, strengthening cooperation with Germany in labour-related cases.

¹⁶⁹ European project Specific Action: "Service coordination for victims of trafficking in South and East Balkans", in short: ISF/2022/SA/3.3.1; Protocol between the involved bodies in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania

through its counterpart offices in countries of return, representing the closest existing approximation to a structured transnational referral pathway. **Sweden** reflects a decentralised model in which cross-border cooperation relies on coordination between competent authorities and existing operational networks rather than a formally designated focal point, with limited centralised tracking or follow-up mechanisms.

4.8.1 Establishment of focal points

The EU Anti-trafficking Directive, as revised by Directive (EU) 2024/1712, introduces a formal obligation for each Member State to appoint **a national focal point responsible for the cross-border referral of victims of trafficking in human beings**. The aim is to strengthen cooperation between national systems and ensure that victims do not lose access to protection when their situation involves more than one jurisdiction and are instead adequately referred to protection and support across borders.

The revised Anti-Trafficking Directive requires the focal point to receive and transmit cross-border referrals. **Its function under Article 11(4) is limited to coordinating cross-border referrals; while it does not exercise investigative or victim-facing functions in that capacity, it may be embedded within institutions that hold broader mandates under national law. The focal point is not intended to replace existing coordination structures, but to ensure a structured, traceable and reliable interface between national systems in cross-border cases.**

Recital 15 states that: *'The focal point should serve as a point of contact for the cross-border referral of victims, in the relations between the authorities or institutions responsible for the cross-border support of victims in the various Member States, but not as a point of contact for the victims themselves. Focal points can be based on existing mechanisms or governance structures and will not have to replace national complaint mechanisms or hotlines.'*

The national focal point for cross-border referral should not function as a helpline or as a direct point of contact for victims, but rather as a coordination hub between competent authorities. The focal point's role should be limited to facilitating structured communication and referrals between national systems, to avoid overlaps, confusion of responsibilities and potential risks for data protection. **This does not preclude the designation of CSOs engaged in victim-facing activities as focal points, provided that separate procedures with distinct mandates are ensured.**

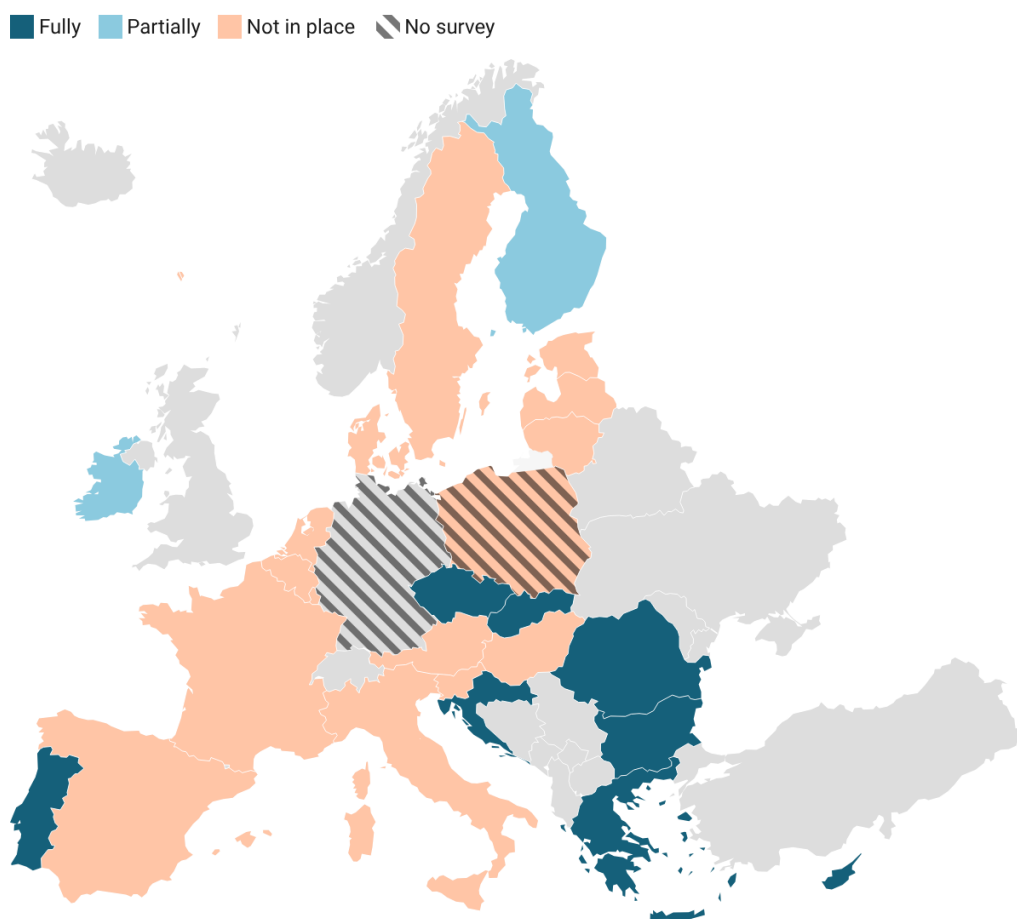
The existence of a specifically designated national focal point for the cross-border referral of victims, as required under the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, appears significantly less widespread. Eight EU MS report that such a focal point is fully in place¹⁷⁰, two indicate that this is partially in place¹⁷¹, and 15 report that no formally designated focal point currently in place¹⁷². The evidence collected suggests that de facto focal-point functions are already performed by existing NRM coordinators or specialised anti-trafficking bodies, even where no formal designation has been made under Article 11(4).

Figure 6. Status of National Focal Points for Cross-Border Referral of Victims Across EU MS

¹⁷⁰ Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia.

¹⁷¹ Finland and Ireland.

¹⁷² Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.



Where focal points are designated, coordination is typically anchored in Ministries of Interior or specialised anti-trafficking bodies. Romania identifies the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP) within the Ministry of Interior, which is also the NRM coordinator. **Bulgaria's** NCCTHB performs a dual role as NRM coordinator and national focal point, with complementary coordination by the State Agency for Child Protection in cases involving children¹⁷³. **Czechia** designates IOM as the focal point under a ministerial methodological manual. **Cyprus** identifies the Anti-Trafficking Unit of the Police and the Deputy Ministry of Immigration and International Protection. **Croatia** locates coordination within the Ministry of the Interior. **Finland** operates a de facto focal point through its national assistance system, and it has been proposed that this body be formally designated under the amended Directive¹⁷⁴. In the **Netherlands**, although no national focal point has yet been designated, a draft law transposing the amended Directive proposes that the NGO CoMensha be mandated to coordinate the focal point function; this proposal has not yet been enacted.

The examples in Table 4 below illustrate existing or proposed arrangements, but also show significant variation between formal designation, legal mandate and actual operational capacity.

¹⁷³ Interview with EU MS. National stakeholders highlighted that this model goes beyond the minimum requirements of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and may not be replicable in all EU MS due to its scale and resource intensity.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with EU MS.

Table 4. Existing or proposed focal points or coordinating body¹⁷⁵

EU MEMBER STATE	NATIONAL FOCAL POINT / COORDINATING BODY	NOTES
Cyprus	Anti-Trafficking Unit of the Cyprus Police and the Deputy Ministry of Immigration and International Protection	Both act as focal contact points for cross-border referrals.
Bulgaria	National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB)	Acts as NRM coordinator, national focal point and primary contact point. For child victims, the State Agency for Child Protection plays a complementary role.
Croatia	Ministry of the Interior	Coordinates the focal point under the Protocol on the Safe Return of Victims, with support from the Croatian Red Cross (for minors) and the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator.
Czechia	International Organisation for Migration (IOM)	Role defined in Methodological Manual No. 4 (14 December 2022) issued by the Ministry of the Interior.
Finland (proposed)	National Assistance System for Victims of Human Trafficking	Performs de facto focal point functions through its central coordination role; proposed for formal designation, but legal form remains subject to ongoing transposition deliberations.
Greece	EKKA (National Centre for Social Solidarity) and Police authorities	Reported in survey as focal point (EKKA and police authorities); however, cross-border cooperation remains largely ad hoc in practice. Formal designation remains incomplete.
Ireland (case by case)	No single designated national focal point	Cross-border referrals are managed case-by-case by competent authorities (national police (An Garda Síochána), immigration authorities, child protection services, victim support providers), including within the Common Travel Area with the UK.
Portugal	National Rapporteur	National coordination is anchored around the National Rapporteur, in cooperation with the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) and regional multidisciplinary teams, reflecting a distributed coordination model rather than a single focal-point structure.
Romania	National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP)	Agency under the Ministry of Interior. Operates as the national focal point, as well as coordinating the NRM.
Slovakia	National Anti-Trafficking Centre	Department of the Ministry of the Interior also serves as National Anti-Trafficking Rapporteur.

National research points to an **important distinction between formal designation and actual operationalisation**. Some EU MS already perform focal-point functions through existing anti-trafficking

¹⁷⁵ The table only includes the data collected through the survey regarding EU MS who reported full or partial designation of focal points.

or victim-support structures, but reporting pathways, secure communication channels, case-tracking systems and follow-up arrangements remain underdeveloped or inconsistently applied.

Slovakia, for example, has formally designated the National Anti-Trafficking Centre as focal point, yet the function remains at an early stage of operationalisation, with limited practical use, the absence of fully developed secure communication channels, and continued reliance on pre-existing law enforcement and civil society networks. The Government of **Ireland** explains that it does not operate a single designated national focal point solely responsible for cross-border victim referral. Instead, coordination is undertaken on a case-by-case basis by competent authorities and operational agencies, including the police (An Garda Síochána), immigration authorities, child protection services and victim support providers. It also highlights the distinct operational context created by the Common Travel Area with the United Kingdom. **Greece** is reported in the survey as having a focal point fully in place (EKKA and police authorities). However, cross-border cooperation remains largely ad hoc, with no single formally designated focal point within the meaning of Article 11(4). In **Sweden**, while the Gender Equality Agency has been suggested as a potential focal point, it does not currently function as one in practice. Cross-border referrals rely on various authorities coordinating on a case-by-case basis, and stakeholders have identified the absence of clear protocols and centralised coordination as limiting the effectiveness of transnational cooperation.

Among EU MS that reported a full or partial focal point, a majority appear not to differentiate between children and adult victims. Seven indicate that the focal point serves both children and adult victims¹⁷⁶, one indicates that it does not¹⁷⁷, and two report partial coverage¹⁷⁸. In the cases of partial coverage, this reflects differentiated institutional arrangements for child victims. In Bulgaria, while NCCTHB acts as the focal point for cross-border referrals, child victims are coordinated through a specialised separate mechanism for children, led by the State Agency for Child Protection. Similarly, in Slovakia, child victim returns may be coordinated through procedures separate from the national focal point.

Coverage of all categories of victims requiring cross-border referral, including nationals, EU citizens and third-country nationals, is also widespread among EU MS with a full or partial focal point. Nine EU MS report no differentiations¹⁷⁹ and one reports partial differences based on nationality¹⁸⁰. When asked whether **certain categories of victims** requiring cross-border referral fall outside focal point coordination, the situation is fragmented. Three EU MS report that certain categories of cases are handled outside the focal point structure¹⁸¹, five indicate that no such exclusions exist¹⁸², and two report partial exclusion¹⁸³.

¹⁷⁶ Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania.

¹⁷⁷ Czechia.

¹⁷⁸ Bulgaria and Slovakia.

¹⁷⁹ Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Romania.

¹⁸⁰ Slovakia – The reason for this partial coverage is the same as the one outlined in the previous paragraph regarding cases of children.

¹⁸¹ Greece, Portugal and Slovakia.

¹⁸² Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia and Romania.

¹⁸³ Finland and Ireland. In the case of Ireland, this classification reflects the absence of a dedicated national focal point solely responsible for cross-border victim referrals. Coordination is undertaken through the competent authority or relevant operational partners depending on the circumstances of the case. While no specific categories of victims are formally excluded from cross-border engagement, the absence of a single focal point means that coordination may occur through different institutional pathways. Irish authorities also note that, although processes associated with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum continue to develop, this does not preclude the identification of victims of trafficking or their access to protection and assistance where indicators are present.

Focal points' responsibilities typically include coordinating cross-border referrals, facilitating communication with foreign authorities and international organisations, and ensuring continuity of protection when victims move between jurisdictions. In several EU MS¹⁸⁴, focal points also support safe return procedures, provide operational guidance to national authorities on transnational referral processes, and, in some cases, contribute to monitoring, reporting, or data collection related to trafficking cases.

Across responding EU MS, focal points may be contacted by a wide range of stakeholders depending on the national framework. These typically include law enforcement authorities, migration and asylum authorities, social welfare services, child protection bodies, NGOs providing victim assistance, and competent authorities in other countries or international organisations. In some EU MS (e.g. Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania), existing coordinating bodies that also perform focal-point functions may in practice receive communications from victims, family members or members of the public. However, Recital 15 of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive clarifies that national focal points for cross-border referral are intended to function as contact points between authorities or institutions responsible for cross-border support, not as direct contact points for victims themselves.

In several responding EU MS, the focal point is embedded in, or closely linked to, the NRM or its coordination structures (e.g., Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania).

Overall, the evidence points to a significant implementation gap between the formal requirement to designate focal points under the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and the current reality of fragmented or only partially operationalised cross-border coordination structures.

4.9 Enablers: training, data collection, monitoring

Effective NRMs depend not only on formal procedures but also on operational enablers, such as frontline actor training, systematic data collection, and monitoring arrangements that enable authorities to assess whether NRMs function effectively in practice.

Survey responses indicate that NRM-related training is widely in place across EU MS. 15 EU MS¹⁸⁵ report that training is fully in place, six¹⁸⁶ indicate that it is partially in place, and three¹⁸⁷ report that it is not in place. Training is commonly delivered through national anti-trafficking coordinators, specialised government agencies or multi-agency cooperation frameworks, and typically targets law enforcement authorities, social services, labour inspectors and other frontline professionals. It should be noted that some respondents might have answered this question more generally about the existence of training related to trafficking in human beings overall, instead of whether stakeholders are trained specifically on the NRM.

In several EU MS¹⁸⁸, training programmes include specialised modules on victim identification, referral procedures and victim-centred approaches, sometimes implemented through inter-agency cooperation or in collaboration with EU bodies, international organisations or civil society actors. Romanian authorities also highlighted the value of training non-obvious frontline actors who

¹⁸⁴ Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Romania.

¹⁸⁵ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

¹⁸⁶ France, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden.

¹⁸⁷ Austria, Denmark and Lithuania.

¹⁸⁸ e.g. Estonia, Italy, Slovenia and Cyprus.

can spot patterns linked to trafficking risks, citing outreach to public notaries involved in authorisations for children travelling abroad¹⁸⁹. **Greece's** EKKA/NRM has developed a distinctive 'pocket seminar' model targeting specific exploitation forms – including domestic servitude (for which dedicated guidelines have been published in Greek and English) – alongside e-learning materials tailored to non-traditional frontline actors in migration, tourism, education, transportation, aviation, and the Labour Inspectorate. In **Malta**, which has no formal NRM, a two-day multidisciplinary ODIHR training on victim identification and referral was held in December 2024, explicitly framed as preparation for the mechanism's establishment.

Survey responses indicate that NRM data collection processes are in place across most EU MS, but with significant discrepancies. Regarding NRM data collection processes, 13 EU MS out of 25¹⁹⁰ report that they are fully in place, five¹⁹¹ report partial implementation and seven¹⁹² report that such processes are not in place. In a number of EU MS¹⁹³, structured databases or reporting systems are used to collect information on identified victims, referrals and protection measures. However, several responses indicate that **available data systems primarily focus on trafficking offences or victims rather than (evaluating) the functioning of the NRM itself**¹⁹⁴, which may limit the ability to assess how referral mechanisms operate in practice. In other cases,¹⁹⁵ data collection responsibilities are distributed across different institutions or administrative processes, which may limit the ability to assess the overall functioning of referral mechanisms.

Monitoring arrangements appear similarly uneven across EU MS. Ten EU MS¹⁹⁶ report that NRM monitoring arrangements are fully in place, seven¹⁹⁷ indicate partial arrangements, and eight¹⁹⁸ report that monitoring arrangements are not in place. It should be noted that responses regarding Ireland present divergent assessments of monitoring arrangements, with one indicating that monitoring structures are in place and another reporting that they are currently absent.

Where monitoring exists, it is typically carried out through national anti-trafficking coordinators, national rapporteurs, or dedicated coordination bodies responsible for implementing national anti-trafficking strategies. In some EU MS, monitoring responsibilities are assigned to specialised institutions or inter-institutional structures. For example, in **Croatia**, the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities prepares regular implementation reports; in **Italy**, a Technical Committee established under the National Action Plan (NAP) monitors implementation; and in **Romania**, monitoring relies on indicators integrated into national databases and the implementation of the national anti-trafficking strategy. In other cases, monitoring is linked to national rapporteur functions or to external oversight bodies (e.g. Finland¹⁹⁹ or Luxembourg) or is conducted through steering committees or regular coordination meetings involving multiple authorities (e.g. Estonia or Portugal).

¹⁸⁹ Interview with EU MS.

¹⁹⁰ Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain.

¹⁹¹ Belgium, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland and Slovakia.

¹⁹² Austria, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden.

¹⁹³ Italy, Romania, Slovenia and Greece.

¹⁹⁴ Hungary, Luxembourg and Spain.

¹⁹⁵ Estonia or Hungary.

¹⁹⁶ Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Romania.

¹⁹⁷ Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Slovenia.

¹⁹⁸ Austria, France, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.

¹⁹⁹ See www.yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu.fi

Monitoring remains indirect or only partially institutionalised, for example, where oversight depends on project-based evaluations (e.g. Bulgaria), periodic reporting under national strategies (e.g. Hungary), or broader coordination frameworks without a dedicated monitoring mandate (e.g. Latvia or Slovakia). In several EU MS, external evaluations by international monitoring bodies – including GRETA, the OSCE and the US Trafficking in Persons Report – have served as the primary instrument for assessing NRM performance in the absence of domestic monitoring frameworks. In **Greece**, monitoring relies on a combination of EKKA’s annual reports, oversight by the National Rapporteur within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and periodic external evaluation by GRETA, the European Commission, and the US Department of State TIP report²⁰⁰. GRETA’s 2023 evaluation noted that while data collection has improved, official recognition rates remain low relative to presumed victim referrals – highlighting a structural gap between identification and formalised protection that internal monitoring does not currently capture²⁰¹.

Despite the general absence of adequate NRM monitoring and evaluation of the functioning or impact of NRMs, including on the victims it is meant to serve, stakeholders do report gaps and challenges related to – or weaknesses of – the NRM, including the fact that monitoring mechanisms are absent.

In several EU MS, recurring weaknesses linked to staff turnover, uneven regional knowledge and the absence of systematic evaluation limit how NRMs function in practice. For instance, **Bulgaria**, identifies staff turnover and limited resources for continuous training as obstacles to consistent implementation, while **Sweden** reports the absence of a formalised, comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for the NRM. In **Greece**, chronic understaffing at EKKA/NRM and high personnel turnover – both within the coordinating body and across partner organisations – were identified as the primary operational vulnerabilities. This creates institutional memory loss, delays in case monitoring, and fragmented service provision where the identifying actor and the service provider are different organisations. In **Slovakia**, the lack of systematic data on potential victims detected by frontline actors who do not proceed to formal identification or enter assistance limits the assessment of early detection and outreach. In **Portugal**, while the NRM has been functional since 2008, full appropriation of referral procedures by all frontline professionals continues to require sustained investment in training at local level. **Latvia** similarly identifies that training activities are organised mainly on a project basis or when additional funding arises, rather than as a systematic, institutionalised programme. **Poland** does not have a central system to track and evaluate how its anti-trafficking referral system works, and because data are collected separately by different actors without a shared database, national statistics on victims are likely incomplete.

Overall, the data indicate that while training is comparatively well embedded across EU MS, data collection and monitoring frameworks remain more fragmented, potentially limiting the capacity to assess compliance with minimum standards and the effectiveness of referral mechanisms in practice. Moreover, even when monitoring frameworks are in place, they are not necessarily evaluating the impact of NRMs.

²⁰⁰ Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Greece, 2023, GRETA <https://rm.coe.int/greta-evaluation-report-on-greece-2nd-evaluation-round/1680aaa70a>; Trafficking in Persons Report: Greece, 2025, U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/greece/>

²⁰¹ GRETA, Second Evaluation Report on Greece (2023), pp. 14, 58, 62.

5 Analysis of National Case Law

The following section examines national case law that has shaped the interpretation and implementation of NRM obligations across the ten in-depth countries. The review is illustrative rather than exhaustive: case law on trafficking in human beings is generally available, but its direct implications for NRM functioning and victim protection are not always explicit or clear.

5.1 Courts' Interpretation of Obligations

There is limited evidence of a consistent body of national case law specifically interpreting EU MS' obligations to identify, refer and protect victims within NRMs. Where judicial developments do appear, they concern aspects of victim protection, particularly access to residence, the evidentiary value of indicators provided by specialised organisations, and the treatment of specific forms of exploitation.

In **Austria**, national case law has influenced the relationship between victim-support organisations and administrative decisions concerning detention and residence. The Austrian Constitutional Court held that statements from relevant and documented actors must be taken into account in the assessment of evidence²⁰². The Federal Administrative Court has subsequently applied this principle in cases concerning detention and residence permits for potential victims of trafficking, requiring that the opinion of specialised victim-support organisations be considered before decisions are taken. Although these decisions did not fundamentally transform the overall identification model, they reinforced the procedural relevance of specialised victim-support organisations and opened limited space for their expertise in early detection and protection-related decisions.

In **Slovakia**, a judgment by the District Court Nitra concerns the transfer of a minor girl for the purpose of a forced or early marriage in exchange for financial consideration²⁰³. The case is relevant because it reflects judicial engagement with trafficking in a child-specific context and illustrates the need for NRMs to be adapted to less visible forms of exploitation.

Even where judgments do not directly reshape referral structures, they can influence how institutions understand the scope of trafficking and the categories of victims requiring protection.

Ireland presented extensive national case law. Here, several High Court and Court of Appeal judgments have contributed to shaping the development and reform of the Irish NRM, in some cases directly highlighting structural deficiencies that prompted legislative and institutional responses. In *P v Chief Superintendent of the Garda National Immigration Bureau* (2015), the High Court found that Ireland's administrative identification mechanism was inadequate to meet EU law obligations, contributing directly to the development of a new (not yet operational) statutory NRM framework²⁰⁴. In *DPP v Edosa and Enoghaghase* (2021/2023), the Court of Appeal secured the first successful trafficking convictions in Irish history and established a detailed checklist of aggravating factors for sentencing,

²⁰² Decision Constitutional Court: 2020, E2875/2019-16

https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/Vfgh/JFT_20200225_19E02875_00/JFT_20200225_19E02875_00.pdf

²⁰³ Judgment of the District Court Nitra, file no. 6T/9/2021, 21 November 2022.

²⁰⁴ *P v The Chief Superintendent Of The Garda National Immigration Bureau* [2015] IEHC 222. Available at https://www2.courts.ie/view/Judgments/3b3fb8e9-71f3-4595-a3b5-434876f25879/6cdda60c-e1a8-45d1-9167-ced7f12370cf/2015_IEHC_222_1.pdf/pdf

explicitly addressing victim vulnerability²⁰⁵. *Win Lin v Governor of Cloverhill Prison (2014)* established that victims forced into criminality may invoke trafficking protections but also set a high threshold requiring a 'real and substantial connection' between the trafficking and the crime – a threshold not met on the facts of that case²⁰⁶. These judgments illustrate how courts have progressively shaped both the identification framework and victim protection standards, though the low overall number of prosecutions limits the breadth of this jurisprudence.

For **Greece**, two relevant judgements were highlighted. Firstly, Supreme Court Decision No. 2/2019 (*Nea Manolada*), following the ECHR judgment in *Chowdury and Others v. Greece*, addressed foundational concepts including the definition of 'vulnerable position' and clarified that absolute deprivation of liberty is not a prerequisite for exploitation – a ruling relevant to labour trafficking cases in agricultural settings²⁰⁷. Second, in 2022 the Deputy Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court issued Circular No. 7 on the official recognition of trafficking victims, standardising the evidentiary threshold for Prosecutors, affirming that recognition orders can be issued independently of criminal proceedings or victim cooperation, and recommending that the three-month reflection period be granted automatically²⁰⁸. This quasi-judicial guidance has had tangible operational effect. Prosecutors are increasingly citing a victim's NRM registry number as a ground for official recognition, progressively validating the 'social path' to identification developed by EKKA. These cases illustrate how administrative guidance can, in practice, perform functions that in other Member States are achieved through primary legislation or binding NRM protocols.

5.2 Influence of Judicial Decisions

The available evidence suggests that **judicial decisions have influenced NRMs primarily at the margins of identification and protection rather than through broad reinterpretation of the mechanisms themselves.**

Austrian jurisprudence appears particularly relevant in requiring administrative authorities to consider evidence and assessments provided by specialised victim-support organisations in decisions affecting detention and residence, thereby strengthening the procedural visibility of such actors. In **Slovakia**, case law concerning child marriage-related exploitation contributes to a wider understanding of trafficking risks and the need for child-sensitive procedures.

Greece similarly illustrates how prosecutorial guidance can complement judicial decisions: the 2022 Circular of the Deputy Public Prosecutor has strengthened the standing of NRM-registered referrals in formal recognition proceedings, though courts have shown limited engagement with the state's positive obligations toward victims.

²⁰⁵ Courts Service (2023) DPP v Alicia Edosa and DPP v Edith Enoghaghase (2021/2023) (188/21, 193/21, 191CJA/21, 192CJA/21) [Online]. Available at <https://ww2.courts.ie/view/Judgments/1621968b-8253-4592-b05a-3d44837298fd/447b81c6-27ea-41cb-9a83-c6d60e1383ed/2023 IECA 38.pdf/pdf>

²⁰⁶ Courts Service (2014) *Win Lin v Governor of Cloverhill Prison (2014)* 1 I.R. 134. <https://ww2.courts.ie/view/Judgments/05d7a70c-fcb3-41f2-a099-03293d2c4ab2/75effc0b-e360-4d5f-8091-3441c2cca88e/2014 IEHC 214 1.pdf/pdf>

²⁰⁷ Supreme Court (Areios Pagos) no 1979/2019 available here: https://www.areiospagos.gr/nomologia/apofaseis_DISPLAY.asp?cd=NUASZPFGWCE2X6NHST38DY8M7UO4C&apof=1979_2019&info=%D0%CF%C9%CD%C9%CA%C5%D3%20-%20%20%D3%D4, Supreme Court (Areios Pagos) no 806/2020 available here: https://www.areiospagos.gr/nomologia/apofaseis_DISPLAY.asp?cd=5LAQKIHJ0MV7QMM24NB4XPWARDQGOP&apof=806_2020&info=%D0%CF%C9%CD%C9%CA%C5%D3%20-%20%20%C5

²⁰⁸ Circular No. 7, titled "Official recognition of victims of trafficking in human beings." 2022, Supreme Court Deputy Prosecutor, official translation available: <https://rm.coe.int/report-submitted-by-the-authorities-of-greece-on-measures-taken-to-com/1680b2bd68>

By contrast, several countries – including Sweden and Latvia – report no relevant national case law for present purposes, indicating that judicial influence on NRM design and victim protection standards remains limited or insufficiently documented at this stage.

Ireland stands as a notable outlier: a series of High Court and Court of Appeal decisions has directly influenced the NRM's institutional design and victim protection standards, although the overall low prosecution rate limits the breadth of this jurisprudence.

6 Alignment of National NRMs with the Revised Directive's Requirements

6.1 Evolution since 2018 — reforms by theme (legal, institutional, procedural); role of the amended Directive (driver / partial influence / unrelated).

The revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, adopted in 2024, introduces specific obligations for Member States in relation to the identification, referral and support of victims, including requirements to establish or formalise NRMs and ensure their effective operation in practice.

Most identified national reforms, however, predate the Directive and were driven by other priorities or developments. The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive nonetheless provides a relevant reference point against which current national frameworks can be assessed, and in a small number of cases it functions as a driver of reform.

The impact of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive varies significantly across EU MS. In several cases, reforms since 2018 predate the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and were therefore not directly driven by it. **Romania** explicitly states that its 2023 revision of the National Identification and Referral Mechanism was unrelated to the amended Directive, and **Italy** similarly notes that recent reforms were conceived and implemented before its adoption, even if they are broadly consistent with its orientation. By contrast, **the Netherlands** identifies the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive as a major driver in formalising its NRM. **Croatia** indicates that strategic drafting paid particular attention to ensuring full implementation of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, suggesting at least partial influence. **Estonia** also links current legislative changes to the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

Overall, the amended EU Anti-Trafficking Directive functions as a strong driver in some Member States and as a point of reference or subsequent alignment tool in others, rather than a uniform source of reform.

Most of the EU MS report that their NRMs or equivalent systems have evolved since 2018. 18 EU MS²⁰⁹ report that they have, while seven²¹⁰ others indicate that they have not. However, even among those reporting no formal evolution, several responses refer to ongoing discussions, draft reforms or functional adjustments.

At the legal and normative level, several EU MS report existing reforms in the form of new laws, revised manuals, or formalisation efforts. For example, **Estonia** refers to its 2023 Victim Support Act and to legislative amendments being prepared in connection with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive²¹¹. **Finland** points to legislative developments since 2022, the appointment of a national coordinator and the publication of a 2024 NRM handbook,²¹² while **Romania** reports that its National

²⁰⁹ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

²¹⁰ Belgium, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Spain.

²¹¹ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/503042023004/consolide>

²¹² <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/80d0391c-9729-4ccc-adee-c0a3ed266a67/content>

Identification and Referral Mechanism was revised and adopted by Government Decision in 2023²¹³. **Denmark** refers to the formalisation of national guidelines in 2025 and the launch of a new National Action Plan against Human Trafficking for 2026–2029²¹⁴.

In other cases, the evolution has taken the form of soft law or methodological guidance rather than primary legislation. For example, in **Czechia**, in 2022, there was an update of the ministerial methodological instruction governing the Programme for the Support and Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings, including changes to nomination procedures, reflection periods and legal assistance²¹⁵.

Alongside these existing reforms, some EU MS that have not reported any formal evolution since 2018 nonetheless indicate planned or forthcoming legal developments. **Slovenia** is preparing a new manual on identification, assistance and protection, expected to be adopted in 2026, while **Latvia** identifies the formalisation of the NRM through legislation as a key next step. **Poland** adopted an NRM in April 2024 through a decision of the Inter-Ministerial Team for Combating Trafficking. However, the mechanism rests on a ministerial resolution rather than primary legislation, and key structural questions around statutory footing and service continuity remain unresolved. **Ireland** placed a revised NRM on a statutory basis through Part 3 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2024, though this part of the Act has not yet been brought into force, meaning the current system continues to operate on its pre-existing semi-formal basis.

Institutional reforms are also prominent. For example, **Croatia** refers to reinforced coordination through new National Plans and stronger institutional cooperation within the anti-trafficking system. **Slovenia** highlights the establishment in 2018 of a dedicated Anti-Trafficking Service within the Ministry of the Interior, which provides expert support to the national coordinator and facilitates inter-ministerial cooperation. **Ireland** describes the Third National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Human Trafficking 2023–2027 as having strengthened national governance, coordination and oversight through a whole-of-government framework²¹⁶. In **Sweden**, the coordination responsibility for the NRM was transferred in 2018 from the County Administrative Board to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, strengthening national oversight. In **Malta**, the anti-trafficking portfolio was transferred in 2020 to the Human Rights Directorate within the Office of the Prime Minister to ensure a human-rights-based approach and streamline inter-ministerial coordination.

Procedural and operational changes are visible in relation to identification, referral and victim support. **Bulgaria** emphasises digitalisation²¹⁷, improved operational procedures, enhanced case coordination and expanded capacity-building. **Greece**, while reporting no formal legal or institutional reform, describes a series of operational adjustments and procedural developments, including updated SOPs for asylum reception facilities, new reporting procedures for the Labour Inspectorate, draft SOPs for regional health and welfare authorities, and ad hoc arrangements to address emergency accommodation needs for labour-exploitation victims identified during major police operations. **Italy**

²¹³

<https://anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/docs/Despre%20Noi/Anexe/Strategia%20Nationala%20Impotriva%20Traficului%20de%20Persoane%202024-2028%20EN.pdf>

²¹⁴

<https://www.cmm.dk/Media/639047563482111886/Strategi-og%20handlingsplan%20til%20bekæmpelse%20af%20menneskehandel%202026-2029.pdf>

²¹⁵ <https://eucpn.org/document/czech-republic-the-programme-to-support-and-protect-victims-of-trafficking-in-human-beings>

²¹⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/news/third-national-action-plan-to-prevent-and-combat-human-trafficking-is-published/>

²¹⁷ nrm.bg platform.

reports more structured integration of trafficking indicators into migration and asylum procedures, as well as stronger links between anti-trafficking projects, territorial commissions, law enforcement and social services. **Denmark** notes new national guidelines and a strategic shift aimed at increasing police reporting. **Sweden** highlights the digitalisation of its NRM in 2022 and its regular updating to reflect changes in Swedish law and regulations.

Across responses, **the reported effects of these reforms include improved coordination, greater clarity of roles, strengthened victim protection, and better operational consistency.** **Croatia, Ireland and Bulgaria** explicitly connect reforms to improved system effectiveness and more coherent inter-agency action. **Greece** underlines that continuous support from the EKKA/NRM team and broad-based capacity-building have improved early identification and access to protection services. **Italy** links the strengthening of cooperation in labour exploitation cases to more effective detection and closer links between criminal investigations and victim-support pathways.

6.2 Planned Steps to Strengthen Compliance (2026-2028) — pipeline actions

The survey responses indicate that, across many EU MS, steps are underway or planned to strengthen compliance with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive regarding Article 11, including NRMs, focal points, and services for victims.

It should be noted that as the transposition deadline is approaching; the actions described below range from steps that EU MS intend to complete before that deadline to longer-term reforms extending through 2027–2028.

These efforts range from comprehensive legislative reforms and formalisation of referral structures to more limited adjustments aimed at clarifying roles, improving procedures, or consolidating already established practices. A smaller number of EU MS consider their existing frameworks already broadly compliant or sufficiently functional, even if some refinements may still follow.

A first group of EU MS is pursuing legislative or regulatory formalisation of the NRM and related arrangements. **Bulgaria**²¹⁸ outlines one of the most comprehensive reform agendas, including a full evaluation and update of the NRM, targeted amendments to the Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act, formalisation of a multi-phase identification model, stronger legal guarantees for victims, clearer regulation of reflection periods and safeguards, and reinforced legal and financial bases for specialised services, shelters and the NRM itself.

In **Austria**, a concept elaborated by the Task Force against Human Trafficking was recently approved to provide a formal legal basis for the NRM. **Slovenia** is preparing a new manual that would introduce both a focal point for cross-border referral and a two-tier identification model combining formal police identification with professional identification by a multidisciplinary team. **Latvia** highlights formalisation of the NRM through legislation, while **Luxembourg** intends to give its NRM a formal basis and make it publicly accessible. The **Netherlands** plans to set out in written procedures the functioning of its currently informal NRM, establish a formal cross-border focal point, identify all stakeholders and their roles, develop monitoring and data-gathering protocols, and improve detection and identification processes.

²¹⁸ The country already has a fully formalised NRM in place and fulfils the Directive's obligations on this point.

Poland already adopted a formalised NRM through Inter-Ministerial Team Resolution in April 2024, establishing an administrative framework for identification and referral. However, the mechanism does not yet have a statutory basis, and KCIK (run by La Strada Poland), which serves as the operational backbone of the system, continues to operate through annually renewable project-based contracts. A new National Action Plan 2025–2027 is in place, and legislative work is ongoing, including on the criminalisation of demand for services from trafficking victims, as required by the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

Portugal is working on a new legal framework to clarify roles, intervention areas, and procedures, and to reinforce protection and support, irrespective of victims' cooperation with authorities. **Spain** refers to ongoing work on a draft comprehensive organic law against trafficking in human beings and exploitation.

A second set of responses points to reforms focused on transposition processes, strategic review or technical alignment with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive. **Italy** notes that a working group coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities is drafting the provisions for transposing the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, including better defining the tasks of the referral mechanism and the cross-border focal point. **Cyprus** reports an ongoing review of the national legal and procedural framework, with particular attention to early identification, the roles of actors within the NRM, child-sensitive safeguards, updated guidelines and stronger inter-agency coordination. **Greece** indicates that a special committee has been established by the Ministry of Justice to transpose the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive into national law. **Sweden** states that the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive is currently being transposed and that the legislative proposal is under public consultation. **Estonia** refers to continuous training, improvement of guidelines, procedural regulation across different authorities and cooperation agreements between stakeholders, while also noting that legislative amendments are being prepared. Finland points to an ongoing project under the Ministry of Justice, still under preparation, which suggests further reform linked to transposition and implementation.

A third category concerns EU MS that frame the next phase less as structural reform and more as consolidation or adaptation of existing systems. **Croatia** states that its national framework is already fully aligned with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and that necessary adjustments will be incorporated into future strategic and operational documents. **Ireland** describes ongoing work to strengthen referral processes, inter-agency cooperation and victim-centred practice, including ensuring operational coherence between anti-trafficking protections and developments under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. At the same time, another Irish response highlights long-standing delays in operationalising the new NRM and stresses that important shortcomings persist in identification, referral, assistance, monitoring, and stakeholder coordination. **Belgium** reports that the NRM is under revision, especially to improve the protection of minors and interaction between federal and regional institutions. **Lithuania** indicates that discussions are ongoing regarding the establishment of a transnational focal point for cross-border referrals and suggests that the National Association Against Trafficking in Human Beings could potentially serve as a central coordinating body.

Some EU MS, by contrast, present their systems as already substantially compliant or do not envisage major institutional change. **Romania** states that its National Mechanism, relevant victim-protection legislation, and criminal procedure framework are fully compliant with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive on Article 11. **Czechia** considers its system fully functional in terms of compliance with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, suggesting no major additional reforms are required.

Hungary states that it does not plan to designate a separate organisation as the national contact point, on the basis that the current coordinating body already partially performs this task. The response from Slovakia explains that any formal steps will become clear only after national processes and data requirements are more clearly defined.

Across the survey responses, several reform priorities emerge. One concerns the **formalisation of the NRM**, whether through legislation, manuals, written procedures or public guidance. Another concern is a **clearer designation of focal points** for cross-border referral and a better definition of their responsibilities. A third relates to **improving early detection and identification**, including better operational guidance for different professional groups and, in some cases, more explicit recognition of presumed victims and access to support irrespective of formal identification or cooperation with criminal proceedings. A fourth recurring theme is the need to **strengthen victim support services**, particularly in areas such as shelter, legal aid, interpretation, psychosocial assistance, and the continuity of protection in complex or cross-border cases. Finally, a number of EU MS link future reforms to **better coordination with asylum and migration authorities**, reflecting the growing relevance of the interaction between anti-trafficking systems and broader migration and asylum governance.

The responses also show that the implementation of Article 11 is increasingly being considered alongside wider EU policy developments. Ireland explicitly addresses the need to ensure coherence with the **implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum**. Cyprus refers to strengthened cooperation between the national focal point for cross-border referrals and authorities in other EU MS, while Bulgaria highlights the need to align broader institutional and financial arrangements with evolving EU standards and international recommendations. This suggests that Article 11 is increasingly framed not as a standalone victim-support provision, but as part of a broader effort to connect anti-trafficking, asylum, migration and child-protection systems.

6.3 Potential gaps for compliance/areas for NRM strengthening

Drawing on the ten in-depth country focus studies and the survey findings, this section synthesises the recurring structural and operational gaps that EU MS will need to address to achieve compliance with the revised Anti-Trafficking Directive and to strengthen practical NRM functioning. Five clusters of gaps emerge consistently across national systems.

A first recurring issue concerns the **degree of formalisation** of referral structures. In some EU MS, procedures remain recommendatory, incomplete, or dependent on administrative practice rather than being embedded in legislation or binding protocols. Latvia is moving towards formalisation through binding legislative provisions, as the current system still relies significantly on goodwill, personal contacts and uneven referral practices, especially in the absence of a statutory or binding administrative basis. Austria similarly continues to operate without a comprehensive legally established NRM, with important elements of identification and referral still governed by internal or non-binding arrangements. Poland's NRM, although adopted in 2024, also lacks a statutory basis, creating vulnerability to administrative change and limiting enforceable rights for victims. Ireland presents a further instructive case: while a statutory NRM was enacted in 2024, the relevant provisions have not been commenced, meaning that the formal legal framework remains inoperative in practice, with victim support continuing to depend on administrative arrangements that are acknowledged to be incomplete, particularly regarding housing and social welfare entitlements. In Malta, the lack of an NRM means that referrals rely on designated contact points and inter-agency working groups, and the authorities acknowledge resulting difficulties

in coordinating multi-agency action and uneven capacity across agencies. In **Sweden**, research found that digitalisation has not resolved underlying implementation gaps: only around 30% of police officers are estimated to be familiar with the NRM, and application remains inconsistent across municipalities, with smaller local authorities often lacking the knowledge and resources to implement referral procedures effectively.

A second recurring gap concerns the **distinction between early detection, presumed-victim recognition and formal identification**. The country reviews suggest that systems function more effectively where presumed victims can access support before full formal identification in criminal proceedings. This issue is especially visible in debates around multi-stage identification models, including in **Latvia** and **Austria**, and in planned reforms elsewhere. Where such distinctions remain unclear, access to protection may be delayed or implicitly tied to law-enforcement processes.

A third cluster of gaps concerns **labour exploitation, migration and child protection**. For example, in **Austria**, labour exploitation was identified as a structural blind spot linked to the police-centred model and the weak direct referral role of labour inspectors and other frontline actors. **Sweden** shows under-identification of child victims, forced criminality and forced marriage, as well as inconsistent municipal responses, with fewer than a third of police officers estimated to be aware of NRM procedures. In **Latvia**, labour exploitation cases are handled significantly less effectively than sexual exploitation cases, pointing to a structural imbalance in which the NRM has been built primarily around one form of trafficking. **Poland's** NRM similarly lacks form-specific protocols, relying on a single referral pathway across all exploitation types without differentiated procedures for labour trafficking, forced criminality, or child-specific cases. **Slovakia** similarly highlights uneven proactive identification in labour exploitation and regional disparities in child-specific expertise. These findings suggest that compliance with Article 11 increasingly depends on whether NRMs are genuinely equipped to operate in labour-market, migration and child-protection settings rather than remaining centred on more traditional trafficking paradigms.

A fourth recurring issue concerns **cross-border referral and continuity of protection**. Even where focal points have been designated, operational challenges remain, including limited secure communication channels, insufficient procedural detail, differentiated handling of child returns, and heavy reliance on informal or pre-existing transnational networks. In **Slovakia**, the focal point remains in an early implementation phase, while **Bulgaria** identifies difficulties linked to cross-border coordination and the uneven existence of NRM frameworks in destination countries. **Latvia** has not yet designated a focal point and notes that alignment with other countries' NRMs is highly context-dependent; the planned statutory NRM is expected to address this, but no concrete mechanism has yet been determined. **Ireland** does not have a designated focal point and handles cross-border referrals on a case-by-case basis through operational agencies, with specific challenges arising from the Common Travel Area with the United Kingdom and the growing interface with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Finally, collected information points to **resource and monitoring deficits**. In **Bulgaria**, the absence of a dedicated NRM budget line constrains return and immediate humanitarian assistance. In **Sweden** a comprehensive monitoring framework is lacking, while **Austria** shows the absence of independent monitoring and the continuing absence of an independent National Rapporteur. For **Ireland**, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), designated as National Rapporteur since 2020, has documented persistent gaps in accommodation for victims, insufficient compensation mechanisms, and difficulties in accessing social welfare entitlements, particularly for EU nationals. **Poland** currently has no

monitoring or evaluation framework for its NRM, with a formal assessment planned only once the current National Action Plan concludes in 2027.

These gaps matter because they affect not only service provision but also the capacity of systems to identify blind spots and adapt over time.

7 Development of Policy Guidance and Operational Tools

This section provides policy guidance and operational tools to support EU MS in establishing, formalising or strengthening their NRMs and national focal points in line with Article 11(4) of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive. It draws on the findings of the EU-wide survey, the ten in-depth country studies, and the Ad hoc Rapid Response Paper completed in January 2025.

It is structured around four components: (1) enhancing NRM functioning, covering the functional architecture of an effective NRM, operational tools, training, and data collection; (2) resilience and adaptability, including monitoring and evaluation frameworks; (3) institutional models and coordination structures, including guidance on the national focal point for cross-border referral; and (4) model provisions that EU MS may draw on when transposing the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

7.1 Enhancing NRM Functioning

The comparative analysis across the ten in-depth countries reveals a consistent set of priority measures deemed as necessary to strengthen NRM establishment and day-to-day operation. This section sets out the functional architecture of an effective NRM, followed by guidance on the operational tools, training, and data collection that underpin it.

Across EU MS, the effectiveness of NRMs seems to depend less on their formal legal design than on the existence of operational ‘bridges’ between actors, sectors and stages of the process. Even where formal procedures exist, breakdowns frequently occur between detection, referral and assistance, particularly in labour exploitation, migration and cross-border contexts.

7.1.1 Functional Architecture of an Effective NRM

An effective NRM is not a single instrument but a **structured multi-stage framework that connects the moment a potential victim is first encountered through to longer-term support, reintegration, and – where necessary – cross-border referral.** Based on the comparative analysis carried out for this study, an effective NRM consists of at least six interconnected components, set out below.

Table 5. Components of a well-functioning NRM

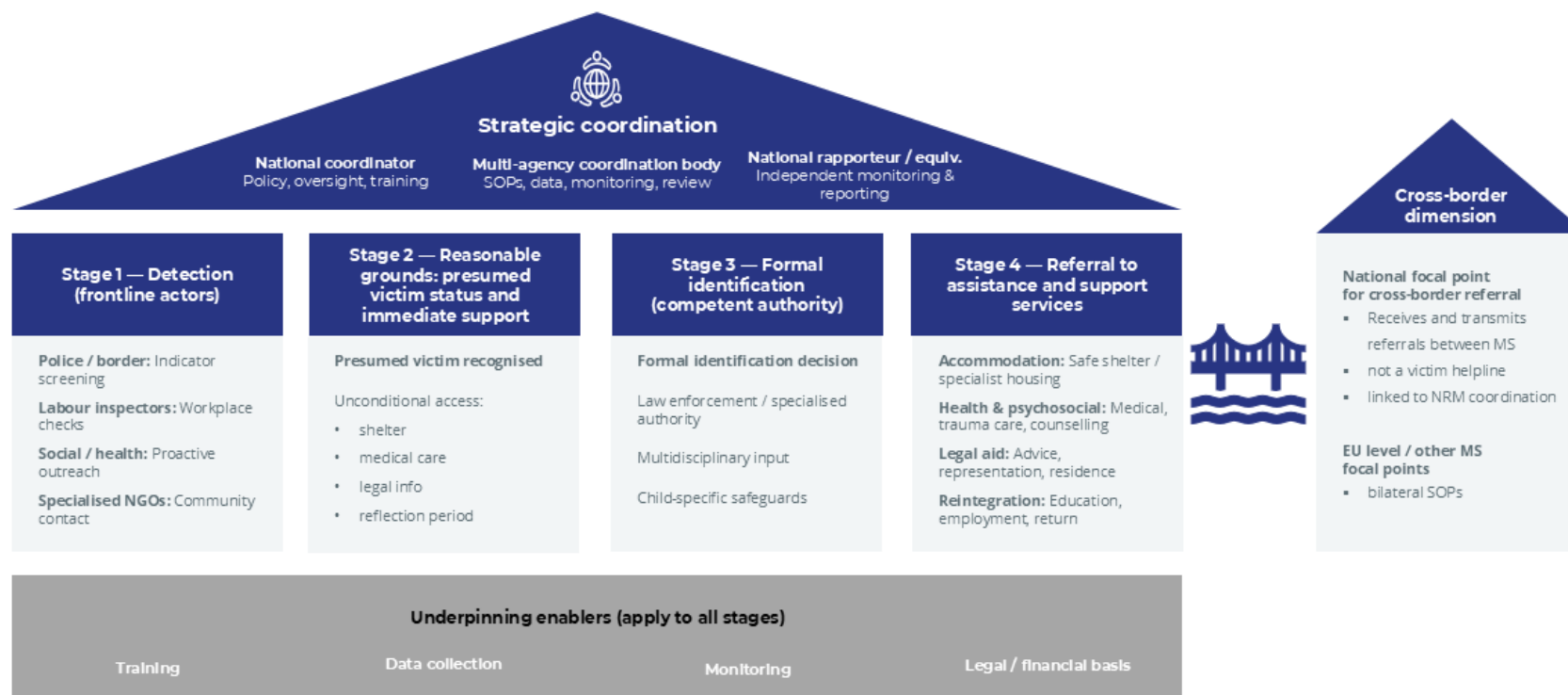
COMPONENT	WHAT IT REQUIRES
1. EARLY DETECTION	Proactive, systematic screening for trafficking indicators by trained frontline actors across all relevant settings: police, border guards, labour inspectorates, social and health services, migration/asylum authorities, and NGOs. Indicators must cover all forms of exploitation and be adapted to child-specific, gender-specific and disability-related contexts.
2. IMMEDIATE SUPPORT	Upon reasonable grounds that a person may be a victim, immediate and unconditional access to support (shelter, medical care, psychological assistance, legal information, interpretation) must be guaranteed, independently of cooperation with criminal proceedings. The reflection/recovery period should begin automatically once reasonable grounds are established.
3. FORMAL IDENTIFICATION	A formal determination, made by a designated competent authority, that a person is a victim of trafficking. This stage unlocks longer-term protection, residence

	permits (where applicable), and extended support. Child-specific procedures, including guardian appointment and best-interests assessment, must be applied. The non-punishment principle should be applied throughout the identification and support process.
4. REFERRAL TO ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT	Structured referral pathways connecting victims to the full package of assistance: specialised accommodation, medical and psychosocial care, legal aid and access to justice, interpretation, reintegration support, and – where relevant – safe return. Support must be available regardless of cooperation with authorities and regardless of immigration status.
5. STRATEGIC COORDINATION BACKBONE	A national coordinator or coordination body that oversees the NRM, maintains SOPs, delivers training, collects data, and monitors effectiveness. A national rapporteur or equivalent mechanism provides independent monitoring and reporting. Civil society organisations should be structurally integrated – rather than merely consulted – across the NRM.
6. CROSS-BORDER FOCAL POINT	A national focal point, appointed by law or binding administrative provision, that serves as the contact point for cross-border referral between competent authorities in different EU MS. The focal point is not a victim helpline; its mandate is coordination between national systems. It must have a clear legal mandate, dedicated staff, SOPs, and secure data-handling arrangements. Effective cross-border referral depends not only on formal designation but on operational protocols, trusted institutional relationships and secure communication channels. In their absence, cooperation continues to rely on informal networks.

The six components are **operationally interdependent**: weaknesses in early detection or presumed victim status cannot be compensated for at later stages. The model provisions set out in section 6.4 are designed to reinforce each component within a coherent system.

Figure 7 below illustrates how these six components interact in a single integrated architecture, from frontline detection through to EU-level cross-border coordination.

Figure 7. Operational model for NRM



7.1.2 Strengthening Legal and Operational Foundations

The most frequently cited structural gap across the countries studied is the absence of a binding legal or administrative foundation establishing the NRM and the obligations of the actors within it. Even where functioning referral practices exist, their reliance on internal police instructions, informal institutional cooperation, or personal relationships rather than enforceable legal obligations creates structural fragility: roles are ambiguous for non-police actors, obligations are unevenly applied across regions, and systems remain exposed to changes of administration, funding cycles, or individual personnel.

Article 11(4) requires that NRMs be established by laws, regulations or administrative provisions.

The instrument must therefore be one that carries legal force. In practice, this means:

- primary legislation adopted through the national legislative process;
- legally binding secondary rules adopted under legislative authority;
- formal, published executive measures – government decisions, decrees or ministerial orders – that establish the mechanism, designate the competent authorities and define their responsibilities.

Internal circulars, service instructions or informal guidance that the administration can alter at will may not qualify, even where they govern referral in practice²¹⁹. Questions remain as to whether instruments like NAPs satisfy the Article 11(4) requirements. This may not be the case where they operate as purely programmatic instruments, i.e., setting objectives, priorities and intended measures without binding legal effect. Instead, if a NAP is adopted through, or given effect by, a binding instrument – e.g., a government decision or decree – that establishes the mechanism, designates the competent authorities and defines their responsibilities, the requirement may be met.

The study findings indicate that this requirement calls for attention to six interconnected elements.

Table 6. Elements of a formally anchored NRM

ELEMENT	REQUIREMENTS	GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES
LEGISLATIVE OR BINDING ADMINISTRATIVE ANCHOR	The NRM must be established through a law, regulation, government decision or ministerial order that designates the mechanism by name, identifies the competent authorities and participating organisations, and defines their respective responsibilities. Informal protocols or internal guidance alone do not satisfy this requirement.	Romania: Government Decision No. 88/2023 provides a comprehensive, binding procedural framework including actors, procedures and monitoring indicators. Bulgaria: the NRM rests on a combination of primary anti-trafficking legislation and a formal Council of Ministers Decision.
LEGALLY DEFINED OBLIGATIONS	The obligation to detect indicators and trigger referrals must extend beyond law	Austria: the Security Police Act mandates the Ministry of the Interior to contract

²¹⁹ See, by analogy, CJEU case law on the transposition of directives, according to which mere administrative practices, which by their nature are alterable at will by the authorities and lack adequate publicity, do not constitute proper fulfilment of the obligation to implement through provisions having binding force: Case 102/79, *Commission v Belgium*, [1980] ECR 1473, para. 11; Case C-361/88, *Commission v Germany*, EU:C:1991:224, paras 15–21.

ACROSS ALL FRONTLINE ACTORS	enforcement to include labour inspectors, health professionals, asylum caseworkers, social services and border guards. Where these actors are not legally obligated to refer, detection gaps arise in all settings outside police encounter.	specialised intervention agencies, anchoring their role in statute. This illustrates how a statutory obligation can be attached at the level of the contracting authority even without primary NRM legislation; it does not, however, extend direct referral duties to non-police frontline actors.
MULTI-AGENCY SOPS WITH DEFINED TIMELINES	SOPs must cover all stages from first contact to reintegration, specify the responsibilities of each actor at each stage, and set defined timelines for acknowledgement, referral, and support access. SOPs must be binding on all designated participants, not merely advisory.	Bulgaria: clear multi-stage SOPs with sector-specific hotlines, including a 24/7 national multilingual helpline, embedded in the NRM document itself.
SECTOR-SPECIFIC ADAPTATION	SOPs must be adapted to the operational context of each frontline setting – including labour inspection, asylum reception, healthcare and border management – rather than applying a single generic procedure across all sectors. Adaptation should extend to the indicators used, the referral trigger, and the responsible actor within each setting.	Greece: sector-specific SOPs for reception and identification centres, detention facilities, hospitals and primary health units, each adapted to the working methods of the relevant sector, with a standardised reporting form that retains cross-sector consistency.
OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE	Legal formalisation must be supported by operational tools that enable consistent implementation: standardised referral and reporting forms, a case management or tracking system, and a standing support function (helpdesk or equivalent) that field professionals can access for complex identification questions and referral decisions.	Greece: dedicated NRM helpdesk providing ongoing support to field professionals. Bulgaria: digital nrm.bg platform enabling real-time case tracking across all participating actors.
FORMAL ANCHORING OF CSOS	Where civil society organisations perform core NRM functions, their role must rest on a statutory or formally contracted basis – with defined responsibilities, stable multi-year funding and clear accountability mechanisms – rather than on informal arrangements or annual procurement cycles.	Portugal: five Regional Specialised Multidisciplinary Teams managed by a single NGO (APF) under the RAPVT network, providing consistent nationwide implementation through a formally contracted, specialised architecture.

7.1.3 Training and Capacity Building

As noted in Section 3.9, **training is comparatively well embedded across EU MS**. Training remains dependent on project-based funding or ad hoc initiatives rather than being embedded as a continuous institutional function. The following minimum requirements apply.

Table 7. Training and data collection standards for an effective NRM

ENABLER	MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS	GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES
TRAINING	Regular mandatory training for all frontline actors (police, border guards, labour inspectors, asylum caseworkers, social services, healthcare, NGOs). Training must include trafficking indicators for all forms of exploitation; victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches; the functioning of the NRM and referral pathways; child-sensitive procedures. Training must be adapted to non-obvious frontline actors (e.g. public notaries, hospitality sector, transport workers).	Romania: training of public notaries involved in travel authorisations for children. Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden: training explicitly includes modules on NRM functioning and referral procedures. Slovakia: mandatory training for police, prosecutors and judges at district level identified as a priority, with online modules available on the Mol learning platform.
DATA COLLECTION	Data collection should cover not only victim characteristics and exploitation types, but also the functioning of the NRM itself: numbers of referrals by stage (detection, presumed victim, formal identification); referral pathways used; time between stages; types of support accessed; cross-border referrals. Data should be disaggregated by age, gender, nationality and form of exploitation.	Bulgaria, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Greece: structured databases or reporting systems collecting information on identified victims, referrals and protection measures. Bulgaria: nrm.bg platform enables real-time monitoring across all participating actors.

7.1.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

As noted in Section 3.9, monitoring, where it exists, does not always evaluate the impact of NRMs – including its impact on the victims it serves – as distinct from the broader anti-trafficking response. Monitoring frameworks often focus on outputs (e.g. number of identified victims) rather than on process quality or outcomes for victims, limiting their ability to assess NRM effectiveness. The following table sets out minimum requirements.

Table 8. Minimum standards for NRM monitoring and evaluation

ENABLER	MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS	GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES
MONITORING	Monitoring should assess: (a) whether NRM procedures are being applied consistently across all sectors and regions; (b) whether minimum quality standards for detection and identification are being met; (c) the effectiveness of victim support – including outcomes for victims, not only procedural compliance. Monitoring should be carried out by the national coordinator/rapporteur and reported publicly on a regular basis. Independent external evaluation should be built into the NRM framework.	Croatia: the Office for Human Rights prepares regular NRM implementation reports. Italy: a Technical Committee monitors NRM implementation under the National Action Plan. Finland: independent monitoring by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman. Romania: monitoring indicators integrated into national databases and voluntary survivor advisory committee providing structured input on victim support systems and contributing to improving service delivery.

		Portugal: regular joint production of national reports with the Observatory on THB and all field stakeholders.
VICTIM PARTICIPATION	Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should include structured mechanisms or at least allow for the participation of persons with lived experience of trafficking in assessing NRM effectiveness, identifying systemic gaps, and informing policy development. Participation should be voluntary, safe, appropriately compensated, and supported by psychosocial safeguards.	Romania: voluntary survivor advisory committee provides structured input into service delivery assessment.

7.2 Resilience and Adaptability

An effective NRM must be able to function across changes of government, during emergency situations (large-scale arrivals of displaced persons, natural disasters, public health emergencies), and in the context of evolving forms of exploitation. Evidence shows a significant gap between formal resilience claims and operational reality across most countries studied. Few EU MS have dedicated contingency protocols or crisis-specific NRM procedures, and structural vulnerabilities – e.g., funding discontinuity, regional fragmentation, and dependence on individual relationships or annual procurement cycles – compound this gap. In several EU MS, system resilience is undermined by dependence on individual actors, short-term funding cycles and weak institutionalisation of procedures. This indicates that **crisis-readiness remains largely reactive rather than structurally embedded in most NRMs**.

NRM resilience is dependent on whether each component of the mechanism is individually grounded in enforceable obligations, operational infrastructure, and clear institutional accountability. Evidence from the EU MS consistently shows that structural vulnerabilities do not only arise from the absence of an NRM, but from the failure to meet minimum requirements at the component level.

Table 9 sets out the minimum requirements that each functional component must meet in order to constitute a resilient and rights-compliant NRM.

Table 9. Measures for NRM resilience

RESILIENCE MEASURE	WHAT IT REQUIRES IN PRACTICE	NATIONAL EXAMPLE
STATUTORY LEGAL BASIS	The NRM should be anchored in laws, regulations or binding administrative provisions, making it less vulnerable to changes of administration and providing legal certainty for victims, authorities, and service providers.	Bulgaria: the NRM is grounded in a combination of the anti-trafficking law and a formally adopted Council of Ministers Decision (20 July 2016). This dual basis proved resilient during the large-scale Ukrainian displacement in 2022, when a Ukrainian-language version of nrm.bg was made available rapidly.
LIVING SOPS ('PROCEDURAL BRIDGES')	SOPs should function as 'living documents', regularly updated to reflect new exploitation patterns, legal changes,	Austria (7th National Action Plan): procedural bridges between initial

	and lessons learned. 'Procedural bridges' should link initial screening in migration/asylum settings to NRM referral pathways, so that victims are not lost in the system during high-pressure situations. screening in asylum/reception settings and NRM referral. Estonia: regular simulation exercises to test SOPs in practice. Poland: the Belarusian border crisis response operated without NRM-specific contingency protocols, resulting in a protection gap at first contact; the response to Ukrainian refugee arrivals from February 2022 was deemed as markedly more effective but reflected mobilisation rather than advance planning.
REGIONAL COVERAGE	In federal and decentralised systems, national frameworks must establish clear coordination mechanisms ensuring minimum standards regardless of where a victim is identified. Anti-trafficking coordinators/units/teams should be appointed in all regions. In centralised systems, regional referral pathways must be operationalised. Austria: plans to appoint anti-trafficking coordinators in all nine Länder under the 7th National Action Plan. Sweden: regional coordinators are present in all regions, but a trend towards strategic rather than operational roles risks reducing capacity for immediate victim-centred response. Portugal: five Regional Multidisciplinary Teams (EME) managed by a single NGO (APF) ensure consistent nationwide implementation.
DEDICATED FINANCIAL BASIS	Sustainable NRM functioning requires a dedicated budget line – not reliance on project-based activities alone. Core services (shelters, specialised NGO support, training) should be funded through stable national appropriations. Annual procurement cycles for NGO service providers create year-to-year uncertainty about staffing, institutional memory and service continuity. Finland: State-funded, centralised assistance system guaranteeing access to support irrespective of residence status, with municipal backstopping. Bulgaria: the absence of a dedicated budget line within the NCCTHB is identified as a key structural vulnerability. Poland: KCIK is procured through annual competitive tender, creating continuity uncertainty. Hungary: funds two CSOs to run five adult shelters through dedicated state allocations. Sweden: the Gender Equality Agency funds the national support programme providing practical assistance, legal advice, and shelters for victims. Slovakia: increasing budget allocations identified as necessary to allow flexible response when the number or complexity of cases increases.
DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE	Digital referral and case management tools improve case tracking, reduce administrative burden, and enable real- Bulgaria: nrm.bg platform enables digital referral and case management across all participating actors, including

	time monitoring of NRM functioning. They must incorporate GDPR-compliant data protection standards by design.	a crisis-accessible version for Ukrainian speakers. Sweden: digitalisation of the NRM was initiated in 2022, though implementation remains uneven across municipalities. France: developing a national digital ecosystem (MNIOP) with GDPR data security guarantees.
EMERGENCY PLANNING AND CONTINUITY PROTOCOLS	Basic contingency planning should be in place even where full formalisation has not yet been achieved. At minimum, this should include: a documented emergency response plan; designated backup service providers; pre-agreed fast-track identification procedures for mass-displacement or crisis scenarios; and a functioning communication system among all NRM actors. Regular reviews of these procedures are necessary to remain current.	Ireland: stakeholders identified an emergency plan, documented standards with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, a functioning communication system, and regular reviews as priority resilience measures – these are not yet fully in place. Portugal: the RAPVT coordination network is identified as a resilience asset, but with limited frequency of meetings dedicated to field-level problem-solving – distinct from Action Plan monitoring – as a mechanism for early identification of emerging gaps before they become operational failures.

The challenge of ensuring coherent NRM functioning across different levels of government deserves particular emphasis. **Federal and decentralised EU MS face specific risks of fragmentation where competences for child protection, social services, labour inspection and policing are distributed across multiple levels of government.** Such fragmentation can lead to variable training, uneven detection capacities, divergent referral practices and gaps in early identification²²⁰. These risks are not confined to formally federal systems but may also arise wherever service delivery or social policy competences are substantially devolved.

At the same time, decentralisation can offer operational advantages. Regional or local actors may develop practices that exceed the national baseline, including more accessible services, stronger non-punishment safeguards, or specialised expertise adapted to local trafficking patterns. The role of a formal nationwide NRM framework should therefore not be to impose uniformity, but to establish a coherent baseline while integrating – rather than replacing – regional mechanisms that provide stronger protections.

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive accommodates this diversity. Recital 15 and Article 11(4) of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive allow for the establishment of ‘one or several’ referral mechanisms, while encouraging a single NRM where the organisation of public administration so allows. Regardless of internal architecture, only one national focal point for cross-border referral is required. The following box sets out the minimum requirements for NRM functioning in federal and decentralised systems.

²²⁰ See also 2025 Rapid Response Paper.

Guidance for NRM functioning in federal and decentralised systems

Federal and decentralised EU MS are not legally required to adopt a single nationwide NRM but are encouraged to do so where the organisation of public administration allows. Where regional competences exist, national frameworks should establish clear coordination mechanisms and minimum standards to ensure that victims receive comparable protection regardless of where they are identified.

National minimum standards. Binding standards for detection, referral, identification, support and data collection should apply across all regions, regardless of which level of government holds the relevant competence. These should cover, at minimum: indicator-based screening tools, referral timelines, access to immediate support, child-sensitive procedures, non-punishment safeguards, and data collection categories.

Multi-level coordination platform. A standing coordination body – inter-ministerial task force, inter-governmental committee, or equivalent – should bring together national and regional actors, maintain shared SOPs, and monitor consistency of implementation across regions. Austria's Federal Task Force on Combating Human Trafficking, which brings together all relevant federal ministries, regional governments, social partners and specialised NGOs, illustrates this model.

Regional coordinators with operational mandates. A designated person or structure in each region should be responsible for operational NRM implementation, with access to specialised services, training and multidisciplinary support. **Austria's** 7th National Action Plan envisages anti-trafficking coordinators in all nine Länder. **Sweden's** regional coordinators are present in all regions, though the study identifies a risk where their role shifts from operational victim support toward more strategic functions. **Portugal's** five Regional Specialised Multidisciplinary Teams (EME), managed by a single NGO (APF) under the RAPVT network, illustrate how entrusting all regional structures to a single coordinating organisation can produce nationwide consistency while retaining responsiveness to local trafficking patterns.

Single national focal point for cross-border referral. Regardless of internal NRM architecture, one designated body must coordinate all cross-border referrals, with clearly defined internal communication lines to all regional structures. This requirement is non-negotiable under Article 11(4) and applies even where multiple regional NRMs operate.

Harmonised data collection. Data collection categories, reporting timelines and disaggregation standards should be uniform across regions, enabling national-level analysis of NRM functioning and cross-regional comparison. Where different regional authorities collect data independently, a centralised aggregation mechanism – such as Statistics Austria's role since 2021/2022 – should ensure that national reporting remains coherent.

Safeguarding stronger regional protections. National frameworks should not weaken effective mechanisms that exist at the regional or local level. Where regional authorities have developed specialised practices – such as stronger non-punishment safeguards, more accessible services, or expertise adapted to local trafficking patterns – these should be preserved within the national framework as long as they meet or exceed the national minimum standards.

7.3 Institutional Models and Coordination Structures

7.3.1 NRM structure

The study findings confirm that **no single institutional model is appropriate for all EU MS**. However, effective coordination across national systems consistently relies on a combination of: a national coordinator with a clear mandate and sufficient authority; a multi-agency coordination body bringing together all relevant actors; a formally integrated role for CSOs; and an independent national rapporteur or equivalent mechanism. Table 10 below sets out the main institutional models identified across EU MS, with their main strengths and limitations.

Table 10. NRM institutional coordination models

MODEL	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTHS	LIMITATIONS / CONDITIONS
CENTRALISED MINISTRY-ANCHORED	National coordinator sits within the Ministry of Interior (Slovakia, Cyprus, Czechia) or Ministry of Justice (Finland, Netherlands). Single vertical authority chain.	Clear accountability, policy coherence, enforcement authority, ease of EU-level communication.	Risk of law-enforcement orientation crowding out victim-centred approaches. Requires strong CSO partnership provisions to balance.
INTER-MINISTERIAL TASK FORCE MODEL	High-level inter-ministerial coordination body chaired by a senior official, with permanent working groups and representation from all relevant ministries, regional governments, social partners, and NGOs. Example: Austria's Task Force (TF-MH), chaired by Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs.	Brings together all relevant actors at policy level; facilitates cross-sectoral coordination; resilient to changes of minister.	Can be slow in operational response. Requires dedicated secretariat to maintain momentum between high-level meetings.
SPECIALISED AGENCY MODEL	Dedicated government agency performs coordination, monitoring, and service delivery functions. Examples: ANITP (Romania), Gender Equality Agency (Sweden), NCCTHB (Bulgaria), Miprof (France).	Specialist expertise, proximity to operational actors, independence from short-term political cycles. Enables digital tools (e.g. Bulgaria's nrm.bg platform). The Greek ONR/EKKA model separates strategic oversight (ONR) from day-to-day operations (EKKA), reinforcing institutional continuity while preserving specialisation.	Requires dedicated budget line and sufficient resources. Risk of duplication with law enforcement functions. Chronic understaffing can constrain operational capacity even where the model is otherwise well-designed.
HYBRID GOVERNMENT-	Policy coordination remains with government; operational coordination (registration,	Leverages NGO expertise and victim-centred	Requires strong contractual clarity on responsibilities,

NGO OPERATIONAL MODEL	referrals, training) is culture; cost-effective; guaranteed multi-year contracted to an NGO. flexible. funding, and oversight Example: Netherlands mechanisms. NGO must (proposed under draft transposition law: CoMensha performs operational coordination; Ministry of Justice coordinates policy). have formal statutory mandate.
REGIONAL COORDINATOR NETWORK	National coordination supplemented by regional or local coordinators embedded in social services, law enforcement, or specialised NGOs. Examples: Sweden's regional coordinators (specialised social workers across all regions); Portugal's five Regional Specialised Multidisciplinary Teams, managed by a single NGO (APF) under the RAPVT network coordinated by the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality. Ensures NRM is adapted to local realities; faster operational response; bridges national and local levels. Portugal's single-NGO model for all regional teams produces consistency without sacrificing local responsiveness. Creates shared instruments and more uniform identification practices across regions. Requires sustained investment in capacity and training at regional level. Risk of uneven implementation across regions where resources differ. Where regional coordinators shift toward strategic rather than operational roles, capacity for immediate victim-centred response diminishes.

7.3.2 National focal point for cross-border referral

Article 11(4) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires each Member State to appoint a national focal point for the cross-border referral of victims. This is a new mandatory obligation. This section provides operational guidance to support EU MS in establishing the focal point by the **July 2026 transposition deadline**.

What the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires of a national focal point

The focal point must: (a) be appointed by law, regulation or binding administrative provision; (b) receive and transmit cross-border referrals between national competent authorities; (c) serve as a contact point in relations between authorities responsible for cross-border victim support in different EU MS – not as a direct point of contact for victims themselves; (d) not replace national complaint mechanisms or helplines. The focal point does not need to be a new body – it may be based on an existing mechanism or governance structure. CSOs engaged in victim-facing activities may be designated, provided separate procedures with distinct mandates are in place for their victim-facing and coordination roles respectively.

In many EU MS, focal-point functions are already performed de facto by existing actors; formal designation will therefore require legal recognition and the development of operational tools, protocols and capacity. Assigning cross-border referral functions to an actor with established transnational

operational networks can facilitate coordination across jurisdictions, provided that a clear mandate and accountability framework are in place²²¹.

Based on the national examples identified in the study, EU MS may designate the focal point within one of the following institutional arrangements:

Table 11. Institutional arrangements for designating the national focal point

OPTION	DESCRIPTION	NATIONAL EXAMPLE
NATIONAL ANTI-TRAFFICKING AGENCY / COORDINATING BODY	The focal point function is integrated into the existing national NRM coordination body, which already has a mandate, staff, and established interlocutor relationships. This avoids duplicating structures.	Romania: ANITP acts as both NRM coordinator and national focal point. Bulgaria: NCCTHB performs both functions, with child victims coordinated by the State Agency for Child Protection.
NATIONAL RAPPOREUR	Where a National Rapporteur or equivalent mechanism exists with sufficient operational capacity, it may be designated as, or host, the focal point.	Portugal: coordination is anchored around the National Rapporteur, in cooperation with CIG and regional multidisciplinary teams, reflecting a distributed model rather than a single focal-point structure. Slovakia: the National Anti-Trafficking Centre also serves as National Rapporteur (formally designated as focal point but at an early operational stage).
DESIGNATED UNIT WITHIN MINISTRY OF INTERIOR / POLICE	An existing anti-trafficking police unit or specialised department within the Ministry of Interior may be designated, particularly where cross-border referrals have a strong law enforcement dimension. In this case, referral and law enforcement mandates should be clearly separated.	Cyprus: Anti-Trafficking Unit of the Cyprus Police and the Deputy Ministry of Immigration and International Protection jointly act as focal contact points. Croatia: Ministry of the Interior coordinates the focal point under the Protocol on Safe Return.
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION (MANDATED BY MINISTERIAL DECISION)	An international organisation with established cross-border networks and referral expertise may be designated as focal point under a formal ministerial mandate, particularly in countries where state capacity is limited.	Czechia: IOM is designated as the focal point in Methodological Manual No. 4 (December 2022) issued by the Ministry of Interior.
CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION (MANDATED)	A specialised NGO may be designated as focal point, especially when it plays an essential role in the referral of cross border cases. This requires a clear legal or administrative mandate, stable public funding, and strict separation between victim-facing and coordination functions.	Poland: KCIK performs de facto cross-border coordination functions through its national network, though it is not formally designated as a focal point. Netherlands: CoMensha performs operational coordination functions within the NRM, and will be designated to take up the coordinate the focal point (the legislation to formalise this is still pending).

²²¹ Interview with EU MS (CZ and FI).

7.4 Model Provisions and Guidelines

Article 11(4) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires that NRMs be established ‘by laws, regulations or administrative provisions’. The comparative study shows that EU MS differ significantly in constitutional structure, degree of legal formalisation, and the allocation of competences between levels of government. **No single legal architecture is appropriate for all contexts.**

This section offers illustrative model provisions that EU MS may adapt when transposing or strengthening their NRM legal frameworks. These are not prescriptive templates, but adaptable examples derived from the comparative analysis. Where a model provision goes beyond the minimum requirements of the EU acquis, it is offered as a recommendation reflecting good practice identified across the countries studied. EU MS remain free to adopt more favourable provisions at national level, consistent with Article 11(4) and the broader framework of the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

7.4.1 Establishing the NRM by law or binding provision

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires that the NRM be established through laws, regulations or binding administrative provisions. At a minimum, the founding instrument should:

- a) designate the mechanism by name;
- b) identify the competent authorities and participating organisations;
- c) define the respective responsibilities and lines of communication; and
- d) authorise the adoption of supplementary SOPs and guidance by the designated coordination body.

Model provision – Legal basis (illustrative)

“The competent minister/authority shall, by [regulation/ministerial order/government decision], establish a National Referral Mechanism for the identification, referral, assistance and support of victims of trafficking in human beings. The mechanism shall apply to all persons who may be victims of any form of trafficking, regardless of their nationality or immigration status, and shall designate the competent authorities, civil society organisations and other relevant bodies involved, together with their respective responsibilities, operational procedures and communication channels. The mechanism shall be reviewed at least every [four] years.”

National example – Romania: Government Decision No. 88/2023 approves the National Mechanism for the Identification and Referral of Victims of Trafficking in Persons, establishing a comprehensive procedural framework including actors, procedures, and monitoring indicators. The Decision is binding on all participating authorities and provides a stable legal basis that is less exposed to changes of administration.

National example – Greece: Law 4198/2013 establishes the NRM in primary legislation and creates the Office of the National Rapporteur, which holds coordination and monitoring responsibility. Joint Ministerial Decision 30840/2016 operationalises the mechanism, designating EKKa as managing body

under the Rapporteur's direct oversight. This dual-instrument structure – primary law setting the mandate, ministerial decision governing operations – illustrates how legal and operational layers can be distributed across instruments without losing coherence.

7.4.2 National coordinator and national rapporteur: establishing and distinguishing the two functions

Recital 15 of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive highlights that the NRM framework should **identify the participating competent authorities, CSOs and other stakeholders and set out their respective responsibilities**, including the procedures and the lines of communication, but the law does not further prescribe how operational and monitoring functions should be allocated specifically for the NRM.

Moreover, **Article 19(1) requires EU MS to take the necessary measures to establish national anti-trafficking coordinators or equivalent mechanisms and to provide them with the adequate resources necessary to effectively carry out their functions**. The national anti-trafficking coordinator or the equivalent mechanism shall work with relevant national, regional and local bodies and agencies, particularly law-enforcement authorities, with NRMs, and with relevant CSOs active in this field.

The tasks of the national anti-trafficking coordinators or equivalent mechanisms include the carrying out of assessments of trends in trafficking in human beings, the measuring of results of anti-trafficking actions, including the gathering of statistics in close cooperation with relevant civil society organisations active in this field, and reporting, but not specially mention the monitoring of the (impact or functioning of the) NRMs or the focal points.

With the revision of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, the establishment of national Rapporteurs became more optional. While the 2011 Directive requested EUMS to take the necessary measures to establish national rapporteurs or equivalent mechanisms, the revised Article 19(3) now just highlights that EUMS may also establish independent bodies whose role may include monitoring the implementation and impact of anti-trafficking actions.

The comparative analysis confirms the absence in many EUMS of the two functionally distinct roles, namely a national coordinator, responsible for operating and maintaining the NRM, and a national rapporteur or equivalent mechanism, responsible for monitoring and independently evaluating it. **Separating these functions is hence no longer required by EU law but is recommended on the basis of the evidence gathered for this Policy Paper.** The distinction matters because a body that both operates the NRM and evaluates cannot easily provide the independent oversight that meaningful accountability requires.

The following illustrative provision shows how EU Member States choosing to separate the two functions could structure and distinguish their respective mandates.

Model provision – National coordinator and national rapporteur (illustrative)

"The [competent authority] shall designate a national coordinator for the National Referral Mechanism. The national coordinator shall be responsible for: (a) establishing, maintaining, and regularly updating the NRM's standard operating procedures in consultation with all designated actors; (b) overseeing training for all frontline actors with obligations under the NRM; (c) collecting, consolidating, and publishing annual data on NRM functioning, disaggregated at minimum by stage

of referral, form of exploitation, age, gender, and nationality; (d) facilitating operational coordination among NRM actors, including in cross-border cases in cooperation with the national focal point; and (e) reporting annually to [government/parliament] on NRM implementation.

Separately, an independent national rapporteur or equivalent mechanism shall be designated with a mandate to: (a) monitor and publicly evaluate the functioning of the NRM, including its compliance with the minimum quality standards established under Article 11(4)(a); (b) assess outcomes for victims, not only procedural compliance; (c) identify systemic gaps and make recommendations to [government/parliament]; and (d) report publicly and independently of the national coordinator.

Member States in which coordination and monitoring functions are currently held by a single body are encouraged to introduce structural separation as part of their transposition process. Pending full separation, the monitoring function shall be exercised through a dedicated unit or process with independent access to data and the freedom to publish findings without prior approval by the coordinating authority."

National example – Greece: the Office of the National Rapporteur holds strategic oversight and monitoring responsibility within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while EKKA manages day-to-day NRM operations.

National example – Finland: the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, an institutionally independent body, monitors NRM implementation without operational responsibility for it, enabling external evaluation.

7.4.3 Minimum standards for early detection and identification

Article 11(4)(a) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires NRMs to include minimum standards for the detection and early identification of victims. On the basis of the comparative analysis conducted for this study, these standards should encompass at least the following elements.

Table 12. Minimum standards for early detection and identification of victims

STANDARD	WHAT IT REQUIRES	NATIONAL EXAMPLE
SCREENING TOOLS	Common indicator-based screening tools covering all forms of exploitation, disseminated to all relevant frontline actors and adapted to specific contexts (labour, asylum, child protection, healthcare).	Hungary: uses a formal Identification Data Sheet (Government Decree 354/2012) with tiered indicators (high/medium/low likelihood) covering appearance, working conditions, and personal circumstances. Belgium: uses sector-specific indicator lists (COL 01/2015 for labour exploitation; COL 04/2011 for sexual exploitation).
TWO-STAGE DETECTION AND IDENTIFICATION	A clear distinction between: (i) detection – proactive recognition of indicators by any frontline actor, triggering immediate protective referral; and (ii) formal identification – a decision by a competent authority enabling longer-term support.	Slovakia: NRM explicitly distinguishes between a 'potential victim' (indicators detected), a 'presumed victim' (admitted to the Programme of Support and Protection), and a 'formally identified victim' (confirmed through law

	Presumed victims must access support at stage (i), not only after (ii).	enforcement). Support attaches at the presumed victim stage.
TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEW CONDITIONS	Protocols guaranteeing privacy, informed consent, professional interpretation, and psychological safety during interviews. Initial interviews should, wherever possible, be separated from criminal-investigative interviewing by law enforcement, with the first contact prioritising victim safety and support over evidence-gathering.	Denmark: recently adopted national guidelines (2025) provide frontline actors with a structured framework for initial contact that prioritises victim safety, support and indicator recognition over evidence-gathering.
CHILD-SENSITIVE PROCEDURES	Immediate appointment of a guardian or legal representative; best-interests assessment; child-friendly interviewing techniques; placement in specialised child-appropriate accommodation. Mandatory reporting obligations for professionals (health, education) overriding confidentiality.	Portugal: NRM contains a dedicated child-specific protocol with end-to-end procedures, professional tools, detection flowcharts for inland and border checkpoints, age assessment safeguards, guardian appointment, and placement in specialised child-specific shelters managed by multidisciplinary teams (EME). Slovenia: mandates immediate reporting by health and education professionals, overriding professional confidentiality.
NON-PUNISHMENT AND DATA PROTECTION SAFEGUARDS	The non-punishment principle must be applied throughout the identification process. Explicit legislative provisions are the most robust foundation, though guidelines implemented consistently in practice can also suffice. Data protection rules must govern all information sharing within the NRM. The non-refoulement principle must equally apply: no victim should be returned or removed before a proper screening and risk assessment has taken place. Early detection must not be used to accelerate removal or deter access to the asylum procedure.	Bulgaria Cyprus, and Greece have codified the non-punishment principle in dedicated primary legislation. In Austria , the same outcome is achieved through the general excusable emergency provision, which is applied to victims of trafficking in the absence of a dedicated statutory clause. Legislation authorises the secure transmission of victim personal data to contracted NGOs without victim consent, enabling proactive outreach in cases involving police-identified victims; this mechanism does not extend to victims identified outside law enforcement channels.

7.4.4 Unconditional access to support and reflection period

Article 11(5) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires that assistance and support be provided on a consensual and informed basis and include, as a minimum, appropriate accommodation, material assistance, medical treatment, psychological assistance, counselling, information, and translation services. Article 11(3) further provides that assistance and support shall not be made conditional on the victim's willingness to cooperate. The study findings show that, in practice, several EU MS link key aspects of support to cooperation with criminal proceedings, which the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive does not permit as a condition for initial support.

Model provision – Unconditional support (illustrative)

"Any person identified as a presumed victim of trafficking in human beings, irrespective of nationality or residence status, shall have, from the moment there are reasonable grounds that the person may be a victim: (a) access to appropriate and safe accommodation, medical care, psychological assistance, legal information and interpretation services; (b) accommodation adapted to the specific needs of victims, including gender-sensitive and child-appropriate placement; and (c) the right to receive such assistance and support without being made conditional on cooperation with law enforcement or competent authorities."

For third-country nationals, the reflection and recovery period is regulated by Directive 2004/81/EC²²²; the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive does not itself prescribe a uniform reflection period for all victims, and the statutory length varies significantly across EU MS, but is generally at least 30 days on the basis of the requirement of the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings²²³. The comparative analysis suggests that EU MS may wish to ensure that any statutory reflection period is sufficient to enable genuine recovery and informed decision-making, and that support is not withdrawn at the end of the period solely on the ground of non-cooperation.

Model provision – Reflection period (illustrative)

"A third-country national identified as a presumed victim of trafficking in human beings shall be entitled to a reflection and recovery period of at least [30/45/60/90] days from the moment there is a reasonable-grounds indication that the person may be a victim, during which no expulsion, return, or removal order shall be enforced. Throughout the reflection period, the person shall enjoy the unconditional access to assistance and support set out in the preceding model provision. The reflection period shall be extended where the person is a child or where their individual circumstances so require."

Beyond the reflection period, the study findings indicate that **residence status** for third-country nationals remains a critical structural junction between NRM support and longer-term integration. **Finland's** 2021 amendment to the Aliens Act provides an instructive model: it introduced a one-year residence permit for third-country national victims of significant employer negligence or exploitation that does not require a criminal investigation to have been opened, decoupling victim protection from prosecution outcomes.

²²² Council Directive 2004/81/EC of 29 April 2004 on the residence permit issued to third-country nationals who are victims of trafficking in human beings or who have been the subject of an action to facilitate illegal immigration, who cooperate with the competent authorities. OJ L 261, 6.8.2004, pp. 19–23. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2004/81/oj/eng>

²²³ Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Council of Europe Treaty Series - No. 197. Warsaw, 16.V.2005. <https://rm.coe.int/168008371d>

EU MS should ensure that NRM frameworks do not only address the reflection period but also the transition to medium- and longer-term residence, including pathways that are not conditional on cooperation with criminal proceedings or on the outcome of such proceedings.

7.4.5 Formal integration of civil society organisations

The revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires that the relevant support organisations and that those organisations be identified among the participating actors.

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive does not, however, prescribe the form that this cooperation must take.

The comparative analysis indicates that NRM frameworks tend to function more effectively where civil society organisations are given a formally defined role, secure funding, and reliable access to victims, rather than where cooperation rests solely on informal practice. The following model provision is offered on that basis as a recommendation.

Model provision – CSO mandate and data sharing (illustrative)

"The [competent authority] shall, following an open selection process, designate one or more specialised non-governmental organisations as authorised partners within the National Referral Mechanism. Authorised organisations shall have a formally defined role in early detection, victim support and reintegration.

As a narrowly defined exception, the [competent authority] shall be authorised to transmit personal data of persons suspected of being victims to authorised organisations for the purpose of facilitating proactive outreach and assistance, without requiring the individual's prior consent, provided that: (a) this is strictly necessary for the individual's immediate protection; (b) no less intrusive means are available; and (c) all processing is subject to applicable data protection safeguards under national and EU law."

National example – Poland (KCIK model): The National Consulting and Intervention Centre for Victims of Trafficking (KCIK) is a publicly funded task commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior through an annual open tender, currently jointly operated by La Strada and Fundacja Dialog. This hybrid model – state-commissioned, NGO-delivered – combines state accountability with NGO expertise and victim-centred culture. The study findings suggest that this architecture offers a potentially replicable governance model across EU MS, provided it is placed on a firmer statutory footing to ensure continuity, enforceability and unified data management – conditions not yet fully met in the Polish case.

National example – Bulgaria: Specialised NGOs are formally integrated into the NRM as service providers, with roles defined in the NRM document itself and participation guaranteed through membership of the Permanent Expert Working Group. State funding flows to NGO service providers, with foreign funding from projects supplementing core national resources. The NRM was originally developed by the NGO sector and later formalised in law.

7.4.6 Sector-specific detection obligations for labour exploitation and non-police frontline actors

Article 11(4)(a) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires NRMs to establish minimum standards for detection and early identification across all forms of exploitation. The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive does not specify which actors must be placed under binding detection duties, leaving Member States discretion in designing sector-specific obligations. Across the majority of the countries studied, NRM procedures tend to under-detect labour trafficking²²⁴. Legal obligations to detect and refer are concentrated in law enforcement, while labour inspectors, social services, healthcare professionals, and asylum caseworkers operate without binding referral duties or sector-adapted screening tools.

A further barrier, documented across multiple systems, is the absence of a firewall between victim identification and immigration enforcement: where potential victims fear that disclosure will trigger removal proceedings, detection fails even where frontline actors are trained and legally obligated to refer. EU MS should ensure that NRM referral and initial support operate independently of immigration status determination, and that immigration enforcement actions – including detention and removal – are suspended pending NRM assessment and throughout the reflection period. This principle is already implicit in Article 11(3) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, which provides that assistance and support shall not be conditional on the victim's willingness to cooperate and in the non-refoulement safeguards. Its operational implementation requires explicit instructions to immigration authorities that NRM referrals take procedural priority over enforcement actions.

The following illustrative model provision shows how EU MS choosing to address this gap could establish binding detection duties for non-police frontline actors and require sector-specific adaptation of indicator tools. It is offered as a recommendation grounded in the comparative findings, not as a restatement of an existing EU obligation.

Model provision – Sector-specific detection obligations (illustrative)

"The [competent authority] shall, by [regulation/ministerial order/government decision], designate the following as obligated first-contact actors within the National Referral Mechanism, each with a legal duty to apply trafficking indicators adapted to their operational context and to refer cases directly to the NRM coordination body or designated victim-support organisation without requiring prior police involvement: (a) labour inspection authorities; (b) social welfare and child protection services; (c) healthcare professionals; (d) asylum caseworkers and reception facility staff; (e) border management officials.

The [competent authority] shall develop and maintain sector-specific indicator tools and referral protocols for each designated actor, covering at minimum: workplace and labour market settings, including agricultural, construction, domestic work, and hospitality sectors; asylum reception and accommodation facilities; primary and secondary healthcare settings; and border entry points.

²²⁴ See also Study on the concept of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation on the basis of illustrative national legislation and jurisprudence (2025). https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f5e23cc0-4c14-47b2-9647-904d0ba3d744_en?filename=Study%20on%20the%20concept%20of%20trafficking%20in%20human%20beings%20for%20the%20purpose%20of%20labour%20exploitation.pdf#page=19.08

Referral by a designated first-contact actor shall not be conditional on confirmation of a trafficking offence by law enforcement. Where a designated actor identifies indicators consistent with trafficking, they shall refer the case to the NRM coordination body or designated victim-support organisation within [24/48] hours and shall not take any action that may compromise the individual's safety or access to support pending that referral."

Virtuous examples can be identified across the EU. For example, **Belgium's** COL 01/2015 establishes a dedicated indicator list specifically adapted to labour exploitation contexts, distinct from the sexual exploitation indicators, providing a replicable model for sector-specific screening tools. **Portugal's** labour inspectorates operate under cooperation agreements with law enforcement and NGOs that define direct referral pathways in agricultural and construction settings, without requiring prior police involvement. **Finland's** 2021 amendment to the Aliens Act introduced a one-year residence permit for victims of significant employer negligence or exploitation that does not require a criminal investigation to have been opened, providing a direct legislative model for decoupling victim protection from prosecution. The EU revised Anti-Trafficking Directive's minimum quality standards requirement makes clear that detection must be proactive and systematic across all relevant settings; sector-specific binding obligations are the primary instrument for achieving this in practice.

7.4.7 Cooperation arrangements with asylum authorities

Article 11(4)(c) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive establishes a specific and legally distinct obligation: **NRMs must include cooperation arrangements or protocols with asylum authorities to ensure that assistance, support and protection is provided to victims of trafficking who are also in need of international protection or who wish to apply for such protection, taking into account the victim's individual circumstances.**

This provision reflects a structural reality documented across the countries studied: a significant proportion of trafficking victims are or become asylum seekers, and many asylum applicants are at heightened risk of trafficking. The study findings confirm that this interface remains the least formalised element of NRM architecture across EU MS. While migration and asylum authorities are widely recognised as NRM actors, and several countries have developed operational links between anti-trafficking and asylum procedures, these arrangements are rarely embedded in the NRM as a required structural component. This generates risks of inconsistency, particularly at the point of first contact, where a victim identified through the asylum channel may not be automatically referred into NRM support, and conversely, where a victim who initiates an asylum claim may not be adequately guided through international protection procedures. This lack of formalisation is reflected in national accounts: in the Netherlands, for example, no clear picture has yet emerged of how coordination between the asylum procedure, the reflection period, and the victim's continued support thereafter is to be operationalised.

The **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** reinforces the policy context for this interface, and several Member States – including Ireland – have explicitly flagged the need to **ensure operational coherence between NRM implementation and developments under the Pact.**

Four issues require specific attention in any cooperation arrangement.

The first is the **dual-status challenge**. A person may simultaneously be a presumed or identified victim of trafficking and an applicant for international protection. These statuses carry different procedural rights, timelines and competent authorities. Cooperation protocols must ensure that neither pathway is subordinated to the other, that anti-trafficking support is not conditional on the progress or outcome of an asylum claim, and that the victim retains the right to apply for international protection independently of their status within the NRM.

The second is **information sharing and data protection**. Cooperation between NRM actors and asylum authorities involves sensitive personal data belonging to individuals in vulnerable situations. Protocols must be GDPR-compliant and must clearly define what information may be shared, by whom, with what consent requirements, and for what purposes. Consistent with the principle set out above that neither the anti-trafficking procedure nor the international protection procedure should be subordinated to the other, information-sharing rules should be designed to enable both procedures to be pursued in parallel, in the interest of the individual concerned. Information-sharing arrangements should not be used to channel data to immigration enforcement authorities for the purpose of removal, nor to compromise the integrity of either the trafficking identification procedure or the asylum determination procedure.

The third is the **non-refoulement safeguards**. As established in the minimum standards for detection and identification (Section 6.4.3), early detection must not be used to accelerate removal or to deter access to the asylum procedure. Cooperation arrangements should explicitly state that anti-trafficking identification neither precludes nor interferes with an individual's right to seek international protection, and that no removal or expulsion order shall be enforced during the reflection period, and, at any rate, that the risk of refoulement can be invoked or examined ex officio at any stage of the removal process.

The fourth is **continuity of support**. When a victim receiving anti-trafficking assistance initiates an asylum claim, or when an asylum applicant is identified as a potential victim of trafficking, the cooperation arrangement must ensure continuity of support through defined referral pathways, clearly allocated responsibilities, and guaranteed access to assistance pending outcomes in either procedure.

The following model provision operationalises the obligation in Article 11(4)(c) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive to establish cooperation arrangements with asylum authorities, taking into account the related obligations in Articles 11(3), 11a and 18b. The specific operational elements are derived from the comparative analysis as good practice for giving effect to that obligation.

Model provision – NRM-asylum cooperation arrangements (illustrative)

"The [competent authority / NRM coordination body] shall establish and maintain written cooperation arrangements with the [national asylum authority] to ensure the coordinated identification, referral, and support of persons who are both victims or presumed victims of trafficking in human beings and applicants for or beneficiaries of international protection.

These arrangements shall, at a minimum: (a) define procedures for the early detection of trafficking indicators during asylum procedures and within asylum reception and accommodation facilities; (b) establish referral pathways between asylum case-handlers and NRM actors, including the trigger for NRM support and the responsibilities of each party; (c) ensure that anti-trafficking support is provided regardless of the progress or outcome of any asylum claim and is not made conditional on decisions under asylum procedures; (d) ensure that the initiation of trafficking identification

procedures does not restrict or delay the individual's right to apply for international protection; (e) specify data protection and information-sharing rules applicable to cases where both procedures are engaged simultaneously; (f) designate a named point of contact in each relevant authority. The cooperation arrangements shall be incorporated into the NRM's standard operating procedures and shall be reviewed at least every [two] years."

7.4.8 Victim compensation and access to justice

Article 17 of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive requires that victims have access to existing schemes of compensation to victims of violent crimes of intent. Article 12(2) requires access without delay to legal counselling and legal representation, including for the purpose of claiming compensation. The study findings indicate that, across most countries studied, practical access to compensation remains severely limited despite the existence of formal legal entitlements²²⁵.

Three structural barriers recur across systems. The first is the frequent referral of victims to separate civil proceedings, which imposes additional procedural and financial burdens and effectively deters claims. The second is the absence of functioning mechanisms to enforce compensation orders, particularly where perpetrators' assets are located abroad or have been confiscated under proceeds-of-crime legislation. The third is the inaccessibility of state compensation schemes.

The following illustrative provision is offered as a recommendation grounded in the comparative findings, going beyond the minimum requirements of Article 17 of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and Directive 2012/29/EU on victims' rights.

Model provision – Victim compensation (illustrative)

"A person identified as a victim of trafficking in human beings shall have the right to claim compensation from the perpetrator within criminal proceedings, without being required to initiate separate civil proceedings. The court shall decide on the compensation claim within the criminal judgment. Where the perpetrator's assets have been confiscated, the [competent authority] shall ensure that compensation to the victim is prioritised before any transfer of confiscated assets to the State. Where compensation from the perpetrator is not obtainable, the victim shall have access to a state compensation scheme under conditions no less favourable than those applicable to victims of other violent crimes of intent."

National example – Slovakia: The Constitutional Court ruling (IV. ÚS 280/2021, 28 March 2022) established that courts are obliged to adjudicate compensation claims by trafficking victims within adhesion proceedings in criminal cases, in accordance with applicable EU standards. Victims also have

²²⁵ In Austria, compensation claims in criminal trials are either rarely granted or never effectively received by the victim. In Ireland, no victim of trafficking has received compensation from a perpetrator, due in part to the absence until 2021 of convictions under the relevant legislation, and confiscation of proceeds of crime flows to the Exchequer rather than to victims. In Greece, zero victims have successfully accessed state compensation, a finding linked by GRETA to an inaccessible application process. In Slovakia, the Constitutional Court (IV. ÚS 280/2021, 28 March 2022) ruled that ordinary courts are obliged to decide on compensation for the injured party within adhesion proceedings in trafficking cases, in accordance with EU standards.

access to the state compensation scheme for victims of intentional violent crimes under Act No. 274/2017 on Victims of Crime, administered by the Ministry of Justice. This dual pathway – adhesion proceedings within criminal cases and a parallel state scheme – illustrates how compensation access can be structured at multiple levels, though the study findings indicate that practical uptake through criminal courts remains low.

7.4.9 Child-specific NRM procedures

Articles 13 to 16 of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive establish specific obligations regarding child victims, including the presumption of minority where age is uncertain, the appointment of a guardian, best-interests assessments, child-friendly interviewing, and specialised accommodation. The study findings indicate that, while child-sensitive language is present in most NRM frameworks, the operationalisation of child-specific procedures remains the weakest component across the majority of systems studied. The following illustrative provision builds on the obligations set out in Articles 13 to 16 and consolidates, by way of recommendation, additional operational elements identified in the comparative analysis as supporting their effective implementation.

Model provision – Child-specific NRM procedures (illustrative)

“The [competent authority] shall establish, within the National Referral Mechanism, a dedicated procedural track for child victims of trafficking in human beings, applicable to all persons under the age of 18 and to any person whose age is uncertain and where there are reasons to believe the person is a child. This procedural track shall provide, at minimum, that:

(a) where the age of a person is uncertain, that person shall be presumed to be a child and shall receive immediate access to assistance, support and protection pending the outcome of any age assessment. Age assessment shall be conducted through multidisciplinary methods taking into account the person’s physical, psychological and developmental maturity, shall not rely solely on medical examination, and shall be subject to the benefit of the doubt;

(b) a qualified guardian or representative, independent of the authorities responsible for investigation or immigration enforcement, shall be appointed from the moment the child is identified, or where the holders of parental responsibility are precluded from ensuring the child’s best interest due to a conflict of interest. Where a conflict of interest arises between the guardian and the child, a different guardian shall be appointed without delay;

(c) a best-interests assessment shall be carried out as the primary consideration in all decisions affecting the child, including placement, referral, participation in proceedings, return, and any durable solution. The assessment shall take due account of the child’s views, needs and concerns in accordance with the child’s age and maturity;

(d) the child shall be placed in specialised, child-appropriate accommodation, separate from accommodation provided to adult victims, equipped with trained staff and adapted to the child’s age, gender and specific needs. Placement shall not be made in general migration reception facilities or adult shelters;

(e) interviews with the child shall be conducted by professionals trained in child-friendly interviewing techniques, in appropriate settings, and shall be limited in number to what is strictly necessary. The

child shall be accompanied by their guardian or representative, and – where appropriate – by a person of trust of the child’s choosing;

(f) where consistent with national rules on professional secrecy and fundamental rights, mandatory reporting obligations should apply to professionals in health, education, social services and child protection who come into contact with children in the course of their duties and identify indicators of trafficking in human beings, overriding professional confidentiality;

(g) safe, confidential and child-friendly reporting procedures shall be established in accordance with Article 13(3) of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, using language adapted to the age and maturity of the child;

(h) specific actions to assist and support child victims shall be undertaken following an individual assessment, with a view to finding a durable solution, and shall include programmes to support the child’s transition to emancipation and adulthood in order to avoid re-trafficking, as well as access to education within a reasonable time.”

National example – Bulgaria: The NRM contains a dedicated section on child victims incorporating best-interests assessment, immediate risk assessment, guardian appointment, child-friendly interviewing, and mandatory involvement of Child Protection Departments. A separate Coordination Mechanism for Unaccompanied Foreign Children and Children Seeking or Granted International Protection (established April 2022) operates alongside the general NRM, designating roles for the State Agency for Refugees, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and Ministry of Education in cases involving unaccompanied and separated minors. The State Agency for Child Protection plays a complementary coordination role in cross-border cases involving child victims.

National example – Portugal: The NRM includes an end-to-end child-specific protocol with professional detection flowcharts adapted to inland and border checkpoint settings, age assessment safeguards, guardian appointment procedures, and placement in specialised shelters for child victims managed by the Regional Specialised Multidisciplinary Teams (EME). This integrated architecture ensures that child-specific procedures are not merely annexed to the general NRM but constitute a distinct procedural track with dedicated tools.

National example – Ireland: IHREC, designated as National Rapporteur, has recommended the establishment of a child-specific identification and assistance process within the NRM, including the mandatory appointment of a Children’s Legal Advisor to every child suspected of being a victim at the earliest stage, dedicated trafficking training for all professionals working with children, and the inclusion of human trafficking in the Child First national guidelines. These recommendations remain pending implementation as of the time of writing.

7.4.10 Focal points for cross-border referral

Building on the institutional analysis in Section 6.3.1, this section sets out the minimum operational requirements for an effective focal point and offers an illustrative model provision.

Regardless of which institutional model is chosen, the focal point’s operational effectiveness depends on the following minimum requirements:

- a) A clear legal mandate, whether in primary legislation, ministerial order, or binding administrative provision, that designates the body and defines its functions.
- b) Dedicated staff with expertise in anti-trafficking, victim protection, and cross-border cooperation – at minimum, a named contact person with a defined availability schedule.
- c) Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) governing how referrals are received; the information required to accompany a referral (standardised referral form); timelines for acknowledgement and response; follow-up and case closure procedures; escalation in complex cases.
- d) Secure, GDPR-compliant data handling arrangements – including consent protocols where required – to enable the lawful transfer of victim data across jurisdictions.
- e) Clear communication channels with competent authorities in other EU MS, whether through direct bilateral contact, through EU-level platforms (Europol, ERM when operational), or through international organisations.
- f) Separate procedures distinguishing the focal point's coordination function from any victim-facing services the same organisation may provide.

Model provision – National focal point (illustrative)

"The [competent authority / designated body] is hereby appointed as the national focal point for the cross-border referral of victims of trafficking in human beings. The focal point shall: (a) receive and transmit referrals from and to competent authorities in other Member States; (b) ensure that referred victims are connected to the appropriate protection, assistance and support services in the receiving country; (c) maintain standard operating procedures for cross-border referral, including a standardised referral form, defined timelines, and a secure data exchange protocol compliant with [national data protection legislation]; (d) not serve as a direct point of contact for victims. The focal point shall report annually on the number and nature of cross-border referrals handled. It shall not replace existing national complaint mechanisms or helplines."

8 Conclusions and Recommendations

Since 2018²²⁶ EU Member States have made substantial progress in the development of National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs), moving from predominantly informal or practice-based coordination arrangements towards more structured and formalised systems. Most countries have strengthened the legal and institutional foundations of their NRMs, increasingly anchoring them in legislation, binding administrative acts or comprehensive national manuals, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of competent authorities. NRMs are now more consistently designed as multiagency frameworks, involving not only law enforcement authorities but also social and child protection services, labour inspectorates, migration and asylum authorities, and specialised civil society organisations, reflecting a clearer alignment with EU standards and a more victim-centred approach.

Progress is also evident in the expansion of early detection and referral frameworks, with many Member States developing written procedures, indicators and multidisciplinary models that allow presumed victims to access protection and assistance earlier, and not solely through criminal justice pathways. Cooperation with civil society organisations has become more structured and formalised, particularly in the provision of accommodation, psychosocial support and long-term assistance. In addition, stronger national coordination arrangements have emerged, including reinforced roles for national coordinators and task forces, more systematic local and regional coordination in several countries, and initial steps towards improving cross-border referral through the designation of national focal points.

Despite this progress, gaps remain for EU Member States to fully comply with the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and ensure NRMs function effectively in practice²²⁷. In several EU Member States, NRMs are not yet underpinned by laws, regulations or administrative provisions or lack clear enforceability, resulting in uneven implementation across sectors and regions. Access to long-term protection and residence status for victims – particularly third country- nationals – often remains de facto linked to cooperation with criminal proceedings, contrary to a victim-centred approach. Persistent weaknesses are also observed in the early detection of less visible forms of trafficking, notably labour exploitation, child trafficking and forced criminality, reflecting gaps in training, mandates and proactive screening beyond law enforcement. Moreover, cross-border referral mechanisms and national focal points remain under-developed in many Member States, with coordination still relying heavily on informal networks. Finally, limited monitoring, data collection, and systematic evaluation continue to constrain Member States' ability to assess NRM effectiveness, identify bottlenecks, and demonstrate compliance with the minimum protection standards required under EU law.

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations have been formulated to support further strengthening of NRMs in EU MS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Completing legal formalisation and strengthening the enforceability of NRMs.**

²²⁶ The date marks the publication of the European Commission's "Study on reviewing the functioning of Member States' National and Transnational Referral Mechanisms".

²²⁷ The study was conducted between February and April 2026.

2. **Clarifying the roles of key actors** involved in NRMs and strengthening coordination mechanisms.
3. **Stabilising and professionalising cooperation with civil society**, based on predictable and uninterrupted funding streams.
4. **Strengthening early detection of all forms of trafficking**, with particular focus on labour exploitation and child trafficking, which remain underidentified.
5. **Ensuring consistent, multidisciplinary training** across all EU MS, making training regular, comprehensive, and accessible to all frontline professionals likely to encounter victims.
6. **Strengthen unconditional access to victim support**, ensuring that all victims, including non-EU nationals, can access immediate assistance (e.g. crisis support, healthcare, legal aid) regardless of cooperation with law enforcement. At the same time, clarify the framework for non-EU victims, ensuring that access to essential services is not undermined by conditions linked to residence status or formal cooperation requirements.
7. **Expanding specialised support services for under-served groups**, particularly persons with disabilities, while maintaining strong frameworks for women and children, consider fathers with children as well.
8. **Strengthening monitoring, data collection of THB data and evaluation** of NRM effectiveness against minimum standards.
9. **Designate a single, state-mandated focal point** with a clear protection mandate and ensure it is operationally distinct from police or border guard international liaison functions.
10. **Provide the focal point with dedicated staff, written SOPs** for cross-border referral, secure communication infrastructure, and guaranteed availability outside standard office hours.
11. **Develop standardised cross-border referral templates** available in multiple EU languages covering risk assessment, support needs, consent documentation, and case closure/follow-up obligations.
12. **Establish a clear agreement with receiving MS focal points** on which state bears responsibility for ongoing support during and after transfer.
13. **Ensure the focal point is operationally integrated with existing NGO and IOM referral channels** rather than supplanting them. Civil society networks and international organisations involved in cross-border protection hold specialised knowledge, established trust relationships and bilateral operational experience that a formal designation alone cannot provide; the focal point's coordination role should reinforce, not replace, these channels.
14. **Plan for the cross-border referral of third-country cases from the outset.** The focal point obligation applies only between EU MS, yet a significant share of cross-border THB referrals involve non-EU origin or destination countries. Member States should clarify how the focal point will engage non-EU actors – including through IOM and existing TRM structures – to avoid gaps in protection continuity.

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